


 A photograph showing three business professionals (two men and one woman) sitting around a table in a modern office setting, engaged in a meeting. The woman is on the left, and the two men are on the right. They are all dressed in business attire. The background shows large windows and office furniture.
 

## Conquering Gender Bias

**A lurking “second-generation gender bias” is slowing women down by dissecting their behaviour and hobbling their advancement. Companies will have to switch tactics to take on this more subtle phenomenon.**

If celebrity culture were a true reflection of women’s progress, one would have to call 2013 a very bad year for the glass ceiling. Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo!, and Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook (and *Lean In* co-author), appear to represent a rising archetype of female corporate leadership, composed of equal parts glamour and geekdom. Might an era be emerging where women at the helm of a corporate behemoth are no longer news?

Unfortunately, a glance at the numbers suggests a different story. A 2012 Grant Thornton report found the percentage of senior management roles held by women globally had stagnated, hovering around 20 percent for the previous eight years. As of this year, just four percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are women.

Gender disparity at the top persists despite being correlated with a poorer showing on several key performance indices, including return on invested capital and stock market growth, according to Grant Thornton.

And companies’ good-faith efforts to address the problem with policy changes, seminars, and the like are only treating symptoms, says Herminia Ibarra, INSEAD Cora Chaired Professor of Leadership and Learning and Professor of Organisational Behaviour.

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The true malady is a system of normalised biases saddling women with often-insupportable burdens as they try to advance to top positions.

### **Second-Generation Gender Bias**

The term Ibarra uses for this system, *second-generation gender bias*, implies that since the days of *Mad Men* ubiquitous, overt sexism in the workplace may have been weeded out, but not torn up by the roots. For many companies, ideas originating from a time when far fewer women worked still shape assumptions about what business leadership looks like.

These deep-seated assumptions help explain the discrepancy between companies’ stated commitment to equality and the lopsided statistics. “People look at who’s currently in charge, and extrapolate that the style of the people in leadership positions is the style of leadership. If you don’t look like them and don’t talk like them, you don’t look like a leader, or at least look like you have potential. ..[You have to] talk a certain way, have a certain way of expressing opinions, have a certain way of handling work/life balance, especially if they don’t have any major responsibilities at home,” Ibarra explained to INSEAD Knowledge in an interview.

Under second-generation gender bias, would-be women leaders end up under the microscope, with their behaviour unfairly dissected, Ibarra says. “They have to reconcile contradictory messages. They’re being told, ‘Go for it,’ but when they do, they’re told they’re too abrasive and have sharp elbows... Women always get feedback that their style is somehow not quite right. It’s kind of the Goldilocks problem: It’s either too hot or too cold. You have to listen to that, because how you’re perceived affects what you’re able to do. But that’s very hard feedback to reconcile.”

Ibarra says another common criticism women receive is that “they’re very confident operationally, as managers, but they’re not viewed as visionary leaders. Why is that? Is it that they’re approaching the vision more collaboratively, and not getting the credit for it? Women are more likely to be challenged, so they tend to stick to the safer ground, but they may be viewed as not bringing as much value as when they’re really extrapolating from facts and figures, and saying ‘This is what it means for the company.’”

### “Trailing Spouse” Blues

Second-generation gender bias also informs how future leaders are groomed, according to Ibarra. Take the few years’ stint working abroad, an unofficial prerequisite for key promotions at many firms. Among other things, accepting a post abroad signals a willingness to put personal goals on hold temporarily for the good of the company. A clear, gender-neutral example of dues-paying to some, but to Ibarra such expectations are unnecessary holdovers from the days of the “trailing spouse”.

“Some women get into a bind because even though they’d like the promotion, the job at the next level requires a relocation. When dual careers or family circumstances make such a move too costly, they accept that plateau,” Ibarra says.

### Assign & Conquer

Opaque policies for doling out promotions and top assignments give greater scope to the bias. “To us, one of the biggest puzzles is how jobs get assigned within companies, particularly at the senior levels. They’re not necessarily posted. People have to be on high-potential lists, or on succession planning lists. A lot of judgment goes into them about whether a person’s ready,” says Ibarra. And while men are known to put themselves forward for top jobs despite not having all the qualifications, “with women, people are more likely to say, ‘Are you sure? It requires a lot of travel, you’ve never had that kind of role...’”

Male candidates also benefit from richer networks,

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often including highly-placed mentors and sponsors. Ibarra says, “A big part of what a mentor or a sponsor does is to confer readiness, to say, ‘You’re ready, even though you may not have 100 percent of it.’” But studies show women on average have a harder time cultivating “instrumental” relationships at work, putting them at an additional disadvantage.

### The Diversity Pledge

Although education about second-generation gender bias is becoming more popular with companies, misconceptions still present barriers, Ibarra notes. “The biggest misconception is that it’s counter to meritocracy, that somehow we have to make exceptions in order to promote women to the most senior levels,” she says. But the idea of meritocracy is undercut, she argues, by the current situation in which “some people receive encouragement and some don’t. And that’s not meritocracy, but people really believe it is.”

Though education is needed across the board and “tone from the top” can’t be overestimated, it’s ultimately the hiring managers who are in the best position to strike palpable blows against the bias, Ibarra says. “Every time they have to make a staffing decision, [they should] make sure they look at a diverse set of people instead of going for a knee-jerk reaction. Insist on diversity in their team by looking at a broad range of candidates. Do their best to get to know the junior women around them. Go out of their way to get to know who these women are. Managers are even imposing targets and goals for the number of women that need to get promoted, but it’s very abstract for them. They need to get to know them.”



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