



## Gender Balance: Moving From Awareness to Action

**A clear-eyed, nuanced organisational perspective can strengthen employee engagement and galvanise change.**

Global awareness of gender imbalance has spiked in recent years, thanks largely to a series of high-profile social movements – Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In, the Women’s March and #MeToo being among the most prominent. However, it is not yet clear whether this groundswell of attention has resulted in much actual narrowing of the gender gap. At the current rate of change, achieving worldwide gender equality could take 100 years, according to **last year’s World Economic Forum estimates**. In 2016, WEF had set the time horizon at 83 years.

In and of itself, awareness of gender imbalance does not inevitably produce change where it counts: organisational policies and practices. However, with the intervention of dedicated and skilled ambassadors, it could give change initiatives the necessary momentum to create an organisational tipping point. We believe strongly that the advocacy itself should be gender-balanced – the fight for equality should not fall disproportionately on women’s or men’s shoulders. Below, we explain this belief and explore ways to engage potential change agents within organisations to shift from silent sympathy to active participation.

### Women and advocacy

Mikki Hebl, Professor of Psychology and Management at Rice University and opening

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speaker at the **INSEAD Gender Initiative’s Women at Work conference**, believes that **subtle gender discrimination** can be even more problematic than the explicit variety. Women are more attuned to it than men, yet often second-guess their intuitive response with energy-wasting deliberation as to whether what occurred was “real” bias. “Let’s label it overt discrimination and move on,” Hebl says. “At least it stops us from expending energy toward it.”

Clarissa Cortland, a post-doctoral research fellow at INSEAD, shared with conference attendees novel research suggesting that this kind of bias-acknowledging clarity could be a precursor to broader organisational change. Along with co-author **Zoe Kinias**, she surveyed MBA students (both men and women) at a leading international business school on, among other issues, the degree to which they perceived gender bias in their programme, their interest in improving the school’s gender climate, and their experience of **stereotype threat** – i.e. fear of confirming negative stereotypes, which is associated with decreased workplace performance and well-being.

As expected, survey results showed that women MBA students perceived more gender bias against women than the men did – a discrepancy linked to increased stereotype threat concerns, lower commitment to the school and less willingness to

recommend the school to potential female candidates. However, perceiving more gender bias was also connected to a heightened interest in improving the gender climate at the institution – and women’s experience of stereotype threat was found to explain this relationship. For women, it seems that personally experiencing gender identity threat may activate engaging with organisational change.

The survey data collected from male MBA students left some questions unanswered. The connection between perceived gender bias and change motivation held for the men as well (albeit at a lower level, because they perceived less bias to begin with), but stereotype threat was not the explanation. The pathway by which men became primed for advocacy was unclear.

**One 2017 study** found that men won’t participate in gender-parity initiatives if they feel it isn’t appropriate for them or it isn’t their place to get involved – even when promoting gender balance would be aligned with their personal beliefs. This might suggest that social initiatives modelling cross-gender advocacy (e.g. #HeforShe and #LeanInTogether) offer men the motivation they need to move from bias awareness to action.

### **Men’s everyday behaviour**

We stated above that for real change to happen, it’s not enough for women alone to take action; both men and women must get involved. On what basis do we make that claim?

For a start, top leaders are mostly men, and systemic change requires support from the top.

At all organisational levels, men who communicate support through their everyday workplace behaviours strongly improve women’s psychological well-being and buffer them against burnout.

At the conference, Toni Schmader, the Canada Research Chair in Social Psychology at the University of British Columbia, presented ongoing research from the traditionally masculine world of science, technology, engineering and maths. Across three field studies involving professional engineers and engineering grad students, Schmader and her co-authors asked participants to recount and rate the three most significant conversations they had during their workday, as well as their daily experience of social identity threat – a concept often used interchangeably with stereotype threat. Participants also rated their feelings of burnout.

A very precise pattern emerged: Work-related conversations with men – and only with men – that were not perceived as positive predicted women’s

increased feelings of social identity threat and burnout. On the other hand, having an accepting conversation with men brought women’s levels of stereotype threat down to those experienced by men, Schmader found.

Were the women in Schmader’s studies reeling from run-ins with flagrant chauvinists? It was not that simple. Fewer than three percent of the interactions were reported as hostile or condescending. It was the absence of positivity, not the presence of negativity, which caused psychological distress in this highly masculine work context.

The researchers also asked professional women engineers to rate their feelings of stereotype threat in the workplace and report on both female representation at their company and their company’s gender-inclusive policies. For this group, gender representation (i.e. how many women worked in the organisation) did not predict women’s feelings of stereotype threat. However, as gender-inclusive policies, e.g. flexible work programmes and targeted recruiting, rose, stereotype threat fell sharply.

Taken together, Schmader argued, the above findings indicate a route to reducing stereotype threat and elevating women’s engagement and performance. “Women experience less daily social identity threat in gender-inclusive contexts because their cross-gender interactions are more supportive,” she said. This suggests that organisations that fight bias by fostering inclusive workplaces – via institutional policies as well as respectful and supportive cross-gender interactions – are the ones that will make the biggest strides in realising actual gender balance.

### **Getting proactive**

Given how critical it is to activate both women and men for change, how do we do this? Cortland, Kinias and Schmader approach the relevant issues from different angles, but they intersect on at least one crucial point: Change requires organisational leaders who recognise bias as bias and are willing to take action against it through inclusive policies and the creation of supportive work environments.

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