
Why Female Superstars Are Often Overlooked



By [Henrich Greve](#) , INSEAD Professor of Entrepreneurship

Men and women evaluate expertise in very different ways. This may not always be fair and can affect the effectiveness of team decisions.

Kaiseki is the fanciest Japanese cuisine. It is not sushi or any other of the other straightforward and specialised kinds of food. A Kaiseki dinner is one with many courses, where each course may include any number of smaller dishes, every one meticulously prepared and beautifully presented. If you haven't tried kaiseki, you should. But I digress from the story I was going to write.

There is a kaiseki restaurant called n/naka in Los Angeles where the master chef stays out of view of customers. That is not particularly unusual in kaiseki restaurants, which often have closed kitchens, but in this case there is a special reason: she is female, and some customers will be more satisfied if they can taste the food without knowing that it is made by a woman. You see, kaiseki chefs are true experts, and nearly all male.

Evaluating expertise

This sounds like a pretty specialised issue relating to Japanese cuisine (sushi chefs are also typically male), but it has even broader implications and relates to what is happening in many work places, including important functions such as corporate research and development. The fact is we constantly evaluate the expertise of others, and in teams where expertise is required, these evaluations are closely related to work distribution and resulting effectiveness. A chef being assessed as less effective because she is female means fewer customers at the restaurant. An engineer being assessed as less effective because she is female could mean an inferior quality product – a problem for the firm, and also, for you, if the product happens to be the car you are driving.

So do we know when the evaluation is fair? This is a topic that there is much research on, and a typical finding is that it is harder for a woman to be evaluated fairly by others. Now, thanks to research on research teams by Aparna Joshi published in [Administrative Science Quarterly](#), we know exactly how important the evaluator is in determining the fairness.

Education or gender?

The results are actually quite simple. When a female assesses others, the better their education is, the higher she will rate them. That sounds simple and logical, and you probably think you would do the same. But that could depend on your gender: when a male assesses others, he will rate them higher when they are male and will ignore their education. This is a pretty big difference. These are research teams in a university, so of course we cannot know whether teams with less educated participants have a more educated way of assessing each other.

Actually, the story is a bit more complex because it depends on how strongly the evaluator identifies with his or her gender. Again, the results are simple, but not really encouraging. A man who feels very manly will rate a woman below men regardless, and even lower when she has more education. Yes, lower. A man who is more neutral will ignore her education and simply rate her lower than men regardless. So, does this mean that firms should be careful about using women in roles that call for expertise to be correctly evaluated?

Well, actually the opposite conclusion seems better. Women are actually better at evaluating both women and men, so if teams had many women (especially in the supervisor role) they would function better. You could be

better off driving a car designed by a team with mostly female engineers.

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