
Three Ways to Build Resilience Against Gender Bias



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Simple, low-cost psychological interventions can be part of an organisational toolkit for enabling gender balance.

Organisations that are committed to improving gender balance often find getting real results surprisingly challenging. Larger companies in historically male-dominated fields can take years to implement the necessary structural changes, even with the support of top leadership. While recognising there is no quick fix, they want to know what they can do right now to help women surmount gender-based obstacles to success.

Recently, a body of experimental field research has coalesced around the possible efficacy of psychological interventions in American educational settings. Researchers propose that these non-disruptive, low-cost exercises counteract the deleterious psychological effects of being a member of an under-represented group, leading to improved performance, retention and even health outcomes. The challenge is to discover how such interventions can be applied to adults in distressing situations and global professional contexts.

Three types of resiliency-bolstering interventions were considered in the research presented at February's [Women at Work](#) conference, organised by the [INSEAD Gender Initiative](#): values affirmations, social belonging interventions and growth mindset interventions.

Values affirmations

In especially stressful environments, strong social networks can be a key source of resilience, but maintaining them is easier said than done. As people begin to buckle under pressure, social ties are often sacrificed. At the conference, Valerie Purdie Greenaway, Associate Professor of Psychology at Columbia University, discussed how individual-level values affirmations can protect social networks from erosion, thereby serving as a bulwark against burnout.

Though not directly gender-related, Purdie Greenaway's findings may apply to how increased stress and social ostracism negatively affect women's persistence in predominantly male contexts.

Purdie Greenaway and her co-authors focused on an introductory course in biology at a leading U.S. university. In addition to being a requirement for pre-med and bioscience majors, the course was consistently judged one of the university's most stressful in evaluations. At the start and close of one semester, the researchers asked all students to list other course participants they considered to be friends, and to rate how close they felt to each. In the third week of the semester, a randomly selected group of students completed a brief values affirmation – in this case, a writing exercise about their most cherished personal value and why this value was so important to them. The remainder of the students wrote about why a value that they did not hold dear might be important to someone else.

Compared to their unaffirmed peers, students who completed the values affirmation reported less erosion of their social networks over the semester. Specifically, they were significantly more likely to make new friends, and marginally more likely to retain friends from the start of the course.

Having a stronger support network fuelled greater persistence. As the paper states, “affirmed students were more likely to enroll in the next semester of the biology course than unaffirmed students, and the number of friends they nominated at the end of the first semester of the course mediated this effect, as did the strength of these friendships.”

Purdie Greenaway summarises, “Simple reminders of your friends or family, or religion or music, shrink stress and allow you to maintain and even bolster your networks.”

In a separate presentation, Zoe Kinias, Academic Director of the INSEAD Gender Initiative, described how a similar values affirmation **dramatically attenuated the gender performance gap** in a leading international business school’s MBA programme. Kinias and co-author Jessica Sim assigned the exercise during orientation week to two consecutive cohorts, achieving comparable success both times.

Most importantly, this shows values affirmations can work beyond the American undergraduate context. The average MBA participant in Kinias’s study was 29 years old, and Americans comprised only about ten percent of the group, with the majority being European or Asian.

The MBA research extends Purdie Greenaway’s work on university students to show that self-affirmation buffers against women’s disproportionate self-doubt in masculine contexts. Essentially the same intervention can buffer resiliency through multiple (potentially related) pathways.

Kinias’s work also underscores the importance of careful adaptation to new contexts. Indeed, an affirmation variant that included the business school’s well-known core values alongside personal values had no effect on the gender performance gap, suggesting that organisation-specific values might reduce the effectiveness of personal values in this context. To be effective, therefore, values affirmations must be carefully tailored to the environment and population concerned.

Social belonging

Sameer Srivastava, Assistant Professor at UC Berkeley’s Haas School of Business, presented more humbling findings regarding real-world results of a psychological intervention. His research was sparked by the observation that despite sizable investments in diversity and inclusion initiatives, women remain marginalised in many tech firms. Some of this marginalisation stems from the tech sector’s infamous “bro” culture, which signals to women that they don’t belong. Srivastava and his co-authors hypothesised that a social belonging intervention would help women in tech feel less like outsiders, and therefore be better able to create a central place for themselves within the workplace network.

They launched an ambitious field experiment targeting women newcomers in the male-dominated R&D department of a major Silicon Valley firm. Over a 13-month period, all employees who joined the department in odd-numbered months underwent a social belonging intervention during the orientation process. After watching a video of a long-standing employee describing how they overcame early struggles at the company, the newcomers prepared a written self-reflection on the video and how their own past experiences could serve them in their current role. They then created their own video wherein they gave advice to future newbies.

In place of the intervention, employees who joined in even-numbered months watched videos of customer testimonials. They were then asked to reflect upon how best to resolve customers' challenges, and to provide advice about customer service to later newcomers.

The researchers hypothesised that women who had completed the social belonging intervention would outperform those who hadn't, in terms of individual achievement (promotion, compensation, etc.) as well as social integration. To measure the latter, weekly metadata was mined from the company's internal collaboration platform. This provided visibility on who was collaborating with whom, and which employees occupied central positions within the organisation's workplace network.

However, post-intervention data didn't bear out their hypotheses. The social belonging intervention made no significant difference on women's measured outcomes, either positive or negative.

Given the uncertainty around why this intervention did not work in this context, companies might generally be cautious about hastily introducing such interventions. Srivastava suggests – and we concur – that companies instead consider a multi-pronged approach that focuses on structural and cultural changes in addition to some of the more subtle mindset shifts that psychological interventions provide.

Growth mindset

These days, we rightly hear a lot about “[second-generation gender bias](#)” – the subtle ways in which sexism cloaks itself in supposedly gender-neutral norms. But that doesn't mean the first generation is no longer with us. Overt bias against women and minorities is more common than many organisations care to admit. Aneeta Rattan, Assistant Professor at London

Business School, presented research exploring the immediate aftermath of blatant expressions of bias – including the crucial question every devalued person wrestles with in that moment: To confront or not to confront?

Rattan's co-author [Carol Dweck](#) famously originated the concepts of “growth mindset” and “fixed mindset” – the former referring to the belief that people are capable of change, the latter describing the fatalistic viewpoint that we are now what we always will be. Rattan and Dweck drew upon these concepts to posit a framework for post-bias confrontation: Calling someone out on their bias could be restorative for the devalued person, but only if that person holds a growth mindset. The belief that one has converted an upsetting experience into a teachable moment – i.e. that the biased individual likely will change – helps one remain positively disposed towards the work environment after exposure to bias.

To test their framework, the researchers conducted four studies with women and minorities as participants. In the first three, participants responded to fictional but plausible scenarios of bias, e.g. a colleague worrying aloud that “all of this ‘diversity’ hiring” might endanger company performance. Crucially, the third study incorporated a manipulation designed to evoke either a growth or a fixed mindset in participants. The fourth and final study involved African-American professionals reflecting on real-life bias they had encountered. Across all studies, those who reported confronting with a growth mindset had a more positive opinion of the biased person after the encounter, and therefore a greater sense of belonging at work as well as higher workplace satisfaction.

There are proven practices for [promoting growth mindsets](#) which could bolster minorities' and women's well-being after experiencing a biased comment. However, Rattan's research suggests that mindset change by itself is not enough. To minimise the damage inflicted by bias, confrontation is key. Therefore, organisations could encourage employees to speak up in the moment and set protocol for doing so. But Rattan emphasises that it is not the job of women and minorities to educate the rest of the organisation. Repeat offenders should be managed with appropriate seriousness. Believing people *can* change, after all, doesn't mean that they necessarily *will*.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/three-ways-build-resilience-against-gender-bias>

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About the series

Gender Initiative

The **INSEAD Gender Initiative** integrates research, business and pedagogy to engage the full potential of both women and men.

Its community of gender researchers conduct cutting-edge research on the experiences and impact of women in business and society. The initiative builds relationships with organisations to enhance their commitment to gender balance and their ability to fulfil this goal. It further strives to create a pipeline of future business leaders who are passionate and equipped to drive gender balance within their existing and future organisations.

Its mission is to create and disseminate knowledge that advances women leaders and optimises their contributions within and beyond their organisations. The Gender Initiative strives to engage both men and women in this effort, inspiring all to take action.