
Stop Blaming Women for Gender Inequality



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

It's hard to “lean in” when you feel you're being pushed out.

We know that women attempting to advance in their careers are dogged at every step by bias in [evaluations](#) and [promotions](#). The higher a woman climbs on the corporate ladder, the worse the unfairness becomes. In the majority of cases, she hits the glass ceiling before reaching the executive suite, unless we are talking about executive roles like HR and investor relations that are seen as typical female niches.

There are still those who are unwilling to acknowledge the centrality of bias in limiting women's career options. One common counterargument (a favourite among cultural conservatives) stresses the career choices women and men freely make. From early adulthood, professional women supposedly place family on par with career and plan their lives accordingly, whereas men go all-in on supporting their family through career advancement. Gender equality activists, the argument suggests, are fighting human nature.

There is a somewhat more “empowering” variant of the same logic that you may be familiar with if you read the bestselling book *Lean in: Women, Work,*

and the Will to Lead. Instead of generalising about women's life aspirations, author Sheryl Sandberg argues that women's lack of belief in themselves prevents them vying with men for the best jobs. She acknowledges gender bias but offers career advice for overcoming it, which implies that it needn't be addressed head-on. Bias hurts women only if they allow it to. This could be seen as a form of "blaming the victim" under the guise of empowering her.

It is fair to say that the discussion of that book is a sideshow for most women with careers. They care about the hiring and promotion decisions that they are exposed to, and they doubt that these are fair. That makes sense: why should they be treated any different from the others? Chances are that they have been hit by unfair promotion criteria at some point in their career.

Leaning out: An alternate theory

However, the two explanations for gender inequality at the top – bias on one hand, women's failure of will on the other – are not mutually exclusive, as research by Raina Brands and Isabel Fernandez-Mateo in [*Administrative Science Quarterly*](#) reveals. Experience within a biased system, the researchers show, weakens the willingness to put oneself out there only to be unjustly rejected one more time.

Using data from an executive search firm in the United Kingdom, they looked at how candidates of both genders responded to losing out on a top role. Women candidates, they found, were much more likely than men not to pursue further opportunities from the head hunters after being rejected previously. Delving deeper, the researchers found that women's aversion to applying again was strongly linked to the sense of not having been treated fairly the first time around. Finally, they launched an experiment where 160 senior executives were asked to either accept or reject a hypothetical candidate for an executive role, then "put themselves in the candidate's shoes" and answer questions on the perceived fairness of the process as well as complete an "executive sense of belonging" questionnaire.

According to the researchers, the combined outcomes of all three studies present an alternate theory of what causes potential women leaders to "lean out" instead of in. Exposure to unfair treatment in the business environment causes women (as a disfavoured group among the executive class) to despair of ever being treated fairly, to feel they will never belong in the world they aspire to join, and ultimately to pass up the chances that come

their way.

Unfairness hurts firms

It turns out that people adapt their behaviour to the fairness of the system. If they are treated fairly, they will reach for opportunities. If they are given signals that they belong in a group, they seek to join it. And once you think about those two mechanisms, it is obvious what happens to women seeking executive positions. They are not treated fairly and not made to feel they belong, and the rejections from positions that they (often) should have gained discourages them from reaching for new opportunities. After all, who plays a losing hand? Naturally this accumulates over time, because more experience means more rejection, so the women exactly best placed to become executives are most likely to think they cannot reach that level.

This is not just a story about women. Unfair treatment can hold back any group in the short run. In the longer run, it creates discouragement and resentment, and the members of the group hold themselves back. They are leaning out of the unfair system, looking for better places to work. The labour market gets split as they avoid the career paths with unfair treatment, and organisations need to fill their positions from an increasingly narrow and less talented pool of applicants. Any firm that shows through its hiring that it has a problem with female, black, Muslim, and Hispanic job applicants will learn the long-term consequences of narrow hiring.

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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.