
The Truth About Gender Stereotypes



By Benjamin Kessler , Asia Editor and Digital Manager; Clarissa Cortland , INSEAD Post-Doctoral Research Fellow; and Zoe Kinias , INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Unraveling popular notions about gender differences in organisations.

Negative stereotypes are intertwined with bias in organisations. Even when they aren't openly expressed, stereotypes can disadvantage members of under-represented groups on several levels: recruitment, demands on time, resource allocation, evaluation, retention and promotion. In addition to the usual pressure to succeed, these employees are sometimes acutely aware of being judged on the basis of stereotypes. The ensuing psychological burden, combined with the above-mentioned disadvantages, can increase their likelihood of underperformance, thus “proving” the stereotype was correct. Bias gets stacked upon bias.

For women, the issue is complicated by documented gender differences. (How accurate they are and whether those differences are due more to nature or nurture is another matter.) For example, some evidence shows that women are more risk-averse than men. Even in the studies that show this,

however, there are many men who are more risk-averse than the average woman and many women who are less risk-averse than the average man. Yet people generally see women and men as categorically different. Why does this matter and what can we do?

Below we address some gender stereotypes, highlight how beliefs seemingly unrelated to gender stereotypes can influence men's and women's outcomes and provide suggestions for how to work against pernicious gender stereotypes.

Gender negotiation myths

Misinterpretations of research findings can reinforce gender stereotypes. For example, take evidence that women are less likely than men to negotiate for higher salaries. Hannah Riley Bowles, Senior Lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School, and other scholars have found that this disparity does not tell the whole story and should not be interpreted as evidence for innate gender differences in ambition. It may reflect reasonable avoidance of the social penalties suffered by women who visibly lobby for their own financial interests in the workplace.

Further, negotiations focused on salary are not the only kind that matter. They are infrequent, if consequential, occurrences, and there are many ways women negotiate well. Bowles's recent research, presented at the [**INSEAD Gender Initiative's Women at Work conference**](#) in February, takes a broader view of women negotiating in the workplace. Across three studies set in the United States and the MENA region, Bowles and her collaborators explored the kinds of internal negotiations in which executives of both genders engaged.

Analyses revealed three forms of negotiations. *Asking* negotiations hinged upon access to standard opportunities or resources: a salary raise, leadership development opportunities, a coveted assignment, etc. Bowles likened them to a vending machine. The terms of the exchange were subject to negotiation, but the sought-after reward was a known "offering".

Bending negotiations were about carving out individual exceptions to established norms. As an example, Bowles mentioned a government executive who negotiated a three-tiered bonus over a three-year period after being assigned to a city with a higher cost of living.

Shaping negotiations involved proposing organisational changes. For example, another executive sought to have his or her role elevated from centre-level to agency-level. This organisational change met the strategic interests of the organisation as well as the executive's leadership aspirations.

Contrary to stereotypes, there were no significant gender differences in the respondents' propensity to negotiate overall, but there were some gender differences in terms of *what* and *how* men and women negotiated. Women were more likely to report negotiating work flexibility than men, and men were more likely to report negotiating job offers. Women also reported engaging in *bending* negotiations more often than men.

As you might expect, some of this gender difference in *bending* involved women seeking customised work-family arrangements. However, women also used *bending* to achieve their leadership aspirations. One woman reported negotiating her way to a promotion despite lacking some of the technical skills deemed necessary for the job, as she was confident she could learn them.

Bowles's findings show that women are not more timid negotiators as compared to men – unless they reasonably fear social reprisal. Fear of adverse social consequences may also prevent men from negotiating greater work flexibility. Furthermore, women appear to be using negotiations to bridge gaps between historical norms – which may have been designed with only men in mind – and their own contemporary needs. In that sense, they could be seen as social pioneers, broadening institutional horizons one negotiation at a time.

Only geniuses need apply

Women's under-representation in STEM fields is another area where gender stereotypes matter. What accounts for the fact that **just one in five physics PhDs**, and fewer than 25 percent of engineering PhDs, are women? Former Google software engineer James Damore, in his **infamous memo**, cited the relative shortage of women in these fields to support his unsophisticated conclusion that women were simply less well-equipped for STEM success than men, by dint of their biology.

Yet academic gender gaps are not restricted to STEM, as Andrei Cimpian, Associate Professor of Psychology at New York University, pointed out in his

Women at Work conference presentation. Glaring gender disparities exist even in some “soft” fields such as **philosophy** and music theory. And some STEM fields aren’t overwhelmingly male – including, ironically enough, **biology**, where the majority of degree-holders are women.

Cimpian wondered whether a common feature shared by these disparate disciplines might help explain their gender gaps. He and his co-authors hypothesised a relationship between under-representation of women in a given field, and the extent to which the definition of success in that field involved stereotypically masculine strengths. Because masculine excellence is often ascribed to “brilliance” or “genius” – i.e. an innate and indefinable intellectual distinction – they zeroed in on those attributes.

In a nationwide survey, they asked more than 1,800 faculty and graduate students of both genders across 30 disciplines (including STEM, humanities and the social sciences) what was required for high achievement in their field: diligent effort, or “a special aptitude that just can’t be taught”. Then they analysed responses in relation to women’s under-representation in given fields. Analyses revealed that beliefs about raw intellectual talent as a prerequisite for success within a field predicted women’s under-representation.

They also assessed alternate explanations for gender gaps, such as variations in intellectual rigour and emotional intelligence among disciplines. No other beliefs, however, predicted gender imbalance as closely as those related to the “genius” question.

Responses to this question also predicted representation of another group often stereotyped as not fitting the mold of the genius academic: African-Americans. But the “genius” question was not predictive of Asian-American representation, presumably because this group is widely stereotyped as inherently “smart”.

While Cimpian doesn’t claim he’s found the sole source of academia’s diversity issues, he says that messages about success in academic disciplines can be an effective tool for increasing representation. A good first step, he says, would be “de-emphasising brilliance and genius in favour of the extent to which hard work is required for success in any job”.

Going a step further, we suggest that this can generalise to industries and company cultures – that wherever we see severe under-representation of

women, we should consider whether beliefs about brilliance being required for success are part of the story.

Changing stereotypes

Stereotypes evolve with social change, exposing how beliefs and reality influence one another. Alice Eagly, Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University, discussed ongoing research based on public-opinion polling data pertaining to perceptions of women over the last 70 years.

For advocates of gender balance, Eagly had good news and bad news. On the one hand, women's perceived competence – the degree to which women are viewed as intelligent, level-headed, organised, etc. – has soared through the decades, exceeding the numbers for men in recent polls. Views of women as communally oriented and nurturing have also increased over time.

However, women's perceived “agentic” qualities – measures of assertiveness and competitiveness – have languished well below men's for all of living memory. It appears some gender stereotypes have only gotten stronger as women have made strides towards equality.

Why would this be? Eagly says that gender workforce segregation is largely responsible. As women entered the workforce, they did so disproportionately in the more communal corners – the helping professions and support roles within organisations. And the segregation is self-perpetuating, as these spaces afford ample opportunity to display competence and warmth, but are not usually where future leaders of business and society are drawn from.

“Sheer intelligence is not the only quality that would get you to rise in politics or corporate leadership,” says Eagly. “Women's employment is at least as cognitively demanding as men's in general, but hierarchies and leadership are heavily weighted with masculine agency in terms of what people expect.”

To equalise the path to leadership, then, it's important both to weaken the assumption that men are more agentic than women and to challenge the notion of agency as root cause of success. Celebrating ambitious and assertive behaviour from women can chip away at the most pernicious gender stereotypes. Additionally, we can consider whether our ideas about what makes a successful leader should be expanded to include both communal and agentic traits.

Clarissa Cortland is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at INSEAD.

***Zoe Kinias** is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and the Academic Director of INSEAD's Gender Initiative.*

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About the author(s)

Clarissa Cortland Clarissa Cortland is a post-doctoral fellow at INSEAD.

Zoe Kinias was an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and the founding Academic Director of INSEAD's **Gender Initiative**. She is the programme director for the **INSEAD Gender Diversity Programme**, an INSEAD Executive Education online programme.

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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.

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