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# Male Professors Can (and Should) Promote Gender Balance



By [Henning Piezunka](#) , INSEAD

## **Male faculty can become powerful gender equality advocates in the classroom.**

I am a male professor at a business school. While I always found discrimination against women to be wrong, it never felt like my problem, as I am not a woman and I do not (knowingly) discriminate against women. However, my role as a professor gives me an opportunity to be part of the solution to a challenge that permeates business, politics and society at the highest levels.

Addressing gender inequality is an obvious need, and because men disproportionately manage the world's resources, finding solutions cannot fall squarely on women's shoulders. Initiatives such as "HeForShe" underscore the important role men (have to) play in promoting gender balance. This is particularly true in business schools. As *The Economist* [pointed out](#) in 2015: "Business-school teaching is a man's, man's, man's world." The percentage of male faculty at top-rated business schools varies between [63 and 87 percent](#). There are also more male than female participants in MBA programmes.

**Research** by my colleague **Zoe Kinias** has shown a method for buffering women against potential deleterious effects of their underrepresentation, but we need to do more. Male faculty members have an enormous opportunity and responsibility to educate the men and women who will be the leaders of the future.

## **How can you promote gender balance?**

Without needing to suddenly teach gender issues, there are many opportunities to advocate for better gender balance in the classroom. By taking a few simple steps, faculty can promote gender equality through teaching materials and behaviour management.

Of course, such changes may require some time investment, but my favourite piece of teaching advice by Stanford's Bob Sutton comes to mind: "It takes as much time to be a good teacher as it takes to be a bad teacher."

- **Case studies.** Given that only 11 percent of top business school cases have a **female protagonist**, the importance of case selection (and writing your own female protagonist cases) cannot be underestimated. I try to choose cases that have female protagonists or write my own. I am currently developing "Lean Entrepreneurship in Nigeria", in which two of the three protagonists are female (contact me by **email** if you are interested in the case and the corresponding teaching material. It will soon be published on **INSEAD Case Publishing** where there is a great selection of case studies with female protagonists). While the case does not emphasise gender specifically, the central role of the female protagonists is crucial as it exposes students to female leadership. The students in the class get used to seeing female founders. It becomes "normal" for female students to become founders/CEOs, for venture capitalists to invest in female founders, for employees to work for a female boss, and for customers to interact with women-led companies. *(INSEAD faculty and other readers with case ideas are invited to contribute to my colleague Pierre Chandon's **campaign** to increase the diversity of case protagonists.)*
- **Teaching materials.** Beyond the cases, it is important to take gender into account when preparing other materials. Here again, it is common to observe a strong male-bias. For example, searching databases of stock images for terms such as "founders" tends to deliver many male examples and only a few female ones. It becomes necessary to go the

extra mile to ensure a balanced selection of stock photos.

- **Examples.** Faculty may also need to update the classic examples they use. For example, I teach a session on how entrepreneurial companies can outcompete incumbents. In this session I provide numerous examples where the underdog wins: For example, David winning against Goliath, Phil Knight founding Nike and upsetting the sportswear industry, or Leicester City winning the Premier League. While I have kept these male-dominated examples, these days I also use the examples of Rosa Parks's engagement in the civil rights movement, Angela Merkel launching out of nowhere only to dominate German politics, or Erin Brockovich successfully challenging powerful companies.
- **Guest speakers.** I often invite female guest speakers. Doing so allows me to further normalise female leadership. Moreover, as having guest speakers often translates into internships, employment or other kinds of business relationships, it further exposes students to female leadership.
- **Student behaviour management.** Gender issues are also relevant in classroom dynamics. For example, the widespread phenomenon of men interrupting women can be seen in the classroom. I come down hard on male students who interrupt women. I also encourage female students to push back. Here's another classroom situation: Multiple students raise their hand and as the instructor hesitates for a moment, a male student simply starts to speak. When this happens, I tend to interrupt the class and ask a woman who had raised her hand why she did not simply start or interrupt the man who did.
- **Identifying and overcoming your own biases.** You may be biased without knowing. For example, you may focus your attention on male students and let them speak more in class. You could ask your teaching assistant to track who you ask to speak up in the classroom. You may also be biased in how you interact with female students. For example, when I started teaching, I used to give more critical feedback to men as I believed "they could take it". So, if a male student said something stupid, I criticised the student and asked him to raise his game. By contrast, I was more considerate with female students and may not have made my disapproval as clear. While I wanted to protect the female students, I actually wasn't helping them.

## **Motivators: Everyone benefits**

Educating students on managerial topics is an important part of teaching at a business school. Gender is relevant for this purpose. As my colleague [Philip Anderson](#) points out, “If you do not prepare your students to work with and for women, you do them a disservice”. Thus, if you do not address gender issues, you may ill-prepare students.

Venture capital illustrates why it is impossible to truly educate on a topic without taking gender into consideration. There is reliable evidence that venture capitalists discriminate against female founders; a recent [study](#) by Dana Kanze, Laura Huang, Mark Conley and Tory Higgins shows that VCs ask female founders [more critical questions](#). There are rich accounts by female founders of how such discrimination hurts them and what strategies they deploy to counter it (see this [interview](#) by ReCode with Jennifer Hyman, Rent the Runway CEO). It is thus crucial to educate future female entrepreneurs about the kind of challenges they are likely to face. [Research](#) by Paul Gompers and Sophie Wang also shows that VCs who are less likely to discriminate against women tend to be more successful in their investments. It is essential to educate future female and male venture capitalists about potential biases and their consequences.

Beyond giving students a more comprehensive understanding of individual topics, addressing gender issues in the classroom will also make students more effective managers and ultimately better business and society leaders. As students will work with and for women, it is crucial for them to navigate gender issues. At the minimum you will discourage inappropriate behaviour (of which there is plenty). You will help students by cautioning them against biases and improving their decision making.

By helping your students at an early point in their careers, you will also help business and society to make [much-needed progress](#) on gender equality. Your teaching ideally enables students to build organisations characterised by gender equality. For example, they may establish fairer recruitment and promotion procedures. You also help to shape the debate on the topic by bringing scientific facts that can counter oft-banded-about stereotypes (for the urgent need to do so, see the [TEDx talk](#) by Sarah Kaplan, Director, Institute for Gender and the Economy, University of Toronto). Thus, business schools as a whole and you in particular can be an important vector of progress towards gender equality.

## **It is also good for you**

Addressing a topic at the top of many students' mind is one way to earn high evaluations. I was surprised by the outpouring of positive comments that I received for addressing gender issues in class – from female and male students. It was clear that I served a broad interest; according to the recent Gender Climate Survey at INSEAD, 77 percent of our male MBAs and 91 percent of our female MBAs expressed an interest in improving the gender climate.

Paying attention to gender issues may also help you to generate demand for your class. Students appreciate it when gender is addressed. It may matter even more with respect to Executive Education. Companies looking for Executive Education are particularly sensitive to this topic, given the numerous recent gender-related scandals at Google, Uber, etc. Since the large majority of business school faculty, students and case protagonists are male, devoting attention to gender is an easy way to differentiate your teaching and offer students and companies something they are seeking.

Advocating gender balance is good for your students, good for the businesses and societies they serve, and good for you. Just do it.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/male-professors-can-and-should-promote-gender-balance>

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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.