Building Gender Balance Through Behavioural Design

By Zoe Kinias and Clarissa Cortland , INSEAD

What can organisations do when changing mindsets isn't enough?

For advocates of workplace gender balance, one of the chief obstacles is the immobility of mindsets. Regardless of our intentions, traditional stereotypes about how men and women work dwell within most of us and can affect our decision making without our necessarily being aware of them. And because unconscious gender biases often have deep cultural foundations, they can be very difficult to shift.

The most common way companies attempt to mitigate bias is through diversity training programmes that focus on mindset changes. In the United States alone, corporate spending on diversity training amounts to approximately US$8 billion annually. However, **researchers have found little evidence** for the long-term efficacy of these programmes. In fact, **some studies** suggest they could lead to companies deprioritising diversity, if being forced to focus on bias becomes a strain on executives' already overtaxed mental attention.

Iris Bohnet, behavioural economist and academic dean at the Harvard Kennedy School, believes gender balance may be best pursued in the opposite direction: from the outside in. Reminiscent of theories and evidence on how **behavioural change can strongly influence mindsets** on an individual level, her 2016 book, *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*, advocates de-biasing workplace processes and routines first, because the hearts and minds will follow. In her recent talk at INSEAD's Singapore campus (part of the school's Distinguished Speaker Series and **INSEAD's Gender Initiative**), she shared insights from the book and described current research in her field of study.

Gender-balanced recruitment

An organisation's gender composition is rooted in recruitment. If the candidate pool skews heavily male or female, a merit-diversity trade-off can be triggered, and equality may fall by the wayside. However, a variety of simple digital tools can assist hiring managers in reducing gendered language in job ads, which often helps get a balanced slate. For example, to attract qualified male applicants for a kindergarten-teacher position, a **machine learning platform** can counterbalance words with strong feminine connotations such as "warm", "caring" and "collaborative" with male-typed words such as "leading".

To Bohnet, these data-driven solutions are "low-hanging fruit". "I have heard of no company who finds out about this technology that does not then use it", she said. It's an easy win for companies looking to expand their cross-gender appeal, while garnering a more competitive pool of applicants.

Gender-balanced hiring

Making actual hiring decisions is a trickier area because managers tend to rely greatly on their gut. As a result, they prefer to conduct unstructured interviews. Not only are open-ended interviews bad predictors of future job performance, they also lack a neutral firewall to protect assessments from unconscious bias. Our gut feeling about someone can be coloured by their gender. Or, as Bohnet put it, "Informality is the home of bias."

Given the opportunity, bias can trump even objective, unambiguous evidence. Bohnet discussed an ongoing research project involving a digital interview-simulation platform for hiring computer programmers. The platform pairs job-seeking coders with roughly equivalent qualifications,

assigns them to write some code and then has them assess each other on the quality of their code. Even though there was no objective gender difference in code quality, Bohnet and her co-authors found that women were consistently judged to be worse coders than men, based on an analysis of 60,000 interviews on the platform. Surprisingly, this gender gap persisted even after the platform incorporated an automated QC reviewing process whose results were visible to both interview participants.

In other words, Bohnet said, "There is a correlation between how well men code and how they are evaluated, but no such correlation exists for women." This caused Bohnet to ponder how far we would have to go to tame unconscious bias: "Do we have to take humans out of the hiring equation completely?"

But Bohnet also cautioned that algorithms can reflect and replicate the biases of their human creators. As algorithmic solutions become more widespread, she said, they might need to be regulated much like newly developed pharmaceutical products, to prevent those contaminated by bias from entering the marketplace.

De-biasing the corporate ladder

Diversity in hiring is a prerequisite for organisational equality, but the most pronounced gender gaps exist at the top of the hierarchy rather than at entry level. The business world badly needs behavioural design solutions for removing bias from talent management and development.

Bohnet endorsed the power of social comparisons to transform behaviour. As inspiration, she cited the **highly effective reports** (adopted by companies in the U.S. and other countries) that encourage energy efficiency by showing consumers how their household's energy usage compares to their neighbours'. Bohnet is working on adapting this nudge for the corporate context. For one company, she helped introduce a "gender promotion ratio" that quantifies managers' gender parity performance – if they have promoted equal numbers of men and women employees, they receive a "perfect" ratio of one.

Sometimes, unpacking the data can start an overdue dialogue. Bohnet described how several departments within a large company saw their gender gap in promotions disappear after she controlled for global mobility. A likely explanation was that these departments were excluding women from

possible promotion due to the assumption that women would be less willing to accept expat assignments. Once they were made aware of this, senior executives began to reconsider not only this assumption, but also the validity of their leadership criteria. "They're thinking, 'Is it really so important?'" said Bohnet. "Secondly, could they think differently about mobility? Could it be three-month internships instead of at least three years abroad?"

Building inclusive cultures

Like the unstructured job interview, many organisational routines – business meetings, for example – are havens of informality where, if we're not careful, bias can find expression. In meetings, bias often crops up in the form of women being interrupted, ignored or robbed of credit for their ideas. Bohnet said that one company placed little red flags on every meeting-room table, which participants could raise when inclusive norms were violated. The results were surprising: "People will raise the flag on themselves…It decriminalised transgression and brought a lot of humour", Bohnet said.

During the Obama administration, in which two-thirds of top presidential aides were men, female White House staffers felt similarly stifled during meetings. They adopted a meeting strategy called "amplification," in which staffers would repeat women's key points and ideas, making sure to give credit to the woman who originally voiced each comment, and forcing everyone in the room to acknowledge the contributions made by women. **One former female aide reported** that Obama soon took notice and started consulting women more in meetings.

A positive spin

Bohnet's approach to gender balance may appear pessimistic, with its emphasis on influencing people's behaviour instead of changing mindsets. Can people ever be trusted to do the right thing without a system of no-no's and nudges to guide their choices?

Bohnet points to the mindset shift achieved by India's 1993 constitutional amendment requiring that one-third of village leadership and council seats be filled by women. Studies suggest that villages that had had female leaders were changed by the experience. Male villagers came to regard the female chiefs as effective leaders, in some cases more effective than their male predecessors. Further, exposure to more than one female chief altered

how young women (and their parents) envisioned their future. Gender gaps in educational aspiration vanished, young women's self-confidence improved, and early marriage became a less compelling life option.

"Actions come before our minds can imagine that something is possible", Bohnet said. "It's hard to change our minds, much harder than the reverse. Change the numbers first."

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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.