
Freeing Women – and Men – From Gender Stereotypes



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

Research from INSEAD’s 2nd annual Women at Work conference offers practical solutions for establishing gender-balanced workplace norms.

In the corporate world, gender balance – in representation, roles and opportunities – is steadily moving up the list of organisational priorities. There is a growing desire among top leaders to do the right thing for their female colleagues and younger generations of women, as well as for society at large. Furthermore, the tangible benefits that can arise from getting it right – the “business case” for gender balance – are increasingly recognised.

The most progressive companies are moving from awareness to action. In doing so, they encounter what we call “the systemic web of challenges”, an intricate net of organisational and interpersonal issues that can slow progress, or even undermine change efforts. Academic research can be a force for good in this context, by developing, testing and fine-tuning

interventions that can be taken up by organisations as part of their toolkits for addressing these challenges at multiple points.

Our 2nd annual Women at Work conference, recently hosted by the [INSEAD Gender Initiative](#) in Singapore, was devoted to just such solution-focused research. The first panel of talks, “Reframing Identities”, concentrated on the thorny problem of gender stereotypes. [Despite some progress](#), these stereotypes still hold enormous power. They continue to constrain the identities of both men and women in the workplace, affecting their notions of who they can be and what is expected of them. For example, women in leadership, STEM, and other male-dominated environments may be led to feel like outsiders, pressured to conceal key facets of their lives (such as the fact that they are mothers) out of a perceived conflict between their professional and personal identities. While recognising that, in many cases, people come into organisations with pre-existing ideas about men and women, how can firms free themselves and their employees from an over-reliance on stereotypes? The expert presenters offered suggestions and concrete action steps across a broad range of contexts.

How to frame diversity

As stereotypes go, those pertaining to gender are perhaps unique in the degree to which people are comfortable perceiving them as natural. It is more acceptable in polite society to talk about innate differences between men and women than it is to do the same for, say, various ethnic groups. In her Women at Work conference talk, Professor Ashley Martin of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, described how the widespread faith placed in gender differences can create unintended negative outcomes in corporate diversity training.

A central tenet of many diversity programmes is that diversity across backgrounds, perspectives and working styles is a factor that organisations ought to celebrate. Their well-intentioned goal is to cultivate an enlightened awareness and acceptance of differences between groups, rather than blindness to them. Consistent with prior work, Martin’s studies (employing online surveys among U.S. populations) found that for majority group members (i.e. white Americans) reflecting on racial diversity, a higher awareness of differences between racial groups indeed led to reduced bias

toward racial minority groups. For gender, however, greater awareness of gender differences was associated with increased bias against women – as evidenced by a denial of sexism and continued support for the gender-imbalanced status quo.

Why? Martin’s findings show that differences between racial groups are generally ascribed to external factors, such as contextualised experiences, systemic barriers and differential opportunities. Gender differences, however, are presumed to stem from internal factors: human nature and biology. Thus, calling attention to them only reinforces the idea that they are “accurate”. The consequence of strengthening stereotypes, Martin explained, is that when women deviate from their culturally assigned role by being competitive or assertive rather than warm and caring, colleagues punish them for their “unnatural” behaviour.

She recommends that diversity programmes adopt a nuanced strategy: To avoid discussing gender differences in ways that strengthen stereotypes, while promoting awareness of racial and ethnic diversity of experiences. Diversity programmes can also focus more on highlighting the true underlying reasons for imbalances among gender as well as along racial, ethnic and cultural lines – the societal challenges that are present for women in masculine work contexts and for members of other underrepresented groups.

The dad at the playground

Professor Steven Stroessner of Barnard College – the elite women’s college affiliated with Columbia University – sheds additional light on how gender stereotypes operate and how individuals can overcome them. At the conference, he shared how socially sanctioned gender roles help fuel the brain’s hyper-efficiency in answering the question, “What is this person like?” upon encountering new people. The unfortunate result is that our first impressions are often biased and not easily revised. Contradictory information is often seen against the backdrop of the impression already formed.

Stroessner described a study where he showed participants a photo depicting a man playing with his child at the park, and asked them to rate the man on qualities such as competence and caring. He found that the responses varied greatly based on whether the photo was presented as having been taken on a Tuesday afternoon or a Saturday. The “Tuesday

dad,” presumably a full-time caregiver, was given reasonably high marks on the caring dimension (a conventionally feminine trait) but fared abysmally on competence. The “Saturday dad” was judged to be very competent and, surprisingly, scored even higher on warmth than “Tuesday dad.”

To explain these findings, Stroessner offered a “role prioritisation model” suggesting that the brain typically associates men and women with different essential functions. For men, providing for their family is a primary responsibility; for women, taking care of the home and children should take precedence. Our impressions of people, whether positive or negative, are influenced by our sense of whether they have fulfilled their primary directive. Stay-at-home dads and childless career women are given less credit for their positive traits, because they have (according to the role prioritisation model) been delinquent where it matters most. However, a busy male executive who spends some of his weekend “babysitting” his child receives extra credit for augmenting his assigned social role with parenting.

This is potentially positive news for working dads, Stroessner suggests, but for women it could exacerbate the famous **workplace double bind** that sets gender norms in opposition to career advancement. The remedy can be for organisations to emphasise the fact that men and women both have family and other non-work obligations or interests. Encouraging senior male leaders to display family photos of themselves with their children, or to share publicly when they leave the office for personal reasons, could add flexibility to people’s mental models about male and female gender roles. This can afford women space to craft their own work identities unconstrained by stereotypes, and as the “Saturday dad” experiment showed, this would only improve the male leaders’ reputations.

Gender norms and entrepreneurship

Gender-stereotyped identities can also work to the detriment of women in entrepreneurship. The male-heavy “bro” culture of some tech start-ups (such as **Uber under previous CEO Travis Kalanick**) is a particularly egregious example. But thousands of miles from Silicon Valley, INSEAD PhD candidate Leena Kinger-Hans has investigated how, given the existing realities, women in India could be more motivated to become entrepreneurs.

In collaboration with INSEAD Assistant Professor of Strategy **Juan Ma**, Kinger-Hans focused on India’s rural micro-enterprise scene. They partnered with a large micro-finance organisation (MFO) in India to study how exposure

to information about start-up resources affects the take-up rates of aspiring women entrepreneurs. For this, they designed customised workshops for the MFO, that are typically used to give potential entrepreneurs – especially women – a head start with information and training.

Using a **randomized control trial (RCT) design**, the study tracked women's decisions to start new enterprises following a randomly assigned treatment of one of the three workshops: a) control workshops that did not provide information about start-up resources; b) 'personal resource information' workshops that emphasised the importance of an individual's own assets and skills in start-up activities; and c) 'social resource information' workshops that underscored the value of taking advantage of social connections in carrying out start-up activities. The authors found that 'social resource information' workshops were by far the most impactful, leading to an increase in entrepreneurial take-up of almost 40 percent as compared to the control. The 'personal resource information' workshops produced a more modest increase of 22 percent.

Furthermore, the positive effect of social resource assessment was even stronger for women who perceived very strong traditional gender norms in their local environment. These findings are of great interest for academics and policymakers grappling with the factors that might foster entrepreneurship among women in developing markets. Existing research has found limited evidence on benefits from other financial and human capital interventions for female micro-entrepreneurs. Kinger-Hans and Ma's findings suggest that social networks can be leveraged as an asset in developing entrepreneurship, particularly among some of the world's women who are arguably most disempowered.

Reworking organisational cultures

Martin and Stroessner's presentations suggest that shifting the cues present in organisational cultures can buffer employees' identities against confining gender norms. Further, Kinger-Hans's findings imply that even within cultures with very firmly entrenched traditional ideas about gender, it may be possible to empower women by leveraging their strong social ties.

An integrating discussion at the end of the session, led by Professor Katherine Phillips of Columbia Business School, focused on what types of workplaces leaders should be striving to create. Research suggests that these kinds of inclusive workplaces should allow us to question our

assumptions (including those about men), bring our whole selves to work, and encourage others to do the same.

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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.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

As society increasingly demands more inclusive leadership and culture, INSEAD is actively studying and engaging business leaders and practitioners on anti-racism, gender balance and other key topics related to creating fairer, more representative organisations. In this series, INSEAD faculty and their close collaborators with rich experience in practice give their insights and suggestions on how to develop diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in businesses and organisations.