

Women at Work: How Organizational Features Impact Career Development

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Abstract

Organizations benefit from gender diversity, as research clearly documents. Nevertheless, statistics reveal consistent gender differences in career development and payment. Women who feel undervalued at work will re-evaluate their priorities and are tempted to “opt out.” Organizations that wish to reap the benefits of gender diversity can profit from behavioral science research identifying mechanisms that may prevent women from making the same career choices as men: (a) *implicit bias* decreases the odds that women will enter and perform in male-dominated job levels or organizations, (b) *glass cliff* effects make career development less attractive for women, (c) *Queen Bee* effects prevent women in leadership from acting as role models for other women, and (d) some *work–family* approaches imply that women have to give up family life to be successful in their professional career. Being aware of these mechanisms, their implications, and possible remedies can benefit organizations and policy makers, and encourage women in different career stages to “lean in.”

Keywords

gender differences, career development, women and work, implicit bias, glass cliff, queen bee, work–family facilitation, gender pay gap, women in leadership

Tweet

Gender diversity benefits organizations, and behavioral science shows how to encourage women to “lean in.”

Key Points

- Behavioral science identifies what prevents women from making the same career choices as men.
- *Implicit bias* undermines women in male-dominated jobs or organizations.
- The *glass cliff* makes career development less attractive for women.
- *Queen Bee* effects prevent women leaders from acting as role models for other women.
- Some *work–family* approaches imply women should give up family life for career success.

Benefits of Gender Diversity

Investigations consistently reveal that organizations profit from gender diversity, especially at the (higher) management level. For instance, in 638 Fortune 1000 firms (with an average size over 13 billion USD), the presence of female directors on the board reliably predicted firm value, regardless of firm size, type of industry, or corporate governance measures (Carter, Simkins, & Simpson, 2003).

Various factors contribute to these effects. Having women represented in strategic leadership positions helps companies to penetrate new markets by catering to different customers and suppliers. In addition, gender-mixed management teams display more creativity and innovation, and can engage in more effective problem solving, due to the presence of different perspectives. Finally, gender-diverse leadership facilitates understanding complex demands and (cultural) differences in global markets (Carter et al., 2003).

Gender diversity in work teams generally predicts creativity and adaptability to change. For instance, female researchers in male-dominated fields yield novel insights that develop science and industry. The domains of such “gendered innovations” include health care, technology and engineering, public transportation, and water infrastructure (for cases see Genderedinnovations.stanford.edu).

The bottom-line benefits of gender diversity in organizations are well documented. Companies that achieve gender diversity in management on average attain better financial results. Companies with the most female board directors

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reported 16% more return on sales, and 26% more return on invested capital. Companies that sustain three or more women board directors over 4 to 5 years outperform companies with no women board directors (Catalyst, 2013). In sum, gender diversity in the workplace, and female representation in leadership, works for organizations.

Gender Differences in Pay and Career Development

At the same time, it is less obvious that organizations equally value men's and women's contributions, or that organizations are equally attractive for them. Men and women starting with the same education develop different career paths. For example, U.K. women business graduates after 7 years were more likely than men to have jobs where a business degree was not needed (Wilton, 2007). Female business graduates also earned 19% less than their former male classmates (£6,500 pounds annually). Similarly, 8 years after graduation, the income of U.S. male MBA graduates had increased faster than female MBA's (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2010).

Gender pay gaps appear across age, ethnicity, profession, education, and country (Catalyst, 2014a). For instance, in 13 EU nations, a gender wage gap of 3% to 15% cannot be explained by legitimate causes, such as experience or part-time employment (Aláez-Aller, Longás-García, & Ullibarri-Arce, 2011).

A clear leadership gap also differentiates the genders. Although men and women participate in paid work almost equally (47% of the U.S. labor force are women), fewer than 5% of CEOs in companies on the 2013 Fortune 1000 list are women (Catalyst, 2014b). Even after reaching this level of leadership, men and women do not receive equal pay. Among 192 male and female executive directors of U.K.-listed firms (Kulich, Trojanowski, Ryan, Haslam, & Renneboog, 2011), male directors received larger bonuses than female directors (a difference of £10,000 or 36%), after controlling for company size, risk level, board tenure, and firm performance.

Other sectors, such as health care, science, politics, and public administration, show similar gender discrepancies. In academia, for instance, women are less well represented than men at the highest scientific and organizational levels, systematically receive less funds for research (Bedi, Van Dam, & Munafo, 2012), and are paid less at the same job levels, across different areas of science (Shen, 2013).

In sum, on the one hand, clear benefits to having (more) women in organizations have been documented. On the other hand, relevant statistics reveal less workplace benefits for women than men, in terms of pay and career prospects. When organizations are unable to offer attractive career prospects to their female employees, this is likely to lower women's motivation to perform well, and to increase their levels of absenteeism and turnover. All these outcomes increase organizational

costs. Understanding the origins of these differences—and how to attract, retain, and promote women in organizations—can help organizations reap the benefits of gender diversity.

Is It Something About Women?

To address these issues requires examining the validity of different explanations for the observed patterns. A first possibility is inherent differences between men and women, in specific abilities, ambitions, and preferences necessary for professional career success. For instance, gender pay differences may result from a greater reluctance of women, compared with men, to negotiate about their pay or to request a raise or promotion (Riley Bowles, 2013). Women tend to avoid competitive pay schemes (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007) and show less performance enhancement due to competition (Gneezy, Niederle, & Rustichini, 2003).

Some explain these patterns by pointing to biological and evolutionary differences, causing men to be more competitive and women to be more caring. However, *no convincing scientific evidence supports this position*. For instance, differences in brain activity between men and women by no means show whether and how these relate to specific behaviors, nor that such observations point to “hard wired” gender differences (Fine, 2013).

This conclusion also emerges from a recent review of meta-analyses testing the statistical robustness of effects across multiple studies (Hyde, 2014). This review examined scientific evidence across hundreds of studies, on a range of gender differences that might be relevant to differential career success of men and women. These included cognitive performance (e.g., math ability), personality and social behaviors (e.g., leadership), and psychological well-being (e.g., academic self-esteem). Across the board, the results were consistent and clear: The “mountains of research” available reveal only small or trivial differences between men and women on these indicators. Gender differences emerged only under specific conditions. *Social context*—instead of biology—creates or erases gender differences (Hyde, 2014). So could gender differences in career development somehow relate to differences in work situations or organizational features typically encountered by men and women?

Is It Something About Work Organizations?

Another possible explanation for gender differences in career development and organizational success is that work organizations tend to favor male over female employees. At first, this may seem unlikely, as laws establish equal rights for men and women in the workplace and enforce gender-neutral treatment of workers. However, even when success criteria seem gender neutral, organizational decision makers may

differ in their expectations, performance appraisals, and treatment of men and women.

Formal anti-discrimination policies may not always prevent gender bias. Different metaphors indicate the persistence of “invisible” barriers that women can encounter at work (sticky floor, leaky pipeline, maternal wall) with “glass ceiling” representing the most widely-used term (Bruckmüller, Ryan, Haslam, & Peters, 2013). Such “invisible” barriers may originate in organizational cultures, expectations, and everyday practices that unintentionally favor men over women. Even systems that seem to value individual performance above all else can have such effects (Teelken & Deem, 2013).

The “Paradox of Equality”

This phenomenon has been referred to as the “paradox of equality” (Castilla & Benard, 2010). Under guidelines that promote meritocracy, men are generally more likely than women to receive rewards. This appears in managers’ recommendations for bonus, promotion, and termination, and occurs despite equal performance evaluations (e.g., when managers respond to identical employee profiles). Paradoxically, this bias against women does not emerge (or even reverses) with *less* emphasis on individual merit (Castilla & Benard, 2010). Yet merit pay plans are common: Surveys reveal around 90% of U.S. firms use this system (Heneman & Werner, 2005).

The paradox lies in unintentionally triggering gender stereotypes and biases, *in particular* when emphasizing merit. Guidelines that emphasize individual merit and gender equality increase confidence in one’s ability to make objective decisions (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Kaiser et al., 2013). So, they mislead people into relying on their stereotypic expectations without noticing that they do. This resonates with broader psychological phenomena established in empirical research. When people somehow are led to believe they are unbiased, they are less inclined to monitor the accuracy of their impressions (Monin & Miller, 2001; Uhlmann & Cohen, 2007).

Thus, the very conviction that individual merit is the only relevant criterion—and can be judged objectively—makes people less vigilant for bias. They then fail to suppress faulty judgments that may lead them to prefer male over female candidates in hiring or promotion (Ellemers & Van Laar, 2010). This counter-intuitive but well-documented observation reminds us that commonsense solutions to achieve gender equality do not always work as intended.

The Behavioral Science Approach

What then might be the “true” explanation of persisting gender differences in the workplace? And more importantly, what can be done if commonsense solutions (such as emphasizing the importance of equality) are ineffective, or when

formal measures (installing anti-discrimination guidelines) are insufficient or may even sustain existing disparities? It might be useful to take advantage of relevant insights from behavioral science, instead of relying on what seems intuitively right—but may be misguided.

Behavioral science offers a different perspective: explicitly allowing for the possibility that individuals and organizations mutually influence *each other*. Small initial differences between men and women can magnify over time, as they learn which behaviors are encouraged in the organization. For instance, being the only female in a group of men leads women to assume that their contributions are likely to be considered unimportant. This undermines their motivation and performance. However, understanding this process also clarifies how to avoid self-defeating responses: Recognizing the unconscious implications of being “solo” and explicitly assuring women that their contributions are valued enhances their motivation and performance (Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2006; Hoyt, Johnson, Murphy, & Skinnell, 2010).

Across the board, organizations reward masculine behavior. Masculinity predicts women’s as well as men’s career advancement, beyond factors such as human capital (Tharenou, 2001). For instance, men and women who opt to work in a masculine organizational culture (characterized by aggressiveness rather than supportiveness) over time earn higher salaries than those who avoid this organizational culture (O’Neill & O’Reilly, 2010). Thus, the interplay between what organizations value, on the one hand, and behavioral preferences of men and women, on the other hand, contribute to current gender differences in organizations.

Rather than “blaming” women *or* organizations, behavioral science can help understand how individuals and organizations *mutually* influence each other. Understanding such cycles—and how these become self-defeating—is crucial for organizations that wish to become more attractive for women, and for women who want to demonstrate more successfully how they contribute to the organization. Four relevant mechanisms are reviewed below.

Implicit Bias

People think of gender bias as negative attitudes about women, endorsed by men. Indeed, such blatantly sexist behavior undermines women’s performance, for instance in a job application situation (e.g., Koch, Konigorski, & Sieverding, 2014). However, bias against women can also emerge in subtle, implicit ways: for instance, positive but patronizing expectations about women having superior socio-emotional skills (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Observing frequently occurring patterns in society, people make implicit associations about women’s and men’s likely behaviors. For instance, whereas females are more easily linked to family, males are more easily associated with careers (see <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/> for a demonstration).

Instead of a simple negative attitude toward women, implicit bias may reflect a perceived *lack of fit* with required job demands (e.g., competitiveness; Heilman & Eagly, 2008; see also Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014). Such subtly biased expectations can be held by men as well as women, and are not easily recognized as unfair (Barreto, Ellemer, Cihangir, & Stroebe, 2008). Nevertheless, they unintentionally influence people's responses to others in the workplace (Heilman, 2012). A classic example is the case of Ann Hopkins, who was denied partnership in her firm, despite her professional success and superior earning power for the company. The main reason provided to deny her partnership was that she did not dress and behave in a sufficiently feminine way and "needed a course at charm school." The U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged this as sexist treatment, citing scientific evidence on implicit bias (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991).

Although expecting women to dress femininely or be socially sensitive might seem innocent, subtle discrimination can be harmful. Two recent meta-analyses, statistically testing results across a large number of men and women participating in correlational ($n = 144,246$) and experimental ($n = 2,640$) studies, reveal that subtle discrimination negatively affects a range of relevant outcome variables (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). These include work outcomes (career success, job stress, performance, turnover), physical health (substance use, cardiovascular health, body size), and psychological health (stress, emotions, satisfaction, self-esteem; see also Jones, Peddie, Gilrane, King, & Gray, 2013).

Implicit bias can set in motion a self-fulfilling cycle of motivational withdrawal and performance failure. In organizations, women's awareness that others (implicitly) expect them to perform poorly due to their gender (e.g., with respect to financial decision making, problem solving, leadership) raises anxiety and distraction. Concern about confirming stereotypes lowers self-confidence, in particular for the only woman in a group of men (Betz, Ramsey, & Sekaquaptewa, 2013). Diminished performance motivation may seem a valid reason to exclude women from attractive jobs. However, behavioral science clarifies how organizational factors may unwittingly contribute, and shows how to enhance instead of diminish women's performance.

Implicit gender bias is widespread and hard to avoid. Investors prefer entrepreneurial ventures pitched by men over identical pitches made by women (Brooks, Huang, Kearney, & Murray, 2014). Scientists too are unable to judge facts about men and women objectively. Male and female senior scientists were more inclined to hire, mentor, and propose higher pay, when the same candidate for a vacancy was identified as John rather than Jennifer (Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012).

In sum, gender-specific performance expectations may influence the way people respond to men's and women's individual achievements (Heilman, 2012). Such implicitly

biased perceptions may take the form of positive expectations, emerge also among those who aim to treat men and women equally, and occur even if the objective performance of men and women is the same (Rudman, Glick, & Phelan, 2008). Yet the more implicit such bias is, the more difficult it becomes to detect, the more reluctant people are to object, and the more likely they lose motivation and performance as a result (Barreto & Ellemer, 2013; Schmitt, Ellemer, & Branscombe, 2003).

Women who do maintain their career ambitions still may be treated differently than men, due to gender-specific performance expectations (Ellemer, Rink, Derks, & Ryan, 2012). The so-called "glass cliff" is a case in point.

Glass Cliffs

Contemporary organizations increasingly compete in service and customer satisfaction—instead of production—and workers more often must collaborate to deliver team performance (Ellemer, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004). Thus, sensitivity to subordinates or clients—typically viewed as women's strength—nowadays is a leadership requirement (Powell, 2011). At first, this might seem advantageous for women's careers. However, studies of women in leadership positions reveal a clear downside to being promoted primarily due to alleged "people skills."

This was convincingly demonstrated in an archival study comparing FTSE-100 U.K. companies that had appointed a woman or a man to their board of directors (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). After appointing a female board member, companies in the same sector and same period increased in average share price on the London Stock Exchange (as an indicator of company performance), while company performance was stable before and after appointing a male board member. This attests to the positive contributions of female leaders, and supports the benefits of gender diversity in management, reviewed above.

However, in the months *preceding* these appointments, the performance of companies that selected a female board member was *worse* than the performance of companies that appointed a man. This suggests that female board members were installed *under less favorable conditions* than their male colleagues. Besides implicitly associating men with leadership ("think manager, think male"; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996), people turn to female leaders preferably in times of organizational crisis ("think crisis, think female"; Haslam & Ryan, 2008).

The tendency to see women as more suitable leaders than men when there is much to lose and little to gain—due to allegedly superior "people skills"—is quite generic. Female lawyers are more often assigned to lead high-risk, controversial cases; female politicians are more often proposed for "unwinnable" seats (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

Overall, women—rather than men—tend to be proposed for leadership positions with few resources. In fact, female leaders were not only preferred to turn around a company in decline (i.e., lacking *material* resources), but were expected to do so with little support from relevant stakeholders (lacking *social* resources). While on the one hand this might communicate extreme confidence in female leaders' ability to operate effectively under difficult circumstances, on the other hand it implies that men and women tend to confront fundamentally different leadership experiences.

This creates a dilemma for women who seek leadership. The tendency to rely on the stereotypically superior “people skills” of female leaders implies that they are more often assigned to risky, precarious positions, with few material and social resources. This makes it more difficult for them than for men to succeed, even if they display identical performance and leadership skills. Yet, failing to turn around the crisis is ascribed more to women's apparent lack of leadership abilities than to demanding circumstances (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). If women recognize that success is unlikely due to lacking resources, they are reluctant to accept the leadership positions offered (Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2012). While this might protect individual women from accepting impossible assignments, it also reinforces the notion that women “opt out” of leadership.

Queen Bees

How valid are such concerns about the ability of women to perform well in leadership positions, as long as some female CEOs, politicians, and business owners are highly visible and extremely successful? Don't these examples provide sufficient evidence of overcoming gender stereotypes and implicit bias? Shouldn't they be a source of inspiration and role models for other women? Doesn't this prove that women who do not advance in their careers only have themselves to blame? Research on the so-called “Queen Bee” phenomenon suggests that this analysis is not as straightforward as it may seem.

Personal accounts of successful women (e.g., Sandberg, 2013) reveal that their careers are marked by difficulties relating to their gender, and that great determination was required to overcome the gender bias they confronted. While the road toward success is not closed for women, access is restricted. Women's career paths have been characterized as a “labyrinth” in which they have to navigate difficulties that men do not encounter on their way to the top, due to implicit gender bias (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

One way to escape gender-based expectations is to focus on one's unique personal qualities. Knowing that others think stereotypically can prompt individual women to demonstrate that such stereotypes should not apply to them. Indeed, across different professions and careers, successful women tend to perceive themselves as different from other women. For instance, they characterize themselves in highly

masculine terms and indicate extreme career ambition—even more than their male colleagues (Ellemers, Van den Heuvel, et al., 2004).

While this may clarify their own abilities and goals, it reinforces stereotypical thinking as accurately describing what to expect from *other* women. Successful women's distancing themselves from the gender stereotype further leads them to underestimate the competence and ambition of more junior women (Ellemers, Van den Heuvel, et al., 2004). As a result, successful senior women generally resist measures aiming to secure equal opportunities and are reluctant to mentor junior colleagues (Derks, Ellemers, Van Laar, & De Groot, 2011).

Some interpret these findings as indicating that women are their own worst enemies, wish to protect their unique position, and will not allow other women to achieve equal career success. Countering this interpretation, research has clearly established that Queen Bee responses emerge as a strategy to *cope with gender bias* in organizations (Ellemers & Barreto, 2008). Thus, the reluctance of successful females to support other women stems from their own career experiences, instead of being characteristic for women in general. In a study of police women, leaders who were asked to recall gender bias in their careers displayed the Queen Bee response. However, no such tendencies emerged among high-level police women invited to think of times they were evaluated on individual merit (Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers, & De Groot, 2011).

So yes, clearly, a number of women have achieved career success. However, in itself this does not provide evidence for equal opportunities, nor is it self-evident that things will be easier for others following in their footsteps. As long as ambitious females confront gender bias at work, they will be tempted to distance themselves from “regular” women. This makes them critical of junior colleagues and their career ambitions, and reluctant to mentor or support equal opportunity measures. Thus, their individual success hinders rather than helps other women (Ellemers et al., 2012). Again, the Queen Bee response is not an inevitable consequence of women in leadership. Instead, it is triggered by the discriminatory career experiences they encountered on their way to the top. Breaking this cycle starts with addressing the impact of gender bias in the workplace.

Work–Family Issues

In this context, how may family responsibilities impact career development? Women—even with a full-time job—spend more time on housework and childcare than men do (Hoyt, 2010). Obviously, combining one's career ambitions with family responsibilities raises logistic complexities. In principle, this holds for men as well as women. However, implicit bias makes people think that women should take primary responsibility for resolving these difficulties. When women devote part of their energies to managing their family

life, this is seen to indicate lack of professional commitment, while this is less true for men who engage with family responsibilities.

Whereas men are expected to simultaneously sustain a professional career and family life, this seems more an either-or choice for women. Women who are successful in their careers are more likely than men to be single or childless (e.g., Ellemers, Van den Heuvel, et al., 2004). Women working in male-dominated jobs are seen as “unfeminine,” and less likely to be chosen as a date (Badgett & Folbre, 2003). Women who resume work after childbirth are evaluated as “cold” and as less attractive employees than working men who become fathers (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004).

Are these perceptions supported by facts, or do they reflect another instance of implicit gender bias? Are women less motivated in their careers because they prioritize family over paid work? Behavioral science suggests otherwise. Social norms and moral obligations endorse women providing (unpaid) care, causing them economic disadvantage (Folbre, 2012). However, a large-scale survey that followed almost 5,000 women over 35 years revealed that the effect of having children on women’s careers is temporary. As children grow, women tend to resume work and compensate for delays in their career development, attesting to their continued interest in career advancement (Kahn, García-Mangano, & Bianchi, 2014).

Behavioral science consistently reveals that people’s inferences about gender differences in career ambitions due to family commitments reflect *biased expectations*, rather than anything else. In a study of over 40,000 men and women in 36 countries (Lyness & Judiesch, 2014), self-reported experiences of men and women in finding a work–life balance were similar, and consistent across countries. However, supervisors generally *perceived* women as less able to combine work and family, especially in societies with low gender equality.

When society’s gender stereotypes bias supervisor perceptions, this likely impacts performance evaluations and promotion decisions concerning men and women. When women realize their career opportunities are diminished due to family obligations, it is tempting to place less value on career progress and prioritize family life instead. Thus, behavioral science again reveals the far-reaching effects of implicit gender bias, which can start a cycle of lost motivation and self-defeating responses among working women. Other’s expectations affect the priorities people set: These do not necessarily reflect stable personal preferences, inherent incompatibility of work and family life, or biologically determined gender differentiation.

When situational influences can impact on people’s career choices and performance motivation, changing the way we approach them might cause people to re-evaluate their priorities. This can have real effects on people’s lives and organizational performance. Studies of nearly 20,000 employees in a large international financial-service institution demonstrate

how this may work. Countering common beliefs, employees experienced the combination of work and family roles primarily as a source of personal *enrichment* and mutual *facilitation*, rather than as incompatible. If they focused on their roles’ mutual benefits, employees reported more satisfaction and work commitment. In addition, employees who experienced work and family roles as facilitating each other (instead of being conflictual) objectively improved work performance (increased sales volume, reduced absenteeism) and physical health (e.g., body mass index, cardio-fitness; Van Steenbergen & Ellemers, 2009).

In this research, after correcting for relevant background variables such as working hours, number of children, or childcare arrangements, women were more likely than men to report combining work and family roles as mutually enriching rather than conflictual. The beneficial effects of work–family facilitation for well-being, physical health, and work performance were more evident for women than for men. Thus, women do not necessarily have to make an either-or choice between their professional career and their family life.

Do others at work play a role in how women appraise the combination of different roles and how it impacts work and life outcomes? Indeed, support from one’s supervisor was crucial in determining whether work and family life were experienced as conflictual or mutually enriching (Van Steenbergen & Ellemers, 2009). Support from one’s supervisor was even more important than support from one’s partner at home. Specifically, when relevant others at work emphasize the difficulties associated with combining work and family roles, this raises negative thoughts and feelings, and reduces perceived ability to cope with one’s dual roles. However, when others focus on the benefits of combining work and family life, employees report more positive thoughts and feelings, and feel better able to cope with the challenges of combining their professional career with their family life (Van Steenbergen, Ellemers, Haslam, & Urlings, 2008).

Now That We Know This, What Can Be Done?

Behavioral science has identified four relevant phenomena that may prevent women from making the same career choices as men. The common pitfall connecting these phenomena is that people tend to rely on implicit gender stereotypes to make inferences about the ambitions, characteristics, and priorities of men and women in organizations. In this way, they unwittingly evaluate men and women at work differently, causing women to perceive fewer advancement opportunities than men. This easily undermines motivation and performance, causing women to “opt out.” Notwithstanding this self-defeating cycle, people believe that every individual has an equal chance to advance or obtain rewards, regardless of gender (Stephens & Levine, 2011).

Table 1. Ways to Achieve Equal Career Opportunities.

What Organizations Can Do	What Women Can Do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge and correct for implicit bias • Keep statistics to monitor gender representation • Encourage women to state their ambitions • Welcome diversity as an organizational asset 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to recognize implicit bias • Ask about specific performance criteria • Find people who can support your ambitions • Focus on the benefits of combining work and family roles

Equal-opportunity legislation and confidence in merit systems make people resist affirmative action policies that seek to correct for unintentional bias (Crosby, Sabattini, & Aizawa, 2013). Simultaneously, organizational good will and resources are wasted on well-intended initiatives that seem to make intuitive sense but are ineffective or even counter-productive. Successful interventions must meet a number of requirements (Moss-Racusin et al., 2014). First, inform people of behavioral science evidence (e.g., about implicit bias), and make sure that prospective measures take these into account. Second, assigning blame adds no value; no single culprit exists in a system of mutual expectations and self-defeating cycles. Finally, good intentions are not enough: Once specific targets are set, progress needs to be monitored systematically. Individual success stories do not demonstrate the broader effectiveness of policy measures—only large numbers of observations and overall statistics tell the true story.

The most consistent conclusion from relevant research is that gender disparities in organizations have no single cause. Multiple (dis-)advantages accumulate, and small differences can become insurmountable barriers over time. There is no silver bullet to secure equal career opportunities for men and women. When developing policies for human resources, strategic management, or labor legislation, each step merits careful attention for unintentional bias. Instead of blaming each other for lack of progress, each party can contribute in their own way to achieving parity (see Table 1). Accepting that gender bias may persist in unwanted and uncontrollable ways is a first step in this process. Obviously, men and women should meet the same performance standards. However, women have more challenges to find their way “through the labyrinth,” and thus need more determination than their male colleagues to achieve career goals. This is why guidance, mentoring, or other support can be crucial in maintaining their ambition and displaying their abilities.

Organizations can counter the impact of implicit bias by developing clear criteria for employment, wages, and promotion, instead of relying on subjective impressions, ambiguous prototypes, or existing selection practices. Women can contribute by requesting that performance criteria are specified. Organizations can keep statistics and monitor progress toward

targets, and women can ask organizations to account for such statistics. In addition, organizations can encourage women to state their career goals or invite them to have their portfolio examined, instead of relying on self-selection of ambitious individuals in a meritocratic system. Women do well to make relevant others aware of their ambitions, and to seek support in achieving their goals. Finally, organizations can only realize the bottom-line benefits of gender diversity when they are open to different approaches and willing to reconsider standard practices. This includes allowing for the possibility that employees and managers develop different solutions to combine their professional career with their family life.

Conclusion

The key to actually providing equal career opportunities for men and women in organizations is in acknowledging that this is hard to achieve, due to implicit gender bias. This allows people in organizations to examine and correct for policies and practices that may unwittingly perpetuate current gender disparities or reinforce implicit bias. Behavioral science demonstrates that some commonsense solutions may be counter-productive, and reveals which interventions are most likely to be effective. Insights from behavioral science inform us about what can be done to help women “lean in”; specific policy choices will depend on the most pressing organizational priorities.

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