

Gender equality: focus less on 'fixing the women' and more on engaging men



Most forward-thinking companies accept that creating an equitable and inclusive workplace is a leadership challenge and one which needs to involve men as active stakeholders. While it is reassuring to see less focus on 'fixing the women' and more on engaging men, there is a lot of confusion about what this actually means and how to approach it, or even how to talk about it.

Catalyst was one of the first organisations to put the spotlight on men's engagement in a series of reports titled [Engaging Men in Gender Initiatives](#). We wanted to better understand what was holding men back and how we can enable men to be more visible and vocal in their advocacy of creating a gender-equitable workplace.

We found from our initial studies that there are three key barriers that could undermine men's support for initiatives to end gender bias: apathy, fear, and ignorance about gender issues:

- **Apathy (74%):** A huge proportion of the men surveyed said that apathy, meaning a sense that gender issues do not concern men, stopped them getting involved in gender equity;
- **Fear (74%):** Similarly, a large amount of men reported three concerns: fears about loss of status and privilege if they supported gender equality; fears about making mistakes when working with women colleagues (e.g., perhaps unknowingly committing an offensive act); and fears about other men's disapproval;
- **Lack of Awareness (51%):** Interviewees perceived that some men are reluctant to join in efforts to end gender bias because of ignorance—both real and perceived.

This research also revealed three key factors that predicted men's awareness of gender bias 1) defiance of certain masculine norms 2) the presence or absence of women mentors and 3) a sense of fair play. Of those three factors, having a strong sense of fair play, defined as a strong commitment to the ideals of fairness, was what most differentiated men who actively championed gender equality from those who were not engaged.

The above findings provided the backdrop for Catalyst's [Men Advocating Real Change, or MARC](#), Initiative, which launched in 2012. While the primary focus of MARC has been on engaging men, MARC is not exclusive to men; it's about effective gender partnership to create a more balanced and equal workplace, beneficial to people of all genders, which can only be achieved by bringing everyone to the table.

But, what's in it for men?

Everyone benefits from more equitable policies. Both men and women report better health, greater freedom to be themselves, and improved ability to share financial responsibilities with a spouse or partner. Men, too, are under enormous pressure to maintain rigid and archaic gender norms and often report relief when these norms are questioned and challenged.

The good news is that we are seeing more and more men who are willing to work towards more gender-balanced leadership. However, before individuals can support change, they need to understand and believe that the status quo disadvantages women in the workplace and is bad for business and the company's reputation.

The workplace is unfortunately not a meritocracy. [Catalyst research](#) has revealed that women MBAs start at lower positions and salaries and do not catch up to their male colleagues. They also do not receive the sponsorship of highly influential individuals, which [our research](#) indicates is critical for advancement.

Furthermore, many organisations have a '[think-leader-think-male](#)' (and probably white male) default and leaders are often recruiting in their own image. This is often an unconscious bias and a comfort level with those who are 'similar', leaving many talented employees, particularly women, on the sidelines, facing frustrating barriers.

We need men to speak up against bias and dismantle the barriers that are holding talented women back. As the number of leaders and organisations willing to engage in these dialogues increases, the richness of the conversation evolves. [Catalyst research](#) shows that gender partnership is a key behaviour central to inclusive leadership. Then, to be an advocate is someone who is a) aware of gender bias, b) accepts the impact of bias and c) actively advocates for gender equity and inclusion and seeks out opportunities for advocacy without waiting to be asked.

Men in leadership must intentionally work to advance progress for women in the workplace. A fair workplace is one in which individuals are able to rise through the ranks based on their talent and uninhibited by their gender, ethnicity etc. and we need men's active support and advocacy to create this workplace. Real change will only come about when gender equity is treated like any business objective with clear targets and accountability.



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