

What if we flipped the conversation from gender discrimination to gender privilege?

*Gender privilege is a key challenge in the workplace that affects decision-making and innovation practices as well as employee well-being and organisational culture. To tackle gender privilege, instead of focusing on removing discrimination against women, a novel approach would be to remove the benefits of being male. But that must be done without excluding men. **Alexandra Kirienko** discusses how the behavioural sciences can help with the process.*

Privilege in the Workplace series - [The Inclusion Initiative](#) - #TIThursday

When talking about issues of gender within organisations, we usually focus on gender discrimination – the missed opportunities are at the centre of what is being discussed. Let us flip the conversation this time and focus on gender privilege instead. Considering gender privilege allows a fresh angle and outlook to gender differences in the workplace. The reason gender privilege is becoming a locus of attention is because it is about additional advantages that are gained, not opportunities missed. Increased understanding of the issue can pave the way towards levelling the playing field among genders.

Manifestation of gender privilege

One measurable way of looking at gender privilege is examining the pay gap. The differences in remuneration by gender have been studied for several decades ([Blau & Kahn, 1999](#); [Manning & Saidi, 2010](#); [Bishu & Alkadry, 2017](#)) and evidence supports that men remain privileged in terms of total compensation at work. The latest data for the European Union for 2018 indicates that men in the EU earned approximately 16% more per hour than women (European Commission, 2021); this trend has remained largely unchanged over the last decade. For the United States, the [Pew Research Center](#) (2021) estimated that male workers earned on average 19% more of what female workers earned in 2020.

The next area to consider is the way gender privilege manifests itself across C-suite and board level management. In the US men are advantaged in holding senior appointments: 79% of C-suite executives in corporate America are male ([McKinsey, 2020](#)). Across the FTSE 100 companies in the UK, there are 94 men as compared to only six female chief executive officers ([Cotton, 2021](#)). Many of the steps that are currently being taken to improve gender diversity at companies are unfortunately found to be highly ineffective. The IBM Institute for Business Value report looks at longitudinal data of 429 companies who participated in their survey both in 2019 and 2021, examining ranks across 10 industries and nine geographic regions ([2021](#)). The report finds that advancing women is not a top priority for the majority of global organisations, and that most equality programs do not necessarily lead to better outcomes. One reason behind the ineffectiveness of such programs is because interventions do not sufficiently address mindset change ([IBM Institute for Business Value, 2021](#)).

Corporate and industry culture has a significant effect on the resulting gender privilege in an organisation, especially among junior and mid-level roles. [Chang](#) (2019) explores the gender disbalance within the technology sector in her book “Brotopia: Breaking Up the Boys’ Club of Silicon Valley”, and [Ensmenger](#) (2015) digs into the historical development of masculine culture within the tech industry that underpins the gender imbalance. The [Behavioural Insights Team](#) (2019) analysis of female job applicants’ behaviour on the LinkedIn platform confirmed Ensmenger’s findings relating to the impact of masculine culture. During the recruitment process, culture also plays an important role: male job applicants experience an advantage of 7% in rates of contact from recruiters in male-dominated jobs as compared to women ([Hangartner, Kopp, & Siegenthaler, 2021](#)). A similar privilege dynamic is experienced by male applicants within female-dominated jobs ([Hangartner et al., 2021](#)).

Although there is a noticeable lack of male candidates looking to enter professions such as nursing ([Meadus, 2000](#)), men who do choose to go into this industry experience a “glass elevator” effect of being overrepresented in leadership positions ([World Health Organisation, 2020](#)). Research by [Lordan and Pischke \(2016\)](#) suggests that there is a negative relationship between female satisfaction and the occupation level share of males. The gender proportion across sector and company, therefore, is related to gender privilege and often results in advantages in favour of men.

Including women, not excluding men

Good inclusion practices should focus on including women, not excluding men. [Von Bergen, Soper and Foster \(2002\)](#) have identified some of the unintended consequences of diversity efforts, including devaluation of employees, increased reverse discrimination, and stereotypes reinforcement. In an ideal intervention, eradicating gender privilege towards one gender would not create new privilege in the opposite direction. Addressing this conundrum should take into account the fact that among women perceptions of discrimination negatively affect their well-being, whereas for men claims of discrimination do not impact well-being ([Schmitt et al., 2002](#)).

An important negative side effect of gender diversity programs is their potential to distort the talent pool of candidates. Female employees are most often underrepresented meaning that the quota ratios favour women, explicitly or implicitly ([PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2017](#)). This in turn shifts the gender privilege creating potential discrimination against male candidates ([Segal, 2015](#)). The desired ratio of women on company boards is one area where such gender quotas are introduced ([UK Government, 2011](#)). As a gender ratio is put forward, employees of the gender with higher representation have an increased chance of being hired ([Shaughnessy et al., 2016](#)). This statistical phenomenon can undermine the meritocratic principle behind hiring practices ([Eichler, 2016](#)), occurring across junior level roles ([O'Brien, 2019](#)) as well as senior management level positions ([Smith, 2018](#)).

Understanding the various impacts of gender privilege

Within an organisational context, gender privilege affects both the employer and the employee. Increased inclusion at work contributes to better results and performance for companies ([Fardale et al., 2015](#)). The companies in the top quartile of gender diversity are 15% more likely to have financial returns above their national industry median ([Hunt et al., 2015](#)). A diverse employee pool within a company brings in more innovative ideas, underpinned by the freedom to communicate without gender constraints ([Østergaard et al., 2011](#)).

A more gender equal environment positively contributes to employees' well-being as well as resilience ([Davies et al., 2019](#)). This, in turn, has an effect on employee turnover ([Böckerman et al., 2011](#)), allowing the company to spare additional financial expenses required for new employee training ([Hinkin & Tracey, 2000](#)). It is also beneficial for reputation ([Brammer et al., 2009](#)). Further, it can impact new generations of workers, who can be encouraged to choose an industry of their preference, without that choice being influenced by the perception of an unsuitable gender.

Harassment at work can occur when gender privilege creates a perceived ability of some employees to behave outside the professional boundaries. Organisations or teams where one gender is prevalent can express hostility towards those in the under-represented group ([International Labour Organisation, 2019](#)). [Einarsen and Raknes \(1997\)](#) find significant correlations between harassment incidents and job satisfaction, mental health and well-being in their analysis of the victimisation of men. A case study by [Raver and Nishii \(2010\)](#) also links gender harassment to other types of harassment, although importantly any one type of harassment is correlated with low organisational commitment, low job satisfaction and turnover intentions.

Addressing gender privilege

To tackle gender privilege, a number of strategies can be considered. The traditional approaches aim to remove discrimination against the women in a specific work environment. However, given the gender privilege focus of this article, an alternative way could be to remove the benefits of being male. There are three main ways behavioural insights can help design a system where gender will not provide a privilege, levelling the playing field across genders.

Fostering the conversation around gender privilege

[Bohnet](#) (2016) highlights that a number of countries use a comply-or-explain approach to gender diversity, where companies have to disclose their diversity policies and levels of diversity in the organisation. This acts as an incentive to hold conversations around gender and gender privilege at the company management level.

At the employee level, it is important to create a culture of speaking up and holding conversations about gender privilege. Importantly, these conversations should include both men and women. [Morrison, Wheeler-Smith and Kamdar](#) (2011) confirm that the group culture of speaking up is shaped by both individual attitudes and perceptions of the work context and also by group-level beliefs.

Intra-organisational culture

Changing culture effectively requires a change in context where the work environment within which people act is influenced. These cultural changes can be classified by using [Dolan et al., 2012](#)'s MINDSPACE framework (messenger, incentives, norms, defaults, salience, priming, affect, commitments, and ego). The "norms" part of the framework indicates that people's behaviour is strongly influenced by what others do. Similarly, all aspects of the framework refer to effective behavioural interventions that can help to influence and change the culture in an organisation ([Liu et al., 2017](#)). Such interventions could effectively encourage company management to target gender privilege. New cultural norms could require developing rules of engagement and checking "who is missing" at meetings and important decision points ([IBM Institute for Business Value, 2021](#)). This can ensure that important stakeholders of both genders are not excluded. Further initiatives can be considered to hold people accountable for following through with the new norms (Bohnet, 2016), such as the comply-or-explain approach, where if a certain diversity target isn't met, public disclosure of the reason behind it needs to be provided.

Technology to increase diversity

Designing ways to avoid the effects of gender privilege can be supported through technology. A variety of ways to increase diversity is proposed by the [IBM Institute for Business Value](#) (2021), putting forward possible digital tools to engage employees, including pulse surveys and agile team rooms. Pulse surveys involve brief questions sent out to employees which allow them to gauge employee sentiment around diversity and pick up any concerns ([Welbourne, 2016](#)). Virtual agile team rooms provide an opportunity for employees to be involved in decision-making, particularly around diversity policies ([Aragon et al., 2019](#)). Introducing initiatives such as pulse surveys and virtual agile team rooms contribute to increasing employee awareness of any problems surrounding gender privilege in the company. Digital feedback tools, in turn, will also encourage conversations around the gender environment in the organisation.

Technological solutions for candidate assessment could also help remove bias resulting from gender privilege during the hiring process, with one such solution proposed by [Sajjadiani et al.](#) (2019) in the form of a model that uses machine learning. However, AI-based technology is still subject to some bias ([Akter et al., 2021](#)). There is evidence that computational frameworks produce more objective results, including gender-agnostic results ([Naim et al., 2016](#)). The model by [Naim et al.](#) (2016) has been tested on a student population which, despite the large sample size, still raises questions about the external validity of the results. [Hangartner et al](#) (2021) propose a tool to monitor gender discrimination to increase awareness of possible gender privilege effects at an early stage of the recruitment process. Their model tracks the search behaviour of recruiters on employment websites and combines this with supervised machine learning to control for all relevant jobseeker characteristics that are visible to recruiters ([Hangartner et al., 2021](#)).

Gender privilege is a key challenge in the workplace that affects decision-making and innovation practices as well as employee well-being and organisational culture. We are fortunate to be living in a day and age when the conversation around gender privilege is ongoing and efforts are being made to promote inclusion. Being open to the application of behavioural insights and instilling real change through speaking up, fostering dialogue, and using technology will ensure that many organisations succeed in minimising the effects of gender privilege.



Notes:

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