

Against systemic gender injustice, our confidence culture encourages women to blame themselves

*Wherever there is talk of inequality—particularly gender inequality—discussions about confidence are never far behind. Women are encouraged to see themselves as stymied by internal obstacles and personal deficits. **Shani Orgad** and **Rosalind Gill** write that at a moment when structural inequalities and injustices are intensifying, instead of identifying their root causes, confidence culture turns away from those wider political, economic, and social issues. Instead, it encourages women to turn inwards and work on themselves.*

Women have been the “[shock absorbers](#)” of the pandemic. They have constituted the majority of essential workers in health, social care, and retail sectors. School and nursery closures have had a disproportionate impact on women, and especially mothers, who bore the brunt of homeschooling. Rates of [violence against women and girls](#) have been on the rise, and the uneven effects of redundancies and furloughs disproportionately hit women, leading to what has been termed a ‘she-cession’.

Indeed, [recent figures](#) show that the she-cession is getting worse: while both men and women suffered the loss of job opportunities in relatively similar numbers, men have regained 300% more of lost jobs than women have.

This is why this year’s International Women’s Day’s call to #BreakTheBias is more urgent than ever.

Breaking the bias is a [commitment](#) to “calling out bias, smashing stereotypes, breaking inequality, and rejecting discrimination.” Most crucially, it is a firm commitment to invest in structural and systemic change. This means tackling ongoing inequalities in the workplace, and not just in the boardroom—however encouraging the significant advancement in women’s [representation on FTSE 100 boards is](#); challenging and eliminating the stigma, silencing, and impunity that enable violence against women and girls ([VAWG](#)); making serious investments in sustainable development and protecting and empowering women, who constitute the majority of the world’s poor and are more vulnerable to the threats of [climate change](#).

Yet against the sobering reality of systemic injustice and the urgent need for structural transformation, all too often our culture encourages women to blame themselves. So, for example, inequality in the workplace is explained away by women’s “confidence gap”, whilst the solution is to encourage women to lean in and become more confident. Confidence coaching and [courses](#) seek to support women by teaching them how to believe in themselves (because no one else will).

Just as social media and advertising intensify body image pressures, women and girls are told that they just need to shut down those voices in their head that tell them their body is not beautiful. Meanwhile, parents, and especially poor and single mothers, struggling to cope with the lack of affordable childcare and housing, are exhorted to instil confidence in their children.

This is what we call [confidence culture](#). In our new book we show how self-confidence is presented as the solution to a wide range of issues. Wherever there is talk of inequality—particularly gender inequality—discussions about confidence are never far behind. Women, in other words, are encouraged to see themselves as stymied by internal obstacles and personal deficits.

Love Your Body advertisements, apps that instil a sense of well-being and self-belief, equality and diversity programs that celebrate women’s personal achievements, bestselling books advising women how to stop apologising and ‘kick ass’ and confidence training courses—these, and many other imperatives, programmes and interventions are aimed at the obvious good of empowering women. And who could possibly be against making young women feel more comfortable in their own skins, endowing mothers with self-esteem, and helping women feel confident in the workplace? Indeed, the idea of self-confidence has become so much a part of our common sense that it is presented as beyond debate.

But the problem is that precisely at a moment when structural inequalities and injustices are intensifying, instead of identifying their root causes, confidence culture turns away from those wider political, economic, and social issues. Instead, it encourages women to turn inwards and work on themselves.

Take, for example, a recent [tweet](#) that went viral, which was accompanied by the hashtag “#beconfident”. In the tweet, an employment recruiter tells an anecdote about a woman who accepted an offer that is \$45K lower than what the company’s budget would have allowed them to offer her. This story is meant to teach women an empowering lesson, namely: “ALWAYS ASK FOR THE SALARY YOU WANT (DESERVE).” Yet rather than criticising the gender pay gap, the constant undervaluing of women, and the company’s lack of transparency, the ‘confidence-lacking’ woman is blamed.

Even a self-proclaimed feminist book such as *Confidence Code*, written by two senior female journalists seeking to help other women to boost their self-confidence, reiterates—if inadvertently—the message that women have only themselves to blame. Part of the problem of gender inequality in the workplace, the authors explain, involves our own obsession with our physical appearance that drains our confidence. “A woman’s brain is not her friend when it comes to confidence,” they write, advising women to be their own “mittens”, to stop self-berating, and to overcome their “self-inflicted confidence wounds”.

Or take the story of [Louise](#), a female marketing manager. After the birth of her first child, Louise had to leave work meetings early occasionally to take her child to medical appointments. She would inform her employer before each of these appointments, but each time she would feel extremely conspicuous and anxious. Each time, Louise apologised, feeling smaller and smaller. Her confidence dwindled. [Girl, Stop Apologizing!](#) our confidence culture tells her. And yet Louise’s boss criticized her inappropriate and unprofessional conduct. Rather than breaking this toxic work culture—by, for example, her employer making the simple change of moving core work meetings to earlier hours—the work culture broke Louise. “I lacked the confidence it takes,” she concluded and quit her job.

International Women’s Day 2022 is a good moment to stop telling women to focus on changing their feelings, thinking and behaviour. Instead, the call to #BreaktheBias should be addressed first and foremost to our governments, workplaces, corporations, and the media. It must be directed at tackling the systemic and multiple biases that sustain inequality in so many ways and on so many levels. And it must move from breaking to building: building a physical, economic, and cultural climate that supports and reinforces the wellbeing, safety, economic security, and power of all women, both as a collective *and* as individuals.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the book [Confidence Culture](#), Duke University Press.
- The post represents the views of the author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics and Political Science.
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