

How we define competition fuels gender inequality in business

Being an active competitor in business has a certain logic when competition is the lifeblood of a free market economy. Competition can be dynamic and multi-dimensional, and many see it as a fuel for productivity, innovation and, of course, profitability. But unfortunately too often it is consigned to a simplistic stereotype of winning and losing. The concept is unexplored, while competitive behaviour is exhibited and marked as hypermasculinised. Such a limited definition has been instrumental in creating a gender bias and an uneven and often unstructured playing field.

The gendering process of competition began to take root as women entered the business world, disturbing the male dominated work environment. Decades of research, beginning with Virginia Schein's 1975 work on [sex role stereotyping](#), find competition defined as a masculine behaviour often co-existing with aggression. Such findings reinforce a stereotype that disables some women and men from accessing competition in multi-dimensional ways.

My [work](#) defines and explores eight dimensions of competition: external, internal, personal, interpersonal, positional, symbolic, collective and temporal. I found the majority of managers comfortable operating in the external dimension, where it is rigidly defined and embedded in key performance indicators. Underpinning this finding is an acceptance that external competition is largely depersonalised. When it is only practiced in one dimension its dynamism cannot be utilised to explore and challenge behaviours and attitudes in business and management which fuel inequalities.



To explore competition it is important to note there are two simple models:

1. Scarcity (only one person can win)
2. Challenge (everyone can win).

Such models are best explained using sporting contests. For example, in some football contests, if at the end of the time the score is a draw, built into the rules are extra time and a penalty shoot-out to ensure a winner is found. In a running race, however, it is possible for all the contestants to win by crossing the finish line at exactly the same time.

So how does gendered competition manifest itself?

Studies have found that women more often than men avoid competition in business both in group and individual scenarios. In Bosquet et al's 2013 [study](#), they wanted to test whether there were fewer women in senior position in French universities because of discrimination. What they found was that while women may not actually be discriminated against in the promotion process, they perceived they might be and so opted out of the competitive process. Opting out of the competition without challenging the actual or perceived discrimination accentuates how the gendered nature of the concept is maintained through silence.

Research carried out at [Olin Business School](#) found that women perform worse than men when they are involved in competitions for resources, ceasing to use the behaviours which, in a team setting, help them to succeed. Baer, who led the research, stated "...on average, competition does not help women."

| *Competition is caught up in a stereotype of winning and losing.*

But this is not the case for women in business who have played sport. In 2014 E&Y published a [report](#) based on a survey with over 400 women from US, Brazil, UK, Canada and China. The research found that the majority (52%) of C-suite women had played sport at the university level, compared to 39% of women at other management levels.

Expanding on their sporting experience and its relationship with business, the senior women cited their competitiveness as a bigger factor in their careers compared to more junior women. Interestingly, only 3% of C-Suite women had never played sport.

Sport provides a structured and comprehensive platform to understand, explore and practice competition and competitive behaviours. In a similar way that competition is caught up in a stereotype of winning and losing, it is also pitted as the opposite of collaboration. Yet sport can also make the connection between competition and collaboration because without teams and individuals signing up to a contest and a set of rules, sport would not happen.

The rules of competition are not always visible in the business world and again this can contribute to excluding some people from being fully engaged. The management and [organisational](#) philosopher [Handy](#) states that successful open competition depends on how all the competitors engage in the practice. He suggests three conditions have to be met:

1. It has to be perceived as genuinely open, i.e., everyone can ultimately win.
2. The rules and procedure for arbitration must be seen to be fair and adequate. No one is likely to be collaborative if the umpire is biased or the rules unknown.
3. The major determinants of success in the competition must be under the control of the competitors. They must have only themselves to blame if they fail ([Handy, 1993](#)).

Ironically to facilitate the disruption of gendered competition, the challenge must be to engage more fully with the concept, to explore its dimensions and to simply practice competing.

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