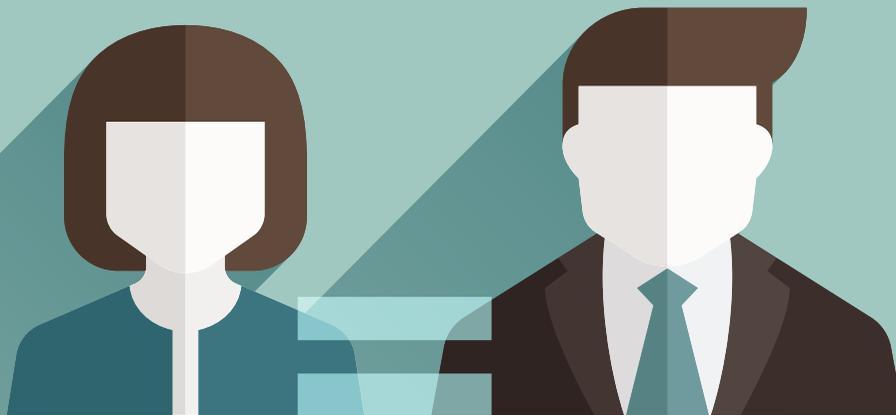


Gender: Ms—ed opportunities for business schools?

Gender equity has been an issue in business schools (and many other places) for a long time. But **Dianne Bevelander** and **Michael Page** wonder why it has taken so long to address it and what the way forward might be



Business, civic and political leaders have increasingly accepted the need for gender equity, both for reasons of justice and for the advantage that comes from greatly expanding the talent pool and diversity of thought across all sectors.

EFMD and AACSB International have pursued strategies aimed at encouraging business schools to address internal gender challenges and transform their programme activities in the pursuit of this goal. However, the pace of progress remains glacial. The 2016 *Financial Times* ranking of global business schools finds that only 12 of the top 100 deans are women and that the proportions of female board members, faculty, and students remain stubbornly below what might be considered desirable at 23.5%, 26.2%, and 34.2% respectively.

What, then, is the cause of this slow rate of transformation? What can be done to break through current barriers to accelerated progress?

The easiest response to the first question may be that business schools are constrained by internal and external factors limiting the rate at which they can transform their faculty and by external factors impacting their ability to recruit more female students and board members.

However, even if partially valid, this response ignores the impact of unconscious bias by school leaders that informs the structures and processes they adopt and perpetuate. Decades of evidence from neurology, and cognitive and social psychology finds that unconscious biases continue to influence our decisions. They do so even when these biases are at odds with our conscious beliefs that hold to the ideals of fairness and objectivity.

In some ways these biases are necessary for survival and are not all bad. However, if we are to successfully transform, we have to recognise that unconscious beliefs—attitudes and biases outside our cognitive perceptions of self—explain a significant element of our behaviour.

Business schools decision makers must take the lead in developing innovative approaches for dealing with gender inequality. They need, consciously and determinedly, to change the masculine business paradigm that remains dominant in the vast majority of schools.

Through their research and through their education programmes business schools play a significant role in informing the business practices and worldview of tomorrow's leaders and influencers. They have an opportunity, and a responsibility, to make a difference.

The imperative to make progress is vividly demonstrated by the 2013 European Commission report on gender, which found evidence of uneven progress in most areas and speculated that it will take "30 years to reach the EU's target of 75% of women in employment, over 70 years to make equal pay a reality, over 20 years to achieve parity in national parliaments (at least 40% of each gender), over 20 years to achieve gender balance on the boards of Europe's biggest companies, and almost 40 years to ensure that housework is equally shared."

Gender bias and many of the barriers to women's advancement occur because of how our social construction of gender defines the role of women. As such, it is not just a man's issue or an injustice perpetrated by men. Rather, achieving gender equality requires that women and men engage collaboratively and proactively to overcome unconscious elements that inform our continuing actions.



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Business school leadership needs to address the challenge of role models. Role models play an extremely important function and have a positive impact on how people view their own abilities. Sadly, female role models are far too scarce in business education

Evidence-based illustrations of bias by men and women include:

- Female leaders who display assertiveness are perceived as competent but unpleasant. They are seen as not “acting to type” by being warm, communicative and gentle.
- Both men and women have been found more likely to hire a man than a woman with the same professional and educational qualifications.
- Employers discriminate against mothers but not fathers; and mothers are seen to be less competent than women who are not mothers.

Business schools, which shape management attitudes and practice, have to be cognisant to the impact of these pervasive biases. Deans, department chairs and programme directors need to acknowledge that hiring and recruiting practices, research, pedagogical materials, business programmes, and role models are not gender neutral.

The existence of unconscious gender-based bias means that the absence of explicit attention to gender does not suggest gender neutrality. Although most case studies have nothing to do with gender, few feature women as primary protagonists. This failing was acknowledged by Nitin Nohria, Dean of Harvard Business School, when he stated his intention to double the number of Harvard case studies featuring women protagonists to around 20% by 2019. At the time, the number of such cases was 8%.

Importantly, pedagogical materials need to feature more women in leadership roles as a matter of course rather than as an “illustration of gender”. School leadership needs to drive the development of such material through resource allocation and other incentives.

Recent research finds that cluster hiring can mitigate the problem. Unconscious and conscious biases become more evident when few women are hired in a cluster than may be obvious when hiring on a case-by-case basis. It is easier to rationalise why one hire just turned out to be a man than why only two out of ten hires are women.

We believe that the same argument can be made for promotion. The AACSB *DataDirect 2014-15 Salary Survey* reports the proportion of female faculty across all ranks to be 31% and the proportion of female full professors to be 20%. Both percentages show little growth over the five-year period ending 2014-15 at 2% and 2.6% respectively. Disappointing as these figures are, they appear even worse when salary differences are acknowledged.

Turning to programmatic issues, here again conscious and unconscious bias is evident. The charismatic leader who rallies the troops like a great military general still looms large in leadership courses. This image remains in spite of the emergence of topics and theories related to spiritual, servant, authentic, and even female leadership. How many of our leadership classes pay sufficient attention to female leadership and in what way? How do we talk about Sheryl Sandberg? And what about Mary Barra, Chanda Kochhar, Christine Lagarde, Indra Nooyi, Guler Sabanci, and Susan Wojcicki?

The sad reality is that the leaders described in our courses seldom mirror the composition of our classes, and women in positions of authority are often spoken about in derogatory terms. The popular press exacerbates this by commenting on female corporate and political leaders in ways that are unrelated to their authority—the way they dress, the tone of their voices and aspects of their personal lives. This is seldom done with men. Business schools can, and should, change this paradigm.

Recently we asked an alumna what organisational behaviour case first sprang to mind that had a female protagonist. Her response: one concerning pregnancy leave!

Our leadership courses, and broader curricula, need to model future leadership that is more diverse. Leadership that includes women, people of colour, and people with different sexual orientations.

This is where business educators must start





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asked why the majority of faculty teaching on the Erasmus Centre for Women and Organisations programmes where female and whether this was positive.

What strange questions? Particularly when you consider the extent to which we have avoided asking questions like: why do we have such a dominance of men teaching at business schools? Is this a good thing?

Clearly, if such thoughts and questions are widespread, we have a way to go.

Senior administrators and faculty should consider devoting more energy to ensuring that successful women serve as speakers, mentors and role models. Such role models are necessary for our students and for our junior faculty and staff. As the institutions that develop the leaders of tomorrow, the behaviours and patterns of our schools matter.

We need to be the future we wish to create. Excuses are easy and action is difficult but now is the time for action: Action that reinforces our conscious sense of fairness and of what is best; action that works deliberately to overcome our unconscious biases.

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SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

<http://www.oecd.org/gender/home/closingthegendergapactnow.htm>
<http://rankings.ft.com/businessschoolrankings/global-mba-ranking-2016>
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<http://www.efmd.org/blog/view/1026-closing-the-gender-gap-in-european-business-schools>
 Flaherty, C. 2015. *Cluster Hiring and Diversity*. Inside Higher Ed May 1, 2015 <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/05/01/new-report-says-cluster-hiring-can-lead-increased-faculty-diversity>. Accessed May 1, 2016
<http://enewsline.aacsb.edu/business-school-faculty-focusing-on-gender-reported-for-full-time-faculty.asp>
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making the change. If cases continue principally to feature male leaders, if programmes and courses continue to be largely designed for a majority male audience, and if our leaders and professors continue to ignore the insidious nature of unconscious bias, change will be slow at best.

In our Academy of Management article, *Ms Trust: Gender, Networks and Trust – Implications for Management & Education*, we provide evidence that female MBA students skew more to men when engaged in activities requiring greater trust. If our programmes are to transform organisations over time to more gender-balanced institutions, this pattern of behaviour should be explicitly addressed.

We need to further develop our female students’ abilities to collaborate, encourage and empower one another in stressful, risky environments. Consideration should be given to offering women-only courses that can support this objective.

At the Rotterdam School of Management, the Kilimanjaro leadership elective was designed with this in mind—a women-only elective that was part of a larger portfolio of education and research initiatives oriented to developing greater gender equality on the programme and, subsequently, in broader society.

Finally, business school leadership needs to address the challenge of role models. Role models play an extremely important function and have a positive impact on how people view their own abilities. Sadly, female role models are far too scarce in business education. This was brought home to us when a senior faculty member

31%

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