ENGAGING MEN

Barriers and Gender Norms

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Men are pivotal in the pursuit of equity. They are arguably the most powerful stakeholder group in most large corporations, and their support can both expand and accelerate progress toward ending gender inequities. However, even when men have the best intentions for supporting gender equity, opposing forces such as gender norms and personal barriers can still undermine progress. For people to be effective advocates for equity and change, it is important to understand these challenges and how to overcome them.

Barriers

In order to understand the barriers that individuals face on their journey toward equity and inclusion, Catalyst interviewed men leaders who were supporters of inclusion. Through this work, we identified three primary barriers that men face: apathy, fear, and real or perceived ignorance.

**APATHY**

74% of interviewees said that many men were unconcerned about issues of gender equality, did not see a compelling reason for becoming actively involved in gender initiatives, or both.

**FEAR**

74% of interviewees said fear is a barrier and identified three pathways:

- Fear of losing status if women were to achieve equality.
- Fear of making mistakes and being criticized when trying to take action intended to reduce gender bias.
- Fear of negative judgments from other men.

**IGNORANCE**

51% of men interviewed believed that because of either perceived or actual ignorance, men are ill-equipped to advocate for gender equity simply because they are men. Some interviewees suggested that men are less aware of the issues around gender bias because they have never been part of an oppressed group.
The good news? While the barriers are clear, so, too, are the solutions. There are five strategies for combating these barriers.

1. **Identify and eliminate apathy.**
   
   Men are often apathetic towards gender equity because they incorrectly assume that gender bias does not impact them. Our interviews suggested that men become apathetic because they do not understand the personal cost of gender bias. However, as discussed below, men are also adversely affected by gender bias with repercussions in both the workplace and one’s personal life. Organizations can shine a spotlight on how gender biases negatively affect men as well as how gender equity will not only help women, but will benefit men, too.³

2. **Gender equity should never be framed as a zero-sum game.**

   One practice that likely contributes to zero-sum thinking is the wide display and dissemination of diversity representation metrics and goals. Research suggests that the mere act of viewing evidence that the share of jobs held by women in their organizations has spiked could increase men’s tendency to view their employers’ diversity initiatives from a zero-sum perspective.⁴ To avoid such consequences, workplaces might reconsider how such metrics are disseminated. Context and communication matter. Organizations should consider alternative ways to signal commitment and progress such as implementing routine diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) progress reports, celebrating individual talent, and clearly stating policies regarding gender equality. And when metrics are shared, do not decouple the numbers from the people behind them. Telling your organization’s talent development story and highlighting success stories and models of leadership and career growth—for women and men alike—can go a long way to helping people see increased diversity as a win-win, and an effort still fundamentally rooted in merit, rather than a sheer numbers game.
3. Men should be included in discussions of gender.
Catalyst’s experience suggests that in many organizations, it is mostly women who participate in and lead such activities. This pattern may reinforce the view that men are judged by women and their organizations as part of the problem. Such circumstances may only further diminish the role of men in DEI discussions. However, the participation of men in these DEI discussions is critical for their success. In organizations where men are silent, men are 50% less likely to be committed to interrupting sexist behavior at work and 40% less confident in their ability to address other people who engage in sexist behavior. By encouraging broader men’s participation in initiatives and programs to promote gender equity, organizations and individual women can signal that men are viewed as having a role in changing the workplace. Additionally, providing men with opportunities to discuss issues of gender in majority-men groups may reduce men’s concerns about making mistakes or being judged as sexist.

Nearly all men (94%) experience some degree of masculine anxiety in the workplace, potentially stifling their willingness to challenge sexist behaviors in the workplace. Exposing men to courageous role models, especially other men, who are challenging the status quo reduces this anxiety and improves the perceived fairness within the workplace. In turn, this provides an important reassurance that men will not lose face and be judged less manly for taking a stand against gender bias. As role models speak up and masculine anxiety decreases, men are more willing to challenge sexist behaviors.

5. Provide men with learning opportunities.
Most men (86%) say they want to interrupt sexist behaviors in the workplace, but far fewer men (31%) feel confident in doing so. Both men-only discussion groups and mixed-gender groups can help to boost men’s confidence and command regarding gender issues in the workplace. These learning opportunities can increase men’s inclination to take an active role in initiatives to eliminate gender disparities in the workplace.
Gender Norms

Gender norms also stymie progress toward equity and inclusion, especially for men. How men negotiate masculine norms is a key determinant of whether they support or resist efforts to foster equity and inclusion in the workplace. Gender norms contribute to masculine anxiety, and as masculine anxiety increases, the likelihood of men standing up to sexist behavior decreases.8 Additionally, a combative culture in the workplace—one where employees seek to dominate one another and value is placed on power, authority, and status—can exacerbate masculine anxiety and further deter men from interrupting sexist behavior. So, it’s important to understand the masculine norms that can contribute to masculine anxiety and combative cultures.9 Some of the ways that masculine norms manifest:

“Avoid all things feminine”
Perhaps the cardinal tenet of stereotypical masculinity, this rule mandates that men should never be seen or acknowledge conforming to any feminine norms.10 If a man is judged as having acted in ways that are consistent with any or all norms prescribed for women—that is, feminine norms—he will often experience criticism, ridicule, and rejection, and his status as a man may be called into question.11 This policing often occurs within men’s peer groups beginning at an early age and continues into adulthood.12 Pejorative terms, such as “sissy,” “wimp,” and “whipped” are regularly used to label men who are judged as acting “feminine” and are often an effective deterrent against future violations of the norm of avoiding the feminine.13

“Show no chinks in the armor”
This norm emphasizes being tough in both body and mind. Physical toughness means never shrinking from the threat of physical harm; while displaying emotional toughness requires that men conceal such emotions as fear, sadness, nervousness, and uncertainty and instead display anger, confidence, or stoicism.14

“Be a winner”
This rule prioritizes any activity that increases men’s wealth, social prestige, and power over others.15 Men who pursue fields that offer fewer opportunities for such status enhancement are far less likely to be admired, especially if those fields are judged to be better suited to women. This norm contributes to and reinforces common gender-segregation patterns in labor markets all over the world where men are consistently overrepresented in the jobs that command the highest salaries and greatest decision-making power.16

“Be a man’s man”
Also known as being “one of the boys,” this rule of masculinity calls for men to win the respect and admiration of other men and to appear to enjoy a special sense of camaraderie with men peers. Being a man’s man means visibly complying with all masculine norms, including participation in stereotypically masculine activities or pastimes (which depending on the culture may include watching sports, drinking beer, or attending men’s clubs). These activities not only serve as rituals that reinforce masculine norms but also promote social ties and solidarity on the basis of these norms.17
In trying to adhere to these norms, many men prioritize career advancement over relationships with friends and family, which not only hurts their quality of life, but also limits sources of support they have in overcoming stress. These gender norms can fuel a feedback loop where gender norms contribute to masculine anxiety and a combative culture in the workplace and those constructs reinforce gender norms. Outside of the workplace, these gender scripts may also contribute to anxiety, depression, and other illnesses while simultaneously discouraging men from seeking treatment for these issues.

Understanding and addressing the barriers and gender norms that men face is critical to creating more equitable workplaces. You can learn more about the ongoing journey toward equity in our companion piece The Journey Toward Equity. Both pieces agree that men must be involved in making the workplace more equitable, yet too often, the challenges men face go unheard and unaddressed. Addressing these barriers and norms will not only positively impact the workplace through improved gender equity, but it will also improve the professional and personal well-being of men. Together, this leads to a more productive and psychologically safe workplace with employees who feel both more committed and more included, regardless of gender.