Making Change:
A Framework for Promoting Gender Equity in Organizations

Suppose your organization is committed to becoming more gender equitable. What kind of change initiative should it undertake? Recent research in the social sciences suggests that the answer to this question is far from simple. The problem is that there are many different theories about the role gender plays in organizational life and about the causes of gender inequity. Each theory has its own perspective on the problem and its own view of the appropriate remedy. Some remedies focus on eliminating overt discrimination in hiring and promotion practices, some focus on reducing the wage gap between men and women, and some focus on training and executive development. While many of these initiatives have achieved significant equity gains for women, each has its limitations, each focuses on a different definition and symptom of the problem, and none, on its own, has been able to address the issue comprehensively.

For organizations interested in addressing the issue of gender equity in a comprehensive and sustainable manner, we offer a comparative framework that illustrates why most approaches to gender equity are partial solutions and do not achieve lasting gains. Drawing on existing frameworks[1] that compare and contrast theoretical perspectives on gender in the workplace, we propose four frames through which to understand gender equity and organizational change. The first three are de-

scriptions of traditional approaches. The fourth frame is an integrated perspective that acknowledges the complex role gender plays in organizational life. It offers a new category of organizational intervention as well as a way of recasting traditional equity initiatives.

Frame 1: "Equip the Woman"

The first, and probably most common approach to promoting gender equity, rests on a liberal and individualistic vision of society and organizations. It assumes that individuals rise and fall on their own merits. Gender translates into biological sex, i.e., men and women. In this view, men and women are assumed to have equal access to opportunities. Women's lack of achievement in organizations relative to men's is attributed to differences in experience. A basic assumption of this approach is that women have not been socialized to the world of business and, therefore, do not know the "rules of the game." They lack the requisite training and skills to compete in the workplace or assume positions of leadership.

The goal of the "Equip the Woman" approach – and thus its vision of gender equity – is to minimize these differences between women and men so that women can compete as equals. Executive development programs for women represent the hallmark of this approach. Leadership programs, assertiveness training, and workshops on presentation skills and negotiation are important interventions.

Many women have learned valuable skills from these programs. They have learned to succeed at the game as well as – or better – than many men. This has helped certain women move into positions of leadership where they serve as role models for others. However, as important as these programs are, on their own, they contribute only marginally to promoting gender equity. They may help certain women play the game, but they leave in place the structures and policies of the game itself. These programs deal with the issue on an individual level, but do little to change the systemic factors within organizations that create an uneven playing field for women.

Frame 2: Create Equal Opportunity

The second perspective on gender equity focuses on structural barriers. Gender in this frame is still defined in terms of differences between women and men, but the deficiencies of individual women are no longer viewed as the source of the problem. This perspective sees the equity problem rooted in the structures of organizations – differential structures of opportunity that create an uneven playing field.[2] This frame points to the gender segregation of occupations and workplaces and the many ways hiring, evaluation, and promotion processes are biased against women and impede their advancement – what many refer to as the "glass ceiling." The goal of this ap-

proach is to create equal opportunity by eliminating discriminatory structural and procedural barriers.

Interventions in this frame tend to be legalistic and policy-based. They include, for example, affirmative action initiatives, revised recruiting procedures, more transparent promotion policies designed to ensure fairness, sexual harassment guidelines, as well as the provision of work and family benefits such as child care, flexible arrangements, or alternative career track options. This approach can be thought of as reducing organizational constraints on women's ability to achieve or providing accommodations for what are recognized as structural disadvantages.

> *Frame 4 starts from the premise that organizations are inherently gendered.*

There is no question that these structural and policy-based interventions have contributed to improving women's opportunities. They have made it possible to recruit, retain, and promote greater numbers of women. As numbers of women increase, options for women expand and the constraints and stresses of tokenism decrease, creating an environment where women can compete on a more level playing field.[3]

These structural and policy interventions are a critical part of any gender equity initiative. Nonetheless, they too have proved insufficient in achieving lasting gains, because they have little direct effect on the informal rules and practices that govern workplace behavior. For example, applicant pools might be required to have a certain number of women candidates, but the informal selection criteria may continue to rule out those who do not fit the accepted image of the position or whose resumes have employment gaps during childbearing years. Or organizational norms may not align with the new policies. Flexible work benefits might be on the books, but using them may have negative career consequences or create backlash.[4] In the absence of cultural change in the organization, structures and policies cannot, on their own, create equitable organizations.

Frame 3: Value Difference

The third frame shifts the focus from eliminating difference to valuing difference. This perspective conceptualizes gender in terms of socialized differences between men and women, embodied in different masculine and feminine styles or "ways of being." Masculine and feminine identities are seen to be shaped by different life experiences and social roles. In this frame, however, the route to equity is not to eliminate or deplore these differences, but to celebrate them. From this perspective, women are disadvantaged because work styles, skills, and attributes associated with "the feminine" are not recognized or valued in the workplace.[5]

Framing the problem of gender inequity in this way points to corrective measures that focus on acknowledging differences and valuing them. This frame often places gender equity within a broader diversity initiative, acknowledging gender as one of many important differences among workers. Intervention strategies include consciousness-raising and diversity training to promote tolerance and understanding of difference. Other initiatives focus on demonstrating how traditionally feminine activities or styles, such as listening, collaborating, nurturing, and behind-the-scenes peacemaking, are a beneficial addition to an organization's skill set. These insights can lead to important changes in cultural norms and practices – such as changes in performance evaluation criteria – that recognize talents and contributions that women often bring to the workplace.

There is no question that interventions to value gender differences have raised awareness and created workplaces that are more tolerant and flexible. While this is an important step in expanding opportunities for women, it too has its limitations. By concentrating on differences, the approach can actually reinforce gender stereotypes rather than break them down. Also, by focusing on recognition and inclusion, there is the assumption that simply naming something as valuable will make it so. It ignores the power of the masculine image that underlies most generally accepted models of success, leadership, or managerial acumen. Women who enact a feminine style, even when its contributions are recognized and applauded, find their efforts (and often themselves) rendered invisible or valued only in the most marginal sense.[6] For example, including interpersonal skills, team building, or consensus-building management styles in a performance evaluation may increase awareness that "people skills" are important in the workplace. However, it does little to challenge the way assertiveness, competition, decisiveness, and rugged individualism are assumed to be critical factors for getting organizational results. Thus, the biggest barrier to achieving gender equity in this frame is that it does not challenge the differential and hierarchical valuing of difference between the masculine and the feminine.

Frame 4: Re-vision Work Culture

Gender equity in the fourth frame focuses on the underlying systemic factors in organizations that lead to workplace inequity. Gender in this frame is not so much a biologic concept as it is a social construct – an organizing principle that underlies

organizational life. In other words, gender in this frame is not about women or discrimination, but is about *the organization itself.*

This frame starts from the premise that organizations are inherently gendered.[7] Having been created largely by and for men, organizational systems, work practices, structures, and norms tend to reflect masculine experience, masculine values, and masculine life situations. As a result, everything we come to regard as normal and commonplace at work tends to privilege traits that are socially and culturally ascribed to men while devaluing or ignoring those ascribed to women. This includes, for example, cultural norms and assumptions in the workplace that value specific types of products and work processes, define competence and excellence of staff, and shape ideas about the best way to get work done. It also includes, for example, systems of reward and recognition that promote specific kinds of behavior as well as systems of communication and decision-making that bestow power and influence on some staff while excluding others.

The gender equity problem in the fourth frame is grounded in deeply held, and often unquestioned assumptions, that drive behavior and work practice in the organization. These assumptions appear neutral and inconsequential on the surface, but often have a differential impact on men and women. For example, a gendered assumption that undergirds much of organizational life is the informal rule that time spent at work, regardless of productivity, is a measure of commitment, loyalty, and organizational worth. The most valuable worker is one who is able, willing, and eager to put work first. This norm inherently gives privilege to those workers who do not have responsibilities in the private

sphere of their lives that impede them from accepting unbounded work responsibilities.

Furthermore, in a situation where attributes and life situations that are socially ascribed to men and masculinity are perceived as normal and neutral, and those socially ascribed to women and femininity are perceived as different or deviant, not only do gender inequities arise, but the organization itself suffers from a narrow, conscripted view of its options for how to do its work. Displays of masculinity often get conflated with images of working in a way that hurts many women, some men, *and* the work.[8] To take the example above, the image of an ideal worker as someone who has no outside responsibilities to interfere with a commitment to work can result in formal and informal work norms that make it difficult not only for women to achieve, but also many men. What is rarely recognized, however, is that it may also have significant negative consequences for organizational per-formance as well. This kind of assumption can lead to ineffective, costly, or inefficient work practices, such as a self-perpetuating crisis mode of operating, where working through the night or holding emergency after-hours meetings becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Gender equity interventions from the fourth frame perspective engage with basic work practices and processes, and the norms that underlie them, in order to re-vision them in ways that are less gendered and more effective for the organization. It is important to underscore that interventions from the fourth frame are not formulaic or procedural. Rather they are based on an ongoing process of inquiry, experimentation, and learning. This process is not a one-time fix. Instead,

it is an iterative process, much like peeling an onion, where each layer reveals yet another to be explored and examined.

What are the limitations of this approach? We see two principal challenges. First, it engages the organization in a long-term process of organizational change and learning. While this can yield significant benefits both for gender equity and organizational performance, not all organizations are ready to make this level of commitment at the beginning of their work on gender equity. Secondly, we have learned that it can be difficult to keep the goal of gender equity in the forefront. It can be easily overshadowed by the more familiar – and for some, the more compelling – goal of improving organizational effectiveness. Careful and sustained attention has to be given to ensuring that staff and managers recognize and understand the gender equity implications of changes introduced.[9]

Conclusion

Experience has shown that promoting gender equity in organizations is a challenging task. We need to consider the unique contributions of each frame when we make interventions. It is important to recognize, however, that the first three frames can benefit from fourth frame thinking and result in more comprehensive, integrative gender equity programs. For example, executive development programs for women are still an important way to change the leadership demographics of organizations. Adding the fourth frame perspective to these initiatives can strengthen their effect. Rather than addressing women as deficient, these efforts would help women understand the larger, *systemic* effects of gender in organizations. "Equipping the women" in this sense would mean supplementing training in management skills with training in the

strategies to use when women find themselves in gendered situations that inhibit their ability to be effective.

It is important to continue structural and policy interventions characteristic of the second frame. Increasing the hiring, retention, and promotion of women is critical to any gender equity initiative. But adding a fourth frame perspective would mean focusing not just on policies, but on how these policies are used in practice. For example, an intervention designed to improve the recruitment of women would go beyond developing mechanisms to "cast the net widely" in distributing job announcements. It would also review the job descriptions to see how they may preclude or prejudice consideration of women, and revise them to be more inclusive.

Adding a fourth frame perspective to the third frame would mean that, rather than simply valuing difference, gender equity interventions would focus on how to claim space for a different model of work practice. It would, for example, focus on developing a language of competency to name alternative strategies for success and would challenge some of the unwritten and unspoken images of ideal workers, strong leaders, and exemplary managers. The interventions would not stop at identifying differences. Instead, they would challenge the way some aspects of work are overvalued simply because of their association with masculinity, while others are devalued because of their association with femininity and not because of the relative contribution they make to the final product.

A pure fourth frame approach builds on interventions typical of the other three frames, but it is broader and deeper and focuses on systemic changes in work culture and practices that will benefit women, men, and the organization. We believe that this level of change is essential for creating organizations that are both effective and truly gender equitable.

Prepared by D. Kolb, J. Fletcher, D. Meyerson, D. Merrill-Sands, and R. Ely. The first four authors are faculty at the Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) at the Simmons Graduate School of Management in Boston, MA, USA. R. Ely is an affiliated faculty with CGO and Associate Professor of Management at Columbia University in NY, USA.

---

[1] For a comprehensive comparison of the different theoretical perspectives on gender and gender equity, see Calas, M. and L. Smircich (1996). "From 'The Women's Point of View: Feminist Approaches to Organization Studies," *Handbook of Organization Studies*, S, Clegg, C. Hardy, and W. Nord, eds. London: Sage Publications. An earlier version of this framework is presented in Kolb, D. and D. Meyerson (forthcoming) "Moving out of 'Armchair': Initial Attempts to Apply Feminist Organization Theory into Organizations." *Organization.*

[2] See Kanter, R.M. (1977). *Men and Women in the Corporation.* New York: Basic Books; Reskin, B. (1984), *Women and Men at Work.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

[3] Ely, R. (1995). "The Power of Demography: Women's Social Construction of Gender Identity at Work." *Academy of Management Journal,* 38(3): 589-634.

[4] Bailyn, L, J. Fletcher, and D. Kolb (1997). "Unexpected Connections: Considering Employees' Personal Lives Can Revitalize Your Business," *Sloan Management Review* (Vol. 38, No. 4), pp 11-19.

[5] See Helgessen, S. (1990). *Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership.* New York: Doubleday; Rosener, J. (1990). "Ways Women Lead," *Harvard Business Review*, November-December, 68 (6): 119-125.

[6] Fletcher, J.K. (1998). "Relational Practice: A Feminist Reconstruction of Work." *Journal of Management Inquiry,* Vol. 7, No. 2, June 1998, pp. 163-186.

[7] See "Looking Below the Surface: The Gendered Nature of Organizations" by J. Fletcher and D. Merrill-Sands in *CGO Insights,* No. 2, December 1998

[8] Martin, P. (1998). "Men, Masculinities, and Working from (some) Women's Standpoint." Unpublished paper presented at The Center for Gender in Organizations case conference, Simmons Institute for Leadership and Change, April, 1998.

[9] Ely, R. and D. Meyerson. (forthcoming). "Holding Gender: The Challenges of Keeping the Gender Rationale Present in the Course of an Organizational Intervention." *Organization.*

Reprinted from the CG Gender Lens, Volume 3, Issue 2, October 1998.