

CENTER FOR GENDER IN ORGANIZATIONS

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**Are We All in This Together?
Challenges of Men Promoting Gender Balance**
Ronit Kark
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Center for Gender in Organizations
Simmons College
300 The Fenway
Boston, MA 02115 USA
cgo@simmons.edu
www.simmons.edu/cgo

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS	i
ABSTRACT AND AUTHOR	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
I. INTRODUCTION	1
A. Men and Gender Equity Policy in Organizations	1
B. Research Context: The N. Group Case Study	2
II. METHODOLOGY	4
A. Men (Only) for Gender Balance: Field Work	4
B. The Men's Group's Activities	4
III. ANALYSIS	6
A. Gender Equity Gatekeeping	6
B. Actions Taken by the Men's Group to Overcome Gatekeeping	9
IV. LESSONS LEARNED	11
REFERENCES	13

An old Chinese belief states that ‘in order for the sky to be in its place, both men and women have to hold it up’. This may also be the case in advancing gender equity in organizations. The current study explores men’s involvement in promoting gender balance and the ways in which women in the organization react to their actions/involvement. It is based on an organizational case study of a group of men in middle management positions, within a large organization in Israel, that worked together, aiming to contribute to the enhancement of gender balance. The study took place over a period of two years and included participant observations, interviews and access to administrative and written texts. Along with women’s support and appreciation of the men’s initiative, the findings also show surprising forms of women’s resistance to the men’s actions. I present the findings, discuss them and conclude by focusing on possible ways in which men can overcome resistance and better take part in holding up the equity ‘sky’ with women within the organizational context.

Ronit Kark is an Associate Professor of Organizational Studies in the Department of Psychology and the Gender Studies Program at Bar-Ilan University (BIU) in Israel. She is the founder and first director of the graduate program ‘Gender in the Field: Linking Feminist Theory and Practice’. She is also an Affiliate Scholar at the Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) at the Simmons College. Her current research interests include positive relationships and relatedness in organizations, gender and diversity dynamics in organizations, identity and identification and the role of ‘play’ in creativity at work. She received her Ph.D. from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and completed her postdoctoral studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her work was published in leading journals (e.g., *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Annals*, *Leadership Quarterly* and *Journal of Applied Psychology*) and she is an Associate Editor at the *LQ*, a Senior Editor in *JLOS* and also served on several Editorial Boards (e.g., *Academy of Management Review* and *Academy of Management Discoveries*). She received the *AOM* 2012 Award for ‘Scholarly Contributions to Advancing Women in Leadership’ and the 2016 prize for ‘Outstanding Researcher’ at BIU. Prof. Kark provides consultancy services to organizations on enhancing socially responsible leadership and serves on advisory boards of NGOs that aim to enhance social change and equity. Email: karkronit@gmail.com.

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Is gender equity a women's issue? An organizational issue? A men's issue? In recent years, both scholars and executives have become more aware of the limitations of women-only approaches, realizing that men can't be left out of the conversation. They must be actively involved in order to effect change and achieve gender equity¹. In my research on this topic, however, I have learned that men's involvement in gender equity work can be perceived ambivalently by women. Although men's support is seen as positive, timely and significant, it can simultaneously be viewed as a negative and threatening initiative that provokes resistance and rejection. This paper will explore this issue including the different attitudes and behaviors I have termed "gender equity gatekeeping". I conclude by providing suggestions for how men can better navigate their efforts towards gender change without sabotaging their goals and sparking resistance among women.

A. Men and Gender Equity Policy in Organizations

With the emergence and growing popularity of the idea that men are crucial to gender equity strategies, over the past decade there has been a rise in men's involvement in promoting gender equity².

One popular approach is involving men organizational leaders (CEOs, CFOs, etc.) in leading change (e.g., Male Champions for Change comprised of Australia's most prominent businessmen (2011)). Programs developed according to this approach focus on top-down influence processes, in which leaders assume an active and leading role in promoting gender change within their organizations. This approach, also referred to as the "business case approach", assumes that leaders will approach gender change in the same way they approach any other business issue.

Movement toward involving men in senior management in the promotion of gender equity has been the focus of many activists', practitioners' and social change organizations' efforts. Although this trend has been met with much excitement, this idea has also met opposition from different parties³ arguing that this development is contradictory to the very goal of gender equity. This opposition is articulated in two ways:

1. Involving men in promoting gender equity and in implementing gender reform is inherently antithetical to men's personal interest. This is based on the assumption that

¹ Esplen, 2006; Ruxton & Oxfam, 2004.

The new perspective on men's role in - and contribution to - gender equity was first introduced globally at the ² 1995 UN Beijing 4th World Conference on Women. Since then, several programs have been initiated around the globe with the aim of getting men involved in the process of leading for gender equity (e.g., 'Male Champions of Change' in Australia, the 'He for She' UN Campaign, and Programs by Catalyst on 'Engaging Men in Gender Initiatives').

³ Such as Scambor et. al., 2014

men have been beneficiaries of the status quo, in which they hold more power than women, and thus they have limited interest to truly promote change.

2. Seeking out privileged men to champion gender change diminishes the role of women in fighting for gender equity. It takes power and voice away from women, and puts it right back in the hands of men⁴. This concern is fueled by statements such as “the key to women’s advancement rests squarely with him”⁵ which point to a disconcerting reality, wherein men are essentially perceived as the gatekeepers of gender equity. Men are seen as holding the political power, economic assets, and cultural authority, as well as the means of coercion, which is precisely what reformers wish to change, not reinforce.

On the other hand, gender equity is an issue that, by definition, pertains to men, involves men, and influences men, as they are also affected by gender stereotypes and norms. Thus, changes that disrupt inequalities between men and women have an impact on people of all genders. To quote Scambor et al.:

...Focusing on men as a ‘gendered social group’, the internal differentiation of this gender group, changing gender roles and attitudes toward gender equality from both genders, and the fact that the gender system is a relational system militates in favor of including both genders in gender equality strategies and policies.

Thus, the question of whether men should be involved, let alone assume a leading role, in promoting gender equity remains to be resolved. In addition, the actual effects of men’s involvement, as it is perceived by all employees, must be taken into account. This is an important issue to consider given that the effectiveness of their efforts are largely determined by the degree to which men’s activism in general, and the specific changes they implement, are accepted by employees and the organization. Thus, there is a need to better understand how, to what extent, and in relation to which topics men can and should play a major role when it comes to promoting gender balance in organizations.⁶ The goal of the current paper is to shed light on these questions based on the case study of a group of men who set out to tackle gender balance issues within their organization.

B. Research Context: The N. Group Case Study

The N. Group is a leading international corporation⁷. In 2012, the N. Group launched a company-wide program with the goal of reaching gender balance in its management levels. The

⁴ Scambor et. al., 2014

⁵ Wellington et al., 2003, p. 19

⁶ Scambor et al., 2014

⁷ The N. group is comprised of five companies, which work in the field of – Health & Wellness, and Fun & Indulgence. It offers a wide range of quality Food & Beverage brands. The Group has 13,500 employees worldwide and is active in more than 21 countries. Its headquarters are located in Israel (The Group’s turnover was estimated at NIS 7.5 billion in 2016, of which its international operations account for about 50%).

company created an infrastructure for enhancing an inclusive workplace environment with an emphasis on gender balance and the promotion of women⁸. Until 2014, the gender equity program was structured as a top-down program, but in 2015 the leader of the Gender Balance Strategy, in collaboration with the author, (who was a consultant to the process), decided to focus on a bottom-up process that would involve the entire organization in the pursuit of gender equity. Thus, the organization created an initiative that challenged all employees to join in the process of promoting gender change.

As part of this initiative, in 2016, the firm presented a novel program called “Equal Organization”. The program’s main goals were to: 1) point out the special characteristics and needs of women workers and to look for appropriate solutions; 2) establish organizational and managerial processes and practices to support women’s needs; 3) address gender equity throughout the organization; and 4) promote diversity at senior leadership levels. The program was structured as a “hackathon”⁹ event in which people at different levels in the organization collaborated to develop ideas and projects for the advancement of gender equity. After the development stage, the teams presented their projects in a formal meeting with top management. The managers then decided which programs the firm would invest in for further development and implementation. Programs of five presenting teams were chosen. One of the presenting teams stood out in particular - a men’s only group of middle level managers that proposed to study men’s perceptions toward gender equity and to build a plan for implementation. This team, originally called “The men’s-only gender balance group”, was the focus of my investigation.

⁸ This included establishing steering teams and raising awareness among all managers and employees, including men. The CEO also committed to increasing the representation of women in middle level and top managerial positions. As part of the managers' yearly goals, which they were compensated for, they were requested to increase the number of women in their management teams.

⁹ The word "hackathon" is a portmanteau of the words "hack" and "marathon", where "hack" is used in the sense of exploratory programming, not its alternate meaning as a reference to computer crime.

A. Men (Only) for Gender Balance: Field Work

The goal of my study was to better understand the role of men in promoting gender equity in organizations in light of the concerns described above. I attempted to do so through following the men's group's activism and examining how various entities in the organization perceived, responded, and reacted to the men's group and their initiatives. I also explored how the men perceived their role, and how they reacted to and resolved the challenges they faced. I wished to explore the complex relations exposed, constructed, reproduced, and dismantled among the employees in the organization, to offer theoretical, empirical, and practical insights.

My field work in the organization spanned a period of 24 months between 2015 and 2017. The study was undertaken within the tradition of participatory action research¹⁰. I acted as both a researcher and an organizational consultant to the gender equity strategy of the firm and to the men's group. Members of the team were aware of the dual purpose of my presence and cooperated generously. I collected data from three main sources:

Participant observation. I spent a few hours a week in the organization, participating in and observing gender equity initiatives in the organization. I attended all weekly "Men for Gender Balance" group meetings, as well as special meetings they held with human resources personnel and other organizational stakeholders. I documented all discussions and kept a detailed field diary of all meetings.

Interviews. I interviewed 25 members who were chosen¹¹ to represent the different social categories and subgroups in the organization, including the four men and one woman directly involved in the initiative.

Administrative and written texts – Throughout the field work, all email correspondence, protocols, team outcomes, organizational materials and communications were collected and saved.

Below I present the actions taken by the men's group, I then expose the challenges they faced within the organization, and how they rerouted their initiatives to address these challenges. I conclude by highlighting practices and lessons learned from this case study.

B. The Men's Group's Activities

The initial men's group included four middle management managers from the organization. They were between the ages of 40 and 45 and all had small children. They were accompanied by

¹⁰ see Ely & Meyerson, 2000

¹¹ Strauss & Corbin, 1990

the organization's talent manager, a woman middle-level 'Talent Manager' who headed the diversity-and-gender strategy of the firm, and by myself, as an organizational, gender, and diversity consultant. During the 24 months the men's group worked together, they experienced and initiated various activities.

They began by learning together about the gender situation within their firm. They met with academics and advisors in the fields of diversity, gender, and inclusion to gain insight from their knowledge and experience. They also read materials on the web and learned about different initiatives of men around the globe for promoting gender balance.

In the second stage, they initiated weekly working sessions to decide how to best move their initiative forward. They decided to create a checklist comprised of simple practices for promoting gender balance that could easily be implemented by managers and employees throughout the organization. Examples of practices that appeared on the checklist include:

- **Diversity shortlists:** in every shortlist for a job opening I have, I will insist on having a woman / or a certain percentage of women
- **A day at 4PM:** I will encourage men in my department to leave work by 16:00 at least one day a week
- **Mazal tov dad:** I will support and enable men that have a newborn baby to have time to adapt and to leave early to be with the baby

In order to bring these practices, as well as a variety of perspectives and new ideas regarding gender balance in the workplace to the attention of the organization's employees, they initiated several roundtables with employees and invited male academics to speak about gender issues.

In the third stage, to obtain greater exposure within the organization, they constructed a website where employees could read about the initiative. Supporters could sign an online pledge of commitment to promoting gender balance within the organization and to applying the suggested practices. In addition, they held a mini-campaign within the firm. After over 150 employees signed the pledge, they ran a number of workshops to provide attendees with the knowledge and skills to become ambassadors of gender balance, and to strengthen their commitment to do so. In each workshop, the employees (many of whom held managerial positions) learned more about the issue and the proposed practices. They were encouraged to think about how they could implement their role as gender-change-ambassadors, and to commit to specific practices they would apply to their day-to-day work.

Through working with the men's group and analyzing my research materials, I detected different forms of women's resistance to the men's activism, which I have named "gender equity gatekeeping". Below I describe the different forms of gender equity gatekeeping and their manifestations, as well as the ways in which the men's group managed the resistance and gained more support from and collaboration with women. This study sheds light on men's challenges in promoting gender equity, on the organizational ambivalence toward their actions, and on ways to overcome both.

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A. Gender Equity Gatekeeping

Both men and women in the organization had positive reactions to, and appreciation for, the men's gender balance initiative. However, there was also ambivalence and reservations regarding the men's initiative. At times, these reservations were quite intense. The men who headed the initiative were surprised by the unexpected resistance, as seen in this quote of one of the men that led the initiative:

From the start of the initiative I was surprised by a few things. Mostly, I was surprised by the fortitude of the pushback we encountered. I thought women would give us their blessing and would be happy to see men standing shoulder to shoulder saying that they are aiming to promote gender balance [in the organization]. Instead there was a lot of pushback... 'you are arrogant and patronizing'. You say one word and you are perceived as patronizing here. Even my wife at home did this. It makes it more intense and risky...it is possible to get hurt. It raises the question of what you can lose (Ohad).

Some of the reservations resembled a process that has been termed "maternal gatekeeping" in the literature. Maternal gatekeeping is defined as a collection of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that inhibit a collaborative effort between fathers and mothers in their family life.¹² Specifically, these attitudes, beliefs and behaviors are undertaken by the mother, either consciously or subconsciously, and limit fathers' opportunities to become involved in housework and childcare and to experience and develop the skills necessary to perform such tasks successfully¹³. Generally, maternal gatekeeping behaviors are not intentional or deliberate and women are unaware, or not fully aware, of enacting them¹⁴. Men, informed by the different societal expectations, structure and norms, tend to have lower levels of involvement in childcare and to use their authority to determine these lower levels¹⁵. However, maternal gatekeeping research suggests that mothers may also, at times, contribute to the maintenance of a gendered division of parenting responsibilities¹⁶.

In the current study, I identify a similar pattern of women demonstrating behaviors that can be seen as gatekeeping. This "gender equity gatekeeping" took the form of a collection of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that could have inhibited men from becoming more active in promoting gender equity in the organization. Women in the organization expressed openly their support for men's involvement in promoting gender equity, but were somewhat less aware and conscious of their resistance and gatekeeping beliefs and behaviors.

¹² Allen & Hawkins, 1999

¹³ Allen & Hawkins, 1999

¹⁴ Gaunt, 2008; Kulker, 2002

¹⁵ Walker & McGraw, 2000

¹⁶ Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan, Altenburger, Lee, Bower, & Kamp Dush, 2015

Within the N. Group I identified four different forms of women's gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors, each characterized by a distinct underlying logic and different manifestation.

1. **Resisting the “knight in shining armor”.** The most common form of gatekeeping involved both implicit and explicit accusations that the men's initiative was a “patronizing” and “paternalistic” attempt to overtake and lead actions toward attaining gender balance. The following quote from a woman manager, well-aware of the men's group's work, is an example of this particular type of gatekeeping attitude:

We do not want the knight on the white horse to come and save us. To take the lead in moving us [the women] forward. To save the women would be to recycle the problems each time...very patronizing. The fact that it was ‘men for gender equity’, it immediately raises the question if they understand better than me. It implies that they will take the responsibility for us as women (Naomi).

Another woman noted: “*it did not sound like a collaboration, it sounded like ‘we, the men, will do it for you the women’.* In such a campaign, there is a need [for the men] to re-explain each time again and again what their intentions are.” This form of resistance was not just prevalent among women that had met with the men's group or heard them speak, but was also evident among women who had only heard about the initiative, and hadn't had any contact with the men's group.

2. **Resisting the notion of inequity.** A second form of gatekeeping attitudes was presented by women who asserted that there are no gender imbalance issues and that women do not encounter any biases or hardships at work. The women who voiced this attitude resisted the notion of inequity, and when men raised the issue and problematized it, they reacted with objection and opposition. As one of the men in the initiating team noted:

I conducted one on one conversations and thought there was a men's world and a women's world, but then I discovered that the world is divided into three: men, women, and women-men. Women that think like men. Women who are role models, but because they are so entrenched in men's roles they're in a completely different mode. It was apparent in personal conversations with these women that they had automatic responses saying that there is no problem whatsoever. 'The world is ok'. 'There's no discrimination'. 'I am completely at ease'. 'Everything is good'. 'It is nonsense and everything I wanted to achieve, I achieved'. Those [women] are scared to see it, they walk in the dark, they are like blind people. (Emit)

The women exhibiting this form of gatekeeping often worked in hyper masculine work-environments within the organization, in departments characterized by male dominance and masculine norms. In such environments, women sometimes reacted to the men's

initiative with anger and, as described by the men: “*they [these opposing women] don’t understand what all the fuss is about and why it is necessary [to engage in such initiatives].*”

3. **Resisting by framing specific topics as exclusively related to women.** A third mode of gender equity gatekeeping is based on the assumptions that men cannot fully understand women and the things that affect their working life. According to this perspective, there are specific fields of activism that relate to more feminine topics in which men are not able to become involved due to their limited knowledge and experience in these fields. When the men in the group attempted to address issues related to sexual harassment and pregnancy, for example, they experienced harsh backlash. One of the women that worked closely with the men that led the initiative said:

Listening to their [the men’s group’s] conversation, I understood that it will forever remain from a male perspective. You understand? That they are a group of men who will never understand the female perspective. They needed to have a woman on the team. I wanted to be there as a woman that would tell them how it looks from the other side. I will give you an example: an athlete knows what another athlete is going through. Routine, training, nutrition, demand, fun, discipline. Even if he is an athlete of another sport. In any kind of sport. They, in the men’s group, will never understand what the other side, of women, experiences. It was important for me that there be one woman in the group. So that they could understand what women think. (Shani)

Regarding more specific topics, one of the women referred to sexual harassment issues:

*At every site in the firm we have someone appointed to treat complaints of sexual harassment. It’s something that was created in the N. Group to create a place to turn to. For every geographical region there is a supervisor, and it is publicized on the bulletin boards, and I am the supervisor of the headquarters. They [the women responsible to take care of sexual harassment complaints] undergo training once a year. She [the women appointed to treat sexual harassment complaints] has knowledge and a role and it is **odd** that they, **the men**, expect to solve problems regarding issues that I perceive to be **purely feminine**. What value can you add there? And why do you think you can do it better? Although, another side of me really liked the men’s group and how they got together and brought with them a new initiative and spirit. (Liat)*

4. **Resisting by questioning the men’s motives.** Another resistance attitude toward the men and their actions took the form of attributing unfavorable motives to their actions. Several women who were interviewed mentioned that they thought the men were involved in this initiative for self-serving reasons. Many said that they thought the men aimed to gain political power. They believed the men wanted to gain exposure to higher management (which in the studied organization, highly regards diversity and inclusion),

to possibly get favorable attention and feedback, better work opportunities and promotions, as well as to appear as more open minded and educated men. As a senior woman manager noted:

During the first meeting, I thought that fighting for gender balance is ours – our issue [belongs to the women]. They [the men] don't need to take part. I will go to the administration and to the higher management and show 'girl power'. It [their initiative] was amusing to me. I thought they were managerial candidates that were trying to gain political power within the organization. (Livia)

To summarize, although the men's initiative was met with much enthusiasm and excitement, and many women held the initiative in high regard, the men were also met with gatekeeping behaviors including ambivalence, skepticism and resistance.

B. Actions Taken by the Men's Group to Overcome Gatekeeping

The men were somewhat surprised by the resistance and pushback they experienced. In their weekly meetings, they aimed to better understand the resistance they experienced and to formulate ways to work through and with these forms of resistance and backlash. During this process, they performed several mini-experiments to attain wider support within the organization. I will note a few of the more successful attempts.

First, they had many individual discussions with women in the organization about their initiative in order to understand what women expected of them. Second, they approached women and invited them to join the group's meetings and gave their input, as well as to join as full members of the initiative. After about six months, one woman temporarily joined the team to help with a specific internal-marketing campaign. Over time, she became a permanent and active member of the team. The group also met with different stakeholders in the organization, most of whom were women, to request their advice and gain their support to move their initiatives forward (e.g., HR managers, head of internal-communications, head of corporate responsibility and head of knowledge management).

Third, over time and somewhat unconsciously, the name of the group and its identity changed. In the "Equal Organization" hackathon, they had called the group the "Men's Only Group for Gender Balance". Over time, they began referring to themselves as "Men for Gender Balance", and more recently, framed their involvement as "Why (also) men need to act to promote gender balance". This marked a change in their perceptions of their role, their identity, and of how they situated themselves within the organization. Furthermore, in an employee workshop presentation, they had a slide titled "is this patronizing?" meaning that in their eyes it was not. The presenters explained that they see men in the organization as their focal target of change, explaining that men currently need to make a bigger shift than women on gender balance issues and that gender balance cannot be achieved if it remains a "women's only issue". Moreover,

they wrote that they were “formed by men, but are open to all that want to join the team”, thus indicating that they are not an exclusive men’s group.

Fourth, the men changed their focus from targeting a wide variety of gender imbalance issues, including those pertaining directly to women only (e.g., pregnancy), to a focus on projects and initiatives that spoke to the issues that troubled them personally. They also chose to focus on recruiting other men, changing their perspectives, and influencing their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. In addition, they each stated their personal interest in the project, for example: *“I had enough of being the only man in the afternoon with my child at the playground, surrounded only by women. I want more men to be there.”* In their declared goals of “why act for gender balance”, the men stated that gender balance should be attained for four reasons: 1. *For men*; 2. *To make a difference*; 3. *For the business*; and 4. *For their spouses, daughters, and sons*.

These changes in focus were reflected in changes to the issues targeted by the group. In the early phases, target issues included extending the organization’s paid maternity leave and working to have lights put in the parking lots (to combat fears of sexual harassment). Within the new framing, projects were more focused on men’s issues or mutual issues of parenting, such as encouraging parents to take time off on the first day of school to escort their children to school and to be home when they return. Apart from other bigger, more strategic initiatives, one small example of their actions was an email they sent out before September 1st (the first day of school in Israel) to all who signed the online pledge and approved receiving e-mails from them. In the email, they included a well-known Israeli poem about a dad walking his kid to school while remembering how his father was involved in his life and walked him to school¹⁷. The email also included a summary of ten principles from a New York Times article¹⁸ of how to educate and raise gender-aware children who will value gender equity.

Last, in order to overcome gatekeeping resistance, they understood that gender equity is a long-term process and that if they want to be influential and change social norms, they will need to keep up the work, the learning, and the initiatives for a long period of time. Currently, they are in the midst of their second year of activities and are working to learn from their experiences and come up with a strategic plan to widen and deepen their influence and to attain gender balance within the N. Group. Thus, over time, the new actions they decided to undertake limited resistance and helped them gain more support from, better influence, and collaborate well with women and different stakeholders within the organization.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIFvQ6g7Y6Q>

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/upshot/how-to-raise-a-feminist-son.html>

IV. LESSONS LEARNED

This study suggests that while the entrance of men in growing numbers into the field of promoting gender equity is warranted and much needed, it should be done with caution. Men and practitioners should expect gatekeeping behaviors, as well as other forms of backlash. These responses can be most important in guiding men's ways of becoming involved in gender equity efforts. They signal the sensitivities and the existing power relations that, without proper attention and care to, can be reproduced in the arena of gender balance activism. The current case study points to a few guiding principles that can be useful for men and practitioners who wish to become involved in contributing to gender balance.

1. Be highly attentive to women's reactions in order to understand and be sensitive to their experience of your involvement. This will set the stage for the best way to go about effecting substantial and meaningful change.
2. Be aware of the privilege men hold when working within the context of gender social change and take a humble stance.
3. Involve women in the process to avoid forming exclusively male structures that mimic other 'men only clubs'. Those structures only perpetuate and fortify the exclusion of women by men, which is a gender imbalance issue in and of itself. It is likely to cause women to resist such structures and their unsolicited and seemingly disingenuous attempts to put an end to gender imbalance. Collaborating with HR managers and personnel, which often primarily consist of women, will allow activists to hear the voices of women and involve them in the change process.
4. Focus not only on women and the biases, discrimination, and challenges they face, but also on issues that matter to men in the organization. For example, their struggle to be involved fathers or the challenge to reach and maintain a work-life balance. Focusing on men, not as the 'patrons' or 'saviors', but rather as people who also pay the price of gender imbalance, will result in less resistance and gatekeeping on the part of women, allowing for better collaboration. This leads to a greater chance of effecting real organizational change that will be embraced by all people. In fact, portraying gender imbalance as an issue that pertains to men too, may encourage more men to get involved in activism. Indeed, Adam Grant (2014) explains that some men are not better advocates of gender equity despite their desire to support the issue because they fear that no one will take them seriously, as they lack (apparent) vested interest in the cause. As evident in the current case study, this fear is not unfounded. Thus, if we want men to join in constructing an equal and inclusive organization, we need to portray gender equity as an issue that affects and pertains to them as well.
5. Alongside the above, it is important to understand that changing an organizational culture towards gender balance is not a sprint, but rather a long marathon so patience will prove highly valuable. Throughout the process the perspectives and needs of all

genders should be incorporated and accounted for in order to achieve true gender equity and balance.

6. Last, this intervention was undertaken in an encouraging organizational environment. For such an initiative to be most successful there is a need for the support of the wider organization, including some key role figures (e.g., head of board, CEO, Talent manager, HR, head of communication, etc.).

So are we all in this together? Can we all be in this together, people of all genders? The current study demonstrates that when men 'lean in' and take responsibility to promote gender balance and equity, they can play a major role in this field, becoming strong advocates of diversity and inclusion. Their involvement opens up many novel directions and opportunities for attaining meaningful organizational change. However, at the same time, there are many challenges that should be considered. Men that aim to promote gender equity need to be aware of the possible difficulties and resistance they can encounter and, in an ongoing process, consciously dismantle the power-relations that can be unintentionally formed and replicated, and initiate a continuous dialogue with women in order to join hands and lead to a significant change in organizations.

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