

Research: How Bias Against Women Persists in Female-Dominated Workplaces

by Amy Diehl, Amber L. Stephenson and Leanne M. Dzubinski

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Summary. New research examines gender bias within four industries with more female than male workers — law, higher education, faith-based nonprofits, and health care. Having balanced or even greater numbers of women in an organization is not, by itself,... [more](#)

It's been thought that once industries achieve gender balance, bias will decrease and gender gaps will close. Sometimes called the "[add women and stir](#)" approach, people tend to think that having more women present is all that's needed to promote change. But simply adding women into a workplace does not change the [organizational structures and systems that benefit men more than women](#). Our [new research](#) (to be published in a forthcoming issue of *Personnel Review*) shows gender bias is still prevalent in gender-balanced and female-dominated industries.

Most gender bias research has focused on male-dominated industries like STEM or law enforcement, where women's experiences of bias and discrimination may be more apparent. Our research is unique in that it examines gender bias in four industries with more female than male workers: law, higher education, faith-based nonprofits, and health care. In these four industries, women dominate. They make up [53.5% of the workforce in law](#), [55.3% in higher education](#), [63.8% in faith-based nonprofits](#), and [77.6% in health care](#). Using the [Gender Bias Scale for Women Leaders](#) along with open-ended questions, we compared perceptions and experiences of gender bias for 1,606 women leaders in these fields across 15 factors, ranging from subtle (such as lack of acknowledgement) to overt (such as workplace harassment).

Even though women are the majority in these industries, we found they still experience [a multitude of biases](#). One example is constrained communication, in which women have to be mindful when expressing authority and downplay their accomplishments. They reported lack of acknowledgement for their contributions and being interrupted by men when speaking. And even when women were well represented, their workplace often still had a boys' club mentality where decisions were made mostly by men. The participants were at times on a [glass cliff](#), being held responsible for problems outside of their control. They often lacked mentors and [sponsors](#). And lastly, some women found no other choice but to limit their aspirations due to personal obligations. In other words, their workplace was not supportive of combining work with family. Beyond these barriers, our results showed notable differences in other aspects of gender bias between the industries.

Law was the most challenging environment in our study. Women reported the highest levels of exclusion and workplace harassment in comparison to the other three industries. There is a long history of bias against women in law. The field's competitive nature and emphasis on billable hours can make it difficult for individuals with caretaking responsibilities (disproportionately women) to keep up, thus perpetuating inequities.

By contrast women in higher education comparatively had the least challenging environment. These women reported facing constrained communication, unequal standards, salary inequality, and even workplace harassment. Yet they experienced more egalitarian organizational norms, were more willing to pursue promotions and other opportunities, had more sponsorship, and received more recognition for contributions compared to the other three industries. Higher education has a communal nature, social justice orientation, and commitment to shared governance and inclusivity, especially in decision making. Collective ownership and stakeholder input may lead to an environment that is comparatively better for women.

Female leaders in the faith-based nonprofit industry reported the lowest levels of queen bee syndrome, workplace harassment, and salary inequality in comparison to the other three samples. Of course, there are some possible explanations for these results. First, the small number of female leaders in faith-based nonprofits may mute queen bee behaviors. Second, the faith-based nature of these organizations may have socialized members to be kinder and women to accept their lower status, which could limit harassment. Last, reports of salary inequality may have been subdued by the industry's generally low salary expectations and an unusual salary structure, in which couples are sometimes hired as a unit.

Our survey participants who worked in health care reported the second highest levels of unequal standards, just behind law. Research in health care and other industries has found that

supposedly meritocratic reward systems have been shown to increase gender inequalities in performance evaluations, work allocation, and rewards — particularly in specialized job roles. Additionally, social expectations for women to be nurturing place pressure on women physicians to spend more time with patients and provide more emotional support than is expected of male counterparts.

Clearly, having balanced or even greater numbers of women in an organization is not, by itself, changing women's experiences of bias. Bias is built into the system and continues to operate even when more women than men are present. But the good news is that leaders can use these findings to create gender-equitable practices and environments which reduce bias.

Replace competition with cooperation.

Eight studies with 147,000 people show that dominant, competitive leadership has the unintended consequence of zero-sum thinking — the belief that progress can be made only at the expense of others — among subordinates. Such environments disincentivize workers from helping or supporting their colleagues.

Top leaders should model cooperation and incentivize collaboration and teamwork. For instance, pharmaceutical company Pfizer had rapid execution and success with its mRNA Covid-19 vaccine through a cooperative environment in which “everybody [was] pulling in the same direction with the same goal.” They asserted that the experience was “like magic.”

Measure success by goals, not by time spent.

Too often presenteeism functions as a measure of employee performance and dedication. As distributed workforces and remote work have taken hold, measuring performance by time in the office or spent online is not relevant. But giving people

freedom and responsibility to choose when they work can make managers anxious.

One way to address this is to specify more and micromanage less. Specify the goals and how success is measured but then allow employees to creatively and freely pursue their objectives.

Implement equitable reward structures.

While “meritocratic” reward systems like pay-for-performance and billable hours may seem equitable, they paradoxically increase gender inequality. One study found that managers in explicit meritocracies were less likely to award pay fairly and more apt to act on biases, such as by giving women smaller bonuses.

It’s better to implement cooperative reward structures which recognize *all* types of contributions toward organizational goals. One way to do this is to measure business units not only on their own performance but also that of peer units, thus encouraging employees to actively help their colleagues.

Provide remote and flexible work with autonomy.

While many companies implemented remote work before 2020, the pandemic has proven the success of remote and flexible work in many more industries. Not only have employee morale and work-life balance improved with less time on the road and more time for personal pursuits and family obligations, but even resistant-to-change industries like banking and finance continue to thrive with a remote workforce. In medicine, telehealth can improve advancement opportunities and decrease burnout for women. Some organizations, like Salesforce and Arena Pharmaceuticals, have moved to full-time remote work. In other industries like higher education, a hybrid workforce may be best.

While remote work isn’t an option for all jobs, flexibility can still be given where possible. In retail, for example, workers can be

permitted to have flexible start and end times and to swap or vary their shifts. To boost motivation and performance, maximize employee autonomy to decide where and when their work gets done. Companies which refuse to offer autonomy, flexibility, or remote work when possible are risking lower employee morale and increased turnover.

Increase transparency in decision making.

When people feel included, they will speak up and go the extra mile, which boosts organizational performance. Transparent decision making has been linked to increased employee trust, happiness, and engagement, and it fosters innovative thinking. Like higher education's shared governance model, full discussion and decisions should occur when stakeholders are present, as opposed to taking place in informal conversations. Leaders should make sure that everyone has a voice in meetings and that all perspectives are heard and considered.

Gender equity isn't just about representation. We need to terminate gender bias at its root by fixing our organizations to make them inclusive, flexible, supportive, and equitable to women.



Amy Diehl, PhD is chief information officer at Wilson College and a gender equity researcher and speaker. She is coauthor of *Glass Walls: Shattering the Six Gender Bias Barriers Still Holding Women Back at Work* (Rowman & Littlefield). Find her on LinkedIn at [Amy-Diehl](#), X/Twitter [@amydiehl](#), and visit her website at [amy-diehl.com](#).

AS

Amber L. Stephenson , PhD is an associate professor of management and director of healthcare management programs in the David D. Reh School of Business at Clarkson University. Her research focuses on the healthcare workforce, how professional identity influences attitudes and behaviors, and how women leaders experience gender bias.

LD

Leanne M. Dzubinski , PhD is professor of leadership and director of the Beeson International Center at Asbury Seminary, and a prominent researcher on women in leadership. She is coauthor of *Glass Walls: Shattering the Six Gender Bias Barriers Still Holding Women Back at Work* (Rowman & Littlefield).



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