



Book Why Women Mean Business

Understanding the Emergence of our next Economic Revolution

Avivah Wittenberg-Cox and Alison Maitland
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Recommendation

Avivah Wittenberg-Cox and Alison Maitland have carefully gazed through the gender-equality kaleidoscope and then turned it slightly – giving readers a refreshing view. Treating women as a workforce minority is no longer acceptable; nor should executives manage them in the same way as their male counterparts. Women are different from men, and their work and leadership styles reflect this difference. Treating women like men, or trying to “fix them” so they will advance in a male-centric work culture has not been successful, as demonstrated by the dearth of women in high leadership positions and on executive boards. Therefore, company leaders must reframe the gender debate and repair their biased systems. This book tells them how. *BooksInShort* considers it important reading for human resources directors and corporate leaders, who may be heartened by its assurance that organizations that become “gender-bilingual” will find solutions to many 21st-century problems.

Take-Aways

- Women represent more than half of the talent pool and they make most consumer purchases.
- Gender equality can help counteract shrinking workforces and talent shortages.
- Men and women have different “career life cycles.” Men tend to advance consistently throughout their careers, whereas women often lose momentum in their 30s.
- Women and men join the workforce in equal numbers, but women steadily drop out at every rung of the management ladder.
- Thus, women are severely underrepresented on executive boards and in senior leadership positions.
- Many companies ignore the basic differences between men’s and women’s leadership styles and, mistakenly, ask women to adapt.
- Traditionally, businesses deal with gender in terms of compliance or diversity.
- Organizations can become “gender-bilingual” by following a seven-step plan.
- The steps are “awaken your leadership team; define the business case; let people express resistance; make it a business issue, not a women’s issue; make changes before making noise; don’t mix up the messages; and give it a budget, not just volunteers.”
- Companies that recognize women’s potential gain a distinct advantage.

Summary

Gender Is a “Business Issue,” Not a “Women’s Issue”

During the last half of the 20th century, women took their place alongside men in the workforce, signaling a significant economic and social shift. Women represent more than half of the talent pool and make most consumer purchases. Their contribution, dubbed “womenomics,” will play a major role in meeting the economic challenges of

the 21st century. For example, the labor force is shrinking in developed countries, due to “declining demographics” such as diminishing birthrates and aging populations. Gender equality can help solve such “talent crises.”

“The 20th century saw the rise of women. The 21st century will witness the economic, political and social consequences.”

Because the talent pool is dwindling, companies that recognize women’s potential have a distinct competitive advantage. Today, organizations must recruit and keep female employees, and advance them to the highest levels of leadership. Traditional leadership boards and teams – primarily made up of white males between the ages of 50 and 65 – are no longer optimal in a multicultural, complex, diverse world market. Research indicates that companies with a higher proportion of women on leadership teams perform better financially than those without female leaders.

Jumping into the Talent Pool

Although women have joined the workforce in large numbers, they are underrepresented in certain areas. For instance, considerably fewer women work in scientific research and development than in “health care, education and hospitality.” The private sector, in particular, fails to take advantage of the “other half” of the labor force. Women also steadily drop out at every rung of the management ladder. Thus, women in high leadership positions are a rarity in the global workforce. In the United States, women make up only 17% of the membership of boards of directors. In Europe, the number is even lower at less than 9% and in Asia it is lower still at 2%. Moreover, research suggests that these numbers will not soon increase.

“Can organizations really believe, as they insistently say, that they are promoting the best talent, if 80% or more of those they are promoting to the top are men?”

Some companies have tried to correct this gender imbalance by recruiting more women. However, keeping and promoting female employees are equally important goals, if not more important. As an executive, you can begin to meet these objectives by analyzing at what levels your organization loses women and why. Implement a program for identifying women candidates for leadership programs. Hold your managers accountable for promoting women and then measure their progress.

“Rather than thinking that men and women are from different planets, we have the more amusing challenge of learning how to run this planet together.”

Unfortunately, many organizations fail to understand or develop women in a “gender-adapted” way. Businesses do not lose women employees because women want to stay at home. Rather, women leave their jobs to go to better work environments, to gain more control over their lives and careers, or to work at something with more meaning.

Who Holds the Purse Strings?

According to Marti Barletta, author of *Marketing to Women*, “Women in the U.S. today make 80% of all consumer purchasing decisions, and the majority of corporate purchasing agents and managers are women.” Yet, many industries have been slow to recognize their female clients’ purchasing power. For instance, the banking and finance sectors are missing opportunities because they haven’t adequately allocated research dollars to understanding women’s wants and needs. Women prefer to work with financial advisors who take a more holistic, relationship-based approach rather than those who use traditional sales tactics.

“The average American woman will earn more money than the average man within 20 years.” [– Michael J. Silverstein, Senior VP, The Boston Consulting Group]

Lumping all women together under one demographic no longer makes sense. In fact, the women’s market contains a plethora of subsegments, including “single, married, divorced, employee, manager, business owner, parent, minority, young or mature.” Marketing campaigns that feature women in limited, one-dimensional roles will not appeal to most female consumers. Knowing this, Unilever took a progressive approach to advertising and ran a much-acclaimed campaign for its Dove brand that featured “real” women of many ages and ethnicities.

“Women entrepreneurs account for 70% of new business start-ups.” [– Marti Barletta, author of *Marketing to Women*]

If you work in sales or marketing, start reaching out to the women in your market by analyzing what share of your client base they represent and how their needs have developed. Know which segment of women customers you are targeting and review your marketing and advertising promotions for gender biases. Ensure that women have influential roles in your design, development and marketing departments.

It’s Broken, So Fix It!

Why have many of the traditional approaches to achieving gender equality failed to produce the desired results? One answer is that many businesses deal with gender primarily in terms of compliance. To reduce the possibility of lawsuits, company leaders instruct supervisors to treat women the same way that they treat men. The negative side effect of such supposedly equal treatment, however, is that managers ignore the differences between men and women, and encourage women to work and behave like men. For example, managers at one firm asked female executives to undergo assertiveness training, even though the women’s natural leadership styles may have been more relationship-based and empathetic than aggressive.

“Economic growth – through better use of women’s talents and skills in the workplace – goes hand in hand with population growth.”

Many managers treat gender as a diversity, or minority, issue, even though women make up half the population. The drawback to this thinking is that racial and ethnic minorities have very different issues than women do. This approach also overlooks women’s strategic value as a large market and a crucial supply of talent.

“If we’re serious about family values, then we can put policies in place that make the juggling of work and parenting a little bit easier.” [– President Barack Obama]

Often, business leaders feel that their practices are egalitarian, even when women make up a very small percentage of their executive teams. In such firms, the established norms for competence and leadership performance tend to be overwhelmingly male-biased. To change this, your employees and managers must make a commitment to creating a “gender-bilingual” company from the top down. Give women the skills and networks they need to get ahead. Examine all aspects of your organization’s operations to weed out gender bias.

Taking Steps to Achieve Gender Equality

Follow these seven steps to introduce a successful gender-balance initiative:

1. **“Awaken your leadership team”** – To be effective, a strategy must start at the top of your organization. Try establishing a “reciprocal mentoring” system in which senior male executives advise, and are advised by, women who show high potential.
2. **“Define the business case”** – Work with an executive committee to build an argument that supports gender diversity as good business policy. Create a case that goes beyond numbers and percentages to recognize core social issues.
3. **“Let people express resistance”** – Addressing naysayers directly works best. In some situations, people will speak more freely to an outside consultant.
4. **“Make it a business issue, not a women’s issue”** – Through no fault of their own, women are not taking their rightful places in the executive suites. The existing systems reflect the values, incentives and beliefs of the male majority.
5. **“Make changes before making noise”** – Convey the reasons why gender balance is important to the health of your company. Align internal and external communications, so you don’t blow your horn until the entire orchestra has warmed up.
6. **“Don’t mix up the messages”** – People tend to think that gender and work-life balance are interchangeable, “that women have work-life issues...and that men don’t.” Don’t let other workforce problems dilute your gender initiatives. Deal with each one separately.
7. **“Give it a budget, not just volunteers”** – No business program carries weight without a budget. Allocate sufficient financial resources to your gender-balance projects.

Some Countries Offer Women More Opportunities

Which countries provide the best economic opportunities for women? The top 10 are Denmark, Norway, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Iceland, Luxembourg, France and Russia. The U.K. ranks 41st, trailed by the U.S. in 46th place and Japan in 52nd. France, particularly, has excelled in this arena. That nation’s “social norm” for families is three children with two working parents. French women do not have to choose between work and family, because the government financially supports “day care, tax breaks, parental leave, after-school clubs and subsidized training for babysitters.”

“Men who want power usually push for it, navigating organizational politics as natives of a familiar homeland.”

In contrast, American women who make it into the upper echelons of the corporate world pay a heavy price. Research shows that almost half of U.S. working women who make more than \$100,000 a year do not have children and 43% are not married. The U.S. is one of only four countries in the developed world that does not provide paid maternity leave, much less any provisions for paternity leave. The nation doesn’t have a fixed maximum workweek and, unlike 100 other countries, doesn’t guarantee a woman’s right to breast-feed.

“Corporate America has let women into the game – and allowed them to scale the heights – as long as they play by the existing rules.”

Contrary to common belief, enabling women to pursue careers does not lower birthrates. In fact, “economic growth – through better use of women’s talents and skills in the workplace – goes hand in hand with population growth.” So, “if countries want people to have children, they need to enable them to combine dual careers with parenthood.” The more a country’s career models support working moms, the higher its fertility rate will be. When circumstances force women to choose between work and having a family, they usually choose work.

Power Play

In general, power does not motivate women in the same way it motivates men. Moreover, women don’t always understand the unwritten rules by which men gain power. Women tend to believe that, if they excel, their companies will reward them. Though their managers appreciate these “worker bees” when tasks need to get done, they often don’t promote them. Women also generally do not feel comfortable with “one-up, one-down” power structures and prefer to treat their co-workers as equals. Unfortunately, this makes it difficult for them to get ahead in most companies, where networking, negotiating, building alliances and gaining visibility are part of corporate politics. Women’s natural disdain for such politics removes them from the game.

“Career Life Cycles”

Most managers fail to recognize that men and women have different “career life cycles.” Although the female career life cycle differs from country to country, in general, women start out strongly in their 20s and lose momentum in their 30s, particularly if they have children. Women’s careers regain speed when they reach their 40s. Men’s careers tend to advance more steadily.

“Progressive companies are realizing that it is in their own interests to have women better represented throughout their ranks, and that to do this they have to stop forcing women to adapt.”

Even women who don’t become mothers face career setbacks in their 30s. That’s when the rules for getting ahead begin to change. Advancement is no longer simply a reflection of performance. The emphasis shifts to how well you can manage people, build and wield influence, and promote your own agendas. Typically, successful males receive help from a network of influencers. Much of their networking takes place outside the office. These male-dominated, informal gatherings include drinks after work, a round of golf or even exotic activities, such as deep-sea fishing. Also, men are usually able to work longer hours, because their partners are managing their homes.

The New Way

Women are not the only ones who desire more flexibility and balance in their careers. Men and women no longer feel the same way about work that they did even a generation ago. Working fathers want to be more actively involved in parenting their children. Older people want to work past retirement age. Business leaders who would like to create a more inclusive environment should strive toward these goals:

- “Understanding that flexibility is a desire of men as well as women.”
- “Recognizing that careers no longer have to be linear and unbroken.”
- “Raising or abolishing narrow age bands for spotting and developing ‘high potential’.”
- “Making the language of corporate leaders more inclusive.”
- “Avoiding assumptions about what women – or men – want from [their] careers.”

About the Authors

Avivah Wittenberg-Cox is the CEO of 20-first, a gender consultancy firm in Europe. Journalist **Alison Maitland** wrote for the *Financial Times* for two decades.
