



ENGAGING MEN

Barriers and Gender Norms

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Men are pivotal in the pursuit of gender equity. Because of well-known gender gaps in executive leadership positions,¹ men can be powerful stakeholders in their organizations. Their support can both expand and accelerate progress toward ending gender inequities.²

However, even when men have the best intentions for supporting gender equity, opposing forces such as personal barriers and gender norms can still undermine progress.³ For people to be effective advocates for equity and change, it is important to understand these challenges and how to overcome them.

Catalyst’s landmark *Engaging Men in Gender Initiatives* research series was able to identify the barriers and gender norms that many men face on their journey toward equity and inclusion. Let’s take a look at some of the key findings.

Barriers

In the first study from the series,⁴ Catalyst researchers interviewed men leaders who were supporters of inclusion. Findings pointed to three primary barriers that men face: apathy, fear, and real or perceived ignorance.⁵

APATHY

Of the men interviewed, 74% said that apathy toward issues of gender equity is a factor in men’s lack of action. They stated that some men were either simply unconcerned or did not see a compelling reason to become actively involved in DEI, or both.

FEAR

74% of men also said fear is a barrier and named 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 men don’t act because of either perceived or actual ignorance, which makes them think that they 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. The report highlighted five strategies for combating these barriers.⁶

1. Identify and eliminate apathy.

Men are often apathetic toward 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 their personal lives. 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.⁷

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

Counterintuitively, the dissemination of inclusion metrics can actually reinforce zero-sum thinking if organizations do not properly frame the data. When information such as job demographics is presented as men versus women, men may perceive a rise in the status of women as a decline in their own status.⁸

To avoid such consequences, workplaces need to consider that context and clear communication are vital.

- Organizations should consider implementing routine DEI progress reports, celebrating individual talent, clearly stating policies regarding gender equity, and other methods of conveying the importance of this work.
- When metrics are shared, share stories about the people behind them, too. 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, rather than a sheer numbers game.

3. Men should be included in discussions of gender.

Catalyst has observed that women often participate in and lead DEI initiatives within their organization while men may not feel welcome to participate in these discussions. Men may even feel as though they are part of the problem.⁹ Such concerns may lead to a feedback loop that results in even fewer men participating. Yet, the participation of men in these DEI discussions is critical for their success.

Organizations need to indicate to men that they play an essential role in creating inclusion in the workplace and encourage men's participation in DEI activities. Additionally, providing men with opportunities to discuss gender issues in majority-men groups may reduce men's concerns about making mistakes or being judged as sexist.

4. Highlight respected men who advocate for gender equity.

Researchers have found that nearly all men (94%) experience some degree of masculine anxiety in the workplace, potentially stifling their willingness to challenge sexist behaviors in the workplace.¹⁰ Showcasing courageous role models, especially other men, who are challenging the status quo can provide an important reassurance that men will not be perceived as less masculine for working toward gender equality.

In fact, it can show that being an inclusive leader will only help men's careers and standing.¹¹ As role models speak up¹² and masculine anxiety decreases,¹³ men are more willing to challenge sexist behaviors.

5. Provide men with learning opportunities.

Researchers also show that most men (86%) say they want to interrupt sexist behaviors in the workplace, but far fewer men (31%) feel confident in doing so.¹⁴

As the first *Engaging Men in Gender Initiatives* report states, both "men-only [discussion] groups and [groups] with women can help to boost men's confidence and command regarding gender issues in the workplace. Such learning opportunities can increase men's inclination to take an active role in initiatives to eliminate gender disparities in the workplace."¹⁵

Gender Norms

Gender norms about how men and women should behave also stymie progress toward equity and inclusion. 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.¹⁶

Additionally, a combative culture in the workplace—one where employees seek to dominate one another and value is placed on power, authority, and status¹⁷—can exacerbate masculine anxiety and further deter men from interrupting sexist behavior.¹⁸ So, it's important to understand the masculine norms that can contribute to masculine anxiety and combative cultures.¹⁹

In the first *Engaging Men in Gender Initiatives* report, researchers found the following specific gender norms get in the way of progress:²⁰

“Avoid all things feminine”

Gender norms enforce a strict distinction between what is considered appropriate behavior for men and what is considered appropriate behavior for women.²¹ Any perceived violations of these norms are met with criticism, ridicule, harsh judgment, and potentially rejection by peers as well as others; this is true for men as well as women.²² Enforcement of these gender norms may begin early in life, making them especially difficult to dispel in adulthood.²³

“Be a winner”

Gender norms often emphasize a man's high status, which he can manifest in a variety of ways such as through wealth, prestige, and power, at the expense of all else.²⁴ Men who act in opposition to this norm may be seen as weak and become stigmatized.²⁵ This is particularly evident in combative workplace cultures, in which men are in a constant battle to prove their masculinity.



“Show no chinks in the armor”

Gender norms often dictate that a man must never show weakness, either physical or mental.²⁶ This attitude can lead to negative physical and psychological consequences.²⁷ For example, a man who can never show weakness may not go to the doctor when he is ill and may not seek help when he feels negative emotions like sadness or anxiety. He may even act aggressively, potentially risking his own or others' physical harm, rather than show what he perceives as weakness.²⁸

“Be a man's man”

Some gender norms encourage men to win the respect of other men by emphasizing their masculinity.²⁹ Often, this means adhering to and enforcing the other masculine norms listed above.³⁰ Being a “man's man” or being “one of the boys” also means engaging in stereotypical masculine pastimes whether the man actually enjoys them or not. These behaviors have the potential to reinforce gender roles and stereotypes.

These gender norms are especially insidious because they self-reinforce and compound to the detriment of men's quality of life. For example, in order to "be a winner," a man may push himself too hard to achieve a high level of status, but because he is not supposed to show any "chinks in the armor" he has no methods or support systems for dealing with the stress and anxiety that he may experience.³¹ Constantly trying to live up to these gender norms may therefore contribute to masculine anxiety as well as a combative culture in the workplace. Ultimately, these gender norms can make it difficult for men to approach DEI conversations from a place of openness, sabotaging any conversation before it has even begun.³²

Understanding and addressing the barriers and gender norms that men face is critical to both creating more equitable workplaces and improving the professional and personal well-being of men. The end result will be a more productive and psychologically safe workplace with employees who feel more committed and more included, regardless of gender.

To learn more about how to include men in gender equity conversations, read our companion piece, [Engaging Men: The Journey Toward Equity](#).

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