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Genders Should Unite for Workplace Equity

Managers give more support to gender equity and women’s advancement when men become allies.

Based on the research of Insiya Hussain



The wage gap is still with us. Despite decades of advocacy by proponents of gender equity in the workplace, female workers earn 84% of what men earn for comparable jobs.



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Now, new research shows this outcry is more likely to reach management's ear when men and women combine their voices.

In a series of three studies by [Insiya Hussain](#), assistant professor of management at Texas McCombs, coalitions that included women and men moved managers more strongly than groups composed solely of women or men.

“When only women advocate for gender equity, it can come across as a niche concern,” Hussain says. “When men speak up about it, they can be seen as lacking the right to protest an issue that doesn't personally concern them.”

“It's really when you bring women and men together as advocates that you circumvent both concerns.” —
Insiya Hussain

Hussain hopes her findings can be useful for everyone: women trying to break glass ceilings and men who want to help as allies. Says Hussain, “This research addresses how best to form an advocacy group to raise these issues, if you want to get results.”

Messengers and Messages

Hussain's earlier research looked at [how employees sell ideas to their employers](#). In the process, she observed that on one kind of issue — gender equity and women's advancement — men were becoming more interested, but they were not always sure about how to get involved.

She theorized that men could help supply a crucial element: issue legitimacy.

Hussain explains that when bosses decide what issues need attention, they look partly at what groups are raising them. They look for two kinds of cues:

- Coalition legitimacy: whether the messenger is appropriate for the issue.
- Issue legitimacy: whether the message itself is important to the organization.

“On gender equity issues, women have the advantage in signaling coalition legitimacy, because they have firsthand experience with the issues and a personal stake in them,” she says.

By contrast, Hussain notes that men lend greater issue legitimacy, particularly when managerial decision-makers hold sexist attitudes.

“Men’s participation indicates that the issue is likely to be strategically relevant to the organization and of concern to a wider range of stakeholders.” — Insiya Hussain

By combining forces, she speculated, women and men could have greater influence than either could have on their own.

Working Together

To test her idea, Hussain worked with colleagues Subra Tangirala of the University of Maryland and Elad Sherf of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. They found support for their predictions over three studies.

The first study asked 707 managers for the names of three male and three female co-workers. It attached the names, in random pairs, to a proposal to

train women on negotiating higher salaries.

After reading the proposal, each manager provided ratings in response to questions about the issue's importance, the workers' legitimacy for bringing it up, and how actively the manager might promote the solution. Each rating was on a scale from 0 to 7, with 7 indicating strong agreement.

The results confirmed the theory.

- Mixed-gender and male-only coalitions were rated the highest on issue legitimacy: 5.47 and 5.38, respectively. Meanwhile, women-only were statistically lower, at 5.18.
 - Managers also saw mixed-gender and women-only groups as the most appropriate messengers, with the highest coalition legitimacy at 5.16 and 5.10, respectively. Here, male-only coalitions were statistically lower, at 4.77.
- “When you bring people together in a mixed-gender coalition, they're able to signal both kinds of legitimacy,” Hussain says. “That makes them especially effective.”

Lessons for Workplace Change

Studies with two other sets of participants found similar results: Managers were more likely to act when women and men jointly raised a gender equity issue.

But the effect was unique to gender equity issues. Mixed-gender coalitions had no advantage when advocating for other issues, such as a training program to improve customer service skills.

“The gender of coalition members matters for sensitive, socially charged issues that implicate people’s identities,” Hussain says. “They don’t matter if you’re talking about customer service.”

That lesson could help workers bringing up other socially sensitive issues, she says, such as racial ones.

“If you’re trying to advance racial equity, for instance, a coalition of white and Black employees might be most effective at signaling both coalition legitimacy and issue legitimacy,” Hussain says. “This would be useful to examine in future work.”

Although women have yet to achieve equity in most workplaces, Hussain says she is encouraged that activist organizations such as HeForShe and Lean In are encouraging men to join in solidarity and support.

She is also encouraged that managers are taking women’s issues seriously, according to the levels of managerial support generally uncovered in the study.

“If we had run this study 10 or 20 years ago, we might have uncovered much poorer attitudes toward gender equity in general,” says Hussain.

“And as the workplace is always evolving, these findings may change 10 or 20 years from now, with more social progress.” — Insiya Hussain

“At least today, though, it helps to recruit men as allies. Gender equity advocacy is most effective when women and men work together.”

“Signaling Legitimacy: Why Mixed-Gender Coalitions Outperform Single-Gender Coalitions in Advocating for Gender Equity” is online in the Academy of Management Journal.

Story by Steve Brooks

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