

## Instead of asking women to 'fix' their choices about work, let's help them belong in a workplace

Written by The Conversation

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Improving gender equality in the workplace needs to be more about ensuring that work is somewhere women feel they can belong and less about trying to simply “fix” women’s choices about their careers.

Our preliminary research suggests, that [women opt-out](#) because they don’t feel they fit in within their organisations, because they feel they won’t succeed, or because they feel their sacrifices will not be rewarded.

There are a number of ways in which [organisation can ensure](#) that women feel as though they fit in. First and foremost, organisations must provide diverse role models and positions that are [attainable as well as inspiring](#), sending the message that all types of people are able to succeed and flourish within the organisation.

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**Read more: [It’s too soon to celebrate a narrowing gender wage gap](#)**

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In the past workplace inequality has been blamed on external barriers faced by women throughout their careers – gendered stereotypes and expectations, the discrimination from those who make hiring and promotion decisions, and the division of labour perpetuated by maternity leave and childcare policies.

Nonetheless, women have begun to trickle into male-dominated professions, with some attaining positions of power within them. So why does the [glass ceiling](#) persist?

Usually it’s argued that women’s active career choices take them away from particular professions and roles. In one [report for the New York Times](#) a journalist interviewed a group of highly successful women who had voluntarily left their careers, often to achieve a better work-life balance. As one women put it:

I don't want to conquer the world; I don't want that kind of life a baby provides a graceful and convenient exit

As someone who has had a baby, I'm not convinced that "graceful" is a word I would necessarily use in this circumstance. However, it is gratifying to see women are no longer being seen as passive objects on which external forces act.

We are active agents in our own careers, so the narrative of choice feels empowering. Choice also opens up the opportunity for change – if women can choose to opt-out, they can also choose to opt-in.

There are a plethora of initiatives designed to empower women to make the right career choices. Emblematic of these is the Lean In phenomenon, instigated by Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg, first in a [Ted Talk](#) and then in her [bestselling book](#). Sandberg urges women to overcome their "internal obstacles", to lean in, "take a seat at the table", and exhibit the will to lead.

This is fighting talk – it inspires women to take their careers into their own hands. While empowering, this rhetoric of choice is problematic for a number of reasons.

First and foremost, it puts the onus for gender equality on women themselves. It implies that inequality is due to women's preferences.

Such victim-blaming was clearly apparent in James Damore's now infamous "[Google memo](#)" which argued, in part, that gender diversity initiatives were unfair to men because gender differences were due to women's own decisions.

## The workplace isn't changing

The workplace remains a problematic space for women – persistent allegations of [sexual misconduct](#), [gender pay gaps](#),

that are more like ravines, and [workplace discrimination scandals](#) in Silicon Valley.

Similarly, [statistics](#) reveal marked differences in the roles in which women and men work. Women continue to be [underrepresented in many industries](#), such as engineering, manufacturing, and construction; and women's representation in positions of power and influence remain [consistently low](#).

## “Fixing” women's choices

If we believe that inequality is due to women's choices, then the obvious solution is to “fix women”. These approaches are prevalent in [workplace interventions](#), which seek to help women with extra assertiveness and negotiation training, or offering part-time and [flexible working](#) options. While training and flexible working have many advantages, such solutions may inadvertently exacerbate the problem.

While organisations may train women to be assertive and to be strong negotiators, they do little to address the stereotypes that results in a strong [backlash](#) when they do so. Similarly, while flexible and part-time work options may be desirable for women (and indeed men), such working patterns rarely lead to promotions and pay raises. When was the last time you saw a part-time CEO? In fact this [reinforces](#) that [stereotypes](#) that women are not committed to their careers.

Moreover, because such solutions focus on women's choices, they downplay the continued existence of external barriers, such as [gendered stereotypes](#). There is an expectation of men to be strong and competent and women to be warm, kind, and caring.

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**Read more: [Did Westpac just mansplain gender diversity to its competitors?](#)**

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Interventions designed to fix women also leave the status quo untouched. They ask women to adjust to workplaces that are primarily designed by, and for, men. Requiring the increasing number of women entering the in the workforce to adjust may work for individual (often privileged) women who succeed in adapting to the status quo, but it is unlikely lead to broader, or long-term, [social change](#) .

What is needed is an approach that acknowledges both the importance of women's choices and the external barriers women face. For example, our recent work demonstrates that when women feel that they fit in and belong within organisations, they feel more ambitious, are more likely to make [sacrifices for their careers](#) , and are less likely to [opt-out](#) .

If we are to address this persistent gender inequality, we need to move away from trying to simply fix women. We need to ensure that organisations are places where women feel they belong, that they promote and reward women, and that they themselves are open to change. We can empower women to lean in, but at the same time, we need to give them something to lean towards.

*Michelle Ryan receives funding from European Research Council, British Vets Association, British Academy. Member of the Labour Party (UK)*

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