

Book Review of *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*

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Iris Bohnet, author of *What Works: Gender Equality by Design* argues that it is dangerous to think that the discussion regarding gender equality is a thing of the past. In the 21st century, no one is immune to gender bias even if society has shifted attention from feminism to the neglect of the male child. Society has been forced to believe that we live in an equal world where all can thrive regardless of their gender. In Bohnet's book, *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*, she manages to convince readers that sexism is still prevalent. She uses a couple of examples to cement her idea that unconscious bias is always a limiting force. Numerous attempts to de-bias people thoughts have proven futile (Bohnet, 2016, p. 54). Bohnet argues that there are better ways and approaches of addressing the issue of gender equality in the contemporary world.

There has been an increase in the number of authors who have written about gender stereotyping in the past. Among all these works, Bohnet's book has been exemplary in explaining why institutions and organizations have adopted a corporate approach in addressing the issue of gender bias. As a behavioral economist, Bohnet managed to conduct exhaustive and comprehensive research on the best method of tackling gender inequality in learning institutions and organizations. Her primary emphasis has been on incidences of gender stereotyping in learning institutions and the workplace environment (Bohnet, 2016, p. 69). Bohnet neither supports nor opposes viewpoints from other scholars but she instead focuses on complementary and behavioral based strategy of addressing sexism.

Whenever the issue of gender inequality is raised, everyone seems concerned. Some will show concern when the topic of gender inequality is introduced but will, later on, turn a blind eye to the matter. Those who make attempts to advocate for gender equality risks inviting a backlash from those who are yet to face up to the facts that the issue of gender equality needs to

be addressed. Bohnet's work is a wake-up call to all who have overlooked the issue of gender equality. Nowadays, humans tend to assume that sexism does not exist anymore (Bohnet, 2016, p. 186). Even after reports of incidences of gender bias, we all turn a blind eye especially if the issue does not involve our accomplices, friends, relatives or even family members. However, little do humans know that this assumption continues to widen the gender gap.

Humans still judge others based on their gender. During the first chapters of Bohnet's book, she gives an analogy of how students were asked to evaluate a fictional Howard Roizen. The student's response was intriguing, but when the name was changed to that of a woman, the reaction was different and disparaging. Apparently, the fictional Howard Roizen was supposed to be the real Howard Heidi who has been a close friend to Steve Jobs and Bill Gates (Bohnet, 2016, p. 34). The fact that the second character is a lady explains the change of the student's reaction and behavior. Bohnet argues that while men are celebrated for their dominion and supremacy in male-dominated fields, women, on the other hand, are criticized and hated. In a nutshell, Bohnet is trying to showcase the unconscious bias that all humans have been forced to believe. Gender stereotyping is passed from one generation to the other where kitchen chores and tending children are considered tasks for women while men are meant to lead and give directions. Those who do not abide by this law are considered outcasts who have defied the cultural and traditional norms and customs.

It is quite intriguing that no one will admit that they are or they have been sexists. In fact, everyone will come out to defend themselves when such allegations are tabled against them. The rational part of a human being may cling to gender neutrality, but the unconscious part of the human being will remain biased (Bohnet, 2016, p. 104). Bohnet narrates stories instigating this notion although very few will openly accept. It can be quite easy to convince oneself that it is

possible to address the issue of gender equality without necessarily engaging the conscious part of the brain. However, the unconscious part of the mind is the largest and humans have limited control. Research shows that it is solely responsible for the prevalent gender bias.

De-biasing of people's mind is time-consuming and is not assuring that these efforts will bear any fruits. The primary motive is to break free from the long-held perception of gender inequality and stereotyping. Research shows that it may take a couple of years for a rational human being to learn how the subconscious part of the human mind operates (Bohnet, 2016, p. 107). However, the first step towards this quest is to acknowledge and admit that there is a looming problem that needs to be addressed. Very few people admit that they entertain gender prejudice, but everyone is quick to judge others when they are convicted of gender stereotyping. Bohnet argues that this explains why diversity training cannot address gender stereotyping in the society. However, many companies invest in the quest to promote a diverse organizational culture; research shows that this has a very minimal impact. Bohnet considers this a waste of resources and time, and in the long run, the entire process is not productive.

Bohnet condemns de-biasing of individuals but believes that de-biasing of institutions can be very useful. She proposes that all institutions should be designed in such a way that they are free from any form of unconscious bias. Bohnet breaks down the word DESIGN into three separate steps, D stands for data, E stands for experiment and SIGN stands for signpost (Bohnet, 2016, p. 94). This represents three insightful steps which if deployed right; they will help address gender stereotyping in institutions. The first step which is denoted by D involves collecting data with the sole intention of determining the prevalence of gender bias in a given institution or organization. The second step which is indicated by E entails experimenting to determine the best approach to fill and bridge the gender bias group. The third and last phase entails coming up

with a signpost that motivates people to deviate from engaging in discussions which might lead to gender segregation.

Among Bohnet's proposed systemic interventions in the quest to address gender inequality is the creation of de-biasing environments. All institutions and organizations should take note of processes and behaviors, how they are illustrated and their impact on gender bias (Bohnet, 2016, p. 123). The best approach to tackle gender stereotyping is to intervene when some processes and actions need to be addressed. The term nudging is used to explain the behavioral and process-based design approach. It is worth noting that this practice has recorded increased popularity in the recent past since more policymakers have endorsed it. This can be attributed to its cost-effectiveness as compared to diversity training which is considered expensive and ineffective. Additionally, this approach is also easy to implement and emphasizes the precise operation such as the hiring and recruitment process with the primary motive of instigating gender equality in the workplace.

In today's society, integrating behavioral insights while making policies is gradually becoming common especially in institutions or organizations with diverse individuals. Bohnet believes that this approach has the capability of alleviating poverty in the world's most impoverished areas if it is deployed in the right manner. Some of the challenges that the current institutions face is complacency, and there are attempts to ensure that human talent is utilized to its full potential (Bohnet, 2016, p. 117). This includes making crucial decisions such as hiring and promotion while structuring the respective teams in a manner that does not entertain gender biasing. Bohnet also considered how institutions can be operated at a low cost and with very minimal effort but still manage to fulfill and achieve their set objectives. She gives an example of Google as one of the firms which have managed to address gender bias at the organizational

level rather than individually. However, there are ongoing efforts from learning institutions such as universities to follow suit. The first step will always be acknowledging that there is a problem that needs to be addressed and then designing the best approach to address the challenge depending on the context.

Bohnet critiques individuals who hold high expectations on optimism and are confident when making decisions and executing vital plans which may impede gender equality in an organization or an institution. The failure of the proposed recommendations will have a negative impact on all those who are attempting to actualize the behaviorally based design approach (Bohnet, 2016, p. 132). Additionally, some tend to ignore that this method also has limitations that may derail its actualization and implementation. Although Bohnet criticizes attempts by institutions to invest heavily in diversity training, she points out that this approach may record positive outcomes, but it is bound and limited by moral licensing (Bohnet, 2016, p. 136). This is common when people tend to act morally because there is an already dictated ethical platform. Bohnet advocates that individuals should embrace a capacity building approach which not only focuses on the individual bias but instead places emphasis on how an institution or an organization can address gender bias using new processes.

Bohnet gives statistical evidence revealing why most of the approaches and processes being implemented by various organizations are not working. She does not offer a remedy explaining how a botched operation can be revived but instead, she gives insight into other approaches and methodologies which can be used to address the issue of gender bias. She argues that the implementation phase is vulnerable to instances of implicit discrimination. This is because the recruiting managers will purposely use a misguided approach to ensure that only individuals of their choice are hired. Bohnet argues that this is one of the pitfalls of gender

stereotyping which can no longer be overlooked. In fact, the least preferred gender will have a lower probability of being invited for an interview or being hired. Once in the interview room, an unstructured approach is used, and this denotes a loophole for confirmation bias (Bohnet, 2016, p. 64). The interviewers will, therefore, shift from the recommended method of interviewing to ensure that only their preferred candidates are hired. Bohnet gives a guide on the best strategy to mitigate gender stereotyping during recruitment.

Some may argue that Bohnet's nudging and behavioral design approach is limited to a one-day affair in the quest to tackle gender stereotyping in organizations. These are just baseless presumptions because Bohnet continues to support her ideas with concrete evidence regarding how behaviorally based methodologies can be used in the current institutions and organizations. Bohnet draws much of her information from sociology and physiology to explain the various types of behavioral biases prevalent in the society, in our workplaces and learning institutions (Bohnet, 2016, p. 89). Bohnet advocates the formation of groups which she refers to as a critical mass in the quest to convince people to shun gender stereotyping. This works by suppressing the individual self-perceptions and paving the way for a massive wave of individuals spanning to all departments within an organization.

Research shows that transitioning from a self-perspective of handling and tackling gender bias to an institutional approach may be quite cumbersome. Some workers especially those in the executive posts will distance themselves from the ordinary workers and attempt to unite the two extremes may be futile. This can be attributed to an already skewed process that workers are familiar with and they are finding challenges shifting and adopting behavioral based design methodologies (Bohnet, 2016, p. 109). However, Bohnet points out that the results are always impeccable and motivating. Each group is bound by a set of rules and regulations that defines the

terms of engagement and Bohnet refers to them as political correctness norms (Bohnet, 2016, p. 143). There are no restrictions as each member of the group is presented with an equal opportunity to air their views and ideas. This also instigates creativity since more people will be prompted to share information, give their ideas, critique those of others and offer suggestions on the best approach to tackle gender bias.

Social norms dictate the scope of the current political institutions, although there is increased speculation regarding the state of the broader environment. Social norm messaging can be applied to ensure that everyone aligns their behaviors with those of a group of persons (Bohnet, 2016, p. 99). This prompts individuals to avoid engaging in self-perceptions and other behavioral processes that may lead to gender bias. In fact, Bohnet claims that this approach has proved expedient in convincing people to pay their dues and taxes on time. There may be fears especially if the behaviors are not salient and therefore not comparable with those of a specific group. Bohnet advises people to consider the prevailing norms which incorporate all parties based on their availability and accountability within the organization.

Critics have opposed the approach that Bohnet recommends when making crucial decisions regarding distinctive cognitive biases of newly identified faults. They argue that there have been similar concepts whose actualization did not yield any fruits. Bohnet decided to dedicate a whole chapter to explain these allegations and the extent of the pervasiveness of the critics. Bohnet makes the reader aware of the fact that there is no single human being who is immune to unconscious bias. Additionally, she points out that there is no precise approach to addressing unconscious bias. Bohnet proceeds to use a couple of jargons such as loss aversion, and algorithm aversion to address the replication crisis currently facing many institutions and organizations (Bohnet, 2016, p. 195).

Bohnet presents research-based solutions to the impending danger of gender biasing. Instead of tackling gender stereotyping at individual levels, there are better changes that can be implemented and have significant impacts on the organizational perception of gender bias. However, Bohnet advises that this effort needs to be moved to classrooms and boardrooms where people usually converge. Bohnet's idea best serves a group of people rather than individual entities. The same approach can also be applied to hiring and promotion to ensure that only the best and not the preferred are recruited. This does not just benefit businesses but is also a panacea to unconscious bias prevalent in most government offices and institutions. The primary motive is to release millions of people from the shackles of gender stereotyping.

What Works: Gender Equality by Design is a wakeup call that it is possible to instigate new insights on the human brain. Blind evaluations have proven that Bohnet's behavioral design can be applied to mitigate gender bias in institutions and organizations. A typical example that she presents is when groups of musicians were allowed to audition for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The judges opted to stay behind the curtains where they would not see the interviewees. The decision on who had excelled was dictated by the quality of sound of the musician. Results showed that the likelihood of a female musician to be chosen rose by 50 percent (Bohnet, 2016, p. 71). Although critics may come out to criticize such initiatives, Bohnet argues that clarifying our judgments will allow us to make better decisions regarding how well we can tackle gender bias. She also emphasizes on picking the best candidate for a particular job rather than a preferred applicant who does not meet the job requirements.

Conclusion

The discussion regarding gender equality has been prevalent for a while now, and yet humans fall victim for the same vice they claim to have shunned several decades ago. Bohnet is saddened by the fact that there are some who will be on the front line advocating for gender equality but will not be true to the call for the long haul. This writer believes many people ignore the fact that anyone can be a victim of gender bias. This can be attributed to human faultiness where we tend to focus on the common bias which accounts for a tiny portion of our brains and ignore the dominant unconscious bias. There is no need of spending billions every year in diversity training only to realize that this approach of addressing gender stereotyping no longer works. This writer believes there are better approaches to addressing gender stereotyping which are based on extensive research on the impact of behavioral and process-based designs of mitigating gender bias. Employers need to actualize this plan in convincing employees and the entire workforce to implement new methodologies aimed at changing how they view gender stereotyping in the workplaces. Additionally, behavioral insight will be a panacea to the numerous incidences of gender discrimination prevalent in learning institutions and other organizations.

Recommendation

After reviewing the book, this writer felt this book would be a great book to read further in regards to Gender Equality. *What Works: Gender Equality by Design* would be recommended for most organizations which aim at eliminating biases and bringing in gender equality to everyone. This writer would also recommend it to anyone advocating for gender equality in any workplace institution or government agency. It is a book that gives straightforward ways on how to open up dialogue about gender equality and biases in order to make it a thing of the past. Gender equality is important in a business and moral sense. Bias was discovered to be something that holds us

back but in the worse sense, unconscious bias and de-biasing people's minds is difficult is expensive and difficult. Individual effort and diversity training programs have amounted to very little success. A solution such as de-biasing organizations was presented in order to produce smart changes that have big impacts. Iris Bonnet provides the tools that are needed to produce research-based solutions for the classroom, boardrooms, in hiring and promotion, benefiting businesses, governments and many other entities.

What Works: Gender Equality by Design is a book that focuses on sex discrimination in employment, gender mainstreaming and organizational behavior. It also focuses on the insights of the human mind. The data collected came from companies, universities, and governments in Australia, India, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States, Zambia, and other countries, often in randomized controlled trials. This book points out interventions that are evidence-based and demonstrates how research is addressing gender bias, performance and improving lives.

What Works: Gender Equality by Design intends to be a solution that requires low cost and produces results at a high speed.

The life-changing book, *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*, reads less as a call to arms than as an invitation to both practitioners and general readers to question their own underlying biases towards, and the prevailing wisdom on how best to tackle, institutional gender inequality (Logan-Murray, 2013, p. 3). According to Logan-Murray (2013), through Bohnet's comprehensive unpacking of the global challenge that faces us, taking in results from studies across all continents, she provides a nuanced discussion of, if not always what works, then what we know about the effectiveness of existing interventions (p. 3). Alongside this, the provision of a behavioural toolkit and numerous workable suggestions that can be implemented immediately mean *What Works: Gender Equality by Design* serves both as a clear indication of where we

currently stand and a guide as to how, institution by institution, we can nudge ourselves towards greater gender equality (Logan-Murray, 2013, p. 3).

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