

# DRO

Deakin University's Research Repository

Vongalis-Macrow, Athena 2015, Opportunity the unlikely culprit holding back female participation, *The Conversation*, 1 May.

The published version is available online at **THE CONVERSATION** :

<https://theconversation.com/opportunity-the-unlikely-culprit-holding-back-female-participation-37969>

©2015, Conversation Media Group

Reproduced by Deakin University under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution NoDerivatives Licence](#)

Available from Deakin Research Online:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30077476>

## THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

# Opportunity the unlikely culprit holding back female participation

May 1, 2015 10.37am AEST

### Author

---



**Athena Vongalis-Macrow**

Director Master of Educational Leadership and Management, Deakin University



The stereotype of male as leader goes part of the way to explaining why so few women are in leadership roles. Mikhail Noel/Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA

Female participation in the workforce has been made a priority by both the G20 and in the government's Intergenerational Report.

Australia's G20 commitment is to reduce the gap in participation rates by 25% by 2025, and it is reportedly not on track to do so.

The problem remains enabling women to take up leadership roles and not check out at mid-levels of their career. Something is clearly blocking the way.

The structure of opportunity may be the culprit. There's some evidence that inequality is experienced differently depending on gender, so perhaps the way that opportunity is structured hampers women's progress.

## **Problems with promotion**

Focusing on a typical promotion process reveals the gendered processes and gendered norms that are inherent in the procedure.

Senior leadership positions are more likely to be associated with males, who perform a certain way. Only one in ten executive management personnel in ASX 500 companies are women, less than one in ten are directors of ASX 500 companies. This is a sample statistic and there are many more to show the leadership norm.

When applying for a promotion, women must challenge male centric leadership models and overcome the social norm of what a leader is. Women have to "make a case" for leadership while their male counterparts have to "take" the leadership role. Opportunity to lead would be more equitable in organisations with embedded diverse leadership, since this signifies challenges to the norm.

The opportunity to be promoted to senior ranks is a networked and social activity. Promotion relies on others' opinion and judgement of your skills and capacity. The more senior and more powerful sources of information regarding your capacity, the higher your leadership worth. Research has shown women know the value of networking, but it remains a challenge for most women.

## **Networking nasties**

The challenging nature of networking has to do with time constraints, and completing work/life demands, but research has also shown women prefer more authentic interactions and find networking contrived and unnatural. So, in order to build those networks women have to overcome a number of career and familial expectations that even the more privileged female CEOs find difficult. They need to ignore their behavioural and cultural preferences in how they build relationships and networks.

The opportunity for promotion is often structured on "individual performance" and "individual achievement" within a competitive culture. The focus on outputs overlooks the socialised nature of achievement and performance. Generally women's strengths are to lead more collaboratively and be open and consultative in decision making. When a job is done, there are many that have been involved.

The promotion narrative for leadership is sustained through events of power and outputs. In higher education, for example, power comes in the form of research comprising funding and grants, and outputs in the form of publications. The activity of teaching and learning is not as prestigious, but more likely to be team based and consultative. It is also the main workplace practice for women academics.

Constructing a narrative of power and capability is more difficult to sell when the workplace activity is more socialised, involves care work and is less driven by discernible, timely outputs. However, opportunity for promotion can be restructured through an “evaluation nudge”, that is individual performance being judged in joint or team evaluations. Research shows that joint evaluation of individual performance overcomes the gender stereotyping that happens in individual evaluations.

## **A vicious cycle**

The lack of women in leadership presents a vicious cycle that impinges on opportunity. The very fact that there are less women in leadership sustains the perception that attaining leadership is hard for women. Studies have shown that telling candidates something is difficult results in lesser performance. Not only do women know that getting to leadership is hard, but those on selection panels also know this. To overcome selection bias, the makeup of candidates is critical.

A study by Iris Bohnet from Harvard University showed that having an equal number of male and female candidates for promotion helped to overcome selection bias. Her research showed that selection panels have difficulty comparing dissimilar options and tend to not pick alike types when there is greater diversity. This underscores the need for more women to be encouraged to apply and go for promotion so they are equally represented in the selection pools. Equity in organisations should be more about getting more women promotion-ready.

Promotion represents a social norm through which power is justified and reproduced. The norm, the narrative, the networking and the numbers work against women. Without changes to how opportunity for promotion is structured, it can be said that opportunity stands in the way of getting more women into leadership.



[Gender bias](#) [Gender inequality](#) [Gender equality](#) [Careers](#) [career aspirations](#)