

**50** YEARS  
WOMEN | MBA

• Rosabeth Moss Kanter  
• The Interplay of Structure and Behavior

# GENDER & WORK:

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

# KEYNOTE

GENDER & WORK

# THE INTERPLAY OF STRUCTURE AND BEHAVIOR:

## How System Dynamics Can Explain or Change Outcomes by Gender or Social Category

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The big mouthful of a title reflects a quest to make things more complex rather than simpler. In research designs, we often make things simpler than they actually are in the real world. But to make progress in both knowledge and action requires understanding the whole system—the interacting forces that shape social patterns and make society and the outcomes in society what they are—so that research can contribute to changing them for the better.

One goal of my journey toward change has been to make sure that research in a field like gender, work, and organizations does not make certain simplifying assumptions. When the women’s movement triggered a wave of studies, one prominent simplifying assumption was to attribute outcomes to individuals—in essence, to blame the victim. Outcomes are a factor of people getting what they deserve because of their own shortcomings, one set of studies implied. A corollary for those who advocated for women was to blame the perpetrator, the oppressor—because if it weren’t for their behavior as individuals or their biases, things would be different, as though individuals willfully chose paths that disadvantaged themselves or others. That’s a pernicious simplifying assumption that fails to view the forces shaping behavior.

A second simplifying assumption is the supposed homogeneity of social categories. Categories are convenient tools for societies to classify and sort people, with social stratification by type a general feature of many societies in earlier centuries. Categories also serve routinization of perceptions—for people to make decisions quickly, based on guesses about what people in a category are like and can do—a form of statistical discrimination that assumes that everyone in a category behaves in the same way and should be treated alike. Social categories are abstractions reflecting some characteristics that appear to be salient at a point in history, ignoring other characteristics. They are constructed, and they can be deconstructed. For example, an anthropologist studying a remote Hmong village behaved in ways that were unlike women in the village; because of her behavior, the villagers made her an honorary man. In general, simplifying assumptions about where people fit in social classifications prevent seeing other dimensions that might produce different outcomes.

A third simplifying assumption involves predictions based on supposedly immutable characteristics. It is certainly a simplifying assumption to see biology as destiny, or hormones as prime drivers. Technology is proving that biology is no longer destiny and further nuances may develop in the future. Even the notion of what gender is may be changing; a *New York Times Magazine* article identified up to twelve gender categories acknowledged on certain college campuses as students changed their gender and sexual preferences. Hormones, too, can be situationally triggered and vary across individuals supposedly of the same category—and a big intellectual chasm must be crossed from biology to complex social patterns.

A final and sweeping simplifying assumption involves causality—the perennial problem of confusing correlation with causality in cross-sectional studies at one point in time. But there

is no clear cause and effect when it comes to gender inequality or indeed other types of social outcomes. Instead, there is the interplay of structure and behavior—interacting forces rather than simple cause and effect. To understand (or change) outcomes, we must focus on structures—roles, institutions, and social pathways—as well as individual behaviors and perceptions. Structure and behavior are constantly interacting and reinforcing one another. For example, roles can trigger more positive or less questionable behavior in a particular situation; that behavior can then cause people to become stuck in that role or advance to another.

Thus, we should study the dynamics of a system to understand what happens when a structure impels a behavior, or when a behavior or perception reinforces a certain kind of structure. Systems create momentum. The more that momentum extends over longer and longer periods of time without intervention or new external forces, the harder it becomes to change. The more feedback loops that are involved, the more mutually reinforcing elements there are in any given system, the harder it can be to change. And when it comes to gender, we see the interplay of many social institutions, including the workplace, family norms, the household division of labor, socialization, the education system, law. There are many institutions which reinforce one other, because systems seem to seek alignment and convergence; systems don’t respond to outliers until enough divergent forces accumulate.

If we understand those interacting elements, we can intervene and change them. Change is always possible. That is what leaders do; that is what agents of change outside the establishment do; that is what happens when social or technological forces create change. Change comes in spurts, sometimes through agents of change, social movement activists, or leaders who decide to aim for large-scale structural change. But a variety of other forces can also effect change. Technologies evolve, populations shift, models are communicated and spread from place to place, and deviations from tradition accumulate, as I found in looking at organizational change through innovation for my book *The Change Masters*. Eventually, when a new crisis or problem emerges, projects or practices that were once peripheral but reflect a possible solution are seized upon and become the norm. Change is often a matter of reframing or redefining what is at the center and what is at the periphery.

This kind of thinking about systems and about change informed my book *Men and Women of the Corporation* and, more recently, the research for my book *Confidence: How Winning Streaks and Losing Streaks Begin and End*, and I continue to study system momentum and change today — e.g., in my focus on innovation and what produces high performance. When I wrote *Men and Women of the Corporation* the conventional wisdom was that gender inequality in the workplace was women’s fault. There were studies, even very good studies by researchers whom I admired, with findings such as “women fear success.” Another finding was “no one wants a woman boss, because women are too bossy”—a bossy woman boss stereotype reflected in survey results. (Today we have the “collaborative woman boss” stereotype. But different-and-better is sometimes not an improvement over different-and-worse, because it still constricts behaviors and perceptions.) Other conclusions of this sort abounded: that “women don’t like other women”—they act as “queen bees” and fail to cooperate. I was skeptical about such assertions and wanted to get underneath these simple statements to see the wider system context. Even if these superficial observations were at all true—and they might not be—what would account for the observed behavior that might reveal the structures and social patterns producing them, and thus the ones that could change them? I wanted to add complexity, examine the context, and understand where the momentum behind the theories came from.

At the time, I was studying an industrial corporation and the ways in which industrial corporations of that era had come to be organized in mid-to-late 20th century American society. In the U.S., and in many other advanced, industrialized societies, organizational forms had come to be rigid patterns shaping people’s use of their talents and their life prospects. Today, the modal

organizational models are already changing, and understanding what the implications of those changes are—looser boundaries, many more small, more open systems—is very important. Before we get change, we must understand whom we’re talking about, what the context is, and how it came to be that way. Often, it is the structures that must be transformed in order for change to occur. I’ve recently started asking audiences to perform a little sentence completion test. The sentence to complete is, “If women ran the world...” I have two answers. One: “If women ran the world, running the world would pay seventy seven cents on the dollar.” The more serious answer is that if women ran the world, the world would have already changed to make it possible for women to run it. This is structure preceding opportunity preceding structure—the momentum of systems.

In *Men and Women of the Corporation*, I examined six issues that accounted for why men rose to the top while women generally did not. I studied roles that had emerged in the industrial model, along with the structures that accompanied them. I identified three kinds of roles: people who rose to the top and ran things; people in the support system at work; and people in the support system outside of work who made it possible for those at the top to run things—in short, managers, secretaries, and wives.

First, I sought to explain why managers were generally men and almost exclusively men at the top, and why that system was perpetuated. While there were some women in managerial positions, they were in more routinized jobs. I found that it was risk, not routine, that propelled people to the top. I used observations to theorize about why this division occurred. I found high-risk jobs require a high degree of trust: open-ended decisions are entrusted to people in those roles. And how do people in power figure out to whom they will entrust a high-risk decision? They want somebody who thinks like them, and at the time I was doing this work, that stemmed chiefly from race and gender identities. I called managers’ tendency to promote others like themselves to the highest risk, and thus most important and powerful, roles “homosocial reproduction;” it later became known as “cloning.” In the absence of other phenomena assuring top leaders that people who are different in social type can be trusted with risk (such as MBAs from similar schools or those with shared experience on a project team), then these choices based on social categories become self-perpetuating. That was one explanation for why certain people rose to the top and why the pattern became hard to break, as many consulting firms found when they realized women were getting lower-risk assignments and thus no chance to prove themselves under fire. The industrial corporation I studied had been started by Scotch-Irish Presbyterians; for decades, a high proportion of people in the management ranks were Scotch-Irish Presbyterian. When those patterns can be identified and understood, they become easier to dismantle.

There were two clear support systems for men at the top, and that’s where the women were clustered, as secretaries (today, administrative assistants, a re-labeling to try to ungender the role) and wives. In the case of secretaries in that kind of industrial corporation, the role produced a disposition toward work that kept talented people from being seen as candidates for advancement. The job involved receiving a flow of instructions and orders, and thus they were being repeatedly thanked. They became praise-addicted, seeking gratification at short intervals. The structure of the role discouraged long time horizons and big visions; the role itself made it hard for people to show abilities that would help them rise or cross over into decision-making roles.

The other support system was outside the office and was related to the emerging focus on work and family as a constraint on women’s advancement. The separation between the two realms became very sharp, particularly for white-collar classes after World War II, due to the move from rural areas (where work and family often co-existed) and suburbanization. It was long true that men at the top had consorts. In industrial corporations, and industrialized society more generally, the presence of someone who could augment what that person at the top did was an asset to the corporation—even as it reinforced the distinction between work and family. But stay-at-home housewives shaped managerial perceptions of women in the office.

Surrounding the roles were structures—patterns of opportunity, power, and numbers that tended to seal the roles in place. Opportunity structures are central. Structural patterns shape who gets the next position, what doors open and for whom—and the behaviors produced in response to opportunity tend to help people advance (high opportunity) or keep them stuck (low opportunity). The structure of opportunity is institutionalized in pathways and ladders, not only the ladders up but also the routes to particular positions. For example, coming into a job by a non-traditional route could derail opportunity as much as a dead-end job itself, accounting for why efforts to get more women in management don’t always work when women come in from outside without the pre-work. It became clear that opportunity shaped aspirations and also the kinds of networks women formed. Those who saw a path ahead developed higher aspirations and formed task-oriented rather than purely social relationships. I later observed the rise of boundary-less careers and job-hopping across companies, as well as entrepreneurship, and explored this in my book *When Giants Learn to Dance*. Theoretically, this should open more opportunity for women, but in fact informal labor markets tended to mean that the structure of power played a more important role.

Power is the second variable I found to be crucial to explaining outcomes. In the industrial corporation context, power was defined as someone’s ability to get things done because they could command resources and get support—that is, the credibility they had with other people. Power derived from sponsorship from above (which brought cloning into play); horizontal cooperation from peers (who had to believe that they had something to gain); and support from subordinates who valued their bosses for what the bosses could do for them, not for likeability. Social status and social categories shaped perceptions of power. Subordinates preferred bosses who could pull them up. Women, even the most competent, were seen as individual achievers rather than as possessing the ability to take others with them or exchange favors with peers. Thus, there was resistance to instructions from the more powerless (women), which caused them to become more strident, which led to the “bossy” stereotype. As women broke into higher positions (see my point about numbers, next), they had resources to offer peers and subordinates, and their desirability as leaders as well as others’ positive perception of women’s styles improved, making it possible to redefine leadership attributes.

The third structural issue was numbers: how many of one kind in a group of another kind. Being someone rare or unusual in a group of any kind set in motion dynamics that made it hard for that rare person to be effective in his or her job. They became tokens, known for their difference or bending over backward to hide it. Either way, having a few women trickle into an organization does not change it and might even perpetuate stereotypes. That’s why some fields are stuck at a surprisingly consistent proportion of women—about 17%. (Of course, finance has a lower proportion in management; education has a much higher proportion.) But the 17% figure is striking, because it is roughly the proportion that I found to perpetuate tokenism rather than full inclusion. This year, at the World Economic Forum, despite WEF’s desire for an increase, there were only 17% women. The actress Geena Davis has found that in Hollywood films since 1946, the modal percentage of women in leading roles and even in crowd scenes is 17%. Davis has pointed out that this is what looks “normal.” She’s trying to make change simply by getting more women into crowd scenes in all the jobs they now hold—as police, firefighters, doctors.

Numbers change, or don’t, as a function of the structures of opportunity and power as well as the institutional forces that create and reinforce roles—including rigid separation between work and family. The impact of numbers is modified or mediated by the power and opportunity otherwise associated with the person who is rare—so that some dynamics occurring around tokens are universal but others shift depending on whether the token is male or female, an advantaged white person or a less-advantaged person of color. But the main effect is on the interplay between structure and behavior which produces momentum increasing or decreasing the probability of success. There are cycles of advantage and cycles of disadvantage. For example, if oppor-

tunity shapes aspirations, then those without opportunity will lower their aspirations, tune out, dream of escape, and thus reinforce the likelihood that they might never be given opportunity. If higher-status people are more likely to be trusted with resources than lower-status people, power and social reproduction reinforce each other. Structures and roles produce behaviors attributed, often falsely or at least inconclusively, to gender. Those behaviors and perceptions should instead be attributed to the underlying system momentum.

A case in point. For my book *Confidence*, I looked at extreme cycles of advantage—winning streaks—and cycles of disadvantage—losing streaks—in order to understand business turnarounds as well as other big changes (such as Nelson Mandela’s role in a country turnaround in South Africa). In addition to collecting data on many companies, I added a study of professional and college sports teams, because of the chance to study momentum in repeated episodes of similar performance at frequent intervals. In the database of teams with the longest winning or losing streaks, two of the longest winning streaks in recent sports history were women’s college teams: the University of Connecticut women’s basketball team and University of North Carolina women’s soccer. That was entirely an artifact of a changed context—the introduction of Title IX—which thereby changed our images of women in sports. Once women had the opportunities guaranteed by Title IX, they could soar. Their behavior as winners involved high aspirations, risk-taking, and high performance. At the same time, the male teams on losing streaks behaved in ways that perpetuated victimhood—one might say that they behaved like the disadvantaged women of the old industrial corporation: they lowered their aspirations, fought amongst themselves, became less interested in their tasks, and didn’t think long-term. It is also clear that more opportunity opens up and people are more empowered in winning streaks than during losing streaks -- one reason why there is a correlation between company performance and the proportion of women in leadership. A more positive company culture propels further success and also opens opportunity.

These cycles of advantage and disadvantage can be broken when system forces realign, and other paths can be forged. The appointment of Virginia Rometty as CEO of IBM in January 2012 is the result of many shifting institutional patterns internal and external to the company that accumulated, beginning with a turnaround in the 1990s. IBM’s strong values, including respect for individuals, focus on innovation, the flexibility inherent in its “dynamic workplace,” and a continuing emphasis on teaching leaders to understand differences, as documented in my latest book *Supercorp: How Vanguard Companies Create Innovation, Profits, Growth, and Social Good*, made it possible for a talented woman engineer to rise through technical, services, sales and marketing ranks and be sponsored by her predecessor to take the helm of one of the world’s largest and most respected technology companies.

### Overall, this analysis suggests several directions for researchers to pursue:

- First and foremost, include context. Regardless of discipline or variables of interest, always look at the context and take it into account. Ask about the institutional setting and the patterns underlying the behaviors or perceptions that are observed.
- Study event sequences and interactions. Don’t make studies mechanistic, about one thing connected to something else. Instead, search for what happens and examine its behavioral consequences. Tell the story over time. Look at how one event triggers another event. Make it dynamic and interactive. Don’t take a variable out of context. Know the history.
- Focus not just on averages or general tendencies but on the outliers, the deviant cases that don’t fit simple models and indicate that change is possible.
- Develop skills in understanding change and the dynamics of how change occurs. In every phenomenon, where are the seeds of change and where is the resistance that makes the system more rigid than it needs to be? People enjoying privilege don’t give it up easily, so some of what

we see is people enjoying privilege. And that privilege often means having someone to whom one is superior. How are we going to make the change, provoke the change, and where do great leaders emerge that have tried to change the norms? There are some leaders who have. At Deloitte & Touche, for example, a pioneer in focusing on advancing women, it was the CEO who finally observed that a high proportion of accounting graduates were women but they left the firm at higher rates. His insight that the firm couldn’t afford to lose its talent investment propelled action.

- Seek cultural nuances. Research shouldn’t stop when it arrives at an interesting finding. Researchers must understand how cultures are shaped, who the leaders are, what they do, and what’s behind a phenomenon that we study. In every culture, certain things are salient, like snow for Eskimos, and words proliferate to describe this. Cultures create meaning; they shape interpretations.

In the corporate world, I heard a proliferation of terms for people who were destined for success. It’s clear but unfortunate that sorting can occur very early in peoples’ lives, which sets in place patterns that are also self-perpetuating. One of the terms I found most interesting for people destined for success was “water walker.” One day a manager said to me, “The problem with those young water walkers is that they forget there are stones holding them up when they walk on the water.” Stones are the hidden structural reinforcers of particular pathways.

In short, the job of research is to find the stones—and perhaps find ways that they can be rearranged. Research should investigate the array of institutions, support systems, people, and assumptions that give advantage to some people and provide them with momentum for continued success, and provoke disadvantage for some people, making it harder for them to achieve. Unless we dig down beneath some of the explanations for inequality and understand the array of intersecting forces that serve as the stones that help people stand or sink, we’ll never be able to make change. And I think our goal ought to be to make change, so that we are not bound by other people’s assumptions about who or what we are, and we can find and use talent and exercise choices in ways that are less rigidly determined. That’s important in a volatile world with many problems to solve.

We have that chance today. Societies everywhere are beginning to change, however slowly. We can use our work to help societies change patterns so that they can use the natural talent that exists, of people of all kinds, without barriers or restrictions, to improve lives and the state of the world.

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Rosabeth Moss Kanter holds the Ernest L. Arbuckle Professorship at Harvard Business School, where she specializes in strategy, innovation, and leadership for change. She is the author or co-author of 18 books, most recently *SuperCorp: How Vanguard Companies Create Innovation, Profits, Growth, and Social Good* (an Amazon top 10 business book for 2009) and *Confidence: How Winning Streaks & Losing Streaks Begin & End* (a New York Times bestseller). Her classic prizewinning book, *Men & Women of the Corporation* (which won the C. Wright Mills award for the year’s best book on social issues) offered insight to countless individuals and organizations about corporate careers and the individual and organizational factors that promote success; a spin-off video, *A Tale of ‘O’: On Being Different*, is among the world’s most widely-used diversity tools; and a related book, *Work & Family in the United States*, set a policy agenda (in 2001, a coalition of university centers created the Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award in her honor for the best research on work/family issues). She co-founded and is Chair and Director of the Harvard University Advanced Leadership Initiative, a collaboration across the professional schools to help successful leaders at the top of their professions apply their skills to addressing challenging national and global problems in their next stages of life.



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