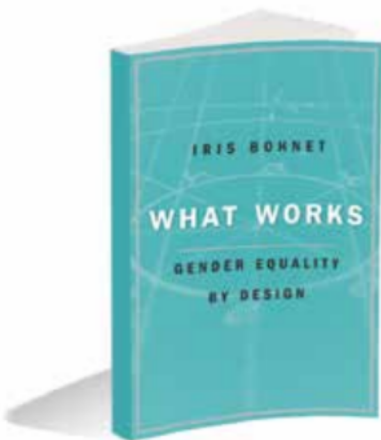


## This Works



Iris Bohnet

### What Works

#### Gender Equality by Design

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016, 400 pp., \$26.95 (cloth).

I was struck by my reaction to Iris Bohnet's promise in the closing chapter of *What Works* that "we can reduce gender inequality." It evoked the image of Rosie the Riveter, iconic symbol of female empowerment, saying, "We Can Do It!" The immediacy of my response was a potent reminder of how ingrained our subconscious biases can be.

Bohnet elegantly and expansively demonstrates how such biases can be obstacles to gender equality. What sets her approach apart in an increasingly crowded field of gender-equality literature is her use of behavioral design to offer practical—and often intuitive—solutions.

*What Works* takes full advantage of the expanse of recent gender analysis and literature. Bohnet begins by reminding us of the biases that surround us and recapping the business case for gender equality. She recounts the value of increased female labor force participation for productivity, income, and economic growth, among others.

That is not to say *What Works* is just a compendium. Far from it. The majority of the book focuses on weaving together the many strands of the gender debate, producing a rich and

interconnected narrative of the barriers to progress that biases present. And of these biases she even laments that "depressingly, unlearning is basically impossible." That is where behavioral design comes in, as "the most useful and underutilized tool we have."

Many of the individual strategies and policy actions called for in traditional debate seek to induce a conscious response that will help promote inclusion. We're asked to "lean in," adopt a "consider-the-opposite approach," or be "more deliberative" in considering diversity issues. Bohnet recognizes the benefits but also the pitfalls of these approaches. Not because she considers diversity training bad or gender targets wrong. But because the environment does not always lend itself to these interventions and actions being effective. We succumb to our biases.

Bohnet illustrates this point well. Inaction or inertia can undermine the need for a conscious response. One such example, albeit not gender focused, is the greater success of opt-out than opt-in retirement saving plans. (Most of us are too lazy to opt in!) And measures intended to promote inclusion can even have the opposite effect. For example, studies show "diversity training" programs may lead to *moral licensing*, where people feel more aware and are thus less likely to consciously apply the knowledge acquired.

Bohnet posits that smart behavioral design can foster an environment that helps minimize the reflection of those biases in our actions. This, she says, is preferable to relying on explicit action to counter those biases.

An example of such design was the Boston Symphony Orchestra's decision to audition musicians behind a screen. Similar "blind" auditions were soon adopted by other orchestras. The share of female musicians in top U.S. orchestras grew from 5 percent in 1970 to more than 35 percent today.

By design, this takes gender out of the equation, allowing men and women to play and be heard equally,

without the albatross of gender. Bohnet offers numerous examples in which "electronic" screens or anonymization can be used in a similar way in recruitment and people management.

Bohnet's focus is the interactions between different aspects of behavioral design—using data analytics to target behavioral change, establishing norms to reorient behavior rather than enable moral licensing, structuring groups to avoid "tokenism" and enable diversity to add value. Yet, in aggregate, the goal is to create a large-scale change "to close gender gaps in economic opportunity, political participation, health and education."

### Biases can be obstacles to gender equality.

*What Works* is not an easy read, particularly if you want to appreciate all it has to offer. At times, it can be heavy going—dense with data, facts, illustration, and imagery, a book that shouldn't be devoured all at once. It is best absorbed and mulled over in several sittings.

The true value of Bohnet's contribution is not in the minutiae, no matter how instructive and insightful. More inspiring is how she integrates so many different theories and data points. Then, rather than getting lost in the complexity, she uses her refrain—the promise of behavioral design—to deliver practical and actionable design suggestions.

In closing, Bohnet suggests that a "good leader is a behavioral designer." And that is perhaps the aspect of *What Works* that works best. Bohnet is no cheerleader. She leads through demonstration and design, leaving readers better equipped to find solutions that work, so we can each contribute to making a difference.

**Karen Ongley**

Deputy Division Chief, IMF Strategy, Policy, and Review Department