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Equalities Office

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INSIGHTS TEAM

Reducing the gender pay gap and  
improving gender equality in organisations:  
**Evidence-based actions for employers**



*“To move the dial on equalising pay, we need to debias systems, not people. Human resource management must be based on rigorous evidence of what works to level the playing field, treat everyone fairly and benefit from 100 percent of the talent pool. Evidence-based design of hiring practices, promotion procedures and compensation schemes helps our organisations do the right and the smart thing, creating more inclusive and better workplaces. This guidance is an important step towards helping employers know what works.”*

**Iris Bohnet, Roy E. Larsen Professor  
of Public Policy and director  
of the Women and Public Policy  
Program, Harvard Kennedy School**

# Actions to close the gender pay gap

Employers have asked us which actions are likely to improve recruitment and progression of women and reduce the gender pay gap.

This guidance summarises approaches that have been shown to work and those which need more evidence before they

can be recommended as widespread approaches. This will help employers create more effective action plans.

Employers who use high quality data to understand the drivers of their gender pay gap will be able to target their actions and therefore deliver the most effective results.



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# Effective actions



These actions have been tested in real world settings and found to have a positive impact.

## 1. Include multiple women in shortlists for recruitment and promotions

When putting together a shortlist of qualified candidates, make sure more than one woman is included. Shortlists with only one woman do not increase the chance of a woman being selected.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Use skill-based assessment tasks in recruitment

Rather than relying only on interviews, ask candidates to perform tasks they would be expected to perform in the role they are applying for. Use their performance on those tasks to assess their suitability for the role. Standardise the tasks and how they are scored to ensure fairness across candidates.<sup>2</sup>

## 3. Use structured interviews for recruitment and promotions

Structured and unstructured interviews both have strengths and weaknesses, but unstructured interviews are

more likely to allow unfair bias to creep in and influence decisions.

Use structured interviews that:

- Ask exactly the same questions of all candidates in a predetermined order and format
- Grade the responses using pre-specified, standardised criteria. This makes the responses comparable and reduces the impact of unconscious bias<sup>3</sup>

## 4. Encourage salary negotiation by showing salary ranges

Women are less likely to negotiate their pay.<sup>4</sup> This is partly because women are put off if they are not sure about what a reasonable offer is. Employers should clearly communicate the salary range on offer for a role to encourage women to negotiate their salary. This helps the applicant know what they can reasonably expect.<sup>5</sup>

1. Johnson, S. K., Hekman, D. R., & Chan, E. T. (2016). If there's only one woman in your candidate pool, there's statistically no chance she'll be hired. *Harvard Business Review*, 26(04).

2. Cabrera, M. A. M., & Nguyen, N. T. (2001). Situational judgment tests: A review of practice and constructs assessed. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 9(1-2), 103-113.

3. Levashina, J., Hartwell, C. J., Morgeson, F. P., & Campion, M. A. (2014). The structured employment interview: Narrative and quantitative review of the research literature. *Personnel Psychology*, 67(1), 241-293; Oh, I., Postlethwaite, B. E. & Schmidt, F. L. (2013). Rethinking the validity of interviews for employment decision making: Implications of recent developments in meta-analysis (Chapter 12, pp. 297-329). In D. J. Svyantek & K. Mahoney (Eds.), *Received wisdom, kernels of truth, and boundary conditions in organizational studies*.

4. Leibbrandt, A., & List, J. A. (2014). Do women avoid salary negotiations? Evidence from a large-scale natural field experiment. *Management Science*, 61(9), 2016-2024.

5. Mazei, J., Hüffmeier, J., Freund, P. A., Stuhlmacher, A. F., Bilke, L., & Hertel, G. (2015). A meta-analysis on gender differences in negotiation outcomes and their moderators. *Psychological Bulletin*, 141(1), 85.

In addition, if the salary for a role is negotiable, employers should state this clearly as this can also encourage women to negotiate.<sup>6</sup> If women negotiate their salaries more, they will end up with salaries that more closely match the salaries of men.

### **5. Introduce transparency to promotion, pay and reward processes**

Transparency means being open about processes, policies and criteria for decision-making. This means employees are clear what is involved, and that managers understand that their decisions need to be objective and evidence-based because those decisions can be reviewed by others. Introducing transparency to promotion, pay and reward processes can reduce pay inequalities.<sup>7</sup>

### **6. Appoint diversity managers and/or diversity task forces**

Diversity managers and task forces monitor talent management processes (such as recruitment or promotions) and diversity within the organisation. They can reduce biased decisions in recruitment and promotion because people who make decisions know

that their decision may be reviewed. This accountability can improve the representation of women in your organisation.<sup>8</sup>

Diversity managers should:

- Have a senior/executive role within the organisation
- Have visibility of internal data
- Be in the position to ask for more information on why decisions were made
- Be empowered to develop and implement diversity strategies and policies



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6. Leibbrandt, A., & List, J. A. (2014). Do women avoid salary negotiations? Evidence from a large-scale natural field experiment. *Management Science*, 61(9), 2016-2024.

7. Castilla, E. J. (2015). Accounting for the gap: A firm study manipulating organizational accountability and transparency in pay decisions. *Organization Science*, 26(2), 311-333.

8. Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016). Why diversity programs fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 94(7/8), 52-60.

# Promising actions



These actions are promising and require further research to improve the evidence on their effectiveness and how best to implement them. The government has policies in place supporting some of these actions to improve women's participation in the workforce. The government is evaluating their effectiveness and we recommend that you evaluate your actions too.



### 1. Improve workplace flexibility for men and women

- Advertise and offer all jobs as having flexible working options, such as part-time work, remote working, job sharing or compressed hours
- Allow people to work flexibly, where possible
- Encourage senior leaders to role model working flexibly and to champion flexible working
- Encourage men to work flexibly, so that it isn't seen as only a female benefit

### 2. Encourage the uptake of Shared Parental Leave

The gender pay gap widens dramatically after women have children but this could be reduced if men and women were able to share childcare more equally. Shared Parental Leave and Pay enables working parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay in their child's first year.

- Offer enhanced Shared Parental Pay at the same level as enhanced maternity pay
- Encourage take up of Shared Parental Leave (see our guidance<sup>9</sup>). For example:
  - Inform future fathers that it's their legal right to request Shared Parental Leave
  - Provide future parents guidance and personal support to understand the scheme
  - Share and promote examples of senior leaders who have taken Shared Parental Leave in your organisation

### 3. Recruit returners

Returners are people who have taken an extended career break for caring or other reasons and who are either not currently employed or are working in roles for which they are over-qualified.

Use our guidance<sup>10</sup> to see how to attract and hire returners. For example:

- Target places where returners are likely to be looking
- Ensure the recruitment process is returner-friendly
- Offer support before and during the assessment

### 4. Offer mentoring and sponsorship

Although quite similar roles, mentors provide guidance and advice to their mentee while sponsors support the advancement and visibility of the person they are sponsoring. Some evidence suggests that mentoring programmes work very well for some women but not for others.<sup>11</sup> It is not clear based on existing evidence whether sponsorships are more effective than mentoring, or how best to run mentoring and sponsorship programmes so they are effective.

### 5. Offer networking programmes

Some evidence suggests that formal networking programmes where members meet and share information and career advice can be helpful for some women but not others.<sup>12</sup> More work is needed to understand the effects of networking programmes, and whether they need to have particular features in order to be successful.

### 6. Set internal targets

It is important to ensure employers' equality goals are clear and realistic, and that progress towards them can be tracked. "Improving gender equality at my organisation" or "reducing my organisation's gender pay gap" can be overarching goals, but they are not specific and they therefore risk being unsuccessful. One way of increasing the likelihood that goals will be reached is by setting specific, time-bound targets: what change will be achieved, and by when?<sup>13</sup>

9. [sharedparentalleave.campaign.gov.uk/](https://sharedparentalleave.campaign.gov.uk/)

10. [gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/685064/Returner\\_Programmes\\_-\\_Best\\_Practice\\_Guidance\\_for\\_Employers.pdf](https://gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/685064/Returner_Programmes_-_Best_Practice_Guidance_for_Employers.pdf)

11. Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016). Why diversity programs fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 94(7/8), 52-60.

12. Dobbin, F., Kalev, A., & Kelly, E. (2007). Diversity management in corporate America. *Contexts*, 6(4), 21-27.

13. Mento, A.J., Steel, R.P. & Karren, R.J. (1987). A meta-analytic study of the effects of goal setting on task performance: 1966-1984. *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, 39(1), 52-83.

# Actions with mixed results

These actions have been shown to have a positive impact sometimes and at other times a negative impact. This might be due to how they are implemented or other factors that we don't fully understand yet. Due to the mixed evidence, we cannot yet make a general recommendation that these are good ways to reduce gender inequality.



## 1. Unconscious bias training

Unconscious biases can influence a person's judgement without them being aware of it. Unconscious bias training in the workplace aims to make people aware of potentially harmful unconscious biases and to reduce the impact of those biases. While some types of unconscious bias training may have some limited positive effects, there is currently no evidence that this training changes behaviour or improves workplace equality.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Diversity training

Diversity training can help raise awareness but is unlikely to change behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Some research in the US has found that mandatory diversity training either does not change the number of women in management positions, or actually reduces it.<sup>16</sup> This backfiring may be for a number of reasons. It may be because people resent being made to do something and so do not take the training seriously. The training might also bring to mind unhelpful stereotypes which people then act upon, or the training might make people think that the organisation has now solved its diversity problems.

14. Girod, S., Fassiotto, M., Grewal, D., Ku, M. C., Sriram, N., Nosek, B. A., & Valentine, H. (2016). Reducing implicit gender leadership bias in academic medicine with an educational intervention. *Academic Medicine*, 91(8), 1143-1150; Atewologun, D., Cornish, T., & Tresh, F. (2018). Unconscious bias training: An assessment of the evidence for effectiveness. Equality and Human Rights Commission.

15. Bezrukova, K., Spell, C.S., Perry, J., & Jehn, K. (2016). A meta-analytical integration of over 40 years of research on diversity training evaluation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 142(11), 1227-1274.

16. Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016). Why diversity programs fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 94(7/8), 52-60.





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### 3. Leadership development training

Leadership development programmes aim to teach qualities including management skills and self-confidence. While there are some very small-scale studies of the effects of leadership training programmes for women, particularly in medicine and academia, there is currently no high-quality evidence that such programmes help women progress. Some people feel that these programmes imply that the women themselves are the problem.

### 4. Performance self-assessments

In terms of performance in the workplace, there is some evidence that women underestimate their abilities or are more conservative in their assessment of their abilities than men are. The size of this gender difference can vary depending on the type of performance people are asked to self-assess.<sup>17</sup> We do not have enough evidence to know how differences in self-assessment affect women's progression at work.

### 5. Diverse selection panels

Having selection panels with a mix of men and women seems to help women's prospects sometimes and harm them at other times. Some studies show that the more women there are on a panel, the more likely women are to be selected for a role<sup>18</sup>, while some studies find the opposite.<sup>19</sup> The effect can also depend on the role being recruited for<sup>20</sup> or the role of women on the committee.<sup>21</sup> More research is needed to understand the conditions under which a diverse selection panel is or isn't effective for improving gender equality.

17. Fletcher (1999). The implications of research on gender differences in self-assessment and 360 degree appraisal. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 9(1), 39-46; Beyer (1990). Gender differences in accuracy of self-evaluations of performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(5), 960-970.

18. De Paola, M., & Scoppa, V. (2015). Gender discrimination and evaluators' gender: evidence from Italian academia. *Economica*, 82(325), 162-188.

19. Bagues, M., Sylos-Labini, M., & Zinovyeva, N. (2017). Does the gender composition of scientific committees matter? *American Economic Review*, 107(4), 1207-38.

20. Ibid.

21. Abramo, G., D'Angelo, C.A., & Rosati, F. (2015). Selection committees for academic recruitment: does gender matter? *Research Evaluation*, 24(4), 392-404.; Duguid, M. (2011). Female tokens in high-prestige work groups: Catalysts or inhibitors of group diversification? *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 116(1), 104-115.



### **What evidence we have used**

This guidance is based on the best available evidence currently. It will be regularly updated as the evidence base develops.

Where possible, we have used evidence based on randomised controlled trials that were conducted in the field and that measure objective outcomes related to recruitment, progression and promotion. Unfortunately, high quality evidence is currently scarce in the field of gender equality in the workplace.

### **How you can help**

To build better evidence, we encourage researchers and employers to evaluate the actions they take to improve gender equality in the workplace.

The Government Equalities Office will be working with employers to build more evidence on what works. If you represent an organisation with 4000 or more employees in the UK and would like to partner with us, please contact the Gender and Behavioural Insights programme ([gabiprogramme@bi.team](mailto:gabiprogramme@bi.team)). This is a programme run by the Behavioural Insights Team for the Government Equalities Office.

### **Further reading**

Bohnet, I. (2016). *What works: Gender equality by design*. Harvard University Press.

Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016). Why diversity programs fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 94(7/8), 52-60.



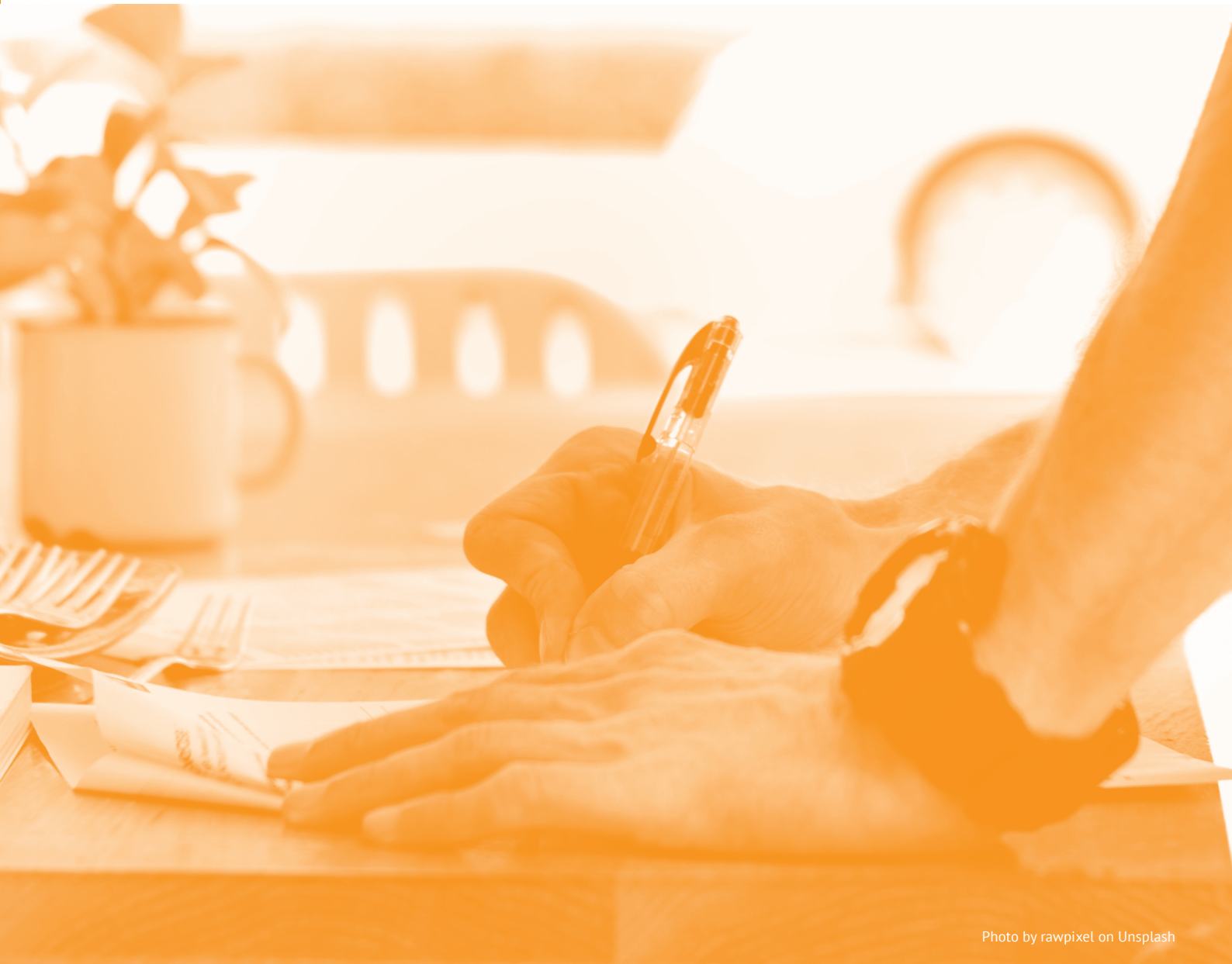


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