THE INVENTION OF DIFFERENCE

The story of gender bias at work

Binna Kandola and Jo Kandola

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Stefan Stern Cass Business School

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"*A thoroughly engaging read by an inspiring author. You will be hard pressed to find a better analysis of the impact of gender bias and therefore the fundamental importance of valuing difference.*"

Arun Batra, CEO National Equality Standard

"Binna Kandola is exceptional. Everything he writes is rooted in his long experience with real people in real situations which is what makes this book so relevant and timely."

Sir David Bell, Former Chairman of the Financial Times and a Non-Executive Director of The Economist

"This book is for all those people who think they are modern and have thrown off the shackles of bias and don't have any truck with stereotypes. Think again. This book on gender bias in the work place, couldn't be more timely. It challenges the so-called new assumptions about valuing the differences between men and women; differences which are just a re-arrangement of the old stereotypes. It is challenging and provocative, and every organisation interested in this subject should read it."

Razia Iqbal, BBC News Presenter

"*Gender diversity is fundamental to our success yet real change is difficult to bring about. This book confirms the importance of requiring everyone to be open-minded and to challenge their fundamental beliefs about gender*."

Ian Powell, Chairman and Senior Partner UK, PwC

"*The Invention of Difference is a thought provoking contribution to the debate about gender equality. It challenges conventional views and argues for fundamental changes in the way we view the world. Required reading for those truly interested in gender equality*."

The Right Honourable Baroness Prashar of Runnymede CBE, Deputy Chair of the British Council, former Chair of the Judicial Appointments Commission and former First Civil Service Commissioner

"*Insightful and thought provoking analysis which brings a fresh and challenging perspective to the question of gender difference in the workplace."*

Melanie Richards, KPMG Partner

"Few people are better equipped than Jo and Binna Kandola to demystify and debunk some of the things we think we know about so-called gender differences. If we are serious about raising the performance of our organisations, as well as making them fairer and better places to work, we will reflect on the lessons contained in this illuminating book, and act on them."

Stefan Stern, Visiting Professor in management practice at Cass Business School, London, and former FT columnist

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Preface

ONE WORLD, ONE SPECIES

Until a few years ago, we knew of only the handful of planets in and around our solar system. We now know of thousands outside our solar system. Some researchers believe there is at least one planet circling every star in our galaxy. That's a minimum of 100 billion worlds, perhaps half of them rocky like ours.[1] Some of these may harbour life. But Earth may be the only one of those worlds in which the dominant species fancies that it is really two incompatible types of animal, with perspectives, insights and goals that are fundamentally unknowable across the divide. Even in the interludes that punctuate the war of the sexes, the two sides persist in their separation. We have made ourselves aliens. Humans – can't live with them, can't live without them.

Books that claim there are eternal and universal differences between the sexes are popular. We seem to recognise ourselves in them. But what we are really responding to is convenient stereotypes. "Typical man," we say, when a dexterous and technologically inclined man fails to work the washing machine. These books purport to tell us why women can't read maps or stick to the point of a story. The reward in reading books of this kind is a little like that of observational stand-up comedy – they are a kind of satire aimed at ourselves. We identify with the caricatures presented to us because this gives us a sense of belonging. We are licensed to excuse the faults and celebrate the talents guaranteed to us by our gender. A good dose of scientific-sounding narrative

about natural selection, and preferably some brightly-coloured brain scans, and we're hooked.

The books that tell us women need to shed tears but men just need sheds play to our existing beliefs and reinforce well-established stereotypes. They make sense based on the ideologies we've been exposed to since birth, so we take them as truth. Although we characterise humans as learning animals, people are actually inclined to seek out information that will prove their existing hypotheses. We don't want to abandon what we already believe, so we are attracted to information that confirms our beliefs.

As the saying goes, people find what they look for, and the dangers of confirmation bias are well known in scientific disciplines. If a researcher already has a settled conviction about the phenomenon they are studying, then they won't pay attention to data that doesn't fit the conviction. Scientific trials have to be blind because researchers cannot be guaranteed to be blind. Experiments are designed specifically to eliminate bias and ensure repeatability by disinterested peers. We are not nearly so scrupulous in our day-to-day explorations of the world around us.

Given the absolute centrality of stereotypes to our habitual thought processes and our unconscious actions, the proposition of this book may be difficult for our minds to deal with. We will be presented with evidence that doesn't fit, so we'll want to ignore it. The key point to hold on to is this:

Personality and ability differences between men and women are not certain truths.

This approach is deeply antithetical to our preferred, habitual ways of interacting with the world. We all build theories all the time, guessing what other people want, what other people will do. But we are looking to be right, not wrong. It is easier and quicker this way because our minds love to take shortcuts.

1

HOW WE BUILT BUSINESS AS USUAL

Ideas about the roles of women and men at work are intertwined with the meaning of work itself. Where did "work" come from, and how has it developed – or not – over the generations? Is work natural or artificial? Work has a complex and colourful history of its own. This chapter and the next look at where work came from – and why we're stuck with it.

What we consider today to be work is relatively new. Also, the notion of a job as a separate part of life, or as an identity that individuals inhabit on certain days of the week, certain hours of the day and in certain settings, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The concept of the job is firmly anchored in a complex cluster of significant concepts, such as the political ideal of full employment, the social validation that jobs bring ("What do you do?"), and the organisation of life streams around jobs – training before, pensions and care after.

"Jobs" rush into the space created by the work–life split. They mediate between people and tasks. A new domain of power, control, conflict and opportunity grows in this newly defined space. And eventually we're all just "living for the weekend".

Work has never been a simple, single facet of human life nor a neutral topic of study: "work itself has a history, changing in nature and understanding, just as

language, customs and fashions have changed throughout the ages."[1]

Our relationship with work, then, has at best been ambiguous – with work seen as something that has to be endured, if not enjoyed. In ancient Greece, for example, work was carried out exclusively by slaves. Slaves were not part of the city state or *polis*: they did not count as citizens. Politics – the affairs of the *polis* – were valued above all else and anyone who worked was by implication ignoble. The Greeks had no single word for work, but three related words: *ponos,* meaning a painful activity; *ergon*, meaning a military or agricultural task; and *techne*, from which we get our word "technique." None of these words refers to roles, relationships or rewards, three of the ideas central to our contemporary conceptual cluster of work.

Revealingly, some modern words for work derive from the "painful" portion of the ancient vocabulary. The French word *travail* derives from the Latin *tripalium*, a torture device made of three stakes to which a victim was tied before being burned.[1,2] The English word "travail" has the same origins. The American spelling of *labor* is identical to its Latin source, which means toil or trouble. Our word "work" can be traced back to the Greek *ergon* and beyond to *varəzem*, a word from ancient Iran.

Our contemporary notion of work as "productive activities" that fill time would have been unrecognisable to people in earlier times, when (what we would call) work stopped as soon as its aim had been achieved. Yet abundance and scarcity of resources do not seem to be the determining factors in the organisational structures of early societies. While the environment dictates what is possible, people design what is permissible.

For us today, "work" can also have connotations of creativity. We talk about the works of great composers, while expressive activities including acting and psychotherapy are often given this creative sense of work. In classical society, craft workers who produced items for other people, or items based on the ideas or requirements of other people, were not seen as creative workers. As Greek society became more consumerist, the craft worker came to be seen more and

more as merely the performer of a labour process, rather than the originator of a product.

Work versus employment

Although they are often used interchangeably – especially by economists and politicians – work and employment are contradictory concepts. Work provides meaning, status and a way of fulfilling oneself. Work can be noble, uplifting and energising. Employment, on the other hand, is a matter of necessity. It can be dehumanising and can abstract us from life.

Our word *employ* means "use". It ultimately derives, via Latin *implicare*, to proto-Indo-European words to do with folding something inside something else. There is a buried sense, then, that to employ something is to capture it or enclose it – to engulf its independence. In modern language, we can often substitute "use" for "employ" with no loss of meaning. The implication (a word from the same Latin root) is that employees are used. They are useful; they are tools. Today we are less likely to talk about factory or field "hands" but "heads" in "roles": people fill the spaces defined by nodes on a process chart.

But not all work–life activity is dignified with the name of work. Keith Grint defines work in this way:

> Work tends to be an activity that transforms nature and is usually undertaken in social situations, but exactly what counts as work depends upon the interpretation of powerful groups.[2]

Those with power – the master, the guild or the management guru – decides what counts as work. Since men have the power, "women's work" has traditionally been regarded as non-work. Domestic labour has long been treated as less important than paid work, and the slogan "wages for housework" is designed to change attitudes to domestic labour – although if this ever did happen it would, ironically, only serve to reinforce the view that a woman's place is in the home.

2

THE MAN-MADE ORGANISATION

The division of labour between the genders today is not the result of "natural" differences between the genders, nor does it represent some sort of fixed order. It is in fact a continuation of very long-standing views about what men and women should be doing at work and at home. Work is not a neutral concept but a value-laden creation, a social construct created and perpetuated by us. This construct has as its core the assumption that men are superior to women – physically, mentally, intellectually. The results of these long-held beliefs can be seen today in the way work is organised and it should be no surprise therefore to find that organisations are structured around the lives of men.

This chapter looks at some of the ways in which this bias manifests itself: the division of work, pay, the way work is carried out, career choices and relationships at work.

Division of work and life

Go into virtually any large corporation and you will see an organisation divided along gender lines. Women will predominate in certain functions and men in others. Rarely will you come across an area with an exact 50:50 split. It is also the case that women will be more highly represented in support roles and men in the more highly regarded functions of the business. Divisions of this kind have occurred throughout history and are not based on skill or competence but status.

The Industrial Revolution led men and women to view work differently and to undertake different roles. As we have seen, prior to the Industrial Revolution, men, women and children worked more cooperatively and flexibly together, interchanging roles and responsibilities as circumstances demanded. Nevertheless, one of the key factors behind today's division of labour was the rise of the guild system in the pre-industrial era.

The guild system was predominantly, but not exclusively, male. Girls were apprentices, but in a smaller number of trades. Females could be apprenticed in 19 trades whereas boys could work in 143 trades. Three-quarters of girls in apprenticeships were involved in textiles. Over 33% of male apprentices were involved in timber and leather. Those trades which had the highest premiums and offered better terms were exclusively male and included millers, grocers, cabinet makers, plumbers and curriers. The guilds held status differences too. For males, having a trade and being an apprentice enhanced their standing, whereas it did little to the status of females. The boys were also trained for a longer period – from 14 to 21 years of age.

Fig 2.1: Woman sculptor from Boccaccio, Le Livre des Cleres et Nobles Femmes (early 15th century).

The process itself – from apprentice to journeyman to master – reflected a man's lifestyle. Becoming a journeyman entailed travelling and working with different masters, a freedom young women did not have. Having completed an apprenticeship and achieved manhood, it was expected that he would marry and that his wife would then support him in his chosen trade.[1] The man was not only granted freedom of the guild but was expected to enter the public sphere via politics or the local economy. Men's roles therefore encompassed greater education, more expertise and better pay. They were also expected to play out part of their role in the public domain.[2]

Girls, on the other hand, gained no such prestige from their apprenticeships and their lives were destined to be played out in the domestic and private sphere. Marriage was not only her destiny but also the principal route to enhanced status.

Guild work carried prestige and status, as it was skilled, higher quality and better paid. Non-guild work was less skilled, lower quality and more poorly paid. Eventually the work of the guilds came to be seen as honourable work.

There was also a geographical split between where men and women worked and how their work was viewed. Work associated with guilds and men was carried out in towns and was valued more highly to the extent that it was considered to be honourable. Non-guild work consequently was valued less and considered dishonourable and was more likely to be located within the home and in the country. These attitudes towards working from home prevail today. The ribbing that people working from home have to put up with may be good-natured (one of the most common is to put the phrase "working from home" in inverted commas) but it carries distant echoes of what was considered honourable (or dishonourable) work hundreds of years ago.[2]

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