



RESPONDING TO OBJECTIONS TO GENDER BALANCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

JULY 2025



In 2024, ESSEC Business School launched a think tank dedicated to accelerating gender balance (women-men) within organizations, called "**Les Ateliers Entreprise et Mixité**", building upon previous work from the *Observatoire de la Mixité* (Gender balance Observatory).

The *Ateliers Entreprise et Mixité* is a think tank space supported by an advisory board ¹ that includes leading companies (Bureau Veritas, Crédit Mutuel Arkéa, Engie, France Télévisions, Mazars, SNCF, Sodexo) which integrate gender balance as a fundamental pillar of their corporate strategy. The advisory board also includes recognized experts in gender balance, representing organizations and associations committed to promoting gender equality in the workplace. **The aim of Les Ateliers Entreprise et Mixité is to identify and share best practices to foster a diverse and inclusive professional environment.**

Beyond the advisory board, *Les Ateliers Entreprise et Mixité* brings together an active club of committed leaders, providing its members a platform to exchange experiences, discuss challenges, and share successes in accelerating gender balance within their respective organizations. This initiative also aims to inspire widespread commitment among executives.

Marie-Christine Mahéas, former coordinator of the *Observatoire de la Mixité* and director of Mazars' Center for Diversity and Inclusion, coordinates the work under the sponsorship of **Michel Landel**, former CEO of Sodexo and independent board member

OBJECTIVE

Despite the quality of progress made over the past 10 years in terms of diversity and inclusion, there has been a noted relaxation, weariness, and sometimes even hostility, as well as a questioning of the effectiveness of the policies implemented so far. The rise to power of the Trump administration in January 2025 has also triggered a wave of anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives in public and private organizations in the United States, although the effects have varied in organizations around the rest of the world.

Members of *Les Ateliers Entreprise et Mixité* have reflected on how to respond to objections voiced by both women and men within organizations. They agree that there is no completely satisfying answer to all objections; indeed, there should be no need to justify gender balance since it is now a strategic issue directly supported by the executives of these organizations.

However, they have deemed it necessary to list the main types of objections and to develop the best responses to address them. This is intended to provide solutions for those wishing to engage in dialogue, bridge misunderstandings, open conversations, and facilitate convergence of views. This exercise also enabled a deeper exploration of the various aspects of the gender balance issue.

Through several working sessions, companies and experts from *Les Ateliers Entreprise et Mixité* identified different broad types of objections commonly heard in organizations. The responses were developed based on recent studies and research, especially in economics, and from personal experiences.

These discussions have been summarized into a guide, which will be included in a forthcoming collection of best practices to accelerate gender balance in organizations.

Note: Some objections may be uncomfortable, either in substance or in form.



Feel free to move your mouse over the **blue links**.

¹ - List of the board members at the end of this document.

GENERAL APPROACH TO ADDRESSING OBJECTIONS

Addressing the topic of gender balance within companies requires certain precautions to avoid misunderstandings or conflicts.

Here are a few guiding principles and common pitfalls to avoid:

Principles to follow:

- Achieving balanced gender balance within companies is a beneficial goal for everyone. It should be approached as such, with mixed teams discussing and handling these topics.
- Use a combination of facts, recent studies, figures, along with personal testimonies and experiences to support the discussion.

Errors to Avoid:

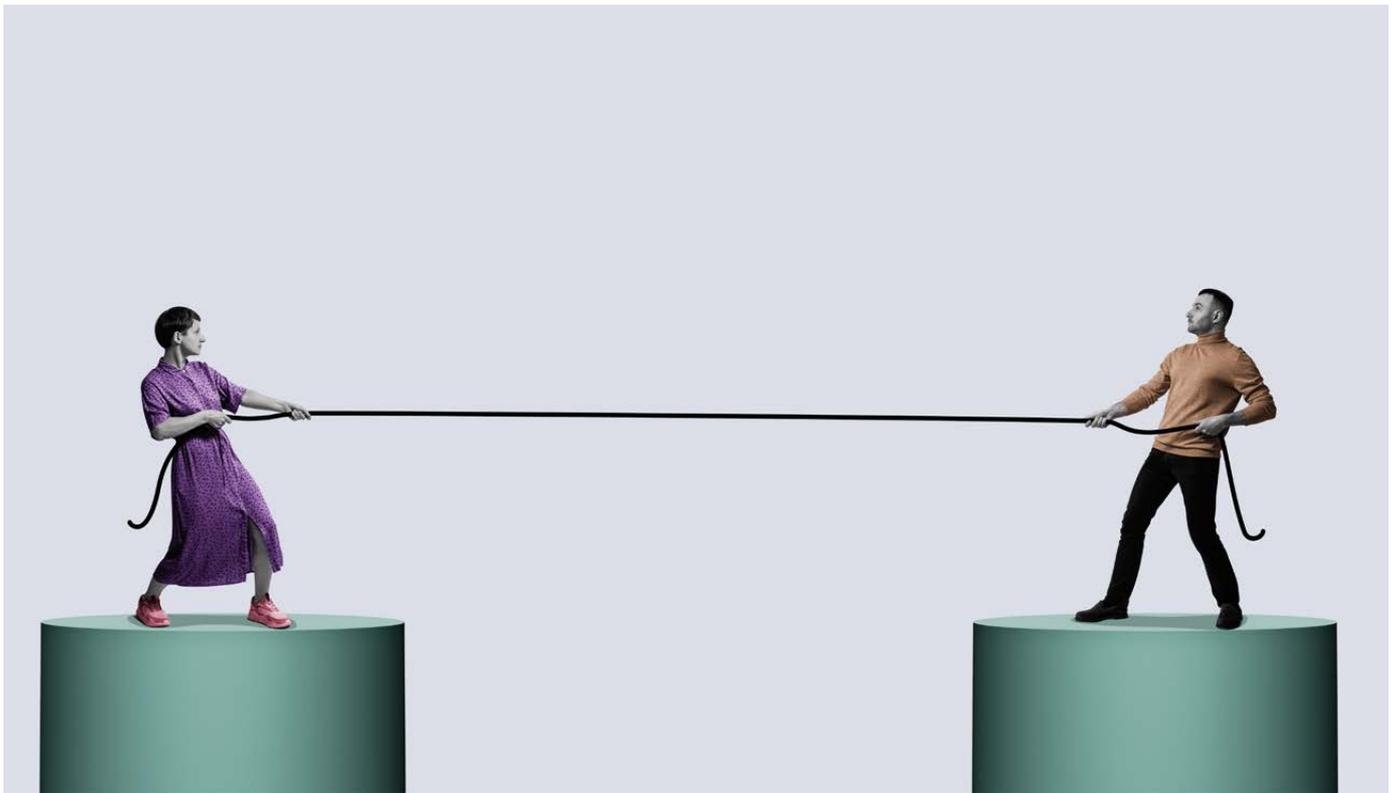
- Avoid philosophical or psychological speeches.
- Refrain from using accusatory, moralizing, or aggressive language.
- Avoid generalizations.

THE 9 TYPES OF OBJECTIONS

Members of Les Ateliers Entreprise et Mixité have identified nine major types of objections to gender balance within organizations. Some of these objections may overlap but still represent distinct perspectives:

- 1 **Objections suggesting there is no longer space for men.**
Example: "There's no room left for white men over 50."
- 2 **Objections arguing that it's an issue of the past.**
Example: "Gender balance is an outdated topic; it's been addressed."
- 3 **Objections against affirmative action or quotas.**
Example: "Affirmative action and quotas are anti-meritocratic."
- 4 **Objections reflecting exaggeration or misinterpretations.**
Example: "This is too much; we need to stop the 'wokism'."
- 5 **Objections based on gender stereotypes.**
Example: "Women have less ambition."
- 6 **Objections founded on essentialism.**
Example: "Are leadership positions really suitable for women?"
- 7 **Objections citing a lack of qualified women.**
Example: "We can't find qualified women."
- 8 **Objections asserting personal commitment to diversity.**
Example: "I am very committed; I can't be criticized for not supporting gender balance."
- 9 **Objections placing responsibility on women.**
Example: "Women refuse promotions."

The document provides a detailed analysis of each type of objection, addressing common misconceptions and presenting research-backed responses.



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OBJECTION ①

OBJECTIONS SUGGESTING THERE IS NO LONGER SPACE FOR MEN.

"There's No Room Left for Men."

EXAMPLES OF COMMON STATEMENTS HEARD IN ORGANIZATIONS

"Is it still possible to be a man in 2024?"

"It's costly and difficult to be a man today."

"We're not allowed to be men anymore..."

"We can no longer be charming."

"We're forbidden from being masculine."

"There's no space left for white males over 50."

"In my organization, it's better to be a woman."

WHY THIS IS INACCURATE

1. In many cases, it's not yet advantageous to be a woman. Women still bear a significant share of mental and familial load, experience violence, and face career slowdowns due to gender.

2. Crime and offense statistics are revealing: men commit 99% of rapes, 97% of sexual assaults, 86% of homicides, 84% of fatal road accidents, and 95% of violent robberies.

3. Men dominate the professional world in France, particularly in leadership roles:

- Statistics show a higher proportion of men in executive positions and in the leadership of SBF120 companies.
- **Gender statistics in the world of work**
- **Ethics & Boards / IFA Barometer of the SBF120**
- **Skema Observatory of the feminisation of the CAC40.**

4. Masculinity itself isn't criticized, but "toxic masculinity"—which includes traits associated with force, dominance, and violence—is problematic. This toxic masculinity often leads men to behaviors harmful to themselves and society, such as addiction and illegal activities.

- **We can debate what it means to be a man today, and the different ways there are to be a man**
- It's interesting to think about what **gallantry** includes and why it's not suitable for some women.



OBJECTION ②

OBJECTIONS ARGUING THAT IT'S AN ISSUE OF THE PAST.

"Gender balance is an outdated topic; it's been addressed."

EXAMPLES OF COMMON STATEMENTS HEARD IN ORGANIZATIONS

"This isn't a problem with the new generations."

"With proper education, the next generation will resolve this."

"Equality has already been achieved."

"Haven't we worked on this long enough?"

"Laws already address this issue."

"Are there still inequalities?"

"Enough already..."

"It's time to move on."

SOURCES OF MISUNDERSTANDING AND WAYS TO ADDRESS IT

Educational, social, and family environments largely explain these masculine hesitations or even hostility:

1. **Unconscious Injunctions:** From a young age, boys are unconsciously subjected to directives that limit freedoms and shape perceptions. They are encouraged to be leaders, to avoid anything "feminine," to show no cracks in their armor, and to be good teammates.
2. **The Atlas Syndrome:** Boys learn that, as men, they will one day need to bear the financial responsibilities of their households, without showing emotions. This expectation fuels a relentless drive for success, with impacts on health, increased likelihood of violence, and detachment from family life.
3. **Consequently, as identified by Catalyst:**
 - Men often hesitate to advocate for gender balance due to fear of losing their status, of being viewed unfavorably since the issue isn't typically considered "business" or professional. They also fear making awkward statements or not finding the right words.
 - They are often unaware of the data, such as the reality of the glass ceiling, gender stereotypes, biases, and sexism.
 - They tend to see what they might lose in supporting gender balance, but fail to recognize what they might gain.
 - Effective actions exist to counter fear, ignorance, and apathy: using appropriate language, creating spaces for men to speak, providing comprehensive information, and raising awareness about the benefits of gender balance for men at all stages of life.

WHY THIS ISN'T THE CASE

1. The Ministry for Gender Equality publishes an **annual report** listing the remaining gender inequalities in France and worldwide: gender-based violence, health disparities, economic autonomy, and more.

2. Key Figures from the 2025 Annual Report on the State of Sexism in France:

- 94% of women aged 15 to 24 believe it is more difficult to be a woman today, a 14-point increase compared to 2023.
- 67% of men in the same age group share this observation (+8 points).
- 13% of men think it is more difficult to be a man than a woman.
- 86% of women report having faced sexist situations, ranging from inappropriate comments to physical assaults.
- 9 out of 10 women adopt avoidance strategies to anticipate sexist behaviors or acts.
- 83% of women feel they are not treated the same way as men at work; 10% report having been overlooked in favor of a man with equal competence.
- 80% of jobs remain non-mixed: 44 male-dominated professions compared to only 23 female-dominated ones.

- Average salary income is 23.5% lower for women in the private sector; only 22% of the highest-paid employees are women.
- Salary drop of about 20% for mothers in the five years following the birth of a child, and up to 40% for the lowest salaries.
- 70% of women feel they did not receive the same treatment as their brothers in family life.
- 74% of women have never considered a career in scientific or technical fields.
- 75% of women state they are not treated equally online.

3. The 2024 Report by the Haut Conseil à l'Égalité

(High Council for Gender Equality) offers further insights:

- Among young adults, there is a return to traditional values for both men and women.
- Sexism remains deeply rooted and has worsened year over year in some demographics.
- Attitudes like "it's normal for women to pause their careers for children" are on the rise, with this belief increasing by 7 points to 34%.
- Male "resistance" to societal change is also evident: 37% of men feel that feminism threatens their status.
- More than 20% of men aged 25-34 believe it's normal for men to earn more than women for equal positions.
- Traditional roles and expectations remain for both men and women, affecting attitudes and career choices.

4. The workplace remains rife with sexism, as highlighted by the **2023 Diversity Managers' Association barometer**:

- 8 out of 10 women regularly face sexist behavior at work.
- One in two women in managerial positions reports being subject to different expectations due to their gender.
- Young women under 35 encounter as much, if not more, casual sexism than older colleagues.
- 6 in 10 women under 35 have implemented avoidance strategies.

5. **For young parents, having a first child often brings a return to a heavier mental load for mothers.**

6. **The economic impact of motherhood is significant, with some women losing up to 10,000 euros in the first year.**

7. **Salary inequalities persist across professions.**

8. **A more diverse workplace improves the professional and personal well-being of both men and women.**

9. **Women are more likely to be sexualized in advertisements, perpetuating stereotypes.**

10. **Recent advances in women's rights have sparked a resurgence in male supremacist movements.**



OBJECTION 3

OBJECTIONS AGAINST AFFIRMATIVE ACTION OR QUOTAS.

“Affirmative action and quotas are anti-meritocratic.”

EXAMPLES OF COMMON STATEMENTS HEARD IN ORGANIZATIONS

“She was promoted because she’s a woman.”

“What about competence and skill equality?”

“Nowadays, it’s better to be a woman in our company.”

“I support meritocracy; quotas go against meritocracy.”

“We should have goals, but not quotas.”

“Why are there quotas for women but not for origin, disability, or age?”

“Positive discrimination contradicts equality values.”

WHY THIS JUDGMENT IS MISGUIDED

1. Implementing Gender Quotas Doesn’t Compromise Competence.

- Gender quotas don’t lower standards or diminish competence. Instead, they help bring talented individuals to the forefront by counteracting existing biases and giving qualified women equal consideration for roles they might otherwise be overlooked for.

2. Quotas and Targets are Mechanisms for Setting Representation Benchmarks.

- Both “quotas” and “targets” function similarly as they establish thresholds for representation, with consequences if these are not met. They are tools to encourage balanced gender representation in leadership roles.

3. There is a Positive Correlation Between Quotas and Women in Leadership.

- Countries that have implemented gender quotas often show a higher percentage of women in leadership positions. For example, countries with quota policies tend to have twice as many women in executive roles. This observation is supported by the **Global Summit of Women:**
 - **Business Cases**
 - **Quota Legislative Strategy, by Country**
 - **Comparison of Gender balance on Boards by Region**

4. The Presence of Women on Boards Improves Decision-Making Quality.

- Studies have shown that having women in board positions enhances preparation, intellectual honesty, and depth in discussions, ultimately raising the quality of boardroom deliberations and decision-making.

5. Some Female Leaders Proudly Identify as “Quota Women.”

- In Germany, some women in leadership positions openly identify as “quota women” to emphasize that quotas provide necessary visibility and pave the way for other competent women.

6. Bias Remains in Recruitment, Evaluation, and Promotion Processes.

- Recruitment and promotion processes are still subject to gender biases:
- Women, despite ranking highest in performance tests, are systematically judged as having less leadership potential.
- Three pervasive gender biases in performance appraisals.
- It is necessary to demand evidence and train assessors in patterns of bias within evaluation processes.
- Reward systems for assessors enable more equitable judgments of women in appraisals.

7. Men Have Long Benefited from “Reverse Bias” and Informal Networks.

- Historically, men have benefited from implicit networks, a phenomenon known as “male bonding”, which facilitates informal **co-optation** in career advancement.

8. Having Women in the Workforce Promotes a “Bilingual” Business Approach.

- Employing women enhances an organization’s ability to understand and cater to the needs of a diverse customer base, thereby refining internal communication processes, training, and client relations to reflect the perspectives of half the consumer population.



OBJECTION 4

OBJECTIONS REFLECTING EXAGGERATION OR MISINTERPRETATIONS

"This is too much; we need to stop the 'wokism'."

EXAMPLES OF COMMON STATEMENTS HEARD IN ORGANIZATIONS

"Honestly, this is just bad feminism."

"It's time to calm down..."

"This is all 'wokism'."

"There's a lot of exaggeration in the so-called reports of discrimination, harassment, or sexist acts."

"There are other important issues."

"#MeToo is just about public shaming."

"There's no harassment or sexism in our workplace."

"Women have the same promotion opportunities as men."

"The issue is simply that there aren't enough women in engineering schools."

AVOIDING MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND CLARIFYING TERMS

1. 'Wokism': Originally an American term, "woke" means being aware of social justice and racial equality issues. However, its use in discussions around gender equality often misrepresents the intent of gender balance initiatives.

2. The Origins of 'Wokism' and Feminism: The history of 'wokism' is somewhat separate from feminism and specifically from the promotion of gender balance in the workplace.

3. Feminism as a Social Movement: Feminism aims at the emancipation of women and expanding their rights to equalize their status with men, particularly in legal, political, and economic spheres. This ideology is central to the push for gender equality.

4. Different Branches of Feminism: Some branches of feminism diverge from this initial definition, potentially leading to differing viewpoints and, in some cases, misunderstandings or objections.

5. Masculinism is experiencing a concerning rise in France, with active influence strategies on social media, a growing impact on young people, and the first thwarted attack motivated by masculinism in July 2025. This context fuels certain discourses of exaggeration and amalgamation around equality policies.

6. Seeking Balance in Leadership Isn't 'Wokism': Promoting gender balance in organizational leadership is a modern approach to leadership that seeks ethical standards and improved performance, not a form of extremism.

OBJECTION 5

OBJECTIONS BASED ON GENDER STEREOTYPES.

"Women have less ambition."

EXAMPLES OF COMMON STATEMENTS HEARD IN ORGANIZATIONS

"Women lack ambition."

"Women are less available."

"Women are less competent."

"Given a choice, they'd rather stay home."

"Women are fragile, gullible, passive, emotional, sensitive."

"Women have stronger relational skills."

"Women aren't as skilled in sciences."

"Pregnant women in a team are difficult to manage."

"Women are naturally better at childcare and caregiving."

"There's too much pressure in positions of power."

"Gender balance is important because men and women are 'complementary' (strength vs. gentleness)."

"Women aren't willing to relocate."

THESE STEREOTYPES ARE NOT BASED ON REALITY

1. Stereotypes Affect Everyone: All individuals, regardless of gender, are impacted by stereotypes. Overcoming these biases is in everyone's interest.

2. Underrepresentation Shapes Perceptions: The difficulty in imagining a woman in a leadership role often stems from the rarity of female role models in such positions. The more women are represented in diverse roles and at all organizational levels, the more naturally they will be considered for these roles, reducing limiting stereotypes.

3. Responding to Specific Stereotypes:

- **On Women's Ambition:** Women's ambition is often natural and multifaceted.

- **On Maternity and Career:** It's a myth that motherhood and career aspirations are incompatible. Having a maternity leave or being a mother doesn't prevent women from assuming responsibilities or advancing professionally.

FOCUS ON GENDER STEREOTYPES

Let's list the stereotypes heard about women:

- Women are better at taking care of children.
- Women are weaker than men.
- Women are less motivated and ambitious to pursue a career.
- Women are less available.
- Women have better interpersonal skills.
- Women are less competent than men.
- Women are hierarchically below men.
- Power is masculine; leaders are men.
- Women are gentle, fragile, gullible, passive, emotional, and sensitive.
- Men must be strong and should not express their emotions.
- Women are more caring and skilled at taking care of others.
- Women are naturally gentler and more maternal, while men are more aggressive and dominant.
- Women are less skilled in mathematics and numeracy.
- Women care more about their physical appearance and beauty.
- Women are better at verbal communication.
- Men are better at leadership and are more capable of making tough decisions, while women are more apt to support and collaborate.
- Men are less involved in household tasks and childcare, while women are naturally better at these responsibilities.
- Men are naturally more inclined to take risks, while women are more cautious and hesitate to take bold initiatives.



FOCUS ON GENDER BIASES

A gender bias is a systematic and often unconscious tendency or preference in favor of one gender (male or female), which can stem from stereotypes and can influence how individuals are perceived, treated, or evaluated in different social contexts. They can lead to gender inequalities and discrimination based on sex, real or perceived, thus limiting opportunities and rights of individuals based on their gender:

- Hiring biases.
- Wage discrimination.
- Unequal distribution of household tasks.
- Perceptions of competence.
- Differential performance evaluation.

FOCUS ON GENDER DIFFERENCES

As a leader of an organization, the precarious balancing act is to combat stereotypes and biases while considering the differences between women and men in processes. These documented differences between women and men are primarily due to differences in education, language use, types of games offered, and social and family environments. These differences are also partly "structural," related to mental load, maternity, and caregiver status.

They can be summarized as follows:

1. Among the real differences between women and men are structural differences:
 - **Mental load:** women still take care of children and the household more and are more often in caregiving situations.
 - **Career cycles:** women's careers are often interrupted by maternity.
2. There are also differences related to education and social and family environments:
 - **Speaking up:** women are generally more hesitant than men to speak in meetings, are more often interrupted, have their statements reformulated more frequently, are more often explained concepts they are experts in, or have their comments taken over by men for their own purposes.
 - **Relationship to power and politics:** women place moral conditions on their accession to responsibilities.
 - **Self-promotion:** women tend to undervalue their achievements and put themselves forward less.
 - **Salary negotiation:** women have the same skills as men in business negotiation, except for negotiations that concern them personally, particularly salary negotiations.
 - **Sensitivity to semantic registers and communication style:** women and men are not attracted to the same semantic registers.
 - **Networking:** women develop networking skills less naturally than men.



OBJECTION 6

OBJECTIONS BASED ON ESSENTIALISM.

“Are leadership positions really a place for women?”

A FEW EXAMPLES OF OBJECTIONS HEARD IN ORGANIZATIONS

“Is it really the place and role of women to lead?”

“Women naturally belong with children.”

“Women naturally belong at home.”

THIS ESSENTIALIST DISCOURSE IS LIBERTICIDE AND BELONGS TO THE PAST

Essentialism is a philosophy that holds that there are essences inherent to every thing and being. As a consequence of these inherent essences, essentialism assigns specific attributes and roles, leaving no room for the specificity of each being, thereby limiting individual particularities and freedoms.



OBJECTION 7

OBJECTIONS ARGUING A LACK OF WOMEN.

“We can’t find women.”

EXAMPLES OF COMMON STATEMENTS HEARD IN ORGANIZATIONS

“There are no women in engineering schools.”

“Recruiters aren’t presenting any to me.”

“They don’t want to.”

“There are no women.”

“We are looking for some...”

HOW TO ADDRESS THIS OFTEN FALSE ASSERTION

1. Many examples from companies show that, under the same conditions in engineering schools, it is possible to accelerate gender balance:
 - **Dassault Systems** proves this.
 - **Attracting young women to tech.**
 - **Attracting women to construction.**
2. Men refuse promotions as much as women do.
3. The image of power is off-putting.
4. Girls do not attend engineering schools because they fear sexism and hazing.
5. School textbooks still propagate stereotypes.
6. 83% of jobs are “gendered.”
7. The glass ceiling is still strong in fields where women are well represented:
 - **Doctors,**
 - **Lawyers,**
 - **University professors.**
8. Recruiters often have a rather narrow or traditional search spectrum, which sometimes prejudices women.
9. A taboo persists around ambition in women.



OBJECTION 9

OBJECTIONS EXPRESSING THE RESPONSIBILITY OF WOMEN.

“Women refuse promotions.”

EXAMPLES OF COMMON STATEMENTS HEARD IN ORGANIZATIONS

“Women are not supportive of each other.”

“When a woman reaches a position of power, she doesn’t help those beneath her.”

“Women don’t put themselves forward.”

“Women refuse promotions.”

“Women don’t apply for positions.”

“They refuse geographic mobility.”

“It’s up to women to assert themselves and learn to say no.”

OBJECTION 8

OBJECTIONS OPPOSING PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO GENDER BALANCE.

“I am very committed; you cannot blame me otherwise.”

EXAMPLES OF COMMON STATEMENTS HEARD IN ORGANIZATIONS

“I am a feminist.”

“I don’t differentiate between women and men; I treat everyone the same.”

“I am inclusive; in fact, my best boss was a woman.”

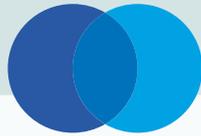
THESE GOODWILL STATEMENTS CAN BE QUESTIONED

1. First, we can challenge these feminist acts: what are they? What is the composition of their executive team
2. While it is necessary to consider the differences between women and men, some risk “treating everyone the same” under the pretext of fighting stereotypes. It is actually important to combat gender stereotypes while also considering the differences between women and men (see these differences in objection 5).

THIS TYPE OF OBJECTION IS BASED ON PERCEPTIONS THAT NEED TO BE QUESTIONED

1. Why is there a demand for women to be supportive of one another when this is not asked of men?
2. These statements are often based on gender stereotypes. See objection 5: stereotypes, biases, and the real differences between women and men.
3. Progress in gender balance does not depend on women but on these 6 measures: **The 6 Concrete Measures to Accelerate Gender balance**
 - Present a strong commitment from leadership.
 - Operate a sustainable cultural change towards a culture of inclusion.
 - Take into account the differences between women and men in processes.
 - Set specific and ambitious gender balance goals.
 - Widely share the dashboard of indicators.
 - Communicate about gender balance both internally and externally.
4. Studies now show that the solutions to accelerate gender balance in organizations rest on three pillars (and not just on women): men, women, and processes.





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OBJECTION 5

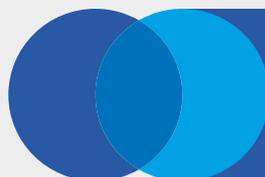
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- » Le Monde: « Manterrupting », le sexisme ordinaire sur la voix publique

OBJECTION 7

- » IT for Business: Valérie Ferret (Dassault Systèmes): « Il faut une démarche collective pour attirer les jeunes filles vers les carrières scientifiques et techniques
- » Cool It Agency: Diversité: comment recruter et engager plus de Femme dans la Tech ?
- » Métiers BTP: Étude régionale sur la féminisation des métiers dans le BTP en Île-de-France – 2024
- » BVA Xsight: Enquête sur le phénomène d'optin-out
- » Les Echos Start: « Me sentir femme a été un obstacle pour apprendre »: une nouvelle enquête montre qu'en école d'ingénieurs, le sexisme persiste
- » Open Edition Journals: Stéréotypes, représentations sexuées et inégalités de genre dans les manuels scolaires
- » Les Echos Start: Seulement 17 % des métiers sont mixtes, et c'est un vrai problème
- » DNA: En France, les femmes médecins se heurtent au « plafond de verre »
- » Décideurs Magazine: Femmes en cabinet d'avocats: vous avez dit plafond de verre ?
- » Cairn: Le plafond de verre universitaire: pour en finir avec l'illusion méritocratique et l'autocensure
- » Les Echos: Au féminin, l'ambition reste taboue

OBJECTION 9

- » Ministère chargé de l'Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes et de la Lutte contre les discriminations: Observatoire de la mixité: 6 mesures concrètes pour accélérer la mixité dans les organisations | Égalité-femmes-hommes





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