

# Demystifying Gender Bias in Service Based Organizations

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*Women experience organizational barriers despite links between greater representation and increases in financial results. As organizations seek for a competitive means they should not neglect moving women to the top of their strategy. This research investigated gender bias by functional area and examined the linkages between gender, gender bias, leadership rank, and equal opportunity measures to support organizations in using gender as a competitive strategy. Findings demonstrated more women than men experienced bias while both genders reported equality in the workplace. Gender bias is explained through the lens of Pluralistic Ignorance to promote organizational awareness and direct their efforts.*

## INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality and the value of gender diversity are widely acknowledged in the literature. Despite links between women and increases in financial results, gender bias is routinely overlooked and minimized. Although there have been improvements between the wage disparity amongst men and women, the glass ceiling continues to triumph with the support of several other barriers to the success of women including gender bias and gender stereotyping, sexual harassment, the lack of mentors and role models, the lack of formal career development activities and projects, the exclusion from informal networks, the perception of leadership style, and value associated with male dominated behaviors and functional roles. One explanation for the failure to address these barriers is Pluralistic Ignorance which can lead to the perpetuation of unsupported social and workplace norms and limit reporting of such incidents (Halbesleben, 2009; Miller & Nelsen, 2002). Additionally, this social phenomenon is likely to occur when peers are gathered together, such as in the workplace, and may explain why group members often refrain from discussing their ultimate concerns with each other surrounding difficult topics (Grant, O'Neil, & Stephens, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002). As a result, organizations must acknowledge Pluralistic Ignorance and the broad environment's reinforcement of gender stereotyping and women's unconscious conformity to gender bias (Evans, 2011; Grant, O'Neil, & Stephens, 2009; Halbesleben, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002; Miller & Sisk, 2012).

As service intense organizations seek for a competitive strategy to combat a highly saturated and differentiated market as well as the growing proportion of women spending contribution, organizations need to focus on increasing organizational gender balance and leverage women talent. Accordingly, organizations are compelled to address the impact of gender bias and utilize their Human Resources

function as a strategic entity to promote increases in organizational awareness and competitive strategies that address gender bias and encourage the development and recruitment of women within the industry. Organizations must support gender awareness and uncover systemic perceptions of gender performance and contribution as a condition for doing business to combat organizational, Pluralistic Ignorance (Miller & Sisk, 2012). Blayney and Blotnicky (2010) suggest activities must include building a diverse strategic culture in which Human Resources practitioners critically evaluate and review organizational promotion practices, reward and recognition systems offered, and developmental processes that are gender specific. Human Resources practitioners should help their organization's identify signs of diversity problems, emphasizing the importance of documenting employment decisions and helping organizational leaders to create policies that are gender neutral, offer family flexibility, and create a fair work environment regardless of gender (Miller & Sisk, 2012).

Research surrounding gender bias in the workplace exists and literature has begun to move from macro to micro views to identify the manifestation of gender influenced activities in organizations in specific industry domains; more so being popular in the international market. Research has investigated and explored the relationships between women and men and the impact of gender from the perspective of leader and subordinate and the glass ceiling phenomenon. Women leadership has also been contextualized and compared to that of men in the hotel, gaming, and food and beverage segment. However, there is a significant gap in the literature that omits comparatively understanding the manifestation and impact of gender bias across traditional service-based disciplines as well as examining it through the lens of Pluralistic Ignorance. Additionally, the research has not investigated this manifestation and the perceived relationship of gender bias to the organization, the leader, and equal opportunity in the workplace. The results of this study indicate a marginal relationship between perceived gender of a leader to subordinate and low acknowledgement of organizational and leader reinforcement of gender bias despite reports of its existence. This study identified contrary positions on the perceptions of gender bias held by men and women that perpetuates the existence and barriers of Pluralistic Ignorance.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Diversity as a whole has been identified as a strategic asset in which its overall existence promotes opportunities for interaction with diverse peers resulting in the possibility of higher learning, problem solving, creativity, innovation, and commitment to change (Borasi & Finnigan, 2010). Coupling this value of diversity and directing attention to the documented ability of women to increase profits and advance business from their unique perspectives and leadership styles needs to become the focus of Human Resource practitioners. Furthermore, organizations must build a diverse environment, realizing that this can only be accomplished when women participate in all levels of management allowing talent to come together regardless of gender differences to affect business decisions (Evans, 2011). Organizations need to develop and promote change to the damaging impact of gender stereotyping and remove this barrier of bottom line performance potential through increasing gender balance in their organization (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Evans, 2011). Clear links to the increased representation of women has already demonstrated positive bottom line results supporting the belief that women drive performance and contribute to an organization's competitive resources (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Evans, 2011; Miller & Sisk, 2012).

Women find themselves trapped in leadership, gender stigmas. Women leaders face higher standards than male leaders and are rewarded less. Women that exhibit traditionally valued masculine leadership behaviors such as assertiveness are perceived as competent but are not well liked while women that exhibit more feminine, stereotypical behaviors are more well liked and perceived as not having the necessary or valued leadership skills to strategically improve the performance of the organization (Evans, 2011). Organizations hold a common belief that masculine leadership characteristics, particularly those related to business acumen and influence, result in better performance while feminine styles of management are evaluated as deficient (Evans, 2011; Miller & Sisk, 2012). Although leadership characteristics and styles between men and women are marginally different, women tend to have higher

interpersonal behaviors and are more oriented to demonstrate collaborative and inclusive approaches to support and maintain relationships as compared to men (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Evans, 2011). Accordingly, these differences may have a direct impact on women as compared to men relative to experiencing gender bias.

Furthermore, women experience organizational barriers to their success including exclusion from informal networks, the lack of role models and mentors and the inability of organizations to support or offer opportunities for development (Evans, 2011). There is a significant lack of women role models as well as men that are comfortable taking on such a role with women (Miller & Sisk, 2012). As a result, women receive less mentoring and have been perceived as misunderstanding mentoring advances as sexual advances (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Miller & Sisk, 2012). Additionally, women rely on the organization's formal process for career development and promotion while men tend to use the informal network to support career advancement objectives (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010). This has resulted in female leaders having fewer development assignments and less mobility for career advancement opportunities. Research conducted by Blayney and Blotnicky (2010) identified that developmental assignments are highly correlated to career success and women become highly disadvantaged in increasing their capability which marginalizes women to lead smaller functional areas or smaller organizations as compared to men. Accordingly, a framework needs to be put into place to emphasize internal mentoring of staff to promote and develop women professionally and as organizational leaders (Evans, 2011). As such the authors hypothesize gender of a direct supervisor impacts equal opportunity for women. Equal opportunity is defined as being selected and participate in informal networks and activities and receiving equal pay.

In the development of an organizational strategy targeting the retention and promotion of women, there have been examples of success and the value of women leadership. These strategies have included developing a culture of retention and recruitment, increasing the number of women in all levels of roles, particularly leadership roles, recognizing women's successes, and enhancing professional development opportunities (Evans, 2011). In one example, an organization was able to significantly improve women partnerships from 31% to 88% based on their efforts. This exemplifies the need to focus on successful employment and retention tactics to overcome barriers experienced by women and to open the door for improved bottom line performance. Unless organizations take immediate action to address gender bias, organizations will be unable to attract and retain talented women to compete in the market. Surprisingly, 71% of companies do not have programs designed to develop women (Evans, 2011). As such the authors hypothesize gender bias intensity varies by functional area and leadership level. Gender bias intensity collectively refers to the factors within the work place that men and women perceive as being unequal. These factors include access to networks, salary, work value, competitive advantage, and gender of supervisor. The more factors perceived as unequal between men and women, the higher the intensity.

### **Clarifying the Nature and Meaning of Pluralistic Ignorance**

In the world of Sociology, the existence of Pluralistic Ignorance has been of great interest as a result of its consequences for employees and organizations. This social phenomenon is defined as the circumstance in which individuals infer that the perceptions, beliefs, and feelings guiding their own actions differ or are opposite from those guiding the identical actions of their peers (Halbesleben, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002). This is likely to occur when peers are gathered together and may explain why group members often refrain from discussing their ultimate concerns with each other (Grant, O'Neil, & Stephens, 2009). This is due to group members' lack of mutual visibility, misreading of behavioral cues by members of a reference group, or taking individual's public behavior as diagnostic of their private thoughts and feelings (Grant, O'Neil, & Stephens, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002)

For an organization, this is important when considering the existence of gender bias as Pluralistic Ignorance can lead to an employee feeling deviant from his or her work group or the organization, reducing retention (Halbesleben, 2009). If employees experience Pluralistic Ignorance, the deviance they experience threatens their social identity; by hiding their true opinion and outwardly supporting the perceived group norm, they can appear as though they fit in with others (Halbesleben, 2009) which may

increase the longevity and existence of gender bias and discrimination in the workplace. Furthermore, Pluralistic Ignorance suggests that at group gatherings members will often refrain from discussing their ultimate concerns (religion, politics, discrimination, harassment, etc.) because they are under the false impression that most members of their group are uncomfortable discussing such topics or group members are ignorant of a norm even when in the presence of each other (Grant, O'Neil, & Stephens, 2009). For example, in a gender-based scenario of sexual harassment, this suggests that when individuals within a group laugh at sexist jokes or do not adversely respond to sexist comments or behavior, they are conveying to others implicit support for the behaviors in question. This may occur despite their personal rejection of the sexist behavior. Furthermore, the ability to observe the behavioral cues that suggest that others support the sexist behavior will increase Pluralistic Ignorance and limit reporting of such situations (Halbesleben, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002).

A consideration worthy in this study is to acknowledge within the bounds of Pluralistic Ignorance, if women feel that a majority of men are comfortable with the current environment, then they are more likely to accept the situation and even fail to report any experiences or concern. Additionally, fear, such as the fear of embarrassment of the individual or someone else, the fear of being materially exploited, and the fear of change or uncertainty—can produce avoidance behavior and hence contribute to Pluralistic Ignorance (Miller & Nelson, 2002). As such, individuals inadvertently create spirals of silence and avoidance (Grant, O'Neil, & Stephens, 2009). This avoidance will ultimately prohibit gender equal opportunity and the elimination of gender bias.

As such the authors hypothesize that evidence of Pluralistic Ignorance will be demonstrated by contrary respondent data and paradoxical trends between experiencing bias and identifying an equal opportunity work environment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a survey as a measurement instrument with Institutional Review Board approval. A 32-question survey was informed by the literature and developed. The respondents were asked to rate the degree of their agreement or disagreement to a number of statements associated with experiencing gender bias and organizational culture in an attempt to answer the research hypotheses. Specifically, the survey utilized a five-point Likert Scale with the exception of questions asking the respondents to select their level within the organization, the gender of their direct supervisor, and demographic information. The Likert Scale ratings included the following options: strongly agree, agree, neutral/neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Only one selection was permitted per question. Limited questions allowed respondents to provide qualitative details of particular experiences or justification of a response. The survey was deployed using SurveyMonkey.com and shared via social media networks including Facebook and LinkedIn.

### **Sample**

A total of 138 individuals responded to the survey. Out of 138 respondents, 110 identified as female and 28 as male. There was an option to select “other” for gender; no respondent identified in this category. 98 respondents obtained a college education including an associate, bachelorette, masters, or terminal degree. 35 respondents earned a high school diploma and the remaining 5 respondents indicated “some college”. 138 respondents reside within the United States. Two of 138 participants identified as having a disability. To capture specific industry information, the survey requested participants to identify their specific industry type including retail, casino/gaming, food and beverage, hotel or other (requesting the respondent to specify). This information is listed in Table 1. Some examples of industry “other” types were Theme Parks, Entertainment, Destination Management, and Health Care. Additionally, the survey captured the specific functional area within the industry. A summary of this data can be found in Table 2.

**TABLE 1  
RESPONDENTS BY INDUSTRY AREA**

Industry	Count	Percentage
Retail	6	4.38%
Casino/Gaming	56	40.88%
Food and Beverage	28	20.44%
Hotel	14	10.22%
Other	33	24.09%

**TABLE 2  
RESPONDENTS BY FUNCTIONAL AREA**

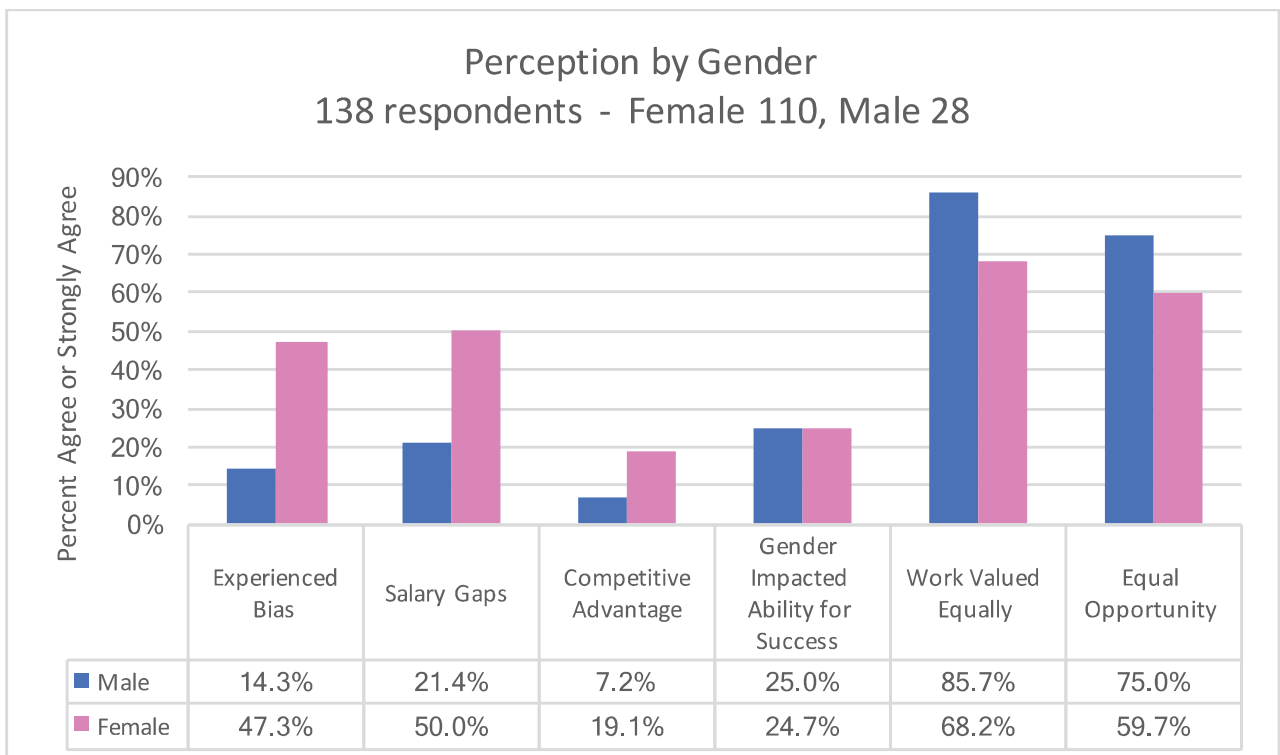
<u>Functional Area</u>	<u>Count</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Accounting	4	2.9%
Administrative	6	4.35%
Customer Service	23	16.67%
Marketing	8	5.8%
Operations	18	13.04%
Human Resources	37	26.81%
Sales	8	5.8%
Finance	6	4.35%
Legal	0	0%
IT	4	2.9%
Engineering	0	0%
Product	1	0.72%
Research and Development	0	0%
International	0	0%
Business Intelligence	1	0.72%
Manufacturing	0	0%
Public Relations	2	1.45%
Other	20	14.49%

## FINDINGS

A high percentage of men and women perceived gender equality in the workplace, see Figure 1. 85.7% of men and 68.2% of women responded that their work is valued equally regardless of their gender. Similarly, 75% of men and 59.7% of women responded that they have equal access to opportunities, including promotion, regardless of their gender. Despite this perception of equality, 47.3% of women reported experiencing gender bias, defined in the survey as being treated differently than a woman or man counterpart and 50% of women reported the existence of salary gaps among men and women at the same level in their organization. This contrary data creates a paradox between perception and experience among women.

Men in the study had a more positive perception of workplace equality and reported a lesser percentage of experienced gender bias. Only 14.3% of men reported experiencing bias compared to 47.3% of women. Most men in the study did not acknowledge the existence of gender bias. Only 21.4% of men reported the existence of salary gaps between men and women. Additionally, the men in the study did not acknowledge that their gender provided a competitive advantage while a higher percentage of women reported that their gender did provide competitive advantage (19.1% of women compared to only 7.2% of men). A higher percentage of men than women had a positive view of the work environment regarding equal opportunity and work being valued equally.

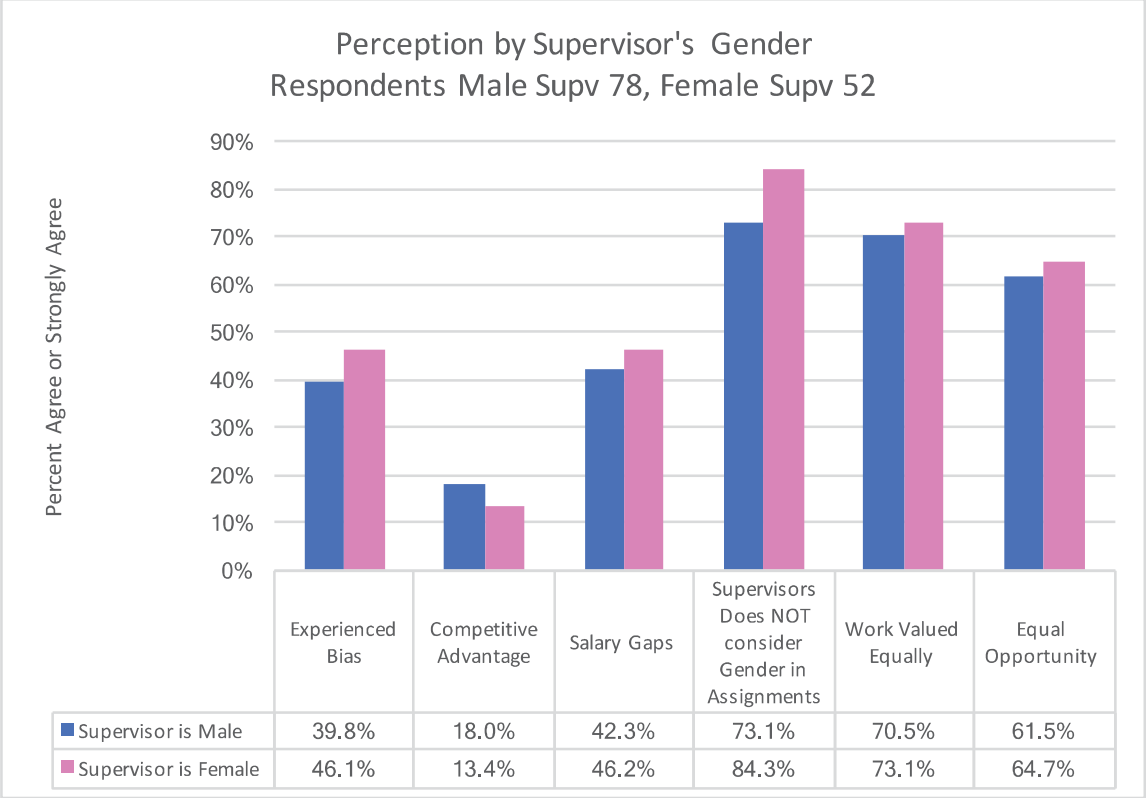
**FIGURE 1  
PERCEPTION BY GENDER**



A slightly higher percentage of respondents with women leaders perceived equality in the workplace compared to those with male leaders, see Figure 2. 84.3% of respondents with female leaders indicated that their direct supervisor does not consider gender in task assignments compared to 73.1% of respondents with male leaders. The results were similar regarding the perception of equal opportunity and work being valued equally. 64.7% of respondents with female leaders compared to 61.5% of those

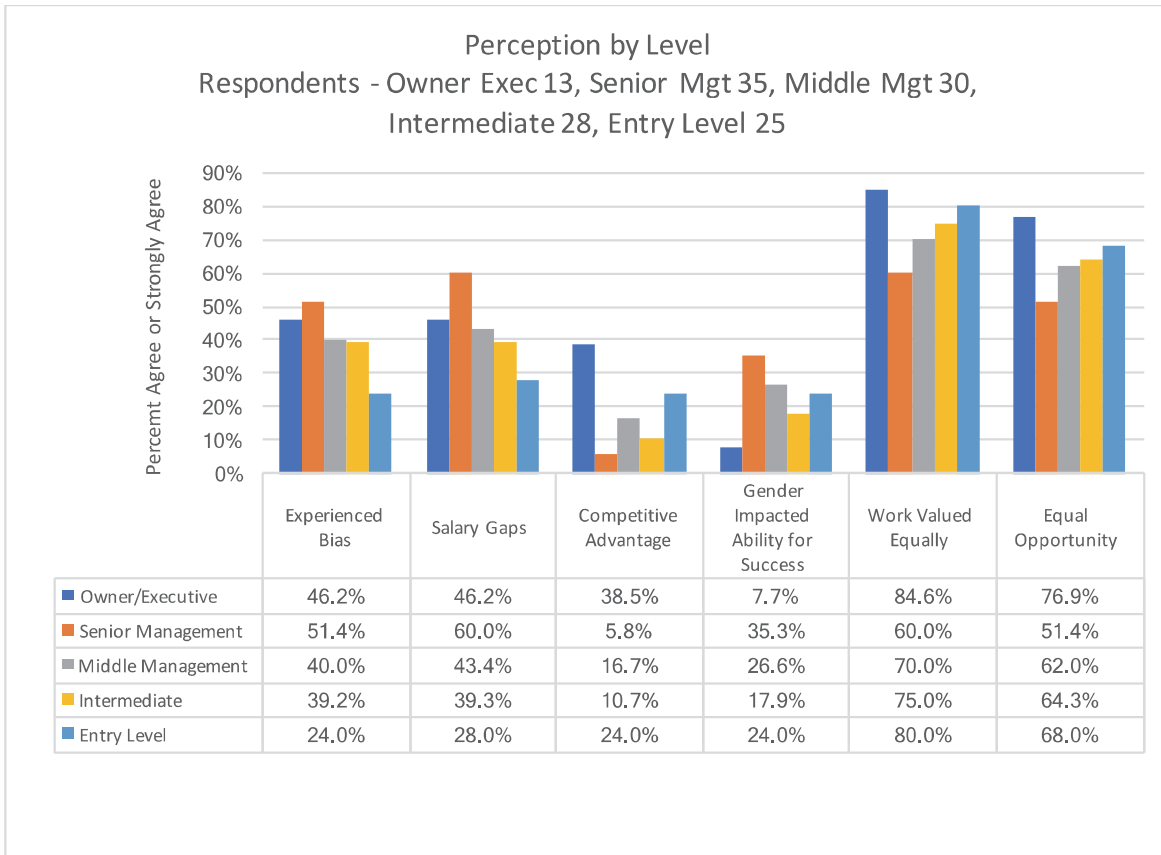
with male leaders reported having equal opportunity and 73.1% of respondents with female leaders compared to 70.5% with male leaders reported that their work was valued equally. The percentage of respondents identifying salary gaps was similar for male and female leaders (46.2% of respondents with female leaders and 42.3% with male leaders). A similar paradox exists in these findings between perception and experience. Despite the high percentage of perceived equality, 46.1% of respondents with female supervisors and 39.8% with male supervisors reported actually having experienced bias.

**FIGURE 2  
PERCEPTION BY SUPERVISOR’S GENDER**



Among respondents in this study, the highest percentage of respondents who experienced bias were at the highest levels of management, see Figure 3. 51.4% of respondents at the senior management level and 46.2% at the owner/executive level reported experiencing bias compared to only 24% at the entry level. Similarly, 60% at the level of senior management and 46.2% at the owner/executive level identified salary gaps, compared to only 28% at the entry level. The perception/experience paradox is most apparent at the owner/executive level where despite a high percentage of people experiencing bias, 84.6% reported work being valued equally and 76.9% reported equal opportunity between genders.

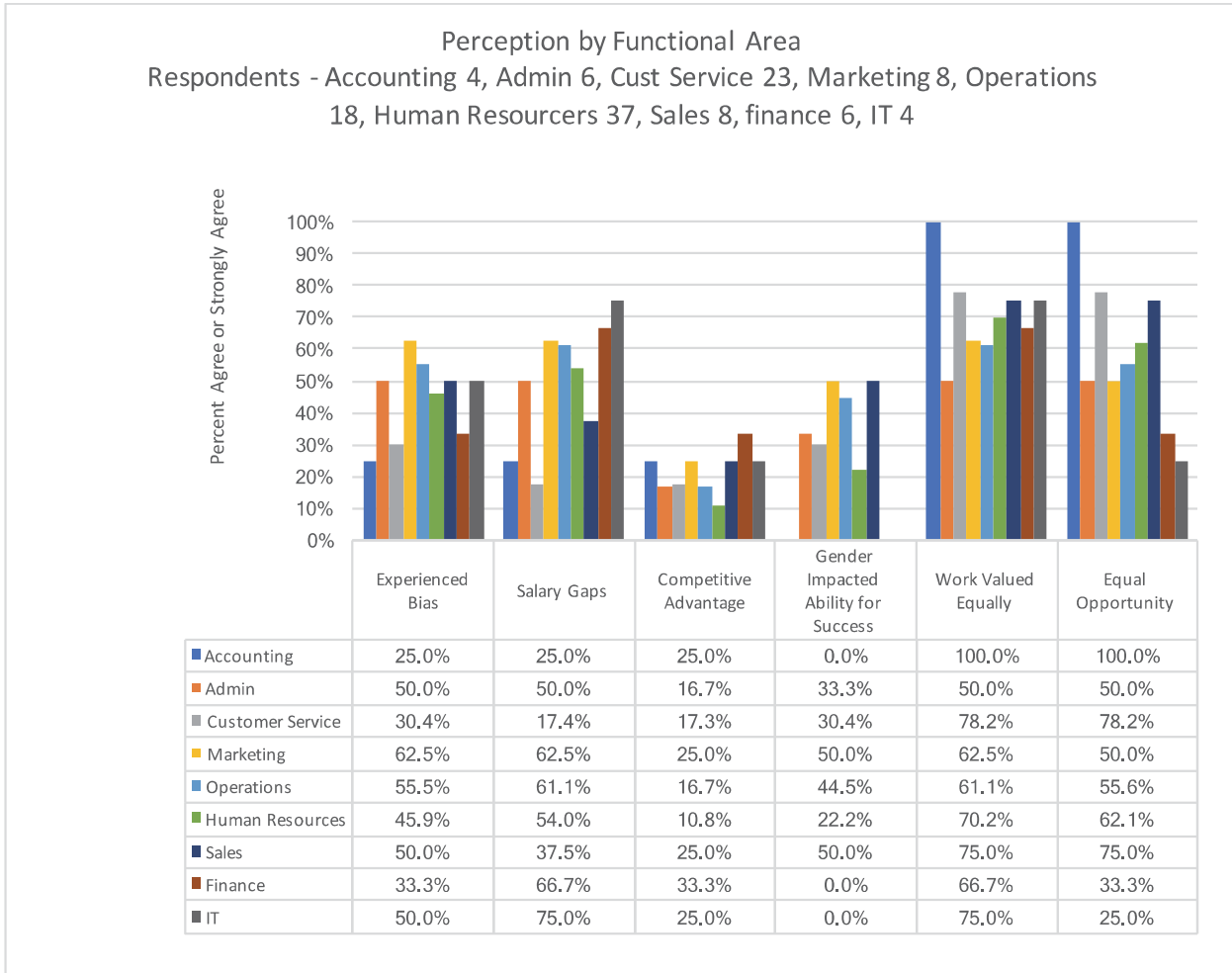
**FIGURE 3  
PERCEPTION BY LEVEL**



The results of the survey revealed wide variation in respondents reporting to have experienced bias by functional area, see Figure 4. The highest percentage of respondents reported they experienced bias was in the Marketing and Operations areas at 62.5% and 55.5% respectively. The Customer Service area had the lowest percentage of respondents reporting to have experienced bias at 30.4%. 66% of respondents in the Finance area identified salary gaps compared to only 25% in Accounting, traditionally dominated areas by men.

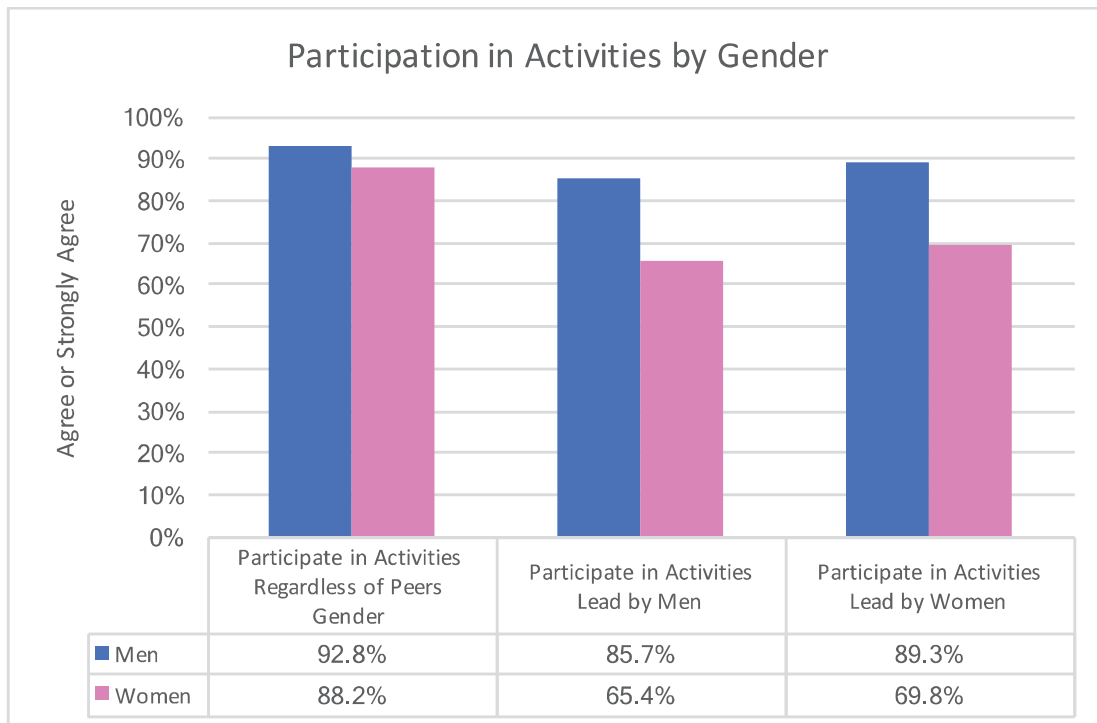


**FIGURE 4  
PERCEPTION BY FUNCTIONAL AREA**



More men than women in the study indicated a willingness to participate in activities, see Figure 5. A high percentage of men and women, 92.8% and 88.2% respectively, said they would participate in activities regardless of the gender of their peers. Only 65.4% of women compared to 85.7% of men said they would participate in activities lead by men. A slightly higher percentage, 69.8%, of women said they would participate in activities lead by women however this is still lower than the 89.3% of men responded that they would participate.

**FIGURE 5  
PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES**



**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

It is known that women experience barriers in the workplace relative to gender. The degree and significance varies; however, common themes include lack of access to projects, value of work, salary, and after work activities are the top barriers to success. Additionally, with the acknowledgement and lens of Pluralistic Ignorance, an additional and intangible barrier presents itself in the workplace. Accordingly, the purpose of this discussion is to provide the study’s data in support of answering the research hypothesizes and to reconcile the discrepancies between the reported occurrences and reporting of gender bias related variables. Pluralistic Ignorance is used to provide an explanation for contrary responses and paradoxal trends that emerged in the data.

In support of research hypothesis one, the gender of a direct supervisor impacts equal opportunity for women, it is perceived that the gender of an individual’s direct supervisor does not have a significant effect on equality opportunity. Men and women both reported equality in equal opportunity related questions and reported equal access to opportunities, including promotion, regardless of their gender. Despite this response data, nearly half of all women respondents reported experiencing gender bias, defined in the survey as being treated differently than a woman or man counterpart. There is a clear gap in the perception of respondents and their report of having experienced gender bias. Accordingly, respondent data did not identify or recognize the root of gender bias experiences. Based on this paradoxal reporting, gender bias is merely acknowledged as existing and lacks substantial evidence of the source of continued discrimination.

In support of hypothesis three, evidence of Pluralistic Ignorance was demonstrated by contrary respondent data and paradoxal trends in which patterns in the data directly linked to group members’ lack of mutual visibility, misreading of behavioral cues by members of a reference group, and taking individual’s public behavior as diagnostic of their private thoughts and feelings as supported by the literature (Grant, O’Neil, & Stephens, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002). This is again supported in the

example of men and women respondents identifying similar salary gaps based on gender of their leader; yet, looking at the data by gender, women are significantly more likely to identify gaps while men are highly unlikely to report any disparity in wages.

Reporting in this research study is similar to Pluralistic Ignorance studies surrounding sexual harassment in which individuals convey to others implicit support for behaviors, actions, and the organization culture in question, ultimately limiting reporting of such situations and creating avoidance of the topic all together (Halbesleben, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002). This avoidance is of great concern for service-based industries as it can prohibit gender equal opportunity and add an additional barrier for women in the workplace. Furthermore, it can have a negative impact on retention, raises in women in leadership, and using women as competitive human capital.

In addressing hypothesis two, gender bias intensity varies by functional area and leadership level, there is variation in gender bias intensity by functional area. Traditionally male dominated areas, such as Finance and Accounting, demonstrate the highest reported gender bias areas. Accordingly, traditionally female dominated areas like Customer Service received the lowest reported gender bias experiences. The identification of intensity by functional area supports the need to inform and educate the existing workforce and address organization's culture and norms that may be the result or effect of Pluralistic Ignorance. As such and referencing research hypothesis one, although gender may not have a significant impact on equal opportunity, the functional area in which an individual pursues may, along with the gender of a direct supervisor and willingness to participate in activities.

The lack of acknowledgement of the existence of gender bias by men and by the highest levels of management is concerning. More men than women are in higher level management positions. For example, in this study 78 respondents reported having a male supervisor compared to 52 who reported having a female supervisor despite women comprising the majority of respondents. If individuals in higher leader levels with authority and power to positively impact equality in the workplace do not see this inequality, this will impede efforts to change it. As such, the data supports research hypothesis two not only in gender bias intensity differences by functional area but includes by leadership level. Accordingly, the higher the leadership level, the more likely an individual is likely to experience gender bias, particularly women.

Although there are limitations of this study including sample size, geographic location of respondents, and further evaluation of additional variables such as leadership behavior and organizational structure, this study contributes to existing literature by clarifying linkages between gender, gender bias, leadership rank, and specific industry functions by exposing the dynamism and relationship among these considerations as well as the impact of Pluralistic Ignorance. As a result, findings of this study improve awareness in service intense organizations and promotes organization's ability to more effectively direct efforts leading to improved performance and competitive advantage with equal opportunity and gender diversity. This research offers Human Resource practitioners a starting point to review organizational culture and norms to prepare to evaluate and generate awareness to address gender bias and Pluralistic Ignorance in the workplace.

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