Why mentoring for women risks propping up patriarchal structures instead of changing them

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It won't come as a surprise to anyone that women are underrepresented in leadership roles in many industries. This has led to a proliferation of

women-only mentoring programs designed to challenge industry standards for female participation. The idea is to normalize women's participation at all employment levels, especially senior ones.

However, our year-long prize-winning international study focused on university mentoring programs has discovered women-only mentoring programs are not all they seem. Surprisingly, they can perpetuate the gendered hierarchies they attempt to remove. Through mentoring, women who have succeeded on male terms set other women on the same path.

This might not be so surprising if you think about Homer's Odyssey—the original story of mentoring. In this myth, the figure of Mentor cares for the young boy Telemachus while his father, Odysseus, is away at war. But the guidance that Mentor provides to Telemachus is designed to keep things just as they were in Odysseus's absence, ensuring the system of power is maintained.

We found a similar thing happens in the modern university. Our study found that, without meaning to, female mentors and mentees participated in the conditions of their own domination, thus keeping male bias and advantage firmly in place.

Our study collected detailed data from mentors and mentees from a range of academic disciplines in universities across the Western world, including several in Australia. These programs typically work by matching the specific career goals of junior women with senior women who have already achieved them. In doing so, women who have risen to the top of the university, despite its gender bias, give structural support to junior women so they can make it to the top, too.

Having made it into the senior roles of professor or associate professor, dean or pro vice chancellor, these exceptional women advise their

juniors on how to replicate their actions. The junior women can then follow a tried and tested pathway to success. Senior men often lend their support to these programs, too, making sure women are afforded equal opportunities.

However, by replicating the actions of the mentors, junior women are merely trained how to navigate a system that favors men. For instance, women can calculate the time and effort they could not put into research while pregnant or caring for their children. This is taken into account when their applications for research funding are considered.

That sounds like it ensures equity, but it reveals women have to explain the reasons for not producing as much as the standard male figure would. Instead of asking why women were compared against a male standard, mentors often gave advice about how to navigate the system.

For instance, male colleagues accused some woman in our study of "playing the baby card" to excuse research outputs lower than their own. Mentees were often advised about how best to play the baby card to make them look like they were outperforming men, rather than excusing themselves from doing research. Whether a woman is made to look worse or better than her male colleagues, she is still judged against a male standard that our research participants rarely questioned.

Playing by the existing rules

Because women in our study genuinely wanted to help junior women to make it, they did not see these kinds of problems. In fact, their very generosity contributes significantly to perpetuating the patriarchal system. When senior women generously give their knowledge, junior women become indebted to them. One mentee said:

"I always feel a combination of being thrilled and feeling guilty when I

have an appointment with [my mentor] because I know there's a zillion things she could be doing instead […] I know how much I owe her […] I pay her back by being successful."

When they pay their mentors back, they do so in the same gender-biased terms in which they were mentored; and so it continues for generations of women. Meanwhile, the female participation rate in the top positions in universities remains low.

Our research showed mentoring practices can conceal power relations and their effects. That's because they teach women how to work within, rather than change, a system biased against them.

So does this mean we should abandon mentoring programs? Not at all. But to really achieve gender equity, programs must stop helping women to succeed on existing male standards. Standards are hardly fair if they're biased to begin with.

Institutions can do this if they stop making junior staff into replicas of successful senior members.

It is difficult to abandon current programs because we've so thoroughly accepted what success is supposed to look like. And it's hard to level criticisms at well-intentioned programs established especially for women. But it's necessary so we can make sure they actually are good at eliminating gender bias, especially in light of growing awareness of how women have been treated more broadly, including in our own parliamentary system.

Approaches to mentoring need to change so they can really change things for women in universities and beyond. If they don't, the impact women can make on what we know about the world might never be realized—and it if isn't, we can expect gender bias will continue.

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