

'Benevolent sexism' in startups widens the gender gap by advantaging men over women

February 19 2024, by Nhu Nguyen, Frederic Godart, Ivona Hideg and Yuval Engel



Credit: Markus Spiske from Pexels

Women continue to face barriers in entrepreneurship, with [only 17 percent of small and medium-sized businesses being owned by women in](#)

[Canada.](#)

To address this issue, the Canadian government has introduced the [Women Entrepreneurship Strategy](#). This strategy seeks to address the gender gap and biases in the Canadian venture capital system.

However, our understanding of the challenges women face in the [startup ecosystem](#) is limited. Past research has focused on overt [negative sexist attitudes that question women's competence and suitability for entrepreneurship](#).

This view overlooks the existence of more subtle, yet pervasive and socially acceptable, sexist attitudes that often go unnoticed. [Given the sheer number of people interested or working in startups today](#), from investors to suppliers to job applicants, the effects of these subtle forms of sexism can accumulate across a large and diverse group of decision-makers.

For initiatives tackling gender inequality in entrepreneurship to be effective, we must gain a deeper understanding of the effects of these subtle biases faced by [women entrepreneurs](#).

Benevolent sexism in entrepreneurship

[Benevolent sexism](#) is a form of bias that, on the surface, appears to be positive toward women, but ultimately reinforces [gender roles](#) and entrenches inequality.

Unlike overtly hostile forms of discrimination, benevolent sexism manifests in seemingly harmless beliefs. This type of sexism often portrays women as delicate or in need of protection, while men are positioned as the providers and protectors.

Because benevolent sexism is often expressed in ways that seem positive, it is rarely challenged by either men or women. It can serve to maintain traditional gender dynamics by creating the illusion of support for women while still restricting their autonomy.

In particular, research shows that benevolent sexism [undermines women at work and results in them holding fewer positions of power in organizations](#). The startup ecosystem is particularly fertile ground for this kind of sexism to manifest and worsen over time.

Since [women are more underrepresented in entrepreneurship than in traditional organizations](#), startup evaluators are careful not to act on overt sexist attitudes. This, in turn, gives room for more subtle forms of bias to emerge.

Benevolent sexism advantages men

Our [recent research paper](#) examined how benevolent sexism affects how evaluators judge woman- and man-led startups.

Initially, we theorized that startup evaluators with benevolent sexist views would more likely to rate women-led startups as less viable (i.e., more likely to fail). We did not expect their evaluation of men's startups to be affected at all.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted three studies where participants were tasked with evaluating a hypothetical early-stage startup founded by either a man or a woman. Both entrepreneurs in our scenarios had identical qualifications and startup ideas.

The results from all three studies found that the more evaluators endorsed benevolent sexist beliefs, the more positively they judged men-led startups. There was no impact on the evaluation of women-led

startups. This finding was the same, regardless of whether the evaluators themselves were men or women, in two out of the three studies.

Addressing unwarranted advantages

Our findings call for a fundamental rethinking of what attaining true equity entails. It is not enough to remove the unfair barriers holding women back; we also need to confront the unfair privileges propelling men forward.

This suggests that common solutions for addressing gender inequities are not sufficient. They mostly focus on barriers that women face, while ignoring the unwarranted advantages afforded to men. Such common solutions include focus on [women's education, mentoring and networking](#).

To effectively address the [gender gap](#) in entrepreneurship, we need to raise awareness about the hidden effects of benevolent sexism. This could be done through education and training of entrepreneurs, mentors and investors. Such interventions could communicate to these stakeholders that while [benevolent sexism](#) seems positive it is actually harmful.

Further, we need to redesign the startup evaluation process. The current ambiguous and unstructured conditions of startups allow subtle biases to emerge.

To address this issue, we need clearly defined and transparent criteria for evaluating startups. Indeed, past research shows that creating [clear structure, transparency and accountability in evaluation processes](#) are critical for reducing biased decision-making.

Fix the system, not women

Our research challenges traditional interventions that solely address overt sexist attitudes towards women. Many interventions suggest that women need to change.

For example, women are advised to [change their communication and negotiation styles](#). They are also advised to venture into more [masculine and higher profile industries](#).

Such advice overlooks the advantages men receive. As our research demonstrates, even when women have identical qualifications and ideas, men-led startups are seen as more promising. Moreover, well-intended initiatives designed to address gender gaps in entrepreneurship may [backfire since they signal women need help, which propagates a benevolent sexist tone](#).

This calls [for fixing the system rather than fixing women](#). We need to address gender inequity by examining and changing evaluators' attitudes and behaviors, as opposed to encouraging women to change.

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