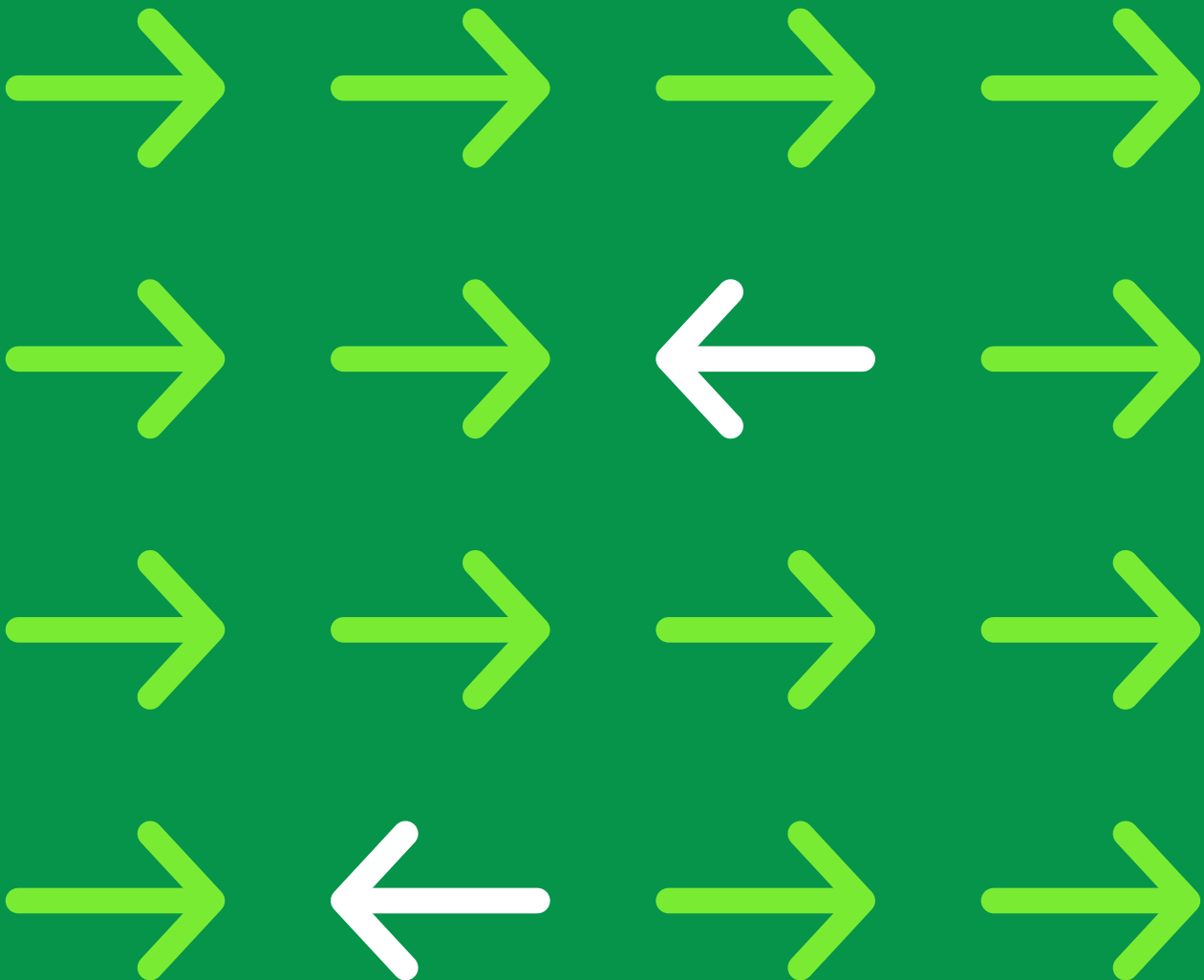


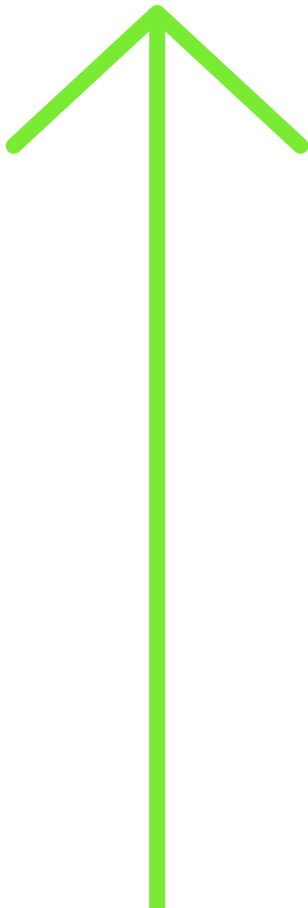
(En)countering resistance

Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives



Getting ready to face resistance

If you are working to promote gender equality, you can expect to meet resistance



This resource draws together some effective tools and strategies to prepare for and respond to backlash and resistance to gender equality initiatives. It's intended to support the people working for gender equality in a range of sectors – education, sport, workplace, local government, health and media.

Every person or group pushing for progressive social change understands that at some point in our journey we'll come up against people who don't agree with what we are doing. Yet it still often takes us by surprise when people we thought would be our allies deny the problem or look away.

If you are working to promote gender equality and tackle inequality you can expect to meet resistance. It may occur in any setting. It may come from individuals or collectively, and from men or women.

How do you prepare for it? What are effective responses?

This publication describes the forms that resistance can take and provides some practical examples from local gender equality initiatives. There are also links to other useful resources from Australia and around the world.

It is guided by a Queensland University of Technology evidence review on backlash to gender equality by Michael Flood, Molly Dragiewicz and Bob Pease, commissioned by VicHealth in 2017.

We hope you find it a useful support as you advocate for equality for all.

What is resistance?

Resistance is defined as an active pushing back against progressive programs, policies and perspectives.

– QUT Evidence Review

The terms '**backlash**' and '**resistance**' are at times used interchangeably to refer to any form of resistance towards progressive social change. But in discussions with those working to promote gender equality, we've found that people frequently describe backlash as the more extreme or aggressive end of resistance encountered.

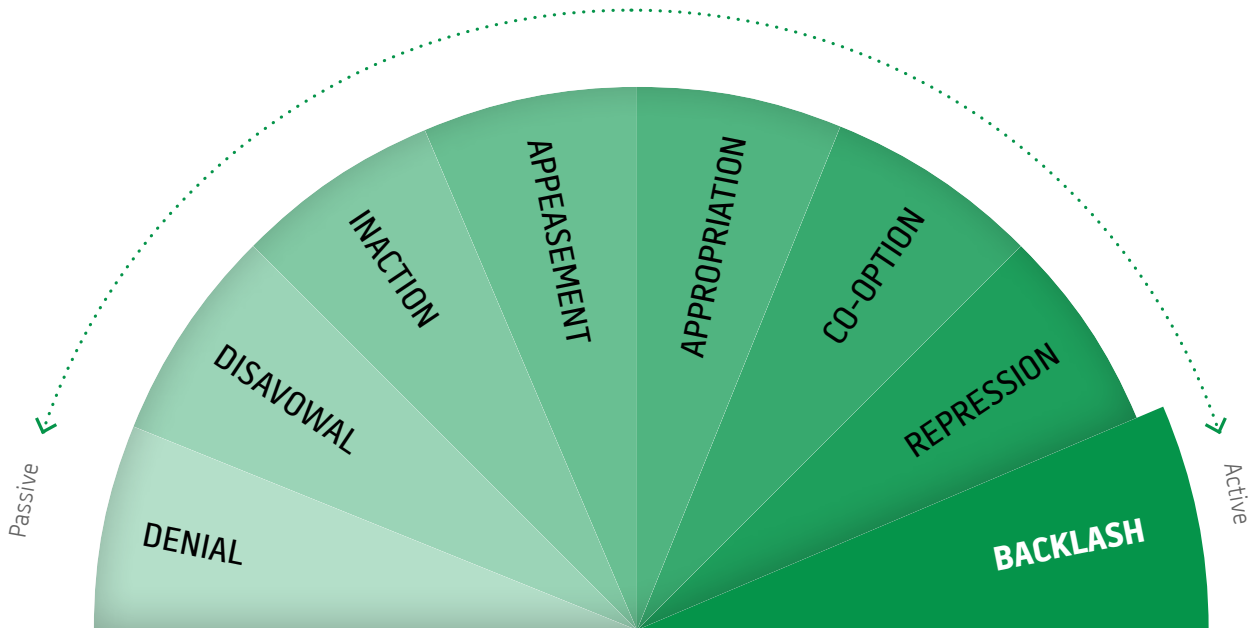
Resistance is most likely to come from the people who are advantaged by the status quo. In efforts to build gender equality, resistance is more common from men, but can also come from women.

Resistance can be at its greatest when existing structures are threatened. The idea of equality can provoke strong feelings – these are long-held social norms that are being challenged. You often know you're starting to get results with your gender equality initiatives when you meet resistance.

Resistance can range from passive blocking techniques which seek to maintain the status quo, to strategies which aim to minimise or co-opt change efforts, to active, aggressive opposition in order to restore the old order.

The diagram on the next page illustrates the range of resistance often met when promoting gender equality.

Forms of resistance



DENIAL

“There’s no problem here.”

Denial of the problem or the credibility of the case for change. Blame the victims.

APPROPRIATION

“Of course we’d appoint more women, if only they were more experienced.”

Simulating change while covertly undermining it.

DISAVOWAL

“It’s not my job to do something about it.”

Refusal to recognise responsibility.

CO-OPTION

“What about men’s rights? Men are victims too, you know.”

Using the language of progressive frameworks and goals for reactionary ends.

INACTION

“It’s not a priority right now.”

Refusal to implement a change initiative.

REPRESSION

“We tried that once and women didn’t want to take up the promotion/training/opportunity.”

Reversing or dismantling a change initiative.

APPEASEMENT

“Yes. Yes. We must do something (one day).”

Efforts to placate or pacify those advocating for change in order to limit its impact.

BACKLASH

“These feminists deserve all the abuse they get.”

Aggressive, attacking response.

Being prepared

Knowing that you'll meet resistance and what it looks like is a great start to being prepared.

If you are working to promote gender equality, whether inside or outside organisations, knowing that you're going to meet resistance and what it looks like is a great start to being prepared.

Experience with anti-vaccination campaigners, gun lobbyists and climate change deniers shows that just throwing facts and information back at your opponents doesn't work.

It also doesn't work with those who are vehemently opposed to gender equality. While facts and figures are important, a range of other strategies can help respond to and reduce resistance.

So what does work? According to research and promising practice, the following strategies are the best ways to prepare for and respond to resistance:

Framing strategies

How you articulate, communicate, or 'frame' the initiative and explain why it's important

Organisational strategies

How you involve leaders, individuals and groups, and address policies, practices and organisational structures

Teaching and learning strategies

Teaching processes, the learning environment, the content and the educators

Individual strategies

Identifying allies, self-care and focusing efforts on those you can influence

Who can you influence?

“Gender equality is challenging for all of us because we all buy into stereotypes and we’ve all been raised to think things a certain way... we don’t want to shut people down who are struggling to get their heads around it.”

– Facilitator, Trades Hall

When you plan for resistance from the start, you don’t get derailed when objections occur.

If you’re already working on gender equality initiatives, you’re probably one of the ‘committed’ audiences to the right of the spectrum illustrated below. You’re motivated and fully convinced of the benefits. So it is useful for you to think about common reasons why people actively resist the idea of gender equality.

Gender equality involves men letting go of privilege. Resistance stems from a defence of privilege – the idea that an advantaged person or group loses out if we give equal rights and opportunities to another group who have had fewer advantages.

Resistance sees people clinging to sexist social norms – the unwritten rules about how to behave in our society. An old and inaccurate example of these unwritten rules is that there is something in our genes that limits what we are suitable for.

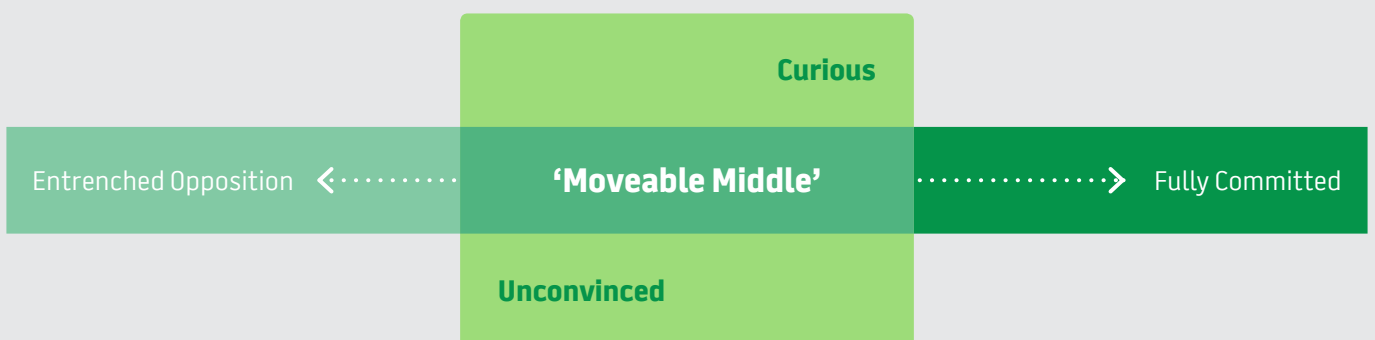
Such attitudes can be expressed by both men and women, and they are so much a part of our culture they are often unconscious, so people genuinely don’t see a problem.

People at the left of the spectrum of resistance – the entrenched opposition – are the least likely to join and support your gender equality initiative, and the social norms in our culture reinforce their prejudices.

The research shows that efforts to reduce and respond to resistance shouldn’t be at the expense of making progress towards gender equality. Most initiatives have found that identifying allies (others who are committed to equality) to work closely with, and then **focusing on the ‘moveable middle’, is where change can most effectively begin.**

It is only by shifting the existing social norms that the entrenched opposition will start to modernise, and realise how outdated and ill-informed they have become.

The Spectrum of Resistance



Framing strategies

Framing theory shows how the way something is presented influences how people process and respond to that information. Every time we communicate we are framing – and we can choose the frame we put around our stories. Framing techniques used in contemporary media include metaphor, stories, tradition, slogans, contrasts and spin.

Framing is how we make the case for gender equality, anticipating and countering resistant reactions, challenging common defences of gender inequality, and ‘touching the hearts’ of those we seek to persuade. As we repeat and continually strengthen the frame, culture and practice can be shifted.

Cognitive scientist George Lakoff notes that rational arguments are not normal modes of real reason, and that what counts as a ‘rational argument’ is not the same for progressives and conservatives.

Framing of gender equality needs to:

- continually articulate the rationale and benefits, noting the benefits to men as well as to women
- offer clear, compelling accounts of the problem and the solutions – real-life stories and personal accounts from within our organisations and settings are extraordinarily powerful
- acknowledge that gender is personal, interpersonal and structural, and that it involves unequal relations of power.

Framing should directly address claims about male disadvantage by anticipating and addressing common resistant reactions. In this we need to be careful not to reinforce common myths and misinformation.

One way to avoid emphasising myths is to **lead with the fact first, before noting and debunking the myth**. Then **explain the fallacy** that the myth uses to distort the fact (fact/myth/fallacy response).

A detailed communications toolkit *Framing Equality* has been produced by Equinet European Network of Equality Bodies and the Public Interest Research Centre (see *Useful resources* on page 16).

Framing with shared values

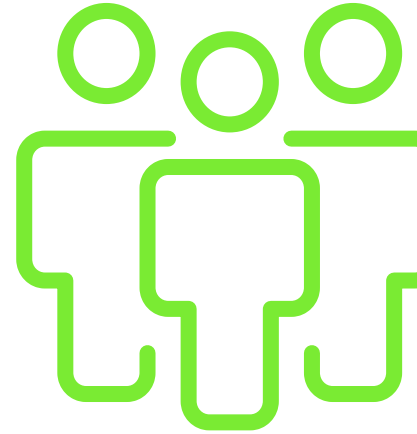
In 2016, the Victorian Trades Hall Council launched their *Stop Gendered Violence at Work* campaign, which positions gendered violence, including sexism and discrimination, as a serious occupational health and safety hazard.

To educate managers and workers, the We Are Union Women team at Trades Hall runs two training programs with unions, delegates and workplaces across Victoria – *Family violence is a workplace issue* and *Stop gendered violence at work*.

The team has found that framing discussions around shared union values helps people connect with gender equality and makes the case for change. People are asked ‘what is union to you?’ with common responses including ‘social justice’, ‘standing strong together’, and ‘no one gets left behind’.

The consistency of these broader values with gender equality principles provides a relatable point of connection and understanding.

Organisational strategies



Our workplaces, sporting clubs, government organisations, schools and other learning institutions are all important settings where gender equality initiatives are taking place. A comprehensive gender equality strategy, involving organisational structures, practices and policies, is both vital for preventing resistance and a necessary feature of gender equality work in organisations.

Organisational leadership and workforce cultures are critical influences. Where leaders and managers are perceived not to support these initiatives, or where culture undermines diversity initiatives, resistance can flourish.

Strategies to minimise institutional resistance include these actions:

Secure support from those in power

Senior leaders – both men and women – must step up (and be seen to step up) to advance gender equality. With the support of leadership, equality initiatives can then be built into the DNA of the organisation via training, position descriptions and performance planning.

Communicate the importance of recognising and addressing unconscious bias

Biases are influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences. We may not even be aware of these views and opinions, or be aware of their full impact and implications.

Tailor information for different audiences

Craft materials specifically for different teams or groups known to have more sexist cultures within an organisation. Find supportive messengers who are likely to be listened to, and be prepared to work intensively with some groups. This will help to counter some of the myths and fallacies they are likely to express, which can strongly influence others.

Form strategic partnerships and allies

Forge links with other groups and individuals who are experiencing similar opposition to their work. This enables you to share ideas and approaches, as well as providing a support network.

Encourage open debate and discussion

Have the courage to participate in difficult conversations. Listen without becoming defensive, and acknowledge people's fears and misinformation about equality.

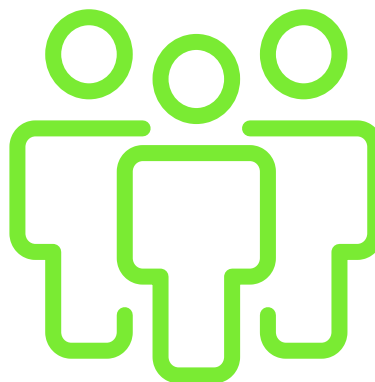
Challenge rationalisations for resistance

Be prepared to respond quickly to questions or comments that seek to justify resistance, to nip it in the bud. Use framing strategies to present sound arguments and evidence to address misinformation.

Establish clear monitoring processes

Feedback loops are essential to ensure that all stages of the change process are implemented, and to identify emerging issues or trends.

Organisational strategies



Supporting and monitoring workplace cultural change

In 2014, Victoria Police commissioned the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to review sexual harassment within Victoria Police, and provide expert and independent advice on the underlying causes of discrimination and harassment in that workplace. A specialist taskforce, Taskforce Salus, was also established, which investigates serious allegations of sexual discrimination, harassment and predatory behaviour in Victoria Police, while adopting a victim-centric approach.

In December 2015, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission released its review findings, which revealed an entrenched culture of everyday sexism combined with a high tolerance for and prevalence of sexual harassment within Victoria Police. More importantly, the review identified the underlying causes and drivers of this toxic workplace culture and made 20 recommendations to support Victoria Police to achieve a safe, inclusive and respectful workplace, free of workplace harm. Victoria Police accepted all 20 recommendations and immediately began putting them into action. These included establishing a centralised Workplace Harm Unit to support and advocate for victims, new counselling and reporting services, an independent and confidential 'Safe Space' for victims and family members to seek assistance and support, the development of a Diversity

and Inclusion Framework and a Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan, a Women in Policing Advisory Group, and training for all leaders and managers across Victoria Police in preventing and calling out sexual harassment, promoting gender equality and addressing bias and sex discrimination.

Regular 'pulse checks' have been used by Victoria Police to track shifts in reporting culture (and confidence in reporting) and levels of confidence in whether management is providing appropriate responses to the change agenda. These 'pulse' surveys help to identify what the resistance factors are, and where they are being expressed, so that tailored materials can be crafted for those areas. The Communications and Engagement strategy has seen the development of a peer-to-peer mentoring program to build leadership on this issue among middle management, as well as senior leadership engagement in leader-led conversations with their workplaces, using personal storytelling and reflection on past behaviours.

A comprehensive suite of gender-related data and reporting has also been developed to allow Victoria Police to track progress and identify workplaces that require further assistance and support in achieving safe, inclusive and respectful workplace.

Teaching and learning strategies

Teaching and learning strategies can lessen the likelihood of resistance, but they must provide people with a balance of challenge and support: challenge to the status quo; support to foster their readiness to make change.

Training alone won't deliver cultural change in organisations. To modernise effectively we need multiple, mutually reinforcing strategies, so training must take place within the context of wider organisational change.

There's a lot of power in letting people have their say in forums, no matter how strident their views. Feeling heard can make them more open to alternative messages.

Teaching and learning strategies must consider:

The environment

Creating a safe, respectful and supportive environment for learners helps to build their understanding of the structures and social norms that underpin inequality.

The content

Using framing strategies and employing lived experiences builds understanding and breathes life into the learning.

The teachers

Those who teach gender equality need to have content expertise, and are more likely to be effective if they also are authentic and empathetic. Research shows that diversity training is more likely to have a significant impact if the trainer is a direct manager or supervisor.

Teaching practice

Education needs to be of sufficient duration and intensity. It needs to be participatory, engage the emotions and foster empathy. And it needs to be relevant to the group.

Inoculate against misinformation

Expose individuals to a small dose of arguments against an idea, followed by criticism of those arguments. Highlight the facts, not the myths, and use framing strategies to present sound arguments and evidence, while acknowledging doubts and fears.

Teaching and learning strategies

ENVIRONMENT



- Safe space
- Respectful and supportive learning
- Small rather than large groups

CONTENT



- Framing strategies
- Conceptual framework that builds awareness of social structures and power relations
- Use personal accounts and live experiences
- Storytelling

TEACHERS



- Content experts
- Knowledgeable and skilled educators
- Authentic, credible and empathetic
- Self-reflective
- Open-hearted and compassionate
- Led by managers and supervisors (if organisational training)
- Draw on mentors, female or male

TEACHING PRACTICE



- Address risk factors
- Sufficient length and intensity
- Participatory (role-plays, simulations, interactive learning, storytelling, discovery)
- Engage emotions
- Foster empathy
- Appeal to values of the group

INOCULATE AGAINST MISINFORMATION



- Employ sound arguments with fact/myth/fallacy approach
- Acknowledge fears and doubts

Individual strategies

A critical challenge for [online] moderators is in striking a balance between a ‘discovery’ methodology, where audiences are encouraged to self-moderate; and a direct, informative approach regarding attitudes and behaviours that cross the line.

– Our Watch’s approach to moderation

Identify allies

As an advocate for gender equality, sometimes you can feel as though your mission is yours alone. It’s not! There are others in your organisation and elsewhere who are also engaged in this work. It’s a matter of finding those like-minded people and creating a network of support. If you can’t find such allies, contact VicHealth or the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission so they can link you up with others working in the field.

Recognise and defend against domination techniques

Norwegian professor, Berit Ås, identified five domination techniques used by both men and women to gain power over others in work and social life. They are:

- making invisible
- ridiculing
- withholding information
- double-edged punishment
- shame and guilt.

By recognising the techniques when they are being used and knowing how to deal with them, you can limit their effectiveness. The document *Facing Resistance – Managing gender mainstreaming in organisations* (see *Useful resources* on page 16) has great descriptions of these techniques and how to defend against them.

5 domination techniques

- Making invisible
- Ridiculing
- Withholding information
- Double-edged punishment
- Shame and guilt

5 defensive strategies

- Take up space
- Ask questions
- Demand that all the cards are on the table
- Break the pattern
- Intellectualise

5 confirmation techniques

- Foregrounding
- Respect
- Inform
- Double rewards
- Confirm good norms

Techniques and strategies derived from the work of Berit Ås, as developed by Amnéus et al.

Individual strategies

Focus your efforts

As mentioned earlier, there are some people – the entrenched opposition – who just won't get on board. Focus your efforts on those who you can influence and set achievable goals for yourself.

Dealing with online abuse

Resistance is often expressed through social media and websites. The virtual world seems to embolden antagonists to say hateful things (even when not anonymous) that they would never say in person. While respectful debate is encouraged, it is vital to have guidelines around social media to protect you, your people and your audiences from online trolling. See our *Useful resources* section for links to documents that can help you.

Practise self-care

Tackling entrenched inequality requires a long-term effort and it doesn't always run smoothly. When the going gets tough and it feels like the wall of resistance you're facing is too high, it's okay to step back and regroup. Looking after your own wellbeing is paramount. Give yourself some time out and talk to trusted friends and allies. Enlist the support of your line manager, HR team or a trusted mentor. It is important to maintain perspective by recognising that resistance is an indication that your work is gaining traction and that long-term change is made up of myriad small achievements along the way. So take the time to share the tough stories as well as identifying and celebrating the gains, no matter how small.

13 steps to manage resistance



1. Don't be surprised

Resistance is to be expected. Prepare for it. Resistance means your work advocating for equality is getting traction.



2. Understand the form

Resistance takes different forms. Thinking through the form will help in crafting your responses – for example, if it is ‘co-option’, where the language and facts are being twisted, a fact/myth/fallacy response might be helpful.



3. Assess who it's from

Monitoring and regular opportunities for feedback to your gender equality initiatives help you understand not just what resistance is being expressed, but who it is coming from. You can then tailor your messaging – and messengers – to address their concerns or correct misinformation.



4. Be willing to listen

Create spaces for diverse views and experiences to be expressed. When people can have their say and talk about their own beliefs (and biases and fears) without being shut down, they are more likely to be open to other messages.



5. Focus efforts on those you can influence

Entrenched opposition won't be convinced. Understand when to respond and when to leave it alone. Find allies and focus on the ‘moveable middle’.



6. Get leaders involved

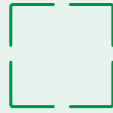
Getting the senior leadership involved is pivotal to getting traction for gender equality initiatives. It is how we get beyond a training or awareness-raising exercise to seeing it embedded into policies, position descriptions and performance planning.



7. Harness the power of your peers

You are not alone in this work. Find people in your organisation and others who are also committed to gender equality and share ideas, approaches and support.

13 steps to manage resistance



8. Frame, don't shame

Framing shapes the story of gender equality. Tell real-life stories and allow personal accounts to be shared to help people connect emotionally, not just rationally, to the concepts. Note the benefits of equality to both men and women, and address myths and misinformation.



9. Make sure to monitor

Regular feedback helps you see how your work is progressing, and understand where resistance lives and what is being said. This doesn't have to be an expensive, outsourced process. An online questionnaire of just a few key questions sent out quarterly can be done in-house.



10. Defend against domination techniques

Domination techniques are used to gain power over others. Recognising them helps you respond effectively. For example, if you're asked, 'Can't you take a joke?', that's the domination technique of ridiculing. The defensive strategy for this is to ask more questions – immediately inviting them to explain what they meant by that. The confirmation technique is to give respect and space for others, confirming that you take contributions seriously. See the outline of these techniques and strategies on page 12.



11. Put guidelines in place

Manage more extreme resistance with clear and unambiguous guidelines about what's allowed and not allowed. In the teaching space, this is about creating a safe and respectful learning environment. For online forums, this requires moderation guidelines.



12. Practice self-care

Look after your own wellbeing, seek support and allow yourself space when you need it.



13. Celebrate success

Truly modernising our organisations will take time. We are tackling some entrenched and structural inequalities. It's a marathon, not a sprint. So take time out to recognise and celebrate the wins along the way.

Useful resources

The following documents have assisted us in preparing this resource. As this is a relatively new area, there is limited robust research on the effectiveness of these strategies, however these are terrific examples of promising practice and the start, we hope, of a significant body of work in responding to and mitigating resistance and backlash to gender equality initiatives.

Amnéus et al, *Validation Techniques and Counter Strategies: Methods for dealing with power structures and changing social climates*, Empowerment Network Stockholm University (ENSU), 2004 http://www.ecosanres.org/pdf_files/Gender_workshop_2010/Resources/Amneus_et_al_2004_Validation_techniques_counter_strategies.pdf

Change the Story, (Our Watch et al., 2015) www.ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story

Communicating Equality through Social Media: A Guide for Equality Bodies, Equinet, European Network of Equality Bodies, 2017 www.equineteurope.org/IMG/pdf/communicating_equality_through_social_media_-_a_guide_for_equality_bodies-3.pdf

Facing Resistance – Managing gender mainstreaming in organisations, Syvonne Nordström, Camilla Simonsson and Dan Humble, Jämtland County Administration (Sweden), 2007 jamda.ub.gu.se/bitstream/1/171/1/Facing_Resistance.pdf

Framing Equality, Communication Toolkit for Equality Bodies, Equinet European Network of Equality Bodies and the Public Interest Research Centre (2017) www.equineteurope.org/IMG/pdf/framing_equality_-_equinet_pirc.pdf

Institutional Transformation: Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit, European Institute for Gender Equality <http://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gender-institutional-transformation/how-react-resistance-statements-and-reactions>

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