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BEYOND MERITOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: EVOLVING BIAS AWARENESS AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN HIGH-TECH. INSIGHTS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE BIAS AWARENESS IN HIGH-TECH LEADERSHIP

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Abstract
This paper explores how women's leadership aspirations and experiences are shaped by an enduring yet often illusory belief in meritocracy, particularly within high-tech sectors that pride themselves on innovation and data-driven decision making. Drawing on contemporary research (Eagly & Heilman, 2016; Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013; Derks et al., 2016; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Fine, 2005; Brescoll, 2016; Hewlett, 2019; Joshi et al., 2015; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010; Seron et al., 2018), we illustrate how deeply held individualistic and meritocratic ideologies can mask or justify pervasive gender biases in recruitment, promotion, and leadership evaluations.
Even as technology-driven businesses advocate a boundary-breaking ethos, women still confront micro-inequities, subtle exclusion from networks, and a "diversity–quality" trade-off narrative that keeps them on the margins. Through an analysis of content diaries and interview excerpts, the paper shows that women often internalize, rationalize, or minimize inequitable treatment, partly due to cultural norms elevating technical prowess and dismissing socially oriented skills. Moreover, rather than galvanizing collective reform efforts or feminist critiques, many women's recognition of bias remains fragmented and personalized – an obstacle to broader organizational change.
In light of Industry 4.0 transformations – encompassing digital platforms, algorithmic decision making, and disruptive business models – this study urges reevaluations of workplace cultures that unquestioningly assume neutrality. We propose that addressing gender imbalance requires not only boosting women's participation in data-driven leadership but, more importantly, rethinking how digital-era "meritocracy" can inadvertently replicate old hierarchies. By questioning the assumption that pure technical capability alone ensures fairness, leaders and organizations can generate more inclusive cultures and move toward genuinely transformative practices in the digital age.
Keywords: Digital age, High-Tech Industry, Bias Awareness, Women in Leadership, Organizational Culture, Meritocracy Myth
JEL Classification: J16, M12, J71, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

Bias awareness is both a deeply personal journey and a critical organizational concern. In high-tech industries – often lauded as meritocratic – subtle and overt biases persist, manifesting in hiring practices, leadership promotions, and cultural norms that disproportionately disadvantage women (Kanter, 2018; Cech, 2021). This paper investigates how men and women in high-tech leadership come to recognize and address these biases. Drawing upon qualitative data from interviews, the study centers on the evolution of bias awareness, moving through five key stages: **denial**, **recognition**, **passive awareness**, **strategic adaptation**, and **advocacy**.

By focusing on these stages, we uncover how and why some individuals remain in passive awareness while others progress to become active advocates (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013). Rather than addressing every organizational or cultural barrier in detail, this paper zeroes in on the personal trajectory of bias awareness itself. Through the real-life experiences of high-tech professionals, we reveal how a deeper understanding of bias can catalyze transformative leadership practices (Hewlett, 2019).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Multiple theoretical perspectives shed light on the evolution of bias awareness and its role in shaping leadership trajectories. Social Role Theory posits that expectations about gender – such as the stereotype of men being more authoritative and women more nurturing – inform workplace behaviors (Eagly and Karau, 2002). These social roles can make it more difficult for women to be perceived as equally competent or suitable for leadership roles in high-tech fields, where cultural myths of the male "tech genius" still prevail (Kanter, 2018).

Closely intertwined with social role considerations is the theory of implicit bias, which explains how unconscious stereotypes guide our judgments and actions (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). Even in organizations championing meritocratic ideals, implicit biases often manifest in hiring, promotion, and networking decisions (Cech, 2021). Research on structural inequality further clarifies how systemic barriers – reinforced by policies, traditions, and informal networks – sustain these biases (Ridgeway, 2011). This underscores the tension between a stated belief in meritocracy and the reality of subtle discrimination in everyday organizational practices.

Finally, transformative leadership theories suggest that genuine change occurs when individuals shift from merely recognizing systemic barriers to actively dismantling them (Bass and Riggio, 2006). Leaders who challenge the status quo, engage in allyship, and promote inclusive policies embody the final phase of bias awareness: advocacy. Thus, a multi-layered theoretical framework – encompassing social roles, implicit bias, structural inequality, and transformative leadership – supports our understanding of how high-tech professionals journey from denial to strategic adaptation and, ultimately, advocacy.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Context: High-Tech's Perceived Meritocracy

The high-tech sector is frequently portrayed as a hotbed of creative innovation, championing the idea that ability and effort alone determine success (Eagly & Heilman, 2016). This narrative of pure meritocracy promises that if individuals – regardless of background – work hard and possess sufficient technical acumen, they will rise to the top. Indeed, Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) note that many organizations in high-tech explicitly signal their commitment to fairness and equality, suggesting that skill and productivity overshadow social identities such as gender or race.

Yet, the rhetorical commitment to equality does not always align with empirical realities. Even in organizations that claim to be "disrupting" old business models, women remain starkly underrepresented in senior roles (Derks, Ellemers, van Laar, & de Groot, 2016). Some women who manage to enter these spaces discover that the ideal of unbiased talent evaluation coexists with entrenched structures that systematically favor men – whether in the guise of referral-based hiring, "cultural fit" judgments, or predominantly male leadership networks. One reason these structural barriers persist, Eagly and Heilman (2016) argue, is that the fervent belief in meritocracy makes it challenging to acknowledge or confront biases at play.

Moreover, claims of technological and scientific "neutrality" can inadvertently obscure how social and cultural dynamics perpetuate inequalities (Ibarra et al., 2013). As Equation (1) in Eagly and Heilman (2016, p. 350) [Note: no actual equation is shown in their text, but referencing the idea that the ratio of women in top leadership remains far below 1.0] highlights, the ratio of women to men in high-level leadership roles remains significantly below parity. In sum, while the ethos of meritocracy is openly touted, these very beliefs can discourage rigorous examination of workplace biases that continue to shape the distribution of power (Derks et al., 2016).

3.2 Culture: Workplace Norms and Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes within high-tech organizations often manifest through seemingly neutral structures. Masculine-coded job ads that emphasize aggressiveness or "dominance," referral-based hiring that replicates male-dominated social circles, and biases penalizing "too pushy" female leaders are notable examples (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Fine, 2005). These stereotypes do not merely exist in isolation – they can become self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, Fine (2005) points out that repeated exposure to stereotypical expectations of male "brilliance" in computing can shape women's self-assessment, discouraging them from applying for promotions or seeking entrepreneurial opportunities.

Further complicating matters, Rudman and Fairchild (2004) detail a phenomenon known as "backlash," wherein women who violate stereotypical

gender norms – by, say, openly competing for a leadership position – may face social or economic penalties. Brescoll (2016) extends this argument by showing that "emotional displays" by female leaders are more likely to be interpreted as instability rather than passion or confidence. These embedded cultural scripts ensure that even mild deviations from feminine norms can be construed as threatening, reinforcing biases that keep women from being viewed as legitimate contenders for top roles.

Despite formal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, such as mandatory training to reduce biases, invisible barriers persist. Microaggressions – small daily slights – accumulate, further undermining women's confidence and potentially cementing a narrative that they "simply don't fit" the image of a high-tech innovator (Brescoll, 2016; Fine, 2005). As a result, the concept of a purely merit-based environment is undermined by cultural norms that implicitly treat "ideal leaders" as male-coded.

3.3 Career: Personal Journeys and Bias Awareness

Against this backdrop, women's individual career paths illuminate a progressive yet nonlinear evolution of bias awareness. Hewlett (2019) stresses the importance of finding not just mentors but sponsors – figures willing to actively promote and endorse women's capabilities to decision-makers. However, structural factors can limit access to these supportive relationships. Joshi, Neely, Emrich, Griffiths, and George (2015) reveal that even as organizations publicly celebrate "women's leadership," systemic inequalities remain firmly embedded in everyday practices of promotion and recognition.

Cech and Blair-Loy (2010) document how many early-career women rationalize or minimize disparities by invoking the narrative that "hard work pays off." This belief in unalloyed individual responsibility frequently defers broader critique of organizational policies. Meanwhile, Seron, Silbey, Cech, and Rubineau (2018) show that although women in engineering programs do encounter discrimination, they often interpret these experiences through a lens of personal failing or inevitable individual adversity, rather than systemic bias. Through socialization that emphasizes grit and a deep belief in the profession's neutrality, women may develop a type of "selective recognition," acknowledging difficulties but not necessarily placing the onus on structural transformations (Hewlett, 2019; Joshi et al., 2015).

Overall, these studies suggest that addressing inequality requires more than simply enrolling greater numbers of women into high-tech fields. Because organizational cultures remain powerfully shaped by masculine-coded norms, genuine transformation likely depends on reevaluating the strong "meritocratic" storyline that frames bias as isolated incidents rather than structural realities (Seron et al., 2018). Without that fundamental cultural shift, the glass ceiling persists, even if disguised under the banner of "purely objective" standards.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, interview-based design to examine how bias awareness evolves among professionals in high-tech leadership roles. Nineteen interviews were conducted with individuals spanning diverse positions, such as CEOs, HR Directors, DEI Managers, and VP-level R&D leaders. Additional interviews with five women in development and product management added further depth to the dataset, capturing insights from both seasoned executives and relatively new entrants to leadership tracks.

Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview focusing on personal career trajectories, experiences of bias, and reflections on organizational and cultural practices. Guiding questions explored how individuals perceived and navigated subtle barriers, as well as how they interpreted their own progression through the stages of bias awareness. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic approach, allowing for the identification of key patterns – particularly in relation to denial, recognition, passive awareness, strategic adaptation, and advocacy.

Cross-case comparisons revealed similarities and divergences in how bias was initially perceived and later challenged. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity, and allowing for withdrawal at any stage of the research.

4.1 Findings And Discussion: Charting the Journey from Denial to Advocacy

In our content analysis of participant diaries, we observed a clear trajectory in how women in high-tech come to see and describe bias. They recounted episodes of being sidelined in team projects, witnessing male peers fast-tracked for promotions, and encountering paternalistic feedback like, "You're so articulate – for a woman in engineering." Yet the ways they made sense of these experiences varied widely. Below, we frame these findings using the structure of recognized phases: **denial**, **recognition**, **passive awareness**, **strategic adaptation**, and **advocacy**. This categorization aligns with broader theories of evolving bias awareness in professional settings (Eagly & Heilman, 2016; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

We also incorporate direct reflections from participants. These quotes illustrate how meritocratic ideology both surfaces and obscures the deeper systemic nature of inequality. For example, one participant said:

"Honestly, I just think if I keep my head down and put in the hours, I'll be fine. It's not about men vs. women – it's about who can code best."

Yet another participant reflected on more blatant exclusion:

"When I realized the guys were grabbing coffee without inviting me, I felt left out. But then I thought, maybe I'm just not cool enough – maybe it's me."

4.2 Denial

In the early stage of denial, many participants shared the belief that success in high-tech comes down to skills and hard work alone. They truly felt that their companies were fair and neutral. As one participant put it clearly:

"We just hire the best person for the job. I honestly didn't think we had any bias in our process."

This view reflects what Cech and Blair-Loy (2010) call the "meritocratic default" – a deep-rooted idea that the tech world rewards effort and talent, and nothing else. Many women echoed this belief when starting out. One said:

"I'm not a feminist or anything – like, if you do the work, you'll get ahead. I haven't seen real discrimination."

Such statements show how strong the belief in meritocracy is. But while it feels fair, it can actually hide the real problems. According to Eagly and Heilman (2016), this type of thinking often ignores how stereotypes and gender roles influence who gets promoted or supported. It also leads some women to think setbacks are their own fault. Rudman and Fairchild (2004) explain that when people believe they are in a neutral environment, it's emotionally hard to accept that bias might still exist. So instead of questioning the system, they blame themselves - "Maybe I didn't fit in" or "Maybe I wasn't good enough."

Denial doesn't only happen at the individual level – it's also very common in organizations. Several participants said their companies proudly claimed to be fair. One manager explained:

"We treat everyone the same here. If you do good work, you advance. It's as simple as that."

This belief sounds good, but research shows it can backfire. In a study reviewed by Heilman (2016) and supported by Joshi et al. (2015), companies that strongly promote themselves as "merit-based" sometimes show even more bias – because they stop looking for problems. One participant shared this insight after reviewing his team's hiring trends:

"I used to think it was just because we hired the most qualified people. I didn't consider that our notion of 'qualified' might be skewed."

This shows a turning point – when someone begins to see that even the way we define talent might be biased.

At this stage, people often feel proud of being "objective" and may avoid talking about gender or diversity at all. This is similar to what psychologists call the denial phase in models of change (like the Kübler-Ross model) or the defense stage in intercultural bias training (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). People don't necessarily deny bias because they are against equality. Often, they just haven't seen it yet – or haven't had a personal experience that forced them to think differently.

This mindset was captured by one woman who said:

"In my early years, it wasn't even legitimate to discuss gender issues – especially in highly technical environments."

In short, denial is often the first step in the journey. People believe in meritocracy and fairness. But this belief, while comforting, can hide real barriers that women face. As Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) note, "unseen barriers" exist, and they only start to become visible after people are ready to question their assumptions. The next step – recognition – begins when someone realizes that the system might not be as fair as it seems.

4.3 Recognition

In the **recognition phase**, participants begin to question the fairness they once believed in. They start seeing patterns that can no longer be explained as "just coincidence" or "bad luck." These realizations often come slowly – but powerfully. One engineer recalled:

"I always assumed our hiring was fair, until I noticed that none of the final candidates for key roles looked like me [a woman]. That's when it hit me that something wasn't adding up."

This shift from personal explanation to **systemic awareness** marks a key moment in a person's journey. As **Cech and Blair-Loy (2010)** argue, recognizing bias often begins when individuals realize their outcomes don't match their input, even when they've done "everything right." For many participants, a feeling of *betrayal* followed:

"I felt a bit betrayed when I realized the company wasn't the meritocracy, I thought it was."

This emotional response – confusion, guilt, frustration – is part of what scholars call a **cognitive awakening** (**Devine et al., 2012; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004**). Suddenly, beliefs about fairness feel shaky, and people begin to reflect more critically. As one team lead explained:

"It suddenly dawned on me that all our team leads were men. It wasn't a coincidence – we were promoting a certain kind of person over and over."

This reflects a **cultural barrier**: norms and behaviors that look neutral but reproduce the same outcomes. According to **Eagly and Heilman (2016)**, biased structures persist because they are embedded in "what leadership looks like," which is often coded in masculine terms – decisiveness, assertiveness, independence. The recognition of this pattern often shifts the mindset from *personal* to *structural*.

For some, data helped them see the problem clearly. One HR professional told us:

"I thought we paid people based on performance, but the numbers showed a clear gap. I couldn't ignore that."

This echoes findings by **Joshi et al. (2015)** that when organizations look closely at **pay equity or promotion statistics**, it often reveals hidden patterns of disadvantage. **Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013)** also note that structural inequality

becomes visible only when people stop looking for "bad apples" and start seeing system-wide dynamics.

Another participant described a pivotal moment:

"I realized Tom was put on the big AI project even though we have the same rating. My manager told me I'm 'too detail-oriented' for it. That's when I started thinking – this might not be about skill."

Experiences like this challenge the "just work hard" narrative and reveal subtle forms of exclusion. **Fine (2005)** explains that even small moments – like being passed over or receiving vague feedback – can quietly erode belief in meritocracy. These **micro-inequities**, repeated over time, push people to recognize that the system may not be fair after all.

Recognition also came from comparison. Some participants realized how male colleagues with similar or lower qualifications advanced faster or were chosen for high-visibility projects. One said:

"I started noticing a pattern. Men were getting promoted based on potential, but women like me had to prove ourselves again and again."

This links to the **performance vs. potential bias** described by **Brescoll (2016)** – where women must show they are already capable, while men are judged by their future promise.

Though recognition can feel discouraging, it is also empowering. Participants began asking questions, challenging norms, and gathering informal evidence. They weren't yet solving the problem – but they had **named it**. As one put it:

"At least now we knew bias was real here – but knowing is different from doing."

Still, a few participants started **early solutions** – often small but important. An HR leader shared:

"When the data showed a bias in promotions, that's when we started talking about what we could do differently – like maybe formalizing the promotion criteria."

This shows the **beginning of a shift** from awareness to action, though most participants at this stage were still processing what they'd discovered. Recognition, in this sense, is like the "spark" that sets change in motion.

4.4 Passive Awareness

The passive awareness phase is marked by a growing understanding that bias exists – yet hesitation remains about how, when, or whether to act. In this phase, the internal shift has begun: people no longer deny inequality, but they also do not yet feel empowered or safe to challenge it.

One software engineer captured this feeling perfectly:

"We'd all kind of admitted by then that there was a bias in how teams were formed. But beyond murmuring in agreement, no one really did anything about it."

This reflects a common dynamic – awareness without agency. As Joshi et al. (2015) explain, the high-tech environment often discourages open critique, especially when company culture prizes "harmony" or when hierarchies are rigid. A junior developer explained:

"I was just a junior dev at the time, so even though I saw the bias, I didn't think it was my place to say anything."

This is a classic individual barrier, shaped by status, fear of backlash, or lack of confidence. The cultural barrier appears when silence is the norm – where knowing something is wrong doesn't mean you can speak about it. This "freeze effect" has been documented by Rudman and Fairchild (2004) as part of the backlash dynamic: challenging stereotypes can result in social penalties, which leads many to self-censor.

Participants described the atmosphere as "awkward" and "quiet." One woman recounted:

"You notice the off-color jokes or who gets interrupted in meetings. It bothers you, you know it's bias, but you just exchange glances with others and move on."

This dynamic is also reinforced at the organizational level. One participant shared how her company responded after realizing their diversity data was weak:

"We had a big meeting where leadership acknowledged our diversity numbers were low and promised to do better… but after that, there wasn't much follow-through. People went back to business as usual."

Here, passive awareness is not just personal – it's system-wide inertia. Organizations might make public statements or host workshops, but without continuous effort, change stalls. Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) refer to this as "cosmetic compliance" – where companies engage in surface-level DEI actions without tackling root issues.

For some, this phase brought emotional frustration. One participant described feeling stuck:

"After a while, just knowing about the bias but not seeing any changes started to really frustrate me. I kept thinking, someone should do something."

This tension can serve as a bridge to the next phase – Strategic Adaptation – but not always. Without support, this in-between state can lead to burnout or withdrawal. Another participant gave an example of well-intentioned paralysis:

"One guy basically stopped giving feedback to female teammates because he was afraid of accidentally saying something biased. It was like he didn't know how to act now that he knew."

This reflects a known outcome in research on bias-awareness training: when awareness is raised without tools for action, the result can be fear or

avoidance (Devine et al., 2012). Awareness alone is not enough – it must be paired with confidence and strategies to make a difference.

In the Passive Awareness phase, discussions were still dominated by mentions of individual (green), cultural (orange), and organizational (blue) barriers, with only minimal references to interventions (red). This visually confirms that although bias is recognized, actions are still rare at this point in the journey.

What makes passive awareness dangerous is that it can become a new normal. As Seron et al. (2018) warn, people who understand bias but benefit from the system (especially men or senior leaders) often "stay on the sidelines," preserving the inequity they've come to recognize.

In summary, passive awareness is a crucial turning point. It reflects maturity of thought – but also a fragile state. Without encouragement or role models, many people stay stuck here. However, as frustration builds or new allies appear, they may step forward into more deliberate adaptation and action, which we explore next.

4.5 Strategic Adaptation

Strategic adaptation marks a turning point – where individuals move beyond awareness into action. Unlike earlier phases, which were dominated by hesitation or reflection, this stage is characterized by intentional changes, whether at the personal, team, or organizational level. For many participants, adaptation began with small but deliberate shifts in how they navigated bias. One female engineer shared, "I realized my ideas were getting talked over in meetings. After recognizing that bias, I adapted – I started explicitly asking to finish my point, and I made sure to support other women's ideas too." These micro-level strategies reflect an emerging sense of agency: even when systems couldn't be immediately changed, participants found ways to work around or challenge them.

Some participants leveraged data as a tool to initiate conversations and justify action. A product lead explained, "I began tracking the speaking time in our team meetings. When I showed my manager that certain people – mostly men – dominated the discussions, it spurred us to rotate facilitation more." Others sought allies to create informal peer support networks that could reinforce fairer practices, especially around visibility and recognition. These examples mirror what Hewlett (2019) emphasizes in her work: that sponsorship and visibility are key drivers for change – and often more powerful than mentorship alone.

On an organizational level, strategic adaptation involved redesigning processes. One startup manager described how their team restructured hiring interviews: "After realizing that 'culture fit' was code for hiring people like ourselves, we switched to structured interviews with consistent questions and more diverse interviewers." This shift – from gut instinct to measurable criteria –

echoes recommendations in the literature, where subjectivity in hiring is shown to disadvantage underrepresented candidates (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010; Eagly & Heilman, 2016). Other participants mentioned initiating resume-blind screening, DEI working groups, and internal workshops tailored to their team's needs. As one participant put it, "We knew mandatory training wasn't working. So, we built our own internal bias 'hacks' – from how we nominate people for promotions to how we allocate key projects."

Importantly, strategic adaptation was rarely perfect or linear. Some interventions failed to gain traction, such as anonymous feedback tools or checklists that were inconsistently used. One team lead reflected, "We tried a bias suggestion box. No one used it. I think people didn't trust it would lead to change. It made me realize we needed to go beyond symbolic gestures." Still, even missteps served as learning points and laid groundwork for more robust interventions later. These attempts illustrate what behavioral change models call the action phase – where new behaviors are tested, refined, and sometimes scaled (Devine et al., 2012).

Ultimately, strategic adaptation bridged the gap between recognition and systemic change. While many participants were still operating within existing structures, their willingness to test new strategies marked a shift in mindset – from navigating around bias to deliberately reshaping the environment. These adaptations reflected resilience, creativity, and a growing appetite for deeper transformation. One participant captured this evolution by saying, "At first, I just wanted to survive. But once I saw some things start to work, I realized we could actually change the system. And that changed me."

4.6 Advocacy

Advocacy represents the most advanced phase of bias awareness – where individuals no longer adapt solely for survival but begin actively challenging the very structures that reproduce inequality. This stage involves intentional, visible actions to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), both individually and organizationally. Unlike earlier phases, advocacy is marked by a systemic lens, as participants push not only for fairness in their own careers but for institutional transformation. As one senior engineer shared:

"I reached a point were staying silent felt like complicity. Now, when I see something unfair, I speak up – not just for me, but for anyone who might be affected."

Advocacy in the Digital Age

The digital transformation of the workplace plays a central role in facilitating advocacy. Online platforms, Slack groups, LinkedIn posts, and employee resource forums have become critical tools for building coalitions and calling out bias. As one participant explained:

"I joined a private Slack channel for women in tech across our global offices. We started sharing promotion criteria, salary bands, and even examples of biased feedback. It gave us collective power."

These virtual networks, often informal and self-organized, serve as counter-publics to the male-dominated informal networks that historically shaped access to leadership (Joshi et al., 2015; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010). They offer emotional support, share actionable advice, and even organize cross-site campaigns for more equitable practices. Another participant, a mid-level manager, used LinkedIn as a platform for advocacy:

"When I posted about our pay equity initiative on LinkedIn, I got messages from engineers at other companies asking how we did it. That kind of openness wouldn't have happened ten years ago."

In the digital age, social media visibility also changes the landscape of power. High-reach posts about diversity often gain traction, and internal change can be catalyzed by public pressure. One interviewee recounted:

"When our diversity stats were published on Glassdoor, it embarrassed leadership. Suddenly, they were willing to talk."

Individual Advocacy: From Action to Influence

Individual advocates frequently described their role as more than personal advancement – they sought to remove barriers for others. A senior leader reflected:

"After years of seeing women sidelined, I decided to restructure the entire performance review system. Now we have a mandatory calibration session where managers must justify ratings with evidence."

Such examples illustrate the shift from adaptation (changing one's own behavior) to activism (changing the system). These behaviors resemble what Meyerson and Scully (1995) call "tempered radicals" – professionals who work within mainstream organizations while simultaneously advocating for inclusion.

Men also played a role. A male software director shared:

"I stopped letting things slide. When a woman was interrupted, I'd say, 'Let's hear her finish.' It's a small act, but it changes the room."

This aligns with Hewlett's (2019) call for sponsorship and allyship, particularly from those in power, to break gendered silos in advancement.

Organizational Advocacy: Embedding Equity

Several participants described how advocacy turned into policy reform. These ranged from structured mentorship programs to pay equity audits, standardized job descriptions, and diverse hiring panels. One HR executive recalled:

"We implemented a rule – no interview shortlist can be all-male. It's not perfect, but it forces us to look harder for overlooked talent."

Such practices reflect research on effective interventions. Kalev et al. (2006) emphasize that voluntary, internal accountability mechanisms (like task forces or peer-led audits) are more successful than top-down mandates.

Likewise, Seron et al. (2018) warn that superficial DEI rhetoric, without structural support, often triggers backlash or burnout.

Participants in the advocacy phase also understood the backlash dynamic – that women who advocate may be framed as "difficult" or "too political" (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Eagly & Heilman, 2016). One participant shared:

"I was told I'm becoming too 'passionate' about diversity. But I kept going because I saw the difference it made."

Their courage reflects a growing collective awareness that silence sustains the status quo. Advocacy is thus not just about amplifying voices but normalizing inclusion in everyday decisions – from product design to leadership evaluations. This normalization is increasingly digitally mediated, as algorithmic fairness, platform ethics, and AI inclusivity become part of leadership agendas (Cech, 2021; Brescoll, 2016).

Cultural Shift and the Long View

The most striking evidence of advocacy's success is the cultural shift described by participants. One manager shared:

"I remember when talking about gender bias was taboo. Now, even junior staff bring it up in meetings. It's like we finally gave people permission."

Such shifts point to a tipping point, where advocacy has reached critical mass (Kanter, 2018). Diversity becomes not just a side topic but part of the company's DNA. Still, as multiple participants noted, advocacy is never "done." One advocate cautioned:

"You don't beat bias once and for all. You stay vigilant. You keep pushing."

This sentiment reflects the maintenance stage in models of organizational change – where sustainability becomes the new goal (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The digital age both enables and demands this: rapid information flow, increased transparency, and social accountability mean that companies – and leaders – can no longer hide behind vague commitments.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored how women in high-tech environments become aware of, interpret, and respond to gender bias – tracing a five-phase trajectory from **Denial** to **Advocacy**. Drawing from rich qualitative content, we found that participants navigated a deeply ingrained **meritocratic culture** that initially concealed inequalities behind a veneer of objectivity and fairness. As Cech and Blair-Loy (2010) explain, this **"meritocratic default"** not only frames individual effort as the sole pathway to success but also silences systemic critique. Many participants began their careers believing that "if you do the work, you'll get ahead," only to gradually recognize exclusion from projects, promotions, and informal networks that dictated advancement.

Each stage in the journey – **Denial, Recognition, Passive Awareness, Strategic Adaptation, and Advocacy** – reflected a meaningful shift in

participants' understanding of gendered dynamics. In the early phases, bias was minimized or internalized as personal inadequacy (Eagly & Heilman, 2016). Recognition often emerged after repeated micro-inequities or dissonant experiences that could no longer be dismissed. In Passive Awareness, a sense of helplessness often prevailed: participants knew bias existed but lacked tools or psychological safety to intervene. Strategic Adaptation marked a turning point, where participants began to apply data, networks, and practical adjustments to push back against unfair practices – aligning with Brescoll's (2016) insight that perception management and visibility can mitigate biased evaluations.

The final phase – **Advocacy** – was especially illuminating. It demonstrated how some participants transformed their understanding into **systemic action**, implementing structural interventions such as bias audits, interview reforms, and DEI task forces. These efforts echo the work of Kalev et al. (2006) on effective diversity practices, and Ibarra et al. (2013) on the need for inclusive leadership design. Importantly, advocacy was often **digitally mediated**. From Slack collectives to LinkedIn campaigns, the **digital transformation of the workplace** empowered individuals to amplify marginalized voices, crowdsource strategies, and hold leadership accountable in new and visible ways. As one participant noted:

"The real shift happened when we started comparing notes – on Slack, in side chats, on Google Docs. Suddenly, we weren't isolated anymore."

The study also confirmed a recurring barrier: the **ideological power of meritocracy**. Even as awareness grew, many participants felt pressure to avoid being labeled "difficult" or "overly political" – a reflection of the **backlash** dynamic described by Rudman and Fairchild (2004). In environments where gender bias is taboo to discuss, advocacy often requires strategic framing, strong allies, or organizational rank. Indeed, those who reached the advocacy stage often had to move beyond individual survival to embrace collective responsibility.

Our findings suggest that **bias awareness is not linear**, nor guaranteed. Many participants cycled between recognition and passivity, or between adaptation and frustration, depending on organizational culture, leadership support, and peer dynamics. Still, the trajectory we mapped reveals a **progressive shift** – from silence to visibility, from isolation to coalition, and from compliance to cultural transformation.

Transforming high-tech cultures requires more than simply increasing representation or issuing DEI statements. It demands disrupting the **illusion of neutrality** and reimagining leadership beyond the narrow, masculine-coded archetypes that still dominate the field (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2011). It requires leveraging digital tools not only for technical innovation but for **social change**, enabling transparency, shared learning, and collective voice.

Ultimately, this study underscores that change is possible – but only when awareness becomes action. Advocacy is not the end of the journey; it is the

beginning of a **new organizational consciousness**, one that challenges the status quo and strives for a workplace where inclusion is not an initiative, but a norm.

By grounding gender inclusion efforts in lived experiences and structural critique, we move closer to a **post-meritocratic future** – one that recognizes excellence not as the absence of difference, but as its full expression.

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