

**‘Putting Gender on the Table’: Understanding Reactions to Women Who Discuss  
Gender Inequality**

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**Abstract (149 words)**

Even though gender inequality remains an important challenge across societies, many believe it to be long gone (Marken, 2016). Thus, it is essential to publicly address issues related to gender inequality as a first step towards advancing change in this domain. However, those who address gender inequality may encounter personal costs. In the current research, we examined reactions to women who 'put gender on the table'. In Study 1 (N = 202), men who were exposed to a woman who raised the issue of gender inequality (vs. age inequality or a neutral topic), had more negative attitudes towards both her and towards gender equality. In Study 2, (N = 233), women high on feminist identification were more positive toward a woman who discussed gender inequality (vs. other topics), whereas women low on feminist identification were more negative toward both her and the issue. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

*Keywords:* addressing gender inequality, feminist identification, gender

*“Friends and colleagues—both male and female—warned me that making this speech would harm my career by instantly typecasting me as a female COO and not a real business executive.”* (Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, on her speech on gender inequality for TEDWomen 2010)

Gender inequality remains a significant challenge for many societies. While much progress had been made in the last century, there are still major gaps between men and women in various life domains. For example, women are underrepresented in leadership positions (J. Warner, 2015), earn less money than men (Catalyst, 2016), and hold fewer seats in parliaments (The World Bank, 2013). While these inequalities are difficult to dispute, many believe that gender inequality is 'a thing of the past', as reflected in a recent survey demonstrating that over 50% of participants believed that women have equal job opportunities to those of men (Marken, 2016). This finding suggests that there is still a need to raise the public's awareness to existing gender inequalities, which is the first step towards advancing change in the status quo (Saguy, Dovidio & Pratto, 2008; Saguy & Kteily, 2014). The goal of the current research is to understand how those who choose to raise issues related to gender inequality are perceived. More specifically, we aim to understand how women who 'put gender on the table' are perceived by considering characteristics of those exposed to the message (their gender and their identification as feminists) as well as whether or not the speaker is categorized as feminist. Such an understanding is critical for informing adaptive ways

to address gender inequality and thus for paving the way towards social change in this domain.

Past research has focused mainly on reactions to minority group members who confront discrimination or racist/sexist remarks. This work suggests that when members of minority groups are seen as sensitive to prejudice and discrimination they incur personal costs, even when there is proven and visible inequity. For example, participants presented with a minority group member (i.e., African-American) who attributed a poor score in a career-related test to discrimination rather than his own performance, rated him as 'a complainer' and were overall more negative toward him (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Importantly, these negative perceptions were unaffected by the degree of actual prejudice the target faced. Similar effects were found even when participants were directly exposed to the racist attitudes affecting a target minority group member's outcomes (Kaiser & Miller, 2003). Further, in a study that included interaction between participants and a confederate (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006), participants who were confronted by the confederate about their *own bias* evaluated their interaction partner (i.e., the confronter) more negatively (compared to when their partner did not confront them).

This phenomenon has also been found in the context of gender bias. Here, women who confronted sexist remarks were perceived as complainers and were rated more negatively overall than women who did not confront such remarks (Shelton & Stewart, 2004, Study 2). Women confronting sexism were also perceived as

overreacting (compared to men who confronted a sexist remark directed toward women; Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Such negative evaluations are also in evidence when the person confronting bias was a bystander rather than the target of discrimination, particularly when the confronter was a woman (Eliezer & Major, 2012). Thus, it appears that confronting discrimination has negative personal costs for members of minority groups.

In the present research, we extend this body of work and focus on the costs of raising attention to gender inequality in general – we term this action ‘putting gender on the table’. Thus, instead of examining how specific targets of bias are perceived once they confront a discriminatory incident, we consider how individuals who raise attention to the issue of inequality at large, specifically gender inequality, are seen. As such, our focus can advance the understanding of the broader phenomenon of addressing inequality, which can occur in a variety of contexts (e.g., in the workplace, in the political arena) and can have broad implications for inequality and social change. Moreover, many times sexism or discrimination are not clearly seen, they are covert and inexplicit, in such situations it is not easy to identify and confront. Therefore, addressing gender inequality more broadly has important implications for our ability to promote social change. To that end, we examine how factors associated with the characteristics of both the recipient of the message (their gender and their feminist identification) and the female speaker (whether or not she is a feminist) affect the outcome of sounding a voice and speaking out on these matters.

### **Recipient Gender and feminist identification**

The recipient's gender can play a pivotal role in reactions to a woman who discusses gender inequality. In the studies described above, participants, for the most part, were members of the majority group (i.e., men or white participants; Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Kaiser & Miller, 2003). This focus on majority group members reflects the assumption that they are the critical audience for any type of action associated with raising awareness to inequality as they hold the power to enact tangible changes in the hierarchical structure. This assumption is also reflected in various public campaigns calling men to join women in their fight for gender equality (e.g., the UN HeForShe campaign, Male Champions of Change, or 'Lean In Together'<sup>1</sup>). In the current context, this would mean that men would be the critical audience for women who discuss gender inequality. We therefore began our investigation by focusing on reactions of men to a woman who addresses gender inequality (Study 1) and then moved to investigate the reactions of women (Study 2).

As with many other intergroup dynamics, men tend to be less committed to gender equality than women (Stewart, 2017) and to be less aware of gender inequality overall (Pew Center, 2013). Moreover, men also tend to perceive disproportionate low representation of women in fields such as STEM and leadership as resulting from women's personal characteristics and not as resulting from discrimination (Cundiff &

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<sup>1</sup>These campaigns can be found at: HeForShe - <http://www.heforshe.org/en>; Male Champions of Change - <http://malechampionsofchange.com>; 'Lean In Together' - <https://leanin.org/together>.

Viscio, 2016). Research on confrontation of sexism revealed that men liked a woman less when she confronted (vs. did not confront) sexism, whereas women liked a woman who confronted (vs. did not confront) a sexist remark (Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell, & Moran, 2001). One underlying reason for such findings is the general threat to the gender status quo that such confrontations may raise. Research had shown that members of high power groups wish to avoid the discussion of power relations (Kteily, Saguy, Sidanius, & Taylor, 2013; Saguy & Kteily, 2014; Saguy et al., 2008), both relative to low power group members, and also relative to other topics. This avoidance was found to stem from their relatively low motivation to change the status quo (Saguy et al., 2008) and from the sense of threat that such discussions raise (Kteily et al., 2013). Following this logic, we would expect men to react negatively to a woman who explicitly raises attention to gender inequality (relative to other issues).

Conversely, disadvantaged group members are motivated to change the status quo and are therefore more interested in discussing power relations (Kteily et al., 2013; Saguy & Kteily, 2014; Saguy et al., 2008). This is particularly true for highly identified group members (Saguy et al., 2008; Study 2). For example, one study showed that in the Israeli context, the more individuals identified as Mizrahi Jews (Jews originating from the East and from North Africa; a low power group in Israel), the more they wanted to talk about the power relations with Ashkenazi Jews (originating from Europe; a high power group in Israel). The association between identification and the desire to address power demonstrates the identity-enhancing function that talking about power might

have for low power groups (Saguy et al., 2008, Study 2). Similarly, in the context of gender identification, women who identified strongly with their identity as women perceived the glass cliff phenomenon (i.e., the increased chances for women, compared to men, to be appointed to leadership roles during times of organizational crisis) as illegitimate and pervasive compared to women low on gender identification (Iyer & Ryan, 2009). Men showed the opposite pattern with highly identified men perceiving the glass cliff as more legitimate. Gender identification was also found to be associated with women's and men's reactions to women who confront sexist remarks. Whereas highly identified women did not differ in their reactions to women who confronted (vs. did not confront) sexism; women low on gender identification were less positive toward such a confronter (Kaiser, Hagiwara, Malahy, & Wilkins, 2009).

Taken together, the work discussed above suggests that gender identification would potentially impact the way both women, and men, react to a woman addressing gender inequality. This should be particularly true for a politicized form of gender identification, which is often reflected in one's degree of feminist identification (Becker & Wagner, 2009; van Breen, Spears, Kuppens, & de Lemus, 2017). Indeed, while strongly identifying as a "woman" can have multiple meanings (e.g., seeing oneself as a traditional woman, progressive woman, etc.; Becker & Wagner, 2009; van Breen et al., 2017; Roy, Weibust, & Miller, 2007), identifying as a feminist implies adherence to more progressive aspects of gender identity including awareness and commitment to change in the gender hierarchy (van Breen et al., 2017; Roy et al., 2007). While the



majority of the work on feminist identification has been conducted only among women, some work suggests that feminist identification is also relevant for men's attitudes toward gender inequality (Kelly & Gauchat, 2016; Konrad & Hartman, 2001; McCabe, 2005). For example, results from a large national survey that showed both women's and men's attitudes regarding gender and social issues were related to their feminist identification (MaCabe, 2005). Thus, given that in the current work we are dealing with a politicized action, namely, addressing inequality, feminist identification can be a more potent predictor of how women, and men, respond to such messages. We expect individuals high on feminist identification to react more positively to a woman discussing gender inequality, both among men and among women.

### **Speaker's Categorization as a Feminist**

We also examined how categorization of the speaker as a feminist would affect reactions toward her. Prior work demonstrates that minority group members' levels of identification with the group affect the way they are perceived by high power group members (e.g., Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). Specifically, majority group members tend to have more negative attitudes toward highly identified minority group members (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009), demonstrate less friendly behaviors when interacting with them (Kaiser, Drury, Malahy, & King, 2011), and even use different language when describing future interaction with them (Kaiser, Drury & Malahy, 2009; described in Kaiser & Wilkins, 2010). In line with these findings, it is possible that merely identifying as a feminist, rather than 'putting gender on the table', would lead to

negative reactions. To ensure that the initiation of discussion on gender inequality independently leads to personal costs, beyond the known effects of high identification among minority group members (e.g., Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009; Roy et al., 2009), we manipulated whether or not the speaker was categorized as a feminist. We expected that discussing gender inequality would affect reactions toward the speaker over and beyond the effect of her feminist categorization.

Thus, in the current research we examined how a woman who addresses gender inequality is perceived by men and women, considering their degree of feminist identification, and also the extent to which the speaker is categorized as a feminist. We focused on two types of outcomes— interpersonal ratings of the speaker, and participants' attitudes toward gender equality. We expected that participant's gender and their level of feminist identification would affect the ways they react to a woman who raises the topic of gender inequality compared to other issues. Specifically, we expected men, and particularly those low on feminist identification, to react more negatively to a woman who 'puts gender on the table', compared to a woman who discusses other issues, either related to other types of inequality (i.e., age inequality) or more neutral in nature. We further explored whether reactions to the speaker would vary as a function of whether or not she was categorized as a feminist. Additionally, we hypothesized that women would react more positively toward a woman who 'puts gender on the table' (vs. other issues) and that this would be particularly true for women

high on feminist identification. Finally, we also explored whether women's reactions would be affected by whether or not the speaker was categorized as a feminist.

### **Overview of Studies**

To test these hypotheses, we conducted two studies, the first included only men as participants and the second included only women as participants. In both studies, participants were presented with a woman who discussed either gender-inequality, age-inequality (ageism) or book reading habits. The age-inequality control condition was critical to include because it allowed us to isolate the effects of "gender-talk" from related factors such as general egalitarianism, sensitivity to justice, and morality - which may all be inferred from both gender-talk and age-talk.

### **Study 1**

Our goal in Study 1 was to examine the reactions of men to a woman discussing gender inequality. As we stated before, we devised two control conditions. One was an 'empty' control in which the same woman talked about reading habits and books, and the second was an 'inequality' control in which the woman had addressed age-inequality in a similar passion and concern as she did when relating to gender-inequality. Thus, the design involved three levels of the key independent variable. In addition, we measured participants' feminist identification and manipulated whether or not the speaker was categorized as feminist – both of which served as additional independent variables. Our outcomes measures included participants' reactions to the speaker, to the issues she raised, and their willingness to engage in a gender equality promoting behavior.

## Method

**Participants.** Participants were 202 men (age ranging from 18 to 64,  $M= 32.75$ ,  $SD=9.62$ ), recruited through Amazon's mTurk. All received \$1 for participation. A-priori power analysis showed that given a multiple regression model with the message type, speaker's categorization as a feminist and participant's feminist identification as predictors, this sample can detect small effect sizes ( $R^2\text{change} \approx 0.06$ ) with a power of  $1 - \beta = 0.85$  when  $\alpha = 0.05$  (G\*Power, see Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007).

**Procedure.** The survey opened with a brief introduction, explaining that the study examined first impressions and attitudes towards unfamiliar others. Participants first read a short bio of Laura Mitchel, a 51-years old woman. Following Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (2009), Laura was either described as a feminist (a member of "the National Organization for Women (NOW) – a feminist women's organization"), or not described as a feminist (a member in a jogging group).

Participants were then told that Laura called a local radio show, in which people go on the air and talk about issues and topics that they see as interesting and important. Following this introduction, they listened to Laura's alleged call to the show, which varied in the three conditions (consisting of the message manipulation): gender-inequality, age-inequality, or the neutral control (book reading habits). A pre-test established that the gender-inequality message was indeed perceived as reflecting an opinion that is concerned with inequality between men and women (for the full text, and for details of the pretest see supplementary material). In the gender-inequality condition,

we included statements such as “Gender inequality is a serious issue and I think it’s time we put it on the table... Men still control resources; Women are still paid less than men...”. In the age-inequality condition these statements were adapted to reflect age inequality, for example: “Age discrimination is a serious issue and I think it’s time we put it on the table... Young people control resources; Unemployment rate is still larger among older people compared to young people...”. Finally, in the control condition, we included statements regarding Laura’s book reading habits and the importance of reading: “Books... are very important to me. I think that our reading habits have really changed in recent years, mine too. A few years ago, I got a kindle and am reading a lot of books...”. After listening to the audio clips, participants completed the dependent measures and provided demographic information.

**Measures.** Our measures included two interpersonal outcomes and two outcomes reflecting participants’ attitudes toward the issues discussed by the speaker, as well as their willingness to engage in a gender equality promoting behavior. All items were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

***Favorability ratings.*** Three items measured participants’ evaluation of the speaker as positive and pleasant (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009): “Laura seems to have a very good personality”, “Laura seems like she would be easy to get along with”, and “Laura seems to be a considerate person” ( $\alpha=.89$ ).

***Preference for social distance.*** Four items measured participants’ desire to befriend the speaker and be close to her (adapted from: R.H. Warner & Kiddoo, 2014):

“I would want Laura as a close friend”, “I would enjoy working on a group project with Laura”, “I feel close to Laura”, and “I would want to meet Laura in person” ( $\alpha=.90$ ).

***Attributions of importance of the issue raised.*** Five items measured participants’ perception of the importance of the issue discussed in the radio interview they have listened to: “I think that Laura discussed important issues”, “I think that Laura raised significant issues”, “I think that Laura raised issues that are very central in our society”, “I tend to agree with the issues raised by Laura”, and “I think that for the most part Laura was talking about outdated issues” (R); ( $\alpha=.88$ ).

***Willingness to send a letter concerning gender inequality.*** One item was used to measure participants’ attitudes and commitment toward gender inequality: “Many different actions can be taken to enhance gender equality in our society, to what extent would you be willing to send a letter objecting gender inequality to the media, or to your Senator” (adapted from Roper Studies, presented in Brady, 1999). We opted to use this measure of collective action for two reasons. First, writing a letter is a relatively low-cost behavior, which does not require much from the individual. As participants have only listened to a short message, it seemed appropriate to use low cost rather than more costly behaviors (e.g., organizing a demonstration). Second, writing a letter is similar to the manipulation, which included a woman calling a radio show to express her opinion, making it a relevant measure of collective action in the current context.

***Participant’s feminist identification.*** We used two items (adapted from Anisman-Razin & Saguy, 2016) to assess participants’ identification with feminism: “I

identify with feminists” and “Being a feminist is a large part of my identity” ( $r=.78$ ).

We measured feminist identification after participants completed all other measures to avoid revealing the goal of the study.

## **Results**

**Preliminary analysis.** Initial analysis indicated that participants’ feminist identification was not impacted by the manipulation of message ( $F(1,196)=.59, p=.56$ ), the speaker’s categorization as a feminist ( $F(1,196)=.22, p=.64$ ), or their interaction ( $F(1,196)=1.14, p=.32$ ). Moreover, the mean feminist identification score in the sample was 2.63 ( $SD=1.71$ ), reflecting a sample somewhat low on feminist identification.

We conducted an initial regression analysis on all dependent variables considering message (gender-inequality/age-inequality/control), the speaker’s categorization as a feminist, and participants’ feminist identification as independent variables. These analyses revealed that there were no main effects, nor interactions involving whether or not the speaker was feminist on any of the dependent variables (the results of the regression analyses can be found in the supplementary material). For the sake of simplicity, we include in the paper the follow-up analyses examining only the significant effects found in the regression analysis, none of which involving the speaker’s categorization as a feminist. We nevertheless controlled for its potential influence across all analyses. In addition, we controlled for participant’s age because the age-inequality message may be of particular relevance for older adults.

**Analyses Strategy.** To compare the gender-inequality condition with the age-inequality and control conditions, we employed Hayes' PROCESS (2016) bootstrapping macro for multicategorical independent variable, by using indicator coding (model 1, using 5000 bootstraps). This created two dummy variables for type of message that reflect the contrasts of interest (gender-inequality vs. age-inequality and gender-inequality vs. control). The message discussing gender inequality was used as a reference group (coded as zero in both contrasts), thus in each dummy variable the gender-inequality condition was compared to the condition coded as "1". Specifically, D1 was coded such that gender-inequality was compared to age-inequality (1 = age-inequality and 0 = gender-inequality and control) and D2 was coded such that gender-inequality was compared to control (1 = control and 0 = gender-inequality and age-inequality). These two dummy variables, and their interactions with participant's feminist identification (the moderator), were included in the model, allowing the comparison of the gender-inequality condition with both the age-inequality and control conditions in the same model<sup>2</sup>. Across analyses we controlled for participants' age and the speaker's categorization as a feminist.

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<sup>2</sup>To examine the difference between the ageism and control condition, we created another independent variable in which ageism was used as the reference group, thus in each dummy variable the age-inequality condition was compared to the condition coded as "1". Specifically, D1 was coded such that age-inequality was compared to gender-inequality (1 = gender-inequality and 0 = age-inequality and control) and D2 was coded such that age-inequality was compared to control (1 = control and 0 = age-inequality and gender-inequality).



**Favorability ratings.** The analysis yielded a main effect for participants' feminist identification ( $b=.28$ ,  $SE=.08$ ,  $t=3.40$ ,  $p=.001$ , CI 95% [.12, .44]), indicating that participants one standard deviation above the mean (hereafter referred to as high on feminist identification) rated the speaker more favorably (regardless of condition) than did those who were one standard deviation below the mean (hereafter referred to as low on feminist identification). A significant main effect was also found for message, for both D1 (gender-inequality vs. age-inequality;  $b=.53$ ,  $SE=.20$ ,  $t=2.62$ ,  $p=.01$ , CI 95% [.13, .93]) and D2 (gender-inequality vs. control;  $b=.65$ ,  $SE=.20$ ,  $t=3.23$ ,  $p=.001$ , CI 95% [.25, 1.05]). The speaker was evaluated least favorably in the gender-inequality condition ( $M=4.85$ ) compared to both the age-inequality ( $M=5.37$ ) and control conditions ( $M=5.49$ ), which did not differ.

**Preference for social distance.** The analysis yielded a main effect for participants' feminist identification ( $b=.30$ ,  $SE=.09$ ,  $t=3.44$ ,  $p<.000$ , CI 95% [.13, .48]). Participants high (vs. low) on feminist identification expressed a greater desire to befriend the speaker (regardless of condition). The analysis also yielded a marginally significant main effect for message, for both D1 (gender-inequality vs. age-inequality;  $b=.41$ ,  $SE=.22$ ,  $t=1.88$ ,  $p=.06$ , CI 95% [-.02, .84]) and D2 (gender-inequality vs. control;  $b=.41$ ,  $SE=.22$ ,  $t=1.87$ ,  $p=.06$ , CI 95% [-.02, .84]). Participants expressed the lowest desire to befriend the speaker in the gender-inequality condition ( $M=3.89$ ) compared to both the age-inequality ( $M=4.30$ ) and control conditions ( $M=4.30$ ), which did not differ from one another.

**Attributions of importance of the issue raised.** The analysis yielded a main effect for participants' feminist identification ( $b=.17$ ,  $SE=.08$ ,  $t=1.98$ ,  $p=.05$ , CI 95% [.00, .34]), so that participants high (vs. low) on feminist identification rated the issues the speaker discussed (in the different conditions) as significantly more important. A significant main effect was found for the type of message, but only for D1 (gender-inequality vs. age-inequality;  $b=.48$ ,  $SE=.21$ ,  $t=2.26$ ,  $p=.02$ , CI 95% [.06, .89]), indicating that participants evaluated the message regarding gender-inequality ( $M=4.71$ ) as significantly less important than the message on age-inequality ( $M=5.18$ ), but as equally important as book reading ( $M=4.61$ ; which was significantly lower than the age-inequality message). In addition, participants' age had a significant effect ( $b=.03$ ,  $SE=.01$ ,  $t=2.87$ ,  $p=.004$ , CI 95% [.01, .04]), so that older participants evaluated the different messages Laura raised as more important than did younger participants.

**Willingness to send a letter concerning gender inequality.** The analysis yielded a main effect for participants' feminist identification ( $b=.57$ ,  $SE=.10$ ,  $t=5.51$ ,  $p=.000$ , CI 95% [.37, .78]), so that participants high on feminist identification were more likely to write a letter regarding gender inequality to the media or their senator, compared to participants low on feminist identification. A significant main effect was found for the type of message, but only for D1 (gender-inequality vs. age-inequality;  $b=.69$ ,  $SE=.26$ ,  $t=2.67$ ,  $p=.01$ , CI 95% [.18, 1.19]), so that participants were less likely to write a letter concerning gender inequality when they listened to a message on gender inequality ( $M=2.58$ ) compared to a message on age inequality ( $M=3.26$ ). Remarkably,

the age-inequality condition elicited somewhat more willingness to write the letter regarding gender relative to the book reading condition ( $M=2.80$ ;  $b=-.46$ ,  $SE=.26$ ,  $t=-1.77$ ,  $p=.08$ , CI 95% [-.98, .05]). Participants' age had a significant effect ( $b=-.02$ ,  $SE=.01$ ,  $t=-1.94$ ,  $p=.05$ , CI 95% [-.04, .0004]), so that older (vs. younger) participants were less likely to write a letter regarding gender inequality.

## **Discussion**

The results of Study 1 partially supported our hypotheses. Participants perceived the speaker most negatively in the gender-inequality, compared to the age-inequality and control conditions. Men high on feminist identification expressed more positive attitudes towards the speaker in general, but this was unaffected by the different messages. In addition, there were no effects for whether or not the speaker was categorized as a feminist, suggesting that reactions to a woman who puts gender on the table are negative, over and above the effect of her feminism (which in general seemed to have little impact in this study).

Across the four measures, participants expressed negative attitudes when the speaker was discussing gender inequality. Thus, our results demonstrate the social costs of 'putting gender on the table' – when a woman discusses gender inequality, men evaluated her more negatively and were less interested to befriend her. Interestingly, participants were willing to act to promote gender equality (i.e., write a letter), when they heard the speaker talk about another inequality, but not about gender inequality or a neutral topic. This effect is particularly intriguing and unexpected. It suggests that

more attention should be given to the means used to raise men's awareness and the ways to recruit them to promote gender equality. Men's attitudes toward gender inequality improved only when a woman discussed another form of inequality. This effect may be due to the more positive attitudes toward the speaker in the age-inequality condition, which may have 'spilled-over' and created more positive attitudes in general. It is possible that the speaker appeared as more communal in the age-inequality condition (as she was showing concern for others), an image which is compatible with women's stereotypical role, generating more positive attitudes. It is also possible that discussing age-inequality has increased participants' sensitivity toward inequality in general, which has positively affected their attitudes toward gender inequality. If this is the case, then addressing gender and feminist issues in an indirect manner (via raising issues related to injustice) could be more effective than when it is directly confronted. Therefore, our findings pose a difficult challenge to those who act to engage men in the conversation on gender inequality, and raise questions regarding the best way to do so.

In Study 2 we examined our predictions regarding women as participants. We expected women (particularly feminists) to react more positively to a woman who discusses gender inequality compared to other issues. As in Study 1, we also examined whether categorization of the speaker as a feminist would affect their reaction to her.

## **Study 2**

### **Method**

**Participants.** Two-hundred and thirty-three female participants (age ranging from 18 to 71,  $M=37.03$ ,  $SD=12.48$ ) were recruited through Amazon's mTurk and received \$1.10 for participation. As in Study 1, this sample size was sufficient to detect small effect sizes ( $R^2\text{change} \approx 0.06$ ) with a power of  $1 - \beta = 0.85$  when  $\alpha = 0.05$  (G\*Power, see Faul et al., 2007).

**Procedure and measures.** The procedure and measures used in Study 2 were identical to those used in Study 1. Participants read the short description of the speaker, Laura, and then listened to one of the audio clips used in Study 1, followed by items measuring the speaker's favorability ratings ( $\alpha=.87$ ), preference for social distance ( $\alpha=.90$ ), attributions of importance of issue raised by the speaker ( $\alpha=.91$ ), willingness to send a letter concerning gender inequality, and participant's feminist identification ( $r=.82$ ).

## Results

Initial analysis indicated that the mean feminist identification score in the sample was 4.02 ( $SD=1.87$ ), which was higher compared to the level of feminist identification of the male sample in Study 1. There was no effect of manipulation of message ( $F(1,227)=.61$ ,  $p=.55$ ), the categorization of the speaker as either feminist or not ( $F(1,227)=2.34$ ,  $p=.13$ ) or their interaction ( $F(1,227)=.05$ ,  $p=.95$ ) on participants' feminist identification. Again, we first run a regression analysis, considering message, the speaker's categorization as a feminist and participant's feminist identification as independent variables on each of our dependent measures (the results of the regression

analyses can be found in the supplementary material). There were no main effects, nor interactions between the speaker's feminism and the other variables, except for the 'willingness to send a letter' variable for which we did consider the speaker's feminism as an IV. In the rest of the analysis, and as in Study 1, we controlled for the speaker's feminism as well as for participant's age.

To examine our hypotheses, we followed the same analytic strategy as in Study 1 involving the multi-categorical IV feature in PROCESS, using the message regarding gender-inequality as reference group that was compared to the message on age-inequality (D1) and book reading habits (D2)<sup>3</sup>.

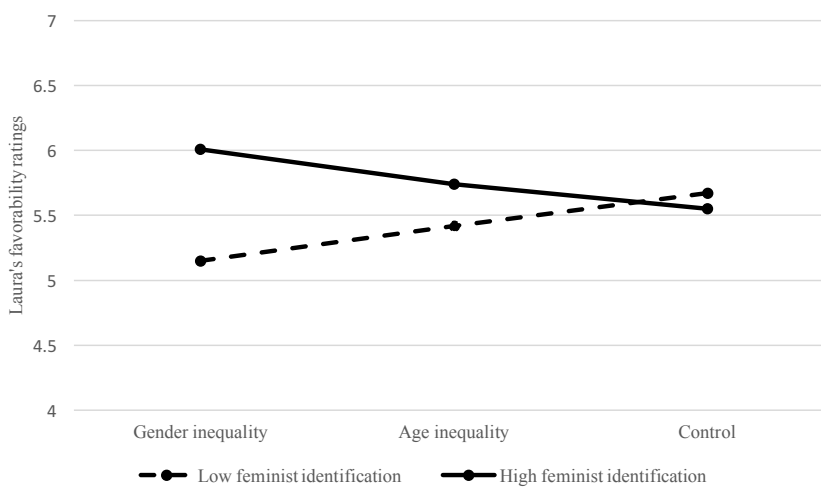
**Favorability ratings.** The analysis yielded a main effect for participant's feminist identification ( $b=.23$ ,  $SE=.07$ ,  $t=3.21$ ,  $p=.001$ , CI 95% [.09, .37]), so that participants high on feminist identification rated the speaker more favorably than did participants low on feminist identification. The analysis also yielded a significant two-way interaction between participant's feminist identification and D2 (gender vs. control;  $b=-.26$ ,  $SE=.09$ ,  $t=-2.76$ ,  $p=.01$ , CI 95% [-.44, -.07]). Analysis of the simple effects revealed that participants who are low on feminist identification evaluated the speaker less favorably in the gender-inequality ( $M=5.15$ ) compared to the control condition ( $M=5.67$ ),  $b=.52$ ,  $SE=.25$ ,  $t=2.06$ ,  $p=.04$ , CI 95% [.02, 1.01]. Participants high on

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<sup>3</sup>As well as conducting the same analysis with the age inequality condition as reference group, as described in Study 1.

feminist identification showed the opposite pattern, evaluating the speaker somewhat more favorably in the gender-inequality ( $M=6.01$ ) than in the control condition ( $M=5.55$ ),  $b=-.56$ ,  $SE=.24$ ,  $t=-1.91$ ,  $p=.06$ ,  $CI\ 95\% [-.93, .01]$ . Participants' attitudes did not differ in the gender-inequality compared to the age-inequality condition both among women high on feminist identification ( $M_{age-inequality}=5.42$ ;  $b=.27$ ,  $ns$ ), and those low on feminist identification ( $M_{age-inequality}=5.74$ ;  $b=-.27$ ,  $ns$ ). The age-inequality and control conditions did not differ as well for both women high ( $b=.25$ ,  $ns$ ) and those low on feminist identification ( $b=-.18$ ,  $ns$ ; see Figure 1).

*Figure 1.* The effects of participant's feminist identification and message on perceptions of speaker's personality

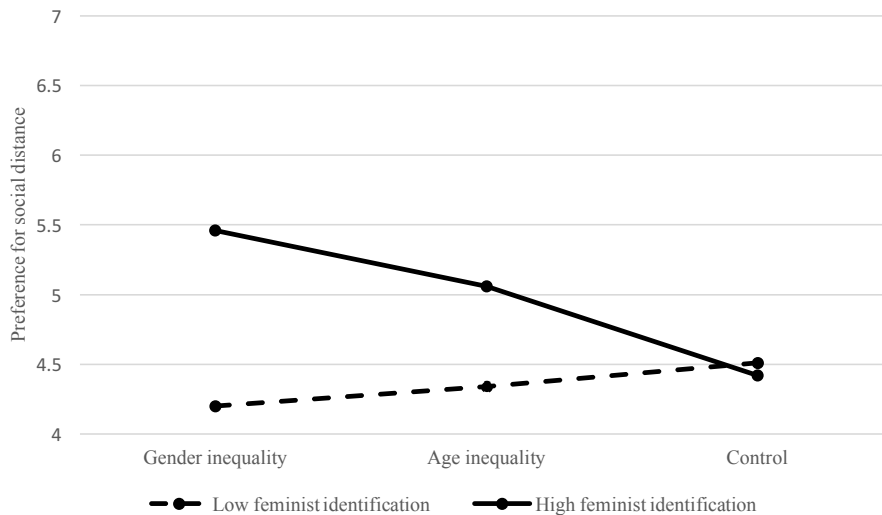


**Preference for social distance.** The analysis yielded a main effect for participant's feminist identification ( $b=.33$ ,  $SE=.09$ ,  $t=3.84$ ,  $p<.000$ ,  $CI\ 95\% [.16, .50]$ ), so that participants high (vs. low) on feminist identification expressed a greater desire to

befriend the speaker. The analysis also yielded a significant two-way interaction between participant's feminist identification and D2 (gender-inequality vs. control;  $b = -.36$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t = -3.11$ ,  $p = .002$ , CI 95% [-.58, -.13]). Analysis of the simple effects revealed that among participants low on feminist identification there were no significant differences in their desire to befriend the speaker in the gender-inequality ( $M = 4.20$ ) compared to the control condition ( $M = 4.51$ ),  $b = .30$ ,  $ns$ . However, participants high on feminist identification were more interested in befriending the speaker in the gender-inequality ( $M = 5.46$ ) versus the control condition ( $M = 4.42$ ;  $b = -1.04$ ,  $SE = .29$ ,  $t = -3.58$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI 95% [-1.61, -.47]). Participants' attitudes toward the speaker did not differ in the gender-inequality compared to the age-inequality among both women low ( $M_{\text{age-inequality}} = 4.34$ ,  $b = .13$ ,  $ns$ ); and high on feminist identification ( $M_{\text{age-inequality}} = 5.06$ ;  $b = -.41$ ,  $ns$ ). While the age-inequality and control conditions did not differ for women low on feminist identification ( $b = .17$ ,  $ns$ ), they significantly differed from one another for women high on feminist identification ( $b = -.63$ ,  $SE = .30$ ,  $t = -2.07$ ,  $p = .04$ , CI 95% [-1.23, -.03]; see Figure 2).



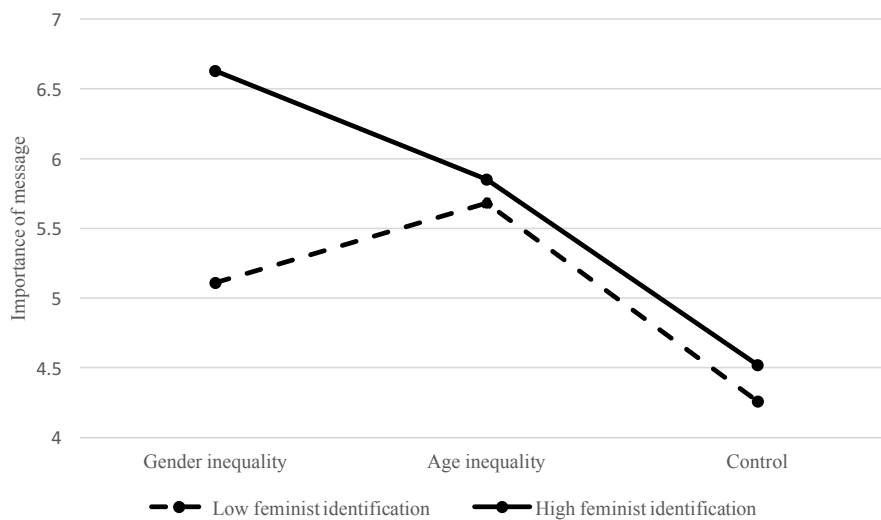
Figure 2. The effects of participant's feminist identification and message on preference for social distance



**Attributions of importance of the issue raised.** The analysis yielded a main effect for participant's feminist identification ( $b=.40$ ,  $SE=.07$ ,  $t=5.56$ ,  $p<.000$ , CI 95% [.26, .55]), so that participants high (vs. low) on feminist identification rated the issues the speaker discussed (in the different conditions) as significantly more important. A significant main effect was found for the type of message, but only for D2 (gender-inequality vs. control;  $b=-1.49$ ,  $SE=.17$ ,  $t=-8.57$ ,  $p<.001$ , CI 95% [-1.83, -1.14]), so that participants evaluated the message regarding gender inequality ( $M=5.88$ ) as significantly more important than the neutral control message ( $M=4.39$ ), but as equally important as the message on age-inequality ( $M=5.76$ ).

The analysis also yielded a significant two-way interaction between participant's feminist identification and D1 (gender-inequality vs. age-inequality;  $b=-.36$ ,  $SE=.10$ ,  $t=-3.62$ ,  $p<.000$ , CI 95% [-.55, -.16]), as well as with D2 (gender-inequality vs. control;  $b=-.33$ ,  $SE=.09$ ,  $t=-3.50$ ,  $p=.001$ , CI 95% [-.52, -.15]). Analysis of the simple effects revealed that participants low on feminist identification perceived the gender-inequality message as less important ( $M=5.11$ ) than the age-inequality message ( $M=5.68$ ),  $b=.56$ ,  $SE=.25$ ,  $t=2.19$ ,  $p=.03$ , CI 95% [.06, 1.06]; but more important than the book reading message ( $M=4.26$ ),  $b=-.86$ ,  $SE=.26$ ,  $t=-3.34$ ,  $p=.001$ , CI 95% [-1.36, -.35] (the age-inequality and control conditions also differed,  $b=-1.42$ ,  $SE=.25$ ,  $t=-5.76$ ,  $p<.000$ , CI 95% [-1.90, -.93]). Conversely, participants high on feminist identification evaluated the issue the speaker raised as more important in the gender-inequality condition ( $M=6.63$ ) compared to both the age-inequality condition ( $M=5.85$ ),  $b=-.78$ ,  $SE=.26$ ,  $t=-2.99$ ,  $p=.003$ , CI 95% [-1.30, -.27]; and control condition ( $M=4.52$ ),  $b=-2.11$ ,  $SE=.24$ ,  $t=-8.70$ ,  $p<.000$ , CI 95% [-2.59, -1.64] (the age-inequality and control conditions differed,  $b=-1.33$ ,  $SE=.25$ ,  $t=-5.28$ ,  $p<.000$ , CI 95% [-1.83, -.83]) (see Figure 3). In addition, participant's age had a significant effect ( $b=.02$ ,  $SE=.01$ ,  $t=3.98$ ,  $p<.001$ , CI 95% [.01, .03]), so that older participants perceived the issues the speaker raised as more important.

Figure 3. The effects of participant's feminist identification and message on attributions of importance of message

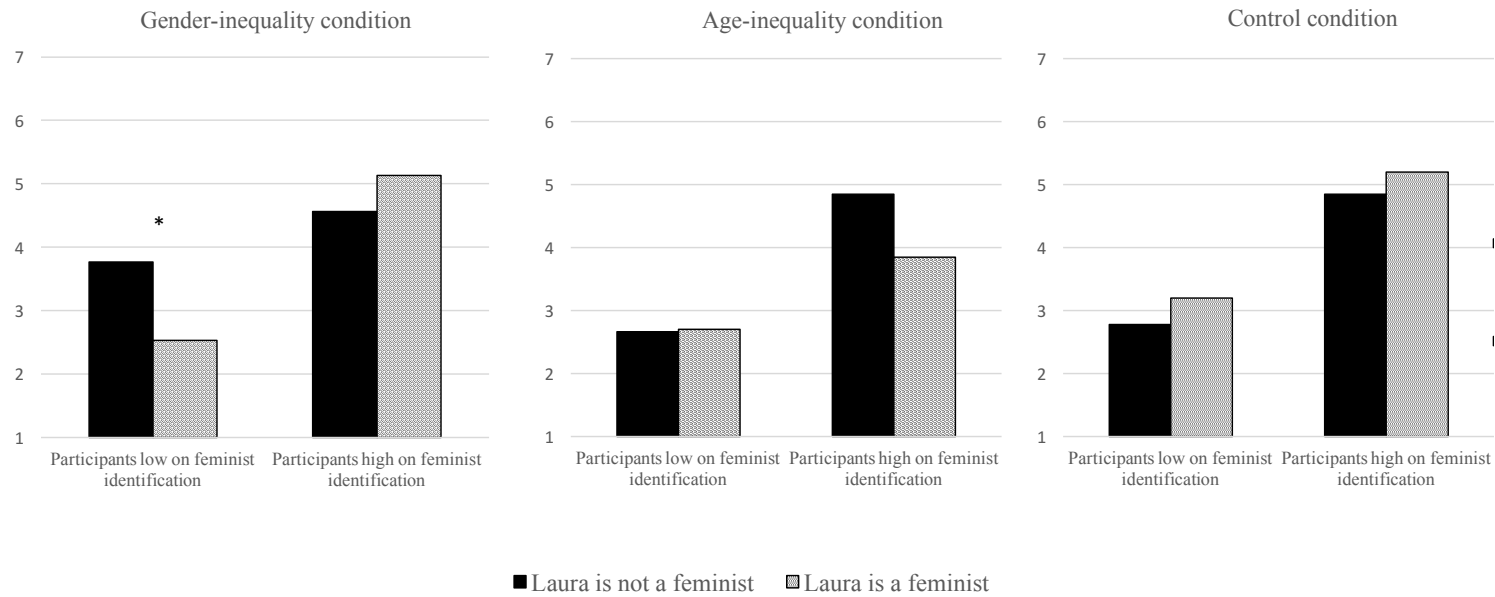


**Willingness to send a letter concerning gender inequality.** The regression analysis conducted in the preliminary analysis revealed a three-way interaction between type of message, participant's feminist identification and the speaker's feminism for D1 (gender-inequality vs. age-inequality;  $b=-.67$ ,  $SE=.34$ ,  $t=-1.99$ ,  $p=.05$ ). To further examine these effects, we conducted a two-way analysis of variance considering the speaker's feminism (feminist/no mention of feminism) and participant's feminist identification (mean centered) as independent variables controlling for participant's age, for each message condition separately (gender-inequality/age-inequality/control). In each of these conditions there was a main effect for participant's feminist identification, so that participants high (vs. low) on feminist identification were more willing to write a

letter concerning gender inequality across all conditions (for the gender inequality condition,  $b=.53$ ,  $SE=.25$ ,  $t=4.21$ ,  $p<.001$ , CI 95% [.28, .78]; for the age-inequality condition,  $b=.41$ ,  $SE=.13$ ,  $t=3.11$ ,  $p<.01$ , CI 95% [.14, .67]; and for the book reading condition,  $b=.53$ ,  $SE=.12$ ,  $t=4.32$ ,  $p<.001$ , CI 95% [.28, .77]).

The analysis also yielded a two-way interaction between participant's feminist identification and the speaker's feminism in the gender-inequality condition,  $b=.53$ ,  $SE=.25$ ,  $t=2.11$ ,  $p=.04$ , CI 95% [.03, 1.04]. This two-way interaction was not obtained in the age-inequality ( $b=-.25$ , *ns*) or control conditions ( $b=-.11$ , *ns*). Analysis of the simple effects within the gender-inequality condition revealed that among participants low on feminist identification, willingness to write a letter was higher when the speaker was not described as feminist ( $M=3.77$ ), compared to when she was described as a feminist ( $M=2.53$ ;  $b=-1.24$ ,  $SE=.61$ ,  $t=-2.01$ ,  $p=.05$ , CI 95% [-2.47, -.01]). Participants high on feminist identification did not differ in their willingness to write a letter in the different conditions ( $M_{feminist}=5.13$ ;  $M_{non\ feminist}=4.56$ ;  $b=.57$ , *ns*). Analysis of the other set of simple effects, revealed a significant difference between participants low and high on feminist identification only when the speaker was described as a feminist,  $b=.45$ ,  $SE=.77$ ,  $t=4.52$ ,  $p<.001$ , CI 95% [.43, 1.11], but not when she was not described as a feminist,  $b=.23$ , *ns* (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The interaction between participant' feminism and the speaker feminism on willingness to a write a letter concerning gender inequality



Note. \* $<.05$

## **Discussion**

The results of Study 2 supported our hypothesis. Women high (vs. low) on feminist identification were overall more positive toward the speaker beyond the different conditions (as were men high on feminist identification), but women who were high on feminist identification were particularly positive toward the speaker when she discussed gender inequality compared to the control conditions. These positive attitudes can be easily explained as the result of the similarity between the speaker's attitudes and those of our feminist participants. It is possible, that these women felt that the speaker resembled them personally and voiced their concerns and values (as is evident from the importance of message and willingness to send a letter variables), and were thus positive toward her and her message.

While women high on feminist identification were overall positive toward the speaker, women who rated themselves low on feminist identification appeared to be more ambivalent toward her. While they were equally interested in befriending her in the three conditions, they evaluated her less favorably in the gender-inequality compared to the control condition and perceived gender inequality as less important than age inequality (but more important than book reading habits). The result for the 'willingness to send a letter' variable may shed some light on these findings. Women who did not identify as feminists, were affected by the speaker's own feminism. When Laura was described as a feminist (vs. not a feminist) and discussed gender inequality, they were significantly less willing to write a letter concerning gender inequality. It

appears that there is a backlash against feminist women by non-feminist women, pointing to the importance of further examining this group to achieve a better understanding of their beliefs and attitudes. This may be explained by the fear of non-feminist women to be tagged by others as feminist and identified as holding subversive feminist attitudes. Thus, different means and messages may be required to engage non-feminist women in discussing and acting to enhance gender equality.

### **General Discussion**

The present research examined the reactions of men and women to a woman who ‘puts gender on the table’. As we hypothesized we found that women who address gender inequality suffer from negative outcomes. Thus, while discussing inequality is important for promoting social change (Saguy et al., 2008), our findings suggest that the way to bring about such change is not without costs. Women who ‘put gender on the table’ may actually fail in generating positive attitudes among their audience, particularly among individuals low on feminist identification. Our results partially support these hypotheses, showing that although feminists (both men and women) were overall more positive toward a woman putting gender on the table, the effects of the specific message they were exposed to, differed for men and women. Discussing gender inequality led to more negative evaluation and attitudes among male participants regardless of their feminist identification, whereas women’s reactions differed as a function of their own feminist identification. Interestingly, our results revealed that the

attitudes of women low on feminist identification were more similar to the attitudes of men, than to those of women high on feminist identification.

A rather surprising finding of the present research, is that men's willingness to act to promote gender equality differed when they were exposed to messages regarding different inequalities, so that they expressed greater willingness to engage in such actions when a woman discussed another type of inequality. It is possible that when more general discrimination and issues related to group-based injustice are raised, men become overall more sensitive to injustice, which also includes gender-related disparities (such as those discussed by the speaker). However, when gender-inequality issues are confronted directly, men may prefer to shy away from these topics and refrain from being active and taking a stance. Thus, our findings point to the importance of further understanding the effects of 'putting gender on the table' and propose that more work is required to design interventions that would enhance sensitivity to inequality, but perhaps in another domain, as means to improve attitudes toward gender inequality.

Our findings show the different factors affecting men's and women's response to the issue. While men's attitudes were somewhat simpler and were affected only by their values (feminist identification) and the speaker's message, women's attitudes were more complex and heterogeneous. It appears that recruiting men's support would require communicating different messages, compared to those required to engage women. These gender differences should be further examined in future research and inform relevant interventions.



Additionally, in the present study we focused on feminist identification as a moderator of men's and women's reactions. Our results confirm the notion that feminist identification is a potent and precise predictor of support for politicized gender issues. These findings are also in line with past work that showed the effects of broader attitudes toward social order such as Social Dominance Orientation (Unzueta, Everly, & Gutierrez, 2014) and System-Justifying beliefs (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006) on reactions to individuals who make discrimination claims. These different constructs are likely to be related to one another and may simultaneously contribute to individuals' reactions to women who discuss gender inequality. Such connections should be examined in future research.

Overall, our findings reveal similar costs as those found for confronting sexism (e.g., Dodd et al., 2001; Shelton & Stewart, 2004). However, the present research focuses on broader addressing of gender inequality and provides important contribution and addition to past findings by potentially informing a range of domains. For example, the reactions to Hillary Clinton, a long time feminist advocate who addressed gender inequality many times in her presidential campaign revealed a strong backlash that can be partially explained with the current findings (notable, a majority of White women voted for Trump (Rogers, 2016); and the majority of White women may presumably not identify themselves as feminists; Huddy, Neely, & Lafay, 2000). Sheryl Sandberg herself described being asked after her first speech on gender inequality "...why I gave more speeches on women's issues than on Facebook" and being asked if gender

inequality "...is your thing now" (Sandberg, 2013, p.146), both remarks not intended as compliments. The findings of the present research can first clarify the responses women may receive when 'putting gender on the table', and then set the stage for critical applied follow up work that can inform how these messages should be phrased in order to be effective. Future research is needed to further understand and develop effective messages that would assist promoting gender equality.

This work can also contribute to practice, as many organizations are occupied with promoting gender equality. Different organizations run diversity programs, gender mainstreaming programs, and try to advance conversation on gender equality. However, information regarding the implications for women who engage in such practices is scarce (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995). The present research sheds light on the consequences that women may face when trying to promote gender equality, and indeed show that such behavior may have a toll for women in the workplace. This is important, since women in many workplaces, due to stereotypes and prejudice have a harder time getting ahead. When they attempt to promote gender issues and sound their voice striving for gender equality, they may pay an additional price. This has to be taken into consideration by organizations that attempt to promote gender equality and those that expect women to push forward topics of gender equity. Moreover, the fact the men were not more willing to promote gender equality when listening to a woman discussing the issue is particularly important, and should call our attention into better understanding

and examining ways to engage men in the discussion and actions required to promote equality.

Notwithstanding its contribution, the present work has some limitations. First, for the sake of simplicity as this is a first examination of this effect, we examined the responses of men and women in two separate studies. This did not allow for a direct comparison between the reactions of men and women to a woman who discusses gender inequality. Future research should include both men and women in the same study to advance our understanding of the differences in their perceptions. Second, participants were exposed to messages on gender inequality by a woman whom they do not know and with whom they do not expect to interact, they had very little knowledge of her, beyond the brief information and the messages themselves. It is possible that prior acquaintance or even engaging in brief interaction with a woman who discusses gender inequality could have positively affected attitudes toward her and the topic. Having long-term association or relationship (e.g., in one's workplace) may lead to more positive results when 'putting gender on the table'. Furthermore, it is possible that knowing other details about women who speak up (their education level, intelligence, femininity or even dress style) would interact with their message and how people react to it. Future research should examine the role of acquaintance or interactions with the recipients of these messages as well as other information about the women who speak up.

Future research could also extend our findings and examine the effects of contextual factors on reactions to women who ‘put gender on the table’. For example, it is possible that the speaker’s status would affect reactions to her. Women like Sheryl Sandberg have both social status and influence because of their professional background and success, which could affect others’ reactions to them (e.g., Walfisch, Van Dijk, & Kark, 2013). This status may serve as a buffer and protect them from the negative social costs women encounter when they discuss gender inequality. In addition, as there is a growing call for men to join the struggle for gender equality, a question remains whether a man who ‘puts gender on the table’ would suffer from similar outcomes, as women appear to suffer. It is possible that men would not suffer from backlash, or may even be perceived more positively, as is suggested by the vast popularity of the Canadian Prime Minister – Justin Trudeau, who is an enthusiastic advocate of gender equality. Thus, future research could examine these questions and shed light on the role of individual characteristics, such as speaker’s gender, on subsequent outcomes.

Future research should also attempt to design the optimal conditions for raising attention to inequality. Our results show that when a woman discusses gender inequality and identifies as a feminist, she suffers backlash from other women who are low on feminist identification. This effect is consistent with past research (Kaiser & Hyatt-Pratt, 2009) showing that highly identified minority group members suffer from negative evaluations. This implies that if a woman would actively identify as a non-feminist and then discuss gender inequality, thereby removing the potential threat her

feminism may pose, she would elicit more positive responses. This raises a complex dynamic of action for social change, in the sense of how strategic one want and should be, in order to communicate a certain message. Identifying as a non-feminist could work strategically but would have little to do with the person's actual sense of self, which could render it an ultimately inapplicable intervention.

To conclude, while it is clear that we must 'put gender on the table' and discuss the injustice in our society, our results demonstrate that women who engage in such discussion encounter negative consequences. While this was not the focus of the present study, research does show that when members of minority group address inequality they enjoy positive outcomes such as physical and psychological health (Cortina & Magley, 2003). Such effects are important and can be beneficial for minority group members. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that addressing inequality is not without costs, which may prevent women from discussing this important issue. Thus, there is not only much work to achieve gender equality, but also to understand how we can ensure that those individuals who are motivated to bring it about and engage in such behavior do not suffer from negative implication because of it.

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