

Data-Driven Fairness: Transforming Workplace Culture for Gender Equality with Siri Chilazi

00:02.346-00:17.314 Announcer: You're listening to the HR Mixtape Your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

00:17.714-00:41.739 Shari Simpson: Joining me on the podcast today is Siri Chilazi, a senior researcher at the Women in Public Policy program at Harvard Kennedy School. Siri is dedicated to advancing gender equality in the workplace and partners with organizations around the world as a strategic advisor and keynote speaker. Her insights are regularly featured in major media outlets, and she holds degrees from Harvard in business, public policy, and science.

00:45.759-00:57.968 Shari Simpson: Siri, I'm so glad you were able to join me on the podcast today. Thank you for having me, Shari. I'm so thrilled to be here. I thought we could start with you sharing a little bit about your background and the book that you wrote. My pleasure.

00:57.988-02:30.746 Siri Chilazi: I am a behavioral scientist and a researcher of gender equality and organizations at Harvard Kennedy School. My research focuses on identifying and testing concrete ways that both individuals and organizations can help to close very well-documented gender gaps. So it's things like, how do we hire more objectively? How can we run a meetings in a way that we can actually benefit from the collective wisdom of everyone present? Or how do we make sure that we're giving everyone a level playing field to advance once they're in the organization? And by giving them equal access to opportunities, evaluating them fairly and promoting the best people. I love that. And what's the title of your book? The title is Make Work Fair Data-Driven Design for Real Results. And the Make Work Fair part of it, the main title really encapsulates what the book is about. It's about concrete. actions, things that we can do to make our workplaces better work. Obviously this has to do with the workplaces of all kinds around the world, whether we're talking about startups or enormous multinational corporations or anything in between. And then fairness. Fairness from my coauthor, Iris Bennett and I wrote this book together is about ensuring that everyone has equal access. access to opportunities and an equal level playing field on which to do their best work. Does that mean that everyone's going to become the CEO? Of course not. Not everyone has the skill, the capabilities. Not everyone wants that job either, right? But we at least should be able to provide everyone a sort of equal basis from which to then rise as far as they wish to rise and can.

02:31.207-02:56.246 Shari Simpson: I love that. You know, we've had so many conversations over the years about quality and equity, and we've really approached it, I think, from the perspective of culture, employee experience, those types of things. Your approach is very data-driven as you've kind of explored this idea around workplace quality. Talk me through how you got to that conclusion that data can

help really drive this change and this focus for us.

02:56.886-04:12.651 Siri Chilazi: Yeah, culture is obviously a really important piece, but culture too, by the way, can be approached in a data-driven way. So the evidence from decades of behavioral science research is really clear that de-biasing human brains or trying to change how people think and feel is really difficult and might even be impossible. But that research also shows that so much of how we behave actually comes from the environments that we surround ourselves with. So I'm talking physical environments, like the layout of our offices or the shapes of tables and conference rooms. I'm talking about behaviors and culture and what we see other people doing. But I'm also talking about organizational processes and systems that govern how we do our everyday work. Like how do we hire? How do we choose which person to put on which project or how to assign tasks in our workplaces? You know, how do we make decisions about who to promote? And so much of how those processes and systems are designed influences what the outcomes are. And it turns out that those systems are much easier to debias than our brains. So we can get humans to behave a lot more fairly and make more objective decisions by just changing the structures in which we operate.

04:13.311-04:32.583 Shari Simpson: What are our approaches to do that? You mentioned so many things there, and I feel like we could dive into each one specifically, but you mentioned the shape of tables. Start there. That's really fascinating. I know that seems like such a simple one to ask about, but yeah, if it is simple, walk me through that a little bit.

04:33.104-05:59.915 Siri Chilazi: Yeah, we humans read so much into something as the shape of a table. So if it's a square or circle, There's no clear head of the table, right? There's no real clear authority position because wherever you sit in a circle, you're kind of equivalent to everybody else. If you have a rectangular table and it's clear that one side is sort of the front of the room, then whoever sits at that front of the table position automatically assumes a position of authority. And we start looking toward that person and say, well, what are they saying? You know, if we're debating an issue, what's the opinion that they express first? And we are more likely to defer to that person and express concurrent opinions, essentially a group thing, in order to create harmony in the group and in order not to stand out. So, you know, one way to create a more level playing field to really signal, Hey, everyone's ideas are valued here. We want to hear from everyone. Your contributions are welcome, is to either move to a round table or a square table, something that physically decreases the hierarchy. Or if you're stuck with that rectangular table and you are the person of highest positional authority in the room, don't sit at the head of the table. Sit down last when everyone has already assumed their positions. Maybe even speak last, you know, foster conversations among others, try to pull out everybody else's opinions before you express your own to make sure that people actually feel comfortable telling you what they think.

06:00.675-06:22.916 Shari Simpson: What are some of the other ways we

should think about this that I would have never considered the table thing? Like, I mean, that concept obviously makes sense. And we've talked about, you know, leadership roles and speaking last, those types of things. But being intentional about the design of the room is really fascinating. What are some other things that people are missing that are like low hanging fruit that could have a big impact if they if they thought to address it now?

06:23.683-09:01.970 Siri Chilazi: That's the thing about design. It's often kind of invisible or slightly underneath the surface to your point so that it doesn't jump out at us. And it's so powerful. So let's talk about resumes. All of us have one, right? Regardless of how recently it's been updated. We use those to apply to jobs, very important. unspoken, unaddressed design of most people's resumes is that you list your past work experience with the specific dates attached. So you say, I was a management consultant from 2010 to 2013, and then I was an assistant product manager from 2015 to 2017. Well, one of the things that that design does, unintentionally, most of us haven't thought about this, is it highlights any gaps in our work history. So if I finished being a management consultant in 2013 and I started my next job in 2015, a recruiter or an algorithm that's screening that resume is going to say, wait a second, what happened between 2013 and 2015? What's going on? And empirically, we know that employers penalize candidates for having these career gaps, even though there's actually no evidence to suggest that people with non-continuous work histories are in any way less talented or capable. So our colleagues ran a really fun experiment in the UK where they tested a very small redesign to that resume format. So that instead of expressing the work experience with the specific date attached, you listed the total amount of time. So you'd say management consultant for three years, assistant product manager for five years. You don't really lose any critical information because you still can get at the amount of experience that a person has in a given role. But what this small redesign does is that it obfuscates those curves. And what these researchers found in this study, which looked at more than 9,000 companies, And he's hiring for all different kinds of jobs, ranging from software engineer and financial analyst to customer call center representative, you know, and care worker. So really a range of jobs. They found that both women and men were about 15% more likely to get invited to an interview, to get a call back. Because those companies were able to look past something that didn't actually matter, which is gaps in work history. And they were able to better focus on the actual skills and competencies that candidates brought to the table. So tiny design that makes a huge difference for whom we select. And for any recruiter, you know, it raises the question of wait a second today when we're screening and we think we're getting the best candidates. Are we actually? Or are we just getting the best candidates with a continuous work history or something else? Are the best candidates from a certain type of school or with a certain type of educational history?

09:02.318-10:13.679 Shari Simpson: Well, and it goes, that plays very

nicely into some of the statistics we've heard around, you know, the way that women will apply for jobs compared to the way men will apply for jobs. Cause you don't necessarily know if you're getting the most qualified person applying for that job because sometimes they won't even raise their hand, you know, females won't if they don't have, you know, a hundred percent of what's on a job posting. So really fascinating to think about that design piece when it comes to applying for jobs. I want to switch gears a little bit and talk about diversity in the context of remote work, hybrid environments, some of the stuff that we're still experiencing now. And granted, there's a lot of return to work mandates happening right now. We know that some of the impacts like just owning real estate have dictated like, Hey, we got to come back in the office. We're paying for, for this real estate. We need to use it. What are the things that we need to consider now that hybrid work is more normal? Organizations are definitely leaning into it more. We're seeing jobs that are consistently staying remote, but we still have to make sure that we're not introducing bias or things like recency bias when you're thinking about who to promote and those types of things. How do we need to start thinking about that?

10:14.713-13:56.365 Siri Chilazi: I love that you mentioned things like real estate, because I do find that people forget that in these conversations about is remote work desirable or should we do it? There's multiple factors at play, right? I can speak to what the evidence says about the actual effects of remote work. And I think it's important because this conversation has been lacking a lot of the data and evidence. I see people saying very ideological things like, I know that my employees are more productive in the office. I'm like. I have the evidence to suggest that that's not the case. So I think it's really important to bring in the data. And then leaders have to be honest when they say, listen, I understand that my employees want remote work. I know that there's data to suggest that that can do great things, but we've still decided to call everyone back into the office because we want to maximize our real estate holdings or whatever, right? Yeah. So I think we just need to be more honest about, you know, what the reasons are that are driving some of these decisions. Here's what the data has to say. Around the world, employees tend to be more enthusiastic about remote work than employers. And we'll get to why that is in a second. Research has shown that working in a hybrid fashion, so some combination of remote and in-person, can increase things like employee job satisfaction, life satisfaction, retention, measurable productivity in those jobs where it's easier to measure productivity. In a lot of white-collar occupations, it's actually incredible. incredibly difficult to measure productivity, which is another important part of this conversation. So we can have many benefits. And while women and men are actually largely, roughly equally excited about remote work, it's particularly caregivers of all genders, people who have either children to take care of or elderly parents or relatives to take care of, as well as people with longer commutes, unsurprisingly, that are especially enthused about remote work. I think one of the reasons why managers

and employers are less enthusiastic, and this goes to how do we make this a success, is that we learned how to manage and how to set up work in an in-person context. That's what our processes were designed for, optimized for. So now, of course, if we're going to have to manage a workforce that is partially in-person, some of them are fully remote, some of them are hybrid, that takes different skills and different processes. And while some organizations were already experimenting with remote work before COVID, most of the organizations that are doing it today were kind of thrust into it overnight in 2020 without having the time to thoughtfully try train managers, educate the workforce and retool their processes. They were just expected from one day to the next to all of a sudden become proficient and expert at managing remotely. So those organizations that have made the transition successfully have discovered that the key is that thoughtful and intentional transition. So you've got to revisit everything from norms for meetings, norms for communication, how quickly do we expect a response? What are the online times? What are the offline times? How do we ensure that people are able to carve out longer blocks of time for continuous focus work when they're not interrupted with pings on Slack or endless emails or meetings? Thinking about rethinking those types of norms to actual formal criteria for performance evaluations, promotions. How do we make sure that we actually focus on the results of what people are achieving, the outputs, rather than assessing inputs like, do I see them sitting with their butt in the chair in front of their screen and who knows what they're doing on that screen? Right. Right. Like them typing on a computer does not equate to productivity necessarily. But that's a big mental shift for most organizations and for most managers. And so it has to be done intentionally.

13:57.446-14:46.422 Shari Simpson: How are you seeing the data play out as they think about the generation that's getting older and older. And you have people like me who are in that Gen X category who are now having to think about being caregivers for their parents and potentially at the same time, their grandkids. How do we think about that data and what's, I mean, and then kind of specifically speaking of the US, because I think about our population here, that demographic is changing so much that you now have these Gen Xers that are in these really unique roles to try to balance all of this. who, you know, are excited about the opportunity of remote work. But there's also like you have to find that balance and flexibility. How is the data either supporting that or not supporting that or things that we should consider? It supports what you just said completely.

14:46.462-17:13.921 Siri Chilazi: There's actually even a term for this generation. It's the sandwich generation. So people who are caring both for elderly relatives as well as kids under 18 in their household at the same time. And we've got, you know, between a quarter and a half of the working population, depending on their exact age, who are in that sandwich generation category. So they've got really substantial commitments and requirements outside of work. At the same time, they're committed to work. They want to work. They want to give

it their best. It has to fit in with life outside of work. And I think this is where flexibility in all forms can come in. So it's flexibility in terms of the location of where you work from. Is it all in office, all at home, or some combination of the two, or even a different location? It's flexibility in terms of when do you work? Not everyone can do nine to five, but they can put in eight hours or even more than eight, cumulatively over the course of a day, when fits their life best. Why would we not give workers that flexibility, right? Or at least some part of it. There's also the flexibility of going into and out of the workforce. The traditional model, right, is you finish education, you go into work and then you're there nonstop for 40ish years and then you exit and then you're gone. And that's not realistic in today's workplace anymore. We've not only got caregiving responsibilities, but people want to pursue side hustles or additional projects. people get ill, they have to go get cancer treatment for a couple months, but then they heal and six months later, they're ready to come back. I think it's really important for us to harness truly the full talent pool that's out there to accommodate this and to make work more conducive to stepping in and stepping out at some times. I wish there was an easy one-stop-shop answer. Of course, there isn't because every workplace is different. Every role is different. And I think this is something that organizations have to embrace a little bit more is the need to develop tailored solutions. If you have a big company with a lot of different divisions and a lot of different types of roles, you might have 20 different remote work policies because some roles are face-to-face and you have, you know, customer service, retail, frontline, this kind of stuff, you just have to be there on the ground. But in the same organization, you might have so many jobs that can be done partially, remotely and flexibly, or even fully. And so this is just something that we have to put a little bit more time and effort toward clarifying and navigating, but it can be done.

17:14.261-17:40.764 Shari Simpson: I think the other complexity that comes with this, and I love your perspective on it, because I've heard this before from employees, Hey, I, my role can't be remote, right? I have to be in the office. It isn't fair that the knowledge workers get to be remote and I don't. How do we test fairness if we're implementing this type of flexibility across different roles and different departments and different parts of our organization?

17:41.465-20:46.986 Siri Chilazi: Yeah, this brings up actually some really deep and fundamental questions because fairness is a shared human value, something really foundational. You know, in studies, children as young as four and five and six years old develop really strong senses of what's fair and what's not, and they react very strongly to perceived unfairness. So this really is something that's, I would argue, almost universally shared by humans. But to your point, Our definitions of what's fair as we grow from that four-year-old and as the world gets more complex and situations we encounter more complex, our definitions are not always the same. I think organizations and leaders just have to be more frankly transparent and honest about both the needs of the business and the decisions that

they're making to try to satisfy the needs of the business while satisfying as many of their employees' needs and demands as possible. So I think folks can understand that if you've applied for a role, that's a customer service role in person, right? And you you're in that job, that's a different job than someone managing accounts or doing budgets on a computer. And if folks want to get into those jobs with more flexibility, then there's maybe reskilling opportunities, upskilling opportunities, apprenticeships that can help put them on that path. This is also something that being more upfront about in job advertisements, can be very helpful. Another big study in the UK, Dan, showed that when jobs were advertised as having more flexibility, if they were actually able to be done more flexibly, once again, it resulted in more applications, especially from women. So companies were able to access a broader talent pool, but it is not going to apply to every job. Well, let me just show one example though, of getting more creative, even in frontline occupations. Chick-fil-A, restaurant chain, right? With locations around the U.S. and actually around the world, requires in-person presence, but their employees also wanted more flexibility. So one of their Florida locations, Reina Pilot, which has now become a permanent mode of operating, where they allowed employees to cram all of their weekly hours into three days. So instead of coming in five or six days a week for however many, six, seven, eight, nine hours, you would work longer shifts, but you'd pack all your hours in Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and then you'd be off Thursday through Sunday. And there was another crew that did the same thing where they packed all their hours in Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and then they had Sunday through Wednesday off. And Chick-fil-A is closed on Sundays anyway, so they only are open six days a week. People loved it because it gave them more predictability in their schedule. They were happy to work longer days, a few days of the week, because on the flip side, they got some days that were completely off. And once again, they got more applications for open roles because this was something not only that existing employees loved, but prospective employees were really drawn to. So even in those frontline roles where work has to be in person, we can get more creative about what else flexibility could entail in terms of scheduling, for example.

20:47.407-21:11.468 Shari Simpson: I love that. I did see, and I don't know if they're still piloting it. I saw it a while ago, but I saw that McDonald's had been trying in their video displays, having remote workers take orders in the drive-thru. And I thought that was really creative. I'm sure there's a lot of, oh, creative. tech involved that could go wrong in that scenario, but it's just one more way organizations are thinking of flexibility. So I love those examples.

21:12.229-21:39.026 Siri Chilazi: And just to connect this to what we were saying a moment ago, these are design choices, right? Someone somewhere has decided that work needs to get done like this and every system and every process can be redesigned. So just like we made that first design choice, we can make a different choice. and experiment and test and see if it works. You know, does it meet the needs of the business? Are employees happy? Does this increase productivity,

retention, sales? And if it does, amazing. Let's keep going.

21:39.898–21:53.681 Shari Simpson: Love that. As we wrap up our conversation, what is one thing that you hope those that are listening that are in the HR space walk away from this conversation with when it comes to things like data and equality? Yeah.

21:53.841–23:19.188 Siri Chilazi: One of the core messages of our book, *Make Work Fair*, is that making fairness and making work fair is not a program. but a way of doing things. So we don't need to start up a new training, start up a new employee resource group, spend times on speaker series or networking events or this and that. Those are all programmatic one-off solutions, which by the way, are really easy to get. cut when budgets are tight, or it's easy for people to skip when they're overwhelmed with their quote unquote real work. So if we really want to make progress on leveling the playing field and getting both the best people in the door, and then making sure that they're in the right roles at the right time, doing their best work to enable our collective success, we need to build fairness into all the things that we're already doing. So I would challenge and encourage everyone listening to even just look at your calendar for today and think about what is it that I'm already doing? You might be writing emails, you might be sitting in meetings, you might be facilitating meetings, you might be giving feedback to somebody, a co-worker, you might be hiring for a new position, you might be assigning people to new projects, right? Those are the things that we have to do a little bit better and a little bit more scenarially. And fortunately, like that resume example from the UK, the evidence is there. The research has been done to tell us what works and what doesn't, how we should do these things and what we should avoid. So all we need to do is just put all that good knowledge into practice.

23:19.508–23:31.830 Shari Simpson: Thank you so much for all of this. What a great discussion. And I will make sure to put your book in the show notes for those listening. They can go grab it. This has been wonderful. Thanks for sitting down with me for a few minutes. Thank you, Shari. And thank you, everybody, for listening.

23:34.594–23:36.356 Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode.

23:36.797–23:40.701 Shari Simpson: You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com.

23:41.142–23:44.505 Announcer: Come back often, and please subscribe, rate, and review.