



Why do affinity spaces matter? Are they exclusionary?

Do they perpetuate the kind of separation you claim to be fighting against?

This is a sampling of questions that are commonly presented when it comes to creating intentional spaces for people who share an identity, culture, experience, or interest. It can be helpful to keep in mind the “why” and the benefits of having affinity spaces while we determine if and how to respond to these comments.

Some statistics:

- Female employees who are the only woman at work are 50% more likely to consider quitting (LeanIn/McKinsey 2018 report).
- 2.6% of airline mechanics and 7% of commercial pilots are women (2020 statistic from Women in Aviation).

What is an affinity space? An “affinity space” is a space in which people bond over a shared interest. A chess club is an affinity space. Identity-based affinity spaces are becoming more common as a way to support those with marginalized identities.

The purpose of gathering in affinity spaces is not to force segregation, but rather to create safe and brave space where people can express their fears, pain, successes, and hopes without bystanders, so when they re-enter mixed identity spaces it will be with greater self-awareness, less self-judgment, and stronger confidence. There is tremendous power in coming together to center growth, joy, and community in a world that does not allow us those experiences in abundance.

These groups are exclusive, yes, but with the purpose of ensuring the freedom of their members. In a gender-based affinity group, structures and conditioning that encourage women to be calm, likable, pliable and to doubt our own instincts to smooth the way for others are recognized but de-centered. The pressure to explain ourselves upon the basis of identity is alleviated. We need not justify our existence under those existing societal structures. Women-only spaces offer a profoundly different experience than co-ed ones. There is simply no substitute for these spaces; they are not competitors, but counterparts.

For some, joining an affinity group is the first step to not feeling alone. Women-only spaces offer a respite from the pressure and, often, trauma wrought by social conditioning and allow us to put our own experiences front and center.

Some known benefits of affinity spaces:

- **Affirmation and recognition.** Affinity spaces provide a place to celebrate the underrepresented populations while offering validation, away from the stress of being ‘the only one’ or of feeling scrutinized in dominant culture settings. These groups provide a break from the constant

explaining, defending, clarifying, and apologizing of expressing a non-male perspective in a male-dominated society. There is a theme amongst groups of *trust*, that every person in the group implicitly understands and believes our experiences.

- **Safety.** All women spaces provide safety for vulnerability. Women are more likely to try activities they'd been embarrassed to express interest in and ask for help without fear of being dismissed as weak and/or emotional. There is also the absence of the "male gaze", which reduces women to sexual objects and interprets our every move in service of male pleasure. In affinity spaces women can relieve the pressure to modify their bodies and police their behavior to be more fully present.
- **Access.** Women's affinity spaces can counter implicit bias in recruitment and hiring by connecting qualified female candidates with opportunities they might miss otherwise- they provide visibility for what women are accomplishing in male-dominated fields. They encourage participants to take risks, learn new skills, and celebrate accomplishments without the competitive (and often silencing) presence of men. They provide opportunities for networking and connecting with industry leaders where women are underrepresented. Women open doors to new careers and jobs that typically have higher salaries than those where women are represented more broadly.
- **Leadership Development.** Affinity spaces help to ensure that women and girls have access to the known benefits of community, skill building, and empowerment, helping to connect them to a greater sense of self. While programming helps to not only bolster self-esteem and agency, it also aids in leadership development.

Content above comes from the following sources:

[Fostering Women's Leadership & Workplace Inclusion | Lean In](#)

[Why women-only spaces still matter | The Week](#)

[THE CASE FOR AFFINITY SPACES \(adventuruswomen.com\)](#)

[Industry Stats - Women in Aviation International \(wai.org\)](#)

If your employer is looking for additional resources, workshops, or consultation regarding understanding and overcoming gender bias and/or recruitment and retention for gender equity, we are available to connect. Email us at: genderequity@vtworksforwomen.org or directly to Margaret Overman, Gender Equity Services Manager at Moverman@vtworksforwomen.org.