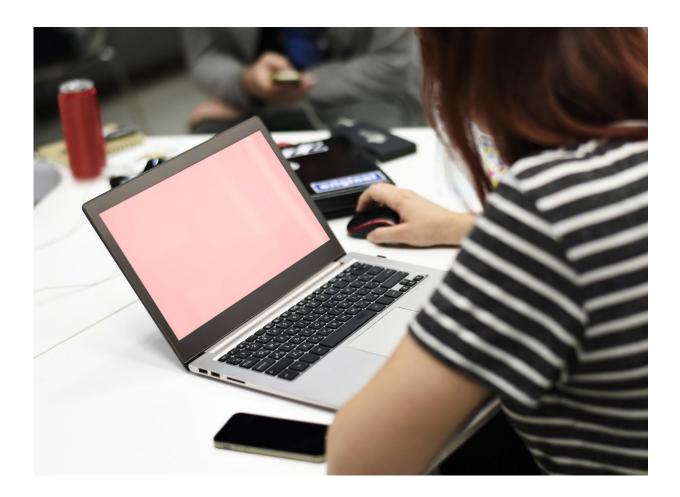# Why women stay behind the scenes at work

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

While research has shown that visibility in the workplace is critical for professional advancement, the reality is that for some women, it's easier said than done.

According to a new study by Stanford scholars, professional women have strong reasons to ignore recommendations that urge them to have a more visible presence at [work](link).

Why professional women avoid the spotlight is the topic of a new paper in *Sociological Perspectives* by sociology doctoral candidates Devon Magliozzi and Priya Fielding-Singh and by Ph.D. alumna Swethaa Ballakrishnen.

For two years, the three sociologists immersed themselves in a women's professional development program at a large nonprofit organization in the United States. They conducted interviews with 86 program participants and observed 36 discussion groups and 15 program-wide meetings where many of the women shared the barriers and biases they encountered at their organization, as well as the strategies they used to overcome them.

They found that for many of the women they studied, there are competing expectations that get in the way of them following common career tips like "take a seat at the table," "speak with authority" and "interject at meetings."

Reasons to avoid the spotlight

Many of the women participating in the study told Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh and Magliozzi that they felt a double bind: If they worked on the sidelines, they could be overshadowed by their colleagues and overlooked for job promotions. But having a more assertive presence in the office, many women thought, could also backfire.

Instead, these women adopted a strategy that the researchers called "intentional invisibility," a risk-averse, conflict-avoidant approach to navigating unequal workplaces.

While women in the study recognized that being less visible in the office could hurt their odds of a promotion or other career opportunities, they acknowledged that violating feminine norms – like being assertive or authoritative when they are expected to be nice, collaborative and communal – could have the same effect.

One woman in the study shared how she was worried that conflict at work could disrupt her relationships with colleagues. She told the researchers that at meetings, men would mistake her as a secretary, when in fact she was a software engineer. Rather than confront the stereotype, she chose to shrug it off. In order to minimize exposure to conflict, she opted to keep a low profile and incrementally advance in her career without backlash.

"To craft careers that felt rewarding, women sought to reduce the chances for interpersonal conflict and to increase opportunities for friendly relationships within their work teams," the researchers wrote.

Challenging norms

Working behind the scenes also resonated with many women in the study who equated a visible presence with attention-seeking behaviors like being aggressive or self-promoting. This felt at odds with their own character, they reported.

In a discussion group the researchers observed, one woman said to her peers, "I mean I'm never going to be big, I just never am." She said that while there were men in her office with large personalities, that approach did not resonate with her own style.

These women questioned the norm that effective employees need to call attention to themselves. "Real leaders don't really have to say what their title is, or have to brag about their accolades or whatever," said one

woman. "Your work should speak for itself."

Rather than emulate behaviors they viewed as inauthentic and masculine, many women chose to quietly challenge conventional definitions of professional success by embracing a different work style, said the researchers.

As one woman said in an interview, "Not that there is anything wrong with people who want to promote themselves and make money and have great titles – it's just that I was very uncomfortable with the word 'leadership' until I was able to redefine it for myself."

Work/life balance

In line with previous research that shows that women generally shoulder a disproportionate share of familial responsibilities, the researchers found that remaining behind the scenes was a particularly common strategy for women caring for children at home. Staying out of the spotlight at work helped these women maintain both professional and personal stability.

Minimizing visibility in order to create work/life balance, though, came at the cost of making big career moves for some women.

For example, one woman said she scaled back her ambitions at work when one of her children was diagnosed with a medical condition that required more adult supervision. She changed from an upper-level role to a less stressful and less visible job.

Many women in the study, the researchers write, "find that they can only pursue their ambitions to a point to ensure stability." Women adjusting to evolving family needs often concluded that embracing a behind-the-scenes approach allowed them to be effective while staying out of the

spotlight and avoiding negative backlash.

"Women in our study chose this strategy from a limited set of options," said Fielding-Singh. "Because there was no clear path to having it all, many chose to prioritize authenticity and conflict reduction at work and home."

Structural change

In the end, the authors said, it is organizations – not the women embedded within them – that need to adapt to create gender equality.

"Organizations should realize that asking women to be visible without recognizing the toll that such visibility takes is not really leveling the playing field," Ballakrishnen said. "To be truly equal workplaces, organizations need to rethink the ways in which they assign and reward visibility."

Although their study did not track the effects of the strategies women took, the authors suspect that working behind the scenes may disadvantage women aiming for top positions in their organizations. Until organizations become level playing fields, there will be incentives for women to continue adopting this strategy.

Looking ahead, they said, organizations need to ensure that women will not face backlash from their managers and peers when they do take on visible roles.

"In the meantime, it is important to understand how structural barriers impact women's choices and, ultimately, their career outcomes," Fielding-Singh said.

 More information: Swethaa Ballakrishnen et al. Intentional