

Q&A: New report examines myths hampering advancement of women in workplace, actual barriers and possible solutions

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Hybrid/remote workers are just as ambitious

Interested in getting promoted to the next level



Credit: Harvard Gazette

Pervasive myths that paint an overall picture of women having a lesser commitment to their jobs are hampering their career advancement, according to a new [report](#) on women in the workplace by McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.org, a nonprofit founded and chaired by Sheryl Sandberg, the former chief operating officer of Meta, Facebook's parent company.

Despite gains over the last five years, [women](#) are still underrepresented

in the talent pipeline for top management and senior executive roles. For every 100 men hired and promoted to manager, only 87 women advance. The [gender gap](#) is even greater for women of color. For every 100 men hired or promoted to management, only 73 women of color are moved up, according to the annual survey report released last month. That number falls to 54 for Black women.

The Gazette spoke with Iris Bohnet, Albert Pratt Professor of Business and Government and co-director of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard Kennedy School, which studies discrimination and [gender equity](#), about the report's findings and what companies can do to ensure more women advance. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Q&A: Iris Bohnet

Gazette: One of the myths debunked by the report is that women are less ambitious and career-oriented than men. Why does that one remain so pervasive?

Bohnet: I agree with the premise that women aren't less ambitious than men, but something that is less talked about is that unpaid work is incredibly unequally allocated between women and men. And that really hasn't changed that much. So, women have entered the workforce more, have made some advancement in careers, but that hasn't changed the allocation of [unpaid work](#)—care, other work at home. I think that's a big driver of people's presumption that women aren't as committed.

Gazette: Another myth is that women want and benefit most from flexible work. The new report found no difference in the desire of women and men

**for flexibility, and neither seems to benefit more.
What's going on?**

Bohnet: I think there are two trends that we're seeing right now. One is that younger cohorts care more about flexibility (that actually started before COVID), about [work-life balance](#), about other interests. Men's interest in flexible work has increased dramatically, and that will decrease the flexibility stigma for women. Secondly, COVID has normalized remote work in particular, flexible work also, where you work when you can, the hours that you want to, and work from different places.

One thing I want to make sure we're also mentioning is that it's still a relatively small proportion of people who are given the chance to work flexibly. It is mostly the highly educated, mostly higher-income earners. It is not the people who might need it most, who might have been affected most by COVID, might have fewer opportunities for day care, insurance, etc. This is incredibly important. It's our experience, but it's not the experience of 60 percent of the people working in the United States. Flexibility is not an option for most.

Gazette: While they may not like it, most business executives don't believe remote and hybrid work are going away any time soon. Some big companies made moves this year to try to rein things in. Would a widespread return-to-office push undermine women's career advancement because they have less freedom to juggle unpaid work obligations?

Bohnet: Generally, yes. But here's the complexity: Working remotely does not work for everyone. We tend to think everyone likes it and

thrives, when in fact, in an early experiment (pre-COVID), where people were randomly assigned to either working from home part-time or working in the office full-time, there was some productivity increase.

That productivity increase more than doubled when, in a second experiment, people could choose what they wanted to do. Choice is incredibly helpful for everyone, including women. Companies are experimenting with very different strategies. So, I don't think we have that final verdict yet on what works and what doesn't work.

Generally, fully remote work has fewer productivity benefits for the company than hybrid work arrangements. At the same time, some companies like Dropbox work fully remotely. They have just arranged around it. They have co-location meetings. Everyone comes together, where the purpose is to work together to catch up, then you go off and do your own thing again. I don't think it's 'flex works or not.' It is, what kind of flex? How's it organized? Are the managers trained to work in a new flexible environment?

That's another thing that we typically see—employees tend to like hybrid work better than their managers. Maybe it's partly you don't quite trust your employees—although the productivity data don't support that. What is more likely is it makes life harder for managers to manage a hybrid team. And so, with these new challenges, you have to redesign how you manage.

Gazette: One longstanding myth is that a 'glass ceiling' of gender bias is the biggest single barrier preventing women from moving from middle management to executive and C-suite positions. But, the report suggests women's advancement appears to

be hobbled far earlier, when they're staff or line employees trying to break into management, a so-called 'broken rung' theory. Do you agree?

Bohnet: I absolutely believe that. In a large European company, women did not want to be promoted. These were women not in managerial roles and that was the first promotion to a managerial role with team responsibility. And women were shying away from being promoted. Why could that be the case? Based on the research, there were very, very few women in [leadership roles](#) in that company, so it didn't feel like this was a company women could thrive in.

In addition, something that is less written about but is incredibly important is bias from below. These women were happy to be promoted if they didn't have to lead a team. There's quite a bit of evidence that we don't like female bosses; we don't like to be told by women; and we tend to be harsher with women. Research suggests, for example, that female faculty tend to be evaluated more harshly than their [male counterparts](#). I don't think we talk enough about bias from below.

Because leadership is still not associated with women, some women might not want to be in this sandwich position. There's bias from below, but women also have to deal with bias from above, where people might not give them the same type of performance rating because they might not have 'male' attributes such as vision, assertiveness, leadership, etc. There's lots of evidence for that.

I see the 'broken rung' everywhere now. Maybe women are also a little nervous that, in a managerial role, they have less control over their time. But the typical problems we're seeing are these two biases. Discrimination from above in some ways is a smaller problem than discrimination from below, not because it's quantitatively smaller, but I

think it's easier to be fixed.

Gazette: What can companies do to make sure promotion decisions are not clouded by these biases? Is there a test for this similar to blind auditions?

Bohnet: We have worked with a financial services company where we focused on their performance appraisals. There's research suggesting that there are gender differences and race differences in performance ratings, which typically are subjective. In many organizations, employees are asked to self-evaluate, and then to share self-evaluations with their managers, and then managers make up their minds.

Women tend to give themselves lower ratings and that's exactly what we found in our company as well. Women, and particularly women of color, gave themselves lower ratings. This can lead to a vicious circle where managers are influenced by these self-ratings. So, because of our work, this [company](#) stopped sharing self-evaluations with managers.

Even more importantly, it now runs calibration meetings at the end, once managers have submitted their performance appraisals, where they make sure they don't have gender dynamics, or race dynamics in specific departments.

Gazette: Is there anything women can do if they're concerned bias is limiting their opportunities at work?

Bohnet: It's very, very hard. Generally, the more structured any process is, whether that is hiring, an interview, a performance appraisal process, a promotion process, the less likely we will see bias. Bias thrives on

ambiguity. Based on the data women should feel better in environments that have less ambiguity, where we have more structure, and policies are clear.

Gazette: Given how pervasive this is and the inequities that flow from disparate promotion rates, does this call for some government policy intervention?

Bohnet: You can be sued, of course, if it can be shown that there's gender discrimination in promotions. But some companies have been proactive. Google, for example, reached out to its technical employees with a message I reference in my book 'What Works.' It said, "I wanted to update everyone on our efforts to encourage women to self-nominate for promotion. This is an important issue, and something I feel passionately about."

"Any Googler who is ready for promotion should feel encouraged to self-nominate and managers play an important role in ensuring that they feel empowered to do so. ... We know that small biases—about ourselves and others—add up over time and overcoming them takes a conscious effort."

Sometimes, we have to go that extra mile, where we decrease the barriers for those for whom self-promotion just is not the norm. Backlash for counter-stereotypical actions, unfortunately, still is real.

More information: Report: www.mckinsey.com/featured-insi...men-in-the-workplace

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