

What still holds Women back?

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The question: What do you believe is the greatest obstacle women face as they pursue their leadership careers?

The answer:

57% **Discrimination**

22% **Confidence**

21% **Balance**

With much focus of late on the issue of too few women at the top, it is still unclear what is holding women back. If we truly knew the answer to this question, surely we would have fixed it by now.

The answer is all too elusive. After having conducted research in 2012 where successful women leaders were asked what truly helped them get promoted, this 2014 study sought to find out from a random group of women, what do they think still gets in the way.

At the highest level, the results of this study show that the majority of women respondents (57%) feel that discrimination is the number one obstacle as women pursue a leadership career. The remaining answers fell almost equally (22% and 21%) between a lack of self-confidence and balancing family obligations.

This indicates there is still an issue that needs to be addressed on the part of organizations to create checks and balances to correct inappropriate discriminatory behaviour. In the mean time, it is also up to the women who desire to work their way up the ranks to understand what the playing field really looks like so they can respond appropriately and proactively.

This research study involved in-person conversations with 311 women in Toronto, Ontario, Canada



28%
Baby Boomer
('46-'64)

50%
Generation X
('65-'79)

22%
Generation Y
('80-'00)

Of the 311 respondents who answered the question, one woman said she really didn't know what the greatest obstacle was, and one woman said she had never encountered any obstacles. Both women were from Generation X. This report will focus on the comments of the remaining 309 women who did report an obstacle.

The women in this study had eight different types of responses that have been grouped into 3 categories:

1. Discrimination (57%)
 - a. Men (32%)
 - b. Gender bias (18%)
 - c. Double standard (4%)
 - d. Other women (3%)
2. Confidence (22%)
 - a. Lack of confidence (20%)
 - b. Themselves (2%)
3. Balance (21%)
 - a. Family balance (17%)
 - b. Lack of resources (4%)

An overriding generalization is that about half of the obstacles are ones women can control and half are ones they cannot control.

Discrimination causes are based on the behaviours of other people, and therefore we don't really have control over those. But *Confidence* and *Balance* causes are ones that we do have control over, albeit some solutions in these categories are easier to employ than others.

The results of this study also seem to both confirm and defy some conventional logic.

They confirm the thinking that says gender discrimination is still alive and well in the minds of working women when it comes to career advancement obstacles.

The results defy the thinking that says women lack confidence and don't get because they don't ask. While it's true that some women may choose not to ask, only 21% of respondents in this study felt it was a major obstacle.

With these general overviews presented, let's dive deeper into some of the detail associated with the responses of the women in the study.



Many believe behaviours and attitudes of men get in the way.

58% Discrimination

There were four main answers that women gave that have been combined into the **Discrimination** category. Here is a closer look at those category results. The associated percentages represent the percent of answers within the specific category.

- Men (55%)
- Gender bias (31%)
- Double standard (8%)
- Other women (6%)

When looking at the specific answers of the women who gave discrimination as the major obstacle, over half felt that it was the behaviours and attitudes of men that got in the way. Many described the old boys club as prevalent and said that it is still a man's world where women are not welcome. Comments also included harassment, intimidation and egotism as behaviours men exhibited that the respondents felt were obstacles to women's advancement.

Thirty-one percent of respondents felt that gender bias in the form of preconceived notions and stereotypes were to blame, whether they came from men or women. Descriptors used in this answer included glass ceiling, assumptions about women's abilities, lack of equality and not being taken seriously.

When it came to the double standard, many women were able to identify specific situations where similar actions displayed by men and women were perceived very differently, and unfairly so.

However, this double standard number seems artificially low. One reason this may be true is that many women seem unaware of a double standard. Unless they have been in personal situations where they have experienced negative consequences because of the double standard, then many are not aware that it exists.

About half the obstacles are ones women can control and half are ones they cannot control.

If we were able to correct the double standard result, the discrimination category would remain unchanged, since the new responses would likely still fall into the same category.

This being said, of the women who gave this response, 43% were from Generation Y. This may indicate that the existence of the double standard is becoming more well known among the younger generation who may have different expectations about how they are treated compared to their male counterparts.

Finally, a small percent of women felt that other women were the main issue; either they didn't help or they overtly would tear other women down. This trend is the most inspiring because had we asked this question twenty or thirty years ago, the numbers may have been much higher.

One of the drawbacks to the study being only short conversations with random women was the inability to dive deeper into the comments of the women to truly understand the difference between bias and men. These findings are based on the words the women chose to use when they answered the question and only limited probing took place when the answers were very short or ambiguous.

Future research with a more analytical approach to understanding the deeper meanings of their answers would serve us well. These limitations contributed to the grouping of the answers into the three overall categories.

22% Confidence

There were two main answers that women gave that have been combined into the **Confidence** category. Here is a closer look at those category results. The associated percentages represent the percent of answers within the specific category.

- Lack of confidence (91%)
- Themselves (9%)

According to the women who felt it was in fact the women themselves who presented the main obstacle, a significant number of women described the problem as lack of confidence.

Of the other answers, indications were that women felt the need to prove themselves first before seeking advancement, as well as a lack of commitment or dedication to advancement.

This was a small number of respondents and again, if additional probing had taken place to determine the cause of these beliefs, it may have lead to a conversation about confidence.

One interesting note about the women who answered with this latter response, is that 83% were Baby Boomers.

The younger generation may have different expectations about how they are treated compared to their male counterparts.

21% Balance

There were two main answers that women gave that have been combined into the **Balance** category. Here is a closer look at those category results. The associated percentages represent the percent of answers within the specific category.

- Family balance (83%)
- Lack of resources (17%)

It was clear that a good deal of women were still struggling to manage family commitments. Whether that struggle was by choice or because of lack of resources is not clear, but what is clear is that women both in their child-bearing years and those beyond, felt that having children had an impact on their career progression.

What is interesting to note is that the overall percentage of women who felt this was a problem, was only 21%. Conventional thinking and popular public opinion would have us believe that a much greater number of women are experiencing challenges because of their family responsibilities.

Additional research in this area to identify what has happened to reduce this actual percentage from the perceived percentage, which may very well have been much higher at some point in the past, would be enlightening.

When it came to resources, the general indication was that funding for education was an obstacle, and almost half of these responses came from women in Generation Y.

Another View

One additional lens that can be applied to the results of this study is the result by generation, based on the eight responses. The top three answers by generation are listed, with the Generation Y category having 4 responses listed to bring it over the 70% threshold:

- Boomer (71%)
 - Men (31%)
 - Confidence (21%)
 - Balance (19%)
- Generation X (74%)
 - Men (37%)
 - Confidence (19%)
 - Balance (18%)
- Generation Y (76%)
 - Bias (22%)
 - Confidence (19%)
 - Men (19%)
 - Balance (16%)

When we look at the results by generation, we see that responses are almost identical where the Boomer and Generation X women are concerned.

There is a difference when it comes to the obstacles that the Generation Y women felt were most prevalent. While this may indicate a shift in thinking, what is that shift, and is it significant?

Perhaps one shift that presents itself is regarding where men fall in the list of obstacles. For the Boomers and Generation X women, men topped the list. For Generation Y, however, men are third on the list and represent a 38% (Boomer) and 48% (Generation X) drop in response frequency.

These numbers seem quite significant, and it may indicate several things. Perhaps Generation Y women see men in a different light, or perhaps they have different experiences with men, or perhaps the men are beginning to change.

Since many of the women mentioned men when they elaborated on their "bias" response, it is still indicative that men are viewed as bearing the heavier burden of responsibility for the problem.

Based on the results of this research, it is encouraging to see that numbers are shifting. It would be interesting to delve much deeper into the meaning behind the responses in order to get a clearer picture that might point to a definitive solution. Until then, it seems as though the tides might be turning. And that is a good thing.

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