

Close the INFLUENCE GAP

Women leaders are needed now more than ever before.

Women leaders across the globe are experiencing the Influence Gap and this is a systemic problem, not a problem with women.

Women hold fewer positions of power and so it is harder for us to get a seat at the table for the discussions and decisions that matter. As of 2022, women hold only 29% of senior management roles globally, despite the fact that gender diversity is known to improve profitability. Progress has been set back by the Covid-19 pandemic, during which LinkedIn saw a marked decline in the hiring of women into leadership roles.

Our leadership skills are equal to those of men yet we are less likely to be encouraged into a leadership role. Men are twice as likely to be promoted or selected for leadership training, while a study published in The Leadership Quarterly showed that "Men were encouraged to step forward and 'claim their space' as

leaders and women were advised to take a narrower focus by developing specific areas of expertise and appealing colleagues." Men tend to be more confident about their leadership skills, rating themselves as better leaders than women do but, in fact, other people often rate female managers more highly for leadership effectiveness.

We can be judged for stepping into our authority. An article in Harvard Business Review on the unseen barriers to women rising into leadership roles shared that, "Integrating leadership into one's core identity is particularly challenging for women, who must establish credibility in a culture that is deeply conflicted about whether, when and how they should exercise authority."

We struggle to get our voices heard in meetings. It's not just about getting a seat at the table - we need to be heard when we get there. Research conducted by RADA in Business found that only 8% of women find it easy to make their voice heard in the workplace and women are 12% more likely than men to feel uncomfortable when meeting with board members or senior management.

We are trying to succeed in a working culture that was designed for men, by men and, as a result, only one in five women feel a strong sense of belonging in the workplace. This makes it harder for us to share dissenting views.

According to the McKinsey & Company Women in the Workplace 2020 report, senior-level women are also nearly twice as likely as women overall to be "Onlys" - the only woman or one of the only women in the room at work. That comes with its own challenges: women who are Onlys are more likely than women who work with other women to feel pressure to work more and to experience microaggressions, including needing to provide additional evidence of their competence.

As we look to the future of work, we must address gender inequality, and recognise the

fact that it intersects with other biases, meaning many women face additional barriers to success

Women of colour, for example, are often an "Only" in two ways and are even more likely to be on the other end of disrespectful behaviour.

It's no wonder so many talented women experience imposter syndrome! I truly believe that women are experiencing significant imposter syndrome because of the environment we are working within as we sense that we don't belong. Most women are unaware of the true extent of gender bias and so, when we experience it, we assume it is because we are doing something wrong or are not good enough in some way.

So what can we do about this?

Women face a double bind. When we try and replicate the behaviour of our male colleagues it feels awkward and we are criticized for it, but when we conform to society's expectations of how women should act, we often go unheard and unrewarded.

First we have to undo the damage to our confidence that gender bias has caused. Thousands of women struggle with negative self-talk. They compare their messy inside to the seemingly confident exterior of others and think they are failing. If that resonates with you there are two things I'd like you to know.

1. YOU ARE NOT ALONE

You are not alone in your self-doubt, in your worry or imposter feelings or in the challenges you face. The other women that you look at in meetings and whom you think have it all sorted - behind the confident exterior, they share many of the same thoughts, feelings and challenges as you do.

2. THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH YOU

You do not need fixing. It is not your fault that your voice isn't being heard. The evidence I've shared above should reassure you that there is a systemic problem with how women are perceived in the workplace, not a problem with you.

There are practical strategies you can use to turn down the volume on your negative self-talk, worry less about work, stop holding yourself to ridiculously high standards and deal with the tough days where you feel overwhelmed.

Once you are seeing yourself as the leader you are, it's time to think about how you're coming across to other people and learn how to step into your authority so that you are seen as a leader by others too. Society teaches women to be much more comfortable taking responsibility than claiming authority and this can often trip women up as they progress in their careers. I encourage women leaders to be really intentional about how they are perceived and to develop a style of leadership that feels both authentic and powerful.

My vision is to support more women to lead their way, redefining what leadership looks like and recognising the strengths that women bring to the workplace. ■

CARLA MILLER is a leadership coach, trainer and keynote speaker who supports employers to develop and retain their female talent, build their pipeline of female leaders and encourage male allyship. She hosts the chart-topping Influence and Impact podcast for female leaders. Her book, *Closing the Influence Gap: A practical guide for women leaders who want to be heard* is published by Practical Inspiration Publishing.

FROM THE UK



BY CARLA MILLER

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