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# What are Organizational and Cultural Barriers in the Workplace to Women Advancing to the C-Suite?

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# What are Organizational and Cultural Barriers in the Workplace to Women Advancing to the C-Suite?

## **Abstract**

Although gender diversity in the workplace has been a “hot topic” and corporate priority for many years, women’s participation in the labor market has not significantly increased since 1990. Today, women are underrepresented in organizations across the United States and globally, and the gender disparity in the pipeline proves greatest at senior leadership levels. This executive summary focuses on the organizational and social barriers that hinder women’s career advancement as well as strategies for addressing these obstacles.

## **Keywords**

human resources, women in the workplace, C-suite, cultural barriers, organizational barriers, diversity, inclusion, labor market, gender disparity, social barriers, good old boy, culture, minorities, senior level positions, role models, sponsorship, social capital, senior management, talent management, leadership development, work life balance, gender diversity, gender bias, training, unconscious bias, performance management, leadership model

## **Comments**

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**Question: What are organizational and cultural barriers in the workplace to women advancing to the C-Suite?****Introduction**

Although gender diversity in the workplace has been a “hot topic” and corporate priority for many years, women’s participation in the labor market has not significantly increased since 1990. Today, women are underrepresented in organizations across the United States and globally, and the gender disparity in the pipeline proves greatest at senior leadership levels. This executive summary focuses on the organizational and social barriers that hinder women’s career advancement as well as strategies for addressing these obstacles.

**Women in the Workplace**

The benefits of women in the workplace are clear. Women bring diverse perspectives and experiences which can prompt creativity, stability and resilience within organizations. This supports a company’s ability to innovate products and services that drive the bottom line<sup>i</sup>. Despite these benefits, studies reveal that women are promoted 30% less than men during early career stages, and women spend more time on average in the same role than men. Additionally, women are less likely to receive feedback, have access to senior level sponsors, and negotiate for promotions and salary raises.<sup>ii</sup>

**Organizational Barriers**

Three organizational barriers emerge as most critical for impeding women’s career advancement:

1. ***Non-inclusive work environment and culture*** These situations are characterized by the following: a) women are the numerical minority, b) there is a male-dominated, “good old boy” culture and diversity is not explicitly valued, and c) there is a lack of flexibility (very conservative and non-consensus).<sup>iii</sup> Together, these factors result in situational/cultural stereotype threat cues that decrease women’s motivation and engagement.<sup>iv</sup> Additionally, because women are not reaching senior level positions, junior women are suffering from lack of role models and lack of female sponsors/advocates with influencing power (i.e., social capital).<sup>v</sup>
2. ***Unequal development opportunities*** Research shows that, during early career stages, women are less likely to participate in important meetings and be assigned to challenging projects. Similarly, women in senior management roles have more than 20% less of an opportunity than men to receive critical feedback, and fewer opportunities to interact with company leaders.<sup>vi</sup>
3. ***Heightened stress and pressure*** 60% of women in the technology industry indicated stress and pressure as the primary reason why they are not pursuing top executive roles.<sup>vii</sup> Per the “glass cliff phenomenon,” women are far more likely to be appointed CEO of a struggling firm or receive promotions during times of crisis, restructuring or performance declines. As a result, women tend to take greater risks in order to prove credibility and leadership capacity.<sup>viii</sup> While taking greater risks can sometimes provide growth opportunities, it is more likely that, for young women, it will result in the challenging obstacle of more stress and pressure.<sup>ix</sup>

### Social Barriers: "Opting Out"

Organizational barriers work in tandem with social barriers to prevent women from successfully advancing in their careers. While most women aspire to be promoted, only 40% of women aspire towards the most senior levels of the organization.<sup>x</sup> Even when women desire these roles, only 24% of women (as opposed to 32% of men) believe it is likely that they will achieve them.<sup>xi</sup> There are several reasons why women may choose to leave the workforce, or “opt out.” Popular media depicts *familial obligations* as the prime motivation; because women tend to be more relational than men, they often leave the workforce to care for children or elderly parents.<sup>xii</sup> Additionally, they may leave the workforce because *a spouse’s job has been relocated*.<sup>xiii</sup> However, to distill the issue down to familial obligations is a simplified explanation, especially because women and men both cite work and family balance as a major area for concern.<sup>xiv</sup> *Women’s reasons for leaving the workforce are complex* and the Kaleidoscope Careers framework demonstrates how careers are impacted by changing personal needs and interests. With three outlined factors shaping career decisions -- authenticity, balance and challenge -- Cabrera argues that women begin careers with an emphasis on challenge, and move towards valuing balance over time.<sup>xv</sup>

### Solutions

***Build the business case for gender diversity*** Using data and storytelling, companies should communicate the benefits that greater gender diversity has for individual employees, customers, the company and society in general.<sup>xvi</sup> For example, greater gender equality can save financial and brand costs by avoiding discrimination lawsuits.<sup>xvii</sup> Specifically, it is important to engage middle managers with hiring responsibilities<sup>xviii</sup> as well as senior leaders (e.g., the CEO<sup>xix</sup>) who can role model a commitment to gender diversity and equality.<sup>xx</sup>

***Address gender biases through employee training*** To combat bias, employees can be educated on unconscious bias<sup>xxi</sup> and how it influences decision making with regards to talent planning (e.g., hiring, promotions, etc.) and performance management.<sup>xxii</sup> Additionally, companies can reinforce training material with aligned communication and behaviors by leaders; as such, the true effectiveness of training often lies in continuing the learning process after the training is over.<sup>xxiii</sup>

***Drive the change for inclusive culture*** To counter a long history of emphasizing masculine-typed competencies, companies can develop and adopt a new leadership model to create standards for evaluation and communicate company values. This refreshed leadership model should highlight female-typed traits such as priority-setting, delegating, growing talent, collaborating, communicating through complex layers and having a global mindset.<sup>xxiv</sup> A model as such would expand the company’s profile of success to include traits that are inherent strengths for both men and women.

### Conclusion

Understanding organizational and social barriers is helpful for diagnosing the current state of women's career advancement within organizations. Continuous and special attention paid to the business case, development programs and culture will enable organizations to shape workplaces that support women leaders. Women, in turn, add value to the business by bringing diverse perspectives and skill sets.

<b>Appendix</b>
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Suggested Further Reading*Opting Back In*

- Lovejoy, M., & Stone, P. (2012). Opting Back In: The Influence of Time at Home on Professional Women's Career Redirection after Opting Out. *Gender, Work & Organization* (6), pp. 631-653.
- Herman, C. (2015). Rebooting and Rerouting: Women's Articulations of Frayed Careers in Science, Engineering and Technology Professions. *Gender, Work & Organization* (4), pp. 324-338.

*Specific Implications/Experiences for Women of Color*

- Bagati, Deepali. (2009). Women of Color Continue to Face Barriers in U.S. Law Firms, According to Catalyst Report. *Diversity Factor* (3), pp. 1-7.
- Page 8 of McKinsey Report

Additional Solutions

McKinsey highlights the additional strategies:

- *Ensure that hiring, promotions, and reviews are fair* by employing practices such as blind resume reviews.
- *Focus on accountability and results* by developing, implementing and judging leader performance against metrics and targets related to representation of women.

CAHRS highlights the additional strategies:

- *Adopt flexible working arrangements* for both female and male employees such as flex-time, job sharing, telecommuting, adoption benefits and on-site child care as well as provide health and wellness benefits such as on-site yoga and meditation classes.
- *Give women more job opportunities* by positioning them closer to the business through stretch assignments, line management positions and international experience.
- *Give women a network* to support career advancement through the introduction of networking events, employee resource groups (ERGs) and sponsorship programs.

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- <sup>v</sup> Cabrera, E.F. (2007). Opting out and opting in: understanding the complexities of women's career transitions. *Career Development International* (12), pp. 218-237.
- <sup>vi</sup> McKinsey & Company. Women in the Workplace 2016. Retrieved from <https://womenintheworkplace.com/>
- <sup>vii</sup> McKinsey & Company. Women in the Workplace 2016. Retrieved from <https://womenintheworkplace.com/>
- <sup>viii</sup> Glass, C., & Cook, A. (2016). Leading at the top: Understanding women's challenges above the glass ceiling. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(1), 51-63. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.09.003
- <sup>ix</sup> Glass, C., & Cook, A. (2016). Leading at the top: Understanding women's challenges above the glass ceiling. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(1), 51-63. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.09.003
- <sup>x</sup> McKinsey & Company. Women in the Workplace 2016. Retrieved from <https://womenintheworkplace.com/>
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- <sup>xii</sup> Cabrera, E.F. (2007). Opting out and opting in: understanding the complexities of women's career transitions. *Career Development International* (12), pp. 218-237.

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