

Gender inequality: Is it a personality issue?

Are women missing out on promotions because they're worriers and tend to overanalyze? One former HR professional thinks so, but experts say the glass ceiling is about much more than personality differences, finds **John Dujay**

WOMEN AT THE TOP



Four women were among Canada's richest 100 CEOs in 2018, up from three in 2017.



Women held 18.2% of the total board seats among companies providing disclosure for 2019.



Women make up 23.2 per cent of the top one-per-cent earners and 16.5 per cent of the top 0.1-per-cent earners.

Source: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Osler, Statistics Canada

WOMEN who are not being promoted are still banging into the glass ceiling — but it's partly their fault, according to a former HR professional. In her book *Fresh Insights to End the Glass Ceiling*, Nancy Parsons, president of CDR Assessment Group in Stafford, Tex., an assessment and leadership development consultancy, talks about the differences between male and female leaders.

"We were researching risk-factor differences — which are the personality-based risks under conflict, stress and pressure — and then we happened on statistically significant differences between men and women leaders. We found that women tend to be high worriers," she says.

On the other hand, men tended to be more aggressive which serves them well in the corporate world.

"We found that men are egotists, up-stagers and rule breakers; they're more aggressive, while women tend to pull back and over-study, overanalyze," says Parsons.

In the business context, women's tendency to over-think means they are bypassed for higher-level positions, she says.

"They have a fear of failure. When the pressure is on, they analyze it inside of their head and they try to make sure everything's 100-per-cent perfect. Rather than standing up and saying, 'No, I disagree with that,' they freeze and fear and what happens is they're not viewed as 'leader-like'; they're not viewed as courageous under fire or stress."

On the other hand, when it come to men in the corporate world, they don't shut down, says Parsons.

"They could keep communicating, even when things are difficult. They keep pushing their point of view, even under stress, where the women who are just sheer worriers shut down and stop communicating because they're overanalyzing; they have a fear of failure, and they lose the visibility."

Variety of reasons for glass ceiling

When promotions are available, women's attitudes can play a role in who

gets the nod, according to a Toronto employment lawyer.

"Women do have a tendency to what I call deselect themselves. What that means is there's a promotion coming up and you'll see a lot of men go for it, but then you'll see a lot of women who will say, 'Well, I don't know if I'm good enough, I don't know if I have the right experience. I'm just going to wait 'til I'm ready,'" says Kathryn Marshall, an asso-

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"There's that hesitation that a lot of women have that is definitely socialized from an early age. You also see it with things like salary negotiation, there definitely is a social pressure for women to just be more appeasing and wait 'til the opportunities are put on their lap," she says.

"Employers always tell me [they'll] post for an internal job and 95 per cent of the resumés are from men."

But the configuration of the workplace in Canada also plays a big role, according to a gender-equality expert.

"Women make up the majority of part-time workers, and a high amount of minimum-wage earners are women as well. Women have more precarious jobs in Canada and women also have a gender pay gap that they're dealing with.



There's always a gender pay gap — it's about 87 cents on the dollar. We have to just look a little deeper than personality factors as the explanation for something like a ceiling and look at the barriers," says Andrea Gunraj, vice-president of public engagement at the Canadian Women's Foundation in Toronto.

"When I hear the term 'glass ceiling,' I think that's another word for systemic barriers."

The glass ceiling remains in place for a variety of reasons, not just personality differences, according to Brian Rubineau, associate professor and Desautels Faculty scholar at McGill University in Montreal.

"It's not just one mechanism, it's not just one process — there are a broad range of processes at multiple levels that all contribute toward an outcome that goes in the same direction."

In his own research, Rubineau has found that, at the lower levels of an



organization, promotions are easier to come by for women, but “the higher you go up, the harder it is to hire and promote women.”

“The whole idea that most jobs are found by somebody saying, ‘I’m looking for a job, do you know anybody who’s hiring?’ That kind of word-of-mouth recruitment is still the dominant mode of labour-market matching even in the digital age,” he says.

And because men dominate upper management, this contributes to the barriers persisting.

“Our social contacts tend to be similar to ourselves. Men’s social contacts tend to be more male and women’s social contacts tend to be more female,” says Rubineau.

One way human resources departments can correct the imbalance is to reconfigure the promotions process, says Rubineau. Since women tend to feel they need more qualifications com-

pared to men, it’s a good idea for organizations to have an automatic generation of a potential applicant pool for any promotion opportunities, rather than requiring people to put themselves up for the role.

‘Old boys’ club’

The concept of the “old boys’ club” remains stubbornly in place, despite years of fighting against it, says Marshall.

“I practise in employment law and I see tons of cases of workplace harassment, ageism. I can tell you, the old boys’ club is alive and well.”

The gender barrier becomes more apparent as people age, she says.

“Women coming into my office, once they hit age 50, their value plummets as a worker. But if you’re a man, it skyrockets. We may be living in a world of equal pay legislation and feminism and the #MeToo movement, but the stereo-

typical old boys’ club — this is still very much there.”

Many women in their 30s, in their prime earning years, are being discriminated against, says Marshall, “passed over for promotions and paid differently because they’re pregnant or because they recently got married and the assumption is they will be having children soon.”

Another barrier is also caused by the traditional structure of company boards, she says.

“There are not enough women at the top of the corporate structure and real positions of power and influence,” she says.

“If you look at the top law firms, for example, and you look at their top executive structure, you’re going to see overwhelmingly men. There are women, definitely, but the men outnumber the women and that has had an impact

because to succeed in the business world, you do need that mentorship, you do need people helping to open doors for you.” [CHRR](#)

“It’s not just one mechanism, it’s not just one process — there are a broad range of processes at multiple levels that all contribute.”

Brian Rubineau, associate professor at McGill University