

Successful Strategies Against Workplace Sexism

What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know

by Joan C. Williams and Rachel Dempsey. New York and London: New York University Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Keshanti Nandlall

Young women just beginning their careers today often enter workplaces with more women in senior positions than ever before. But Joan C. Williams and Rachel Dempsey argue that, regardless of age or occupation, most of America's working women still face persistent patterns of bias. They have written a book for women of all ages, races and careers to help them identify discriminatory behaviors that they could potentially face on the job and learn appropriate, effective responses that can protect their rights, integrity and career progress. Men can learn a lot from this volume too about the stereotyping of women (for example, when women gather together it is too often assumed mere gossiping) and the mutual benefits they could gain by fighting bias against them.

The book draws on interviews with 127 successful working women, the majority of whom are people of color. Its authors are a Harvard Law grad (Williams) who directs the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California's Hastings College of Law, and her daughter (Dempsey), currently a student at Yale Law School

What Works for Women at Work has a clear writing style and simple structure. After a forward by Anne-Marie Slaughter and an introductory chapter ("It's Not [Always] Your Fault"), the first four parts are about the main patterns of bias that women face in the workplace, followed by suggestions for taking action. The fifth part describes the double standard women of color face in terms of gender discrimination and race discrimination. Part 6 offers insights on the question whether it is more beneficial for one to stay or leave a job in which she experiences discrimination. The final, seventh section has a list of twenty lessons women and men should take away from the book that will help them in combating gender bias in the workplace, as well a conclusion encouraging women and men to jump-start the stalled gender revolution.

The book describes four patterns of discrimination women face in the American workplace today: "Prove It Again;" "The Tightrope;" "The Maternal Wall;" and "The Tug of War." The first requires women to constantly prove their competence, often based on the unstated assumption that whatever an accomplished woman has achieved in her career was by luck, chance, or a man's aid. The evidence provided by the women surveyed indicate that men are judged more on their potential, whereas women are judged on their achievements. According to the nonprofit research organization

Catalyst, males with MBAs earned \$14,000 more if they were at their second post-graduate job, rather than at their first, while comparable female MBAs switching jobs earned far less than those women who would stayed at their first job. This is because a young man with good credentials but little experience is deemed a hiring opportunity, whereas a younger woman is simply viewed as inexperienced. The authors suggest that one way to aid women in combating this sort of bias is by keeping record of their achievements through clients and their own files, thereby proving luck is not the main contributor to their success, but hard work and discipline.

The second pattern, "The Tightrope," forces women to find balance between masculinity and femininity. "Masculine" woman are deemed competent, but lacking emotional intelligence, whereas more feminine woman judged as having low competence, but are treated kindly and not taken seriously. As a result, one is either seen as a Queen Bee or a Doormat. "In an experiment given to students by their professor at Stanford Business School, the students looked at a case study of two individuals who were both competent and accomplished, except one was a man and the other a woman. The class deemed Heidi to be more selfish, and therefore less hireable." This may explain why a woman who viewed as more masculine is less desirable as a potential employee, despite the similar success of both people. On the flip side, those women who are more feminine are looked down upon and are less likely to receive work that pushes them forward in their careers. Either be liked but not respected, or be respected but not liked.

The third pattern, "The Maternal Wall," pushes mothers to be at home with their children rather than work. The Maternal Wall causes a drop in women's labor force participation, due to a decrease in their promotional opportunities, or their workload becoming too much for them. Employers immediately see young women as likely to have children, making them perceived as risky long-term hires. Those expected to interrupt their job duties with more frequent parental leaves will be offered fewer training or promotional opportunities than a man of the same age. Finally, there are the women who have succeeded in having successful careers and raising their children, but are deemed as freaks of nature due to their success. In a study by sociologists, "when subjects were given identical resumes, one but not the other being a mother, non-mothers received 2.1 times as many callbacks as

equally qualified mothers and were recommended for hire 1.8 time more frequently than mothers." In this case, the motherhood penalty is clearly seen in employer preferences for hiring non-mothers. In addressing this issue, Williams suggests working closely with ones' mentor or supervisors so that those women who go on maternity leave can re-enter the workforce with an integration plan to help them move along with their careers rather than stay stagnant.

The fourth pattern, "The Tug of War," leads some women to defend themselves and their own strategies, meanwhile condemning others. This is seen in the constant disagreement between women who consider themselves as "one of the guys," against other women with conflicting ideals. For instance, there are a group of five women, one of whom goes along with her male coworkers and their antics of visiting strip clubs and making obscene jokes, thus the men accept the one woman, all the while complaining about the other four women who do not agree with the actions of the men as well as the other woman. This, in return creates internal conflict between the women of the business, hurting the entire group of women in the process. One study shows that "women are less likely to be stereotyped if they make-up at least 25 percent of a group. When women make up less than 20 percent of a group, their performance evaluations are significantly lower than men's, meanwhile when they are more than 50 percent of a group, their performance evaluations exceed men's." When there are more women in a group setting, the need for competing with one another fades and more natural work arrangements are instilled in the workplace. One of the maneuvers to ease this is to speak to the other women of the office and connect with them, thereby empowering each other and at the same time, working together to exterminate the stereotype of catfights, when in actuality there is just a small disagreement.

The Williams and Dempsey book usefully describes the varied work experiences of women of all ages, the biases that too many of them still face, and methods to ease the burden of discrimination and to advance in their careers. The advice given alongside the data will be plausible to many women, allowing them to be as adaptable as chameleons in order to succeed. At the same time, the approach of many of the authors arguably reflects a rather libertarian view in which women are encouraged to build careers by making their lives

in both the home and the office more comfortable, all the while drowning the prejudices and stereotypes so threatening to them.

In conclusion, What Works for Women at Work is an exceptional read that is eye-opening in the many ways women face bias in the workplace, whether due to their looks, personality, drive or even biases against one another. The data that accompanies the main arguments illuminate what women can do to help their progress in diverse work situations. Given how long and hard is the typical struggle to change the minds of the many, the authors suggest that one is better off starting the changes within oneself in order to jump start the needed revolution. The revolution in question is the fight for women to receive, not just equal pay, but equal opportunities in their career and their advancement to the top, regardless of their personality, their dress, or their having, or lack of, children. For those who want to compete, the world should not push them out of the running just because tradition says otherwise. To hell with tradition, do what one feels is right, and make ones' own choices. Women do not need to hate one another in order to make themselves fit in, nor should they have to deal with the horrible behavior of others just because they are wrongly seen as incompetent. This book does an amazing job of showcasing that, and as such, is a highly recommended read to anyone, regardless of race, age, and yes, even gender.

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