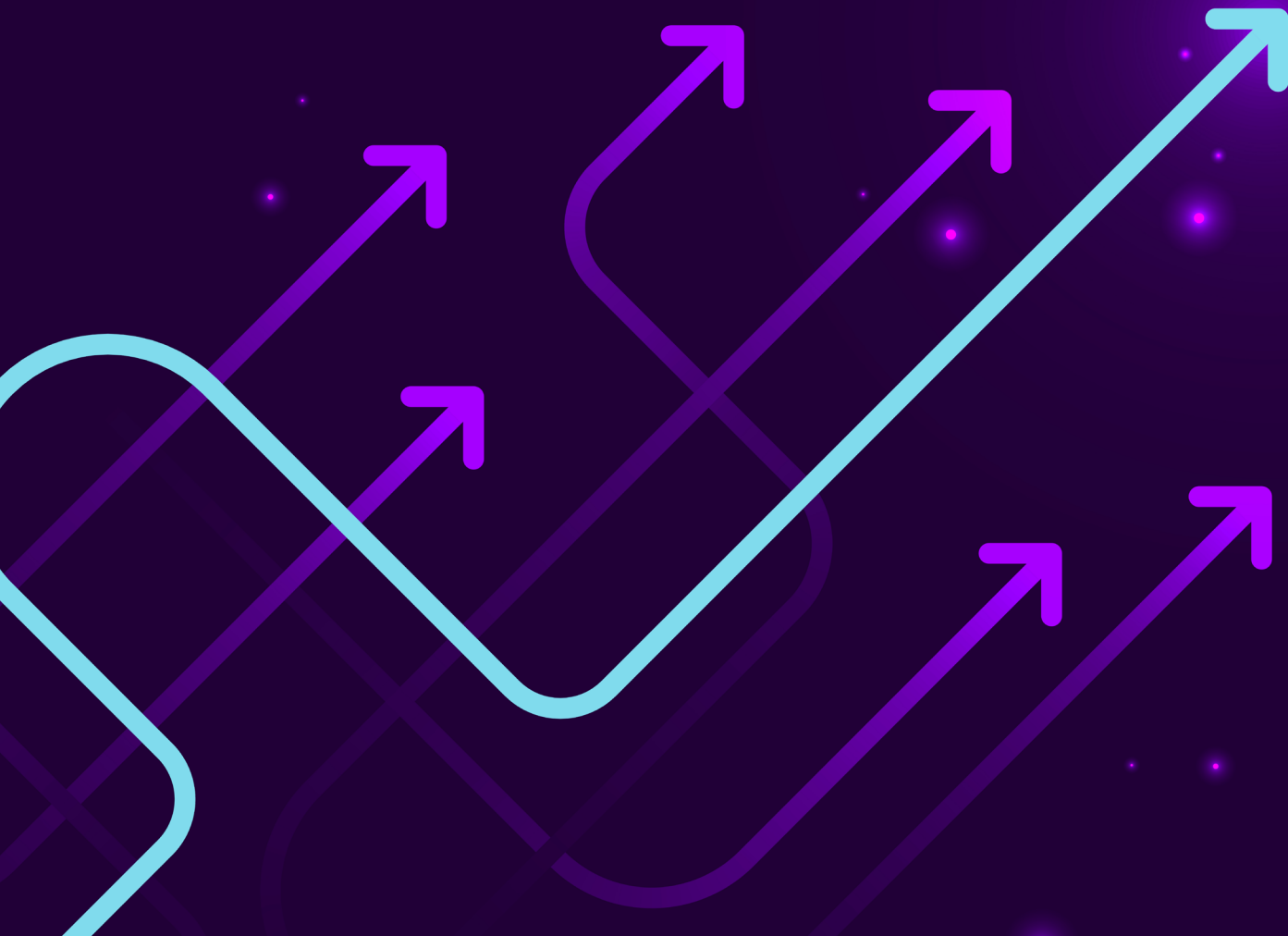# Balancing the Boardroom

NAVIGATING THE PATH TO EQUITABLE LEADERSHIP

Introduction

"I never dreamed of success — I worked for it."

Much liked famed businesswoman Estée Lauder, to whom this quote is attributed, women in today's workforce aren't just dreaming of high-powered roles — they're going for them.

In fact, 59% of women in leadership roles currently have their sights set on the C-suite, while half (50%) dream of securing a place on a corporate board.

Yet for some, a gap exists between ambition and attainability, with only 63% of women who aspire to join the most senior corporate ranks saying they feel it's realistically achievable within their current organization — compared to 82% of men who said the same.

It's no secret that we have a representation problem in the modern workplace, especially at the highest levels of power. The narrative most commonly used to explain this ties back to women's greater average share of family responsibilities, which certainly tips the scales out of balance — but it doesn't begin to tell the whole story.

It's not just about juggling board meetings and bedtime stories, or who does the dishes and daycare drop-off. The real challenge runs deeper, rooted in messages we've all been hearing since we were kids. These signals to young girls about where they fit in the world echo well into adulthood, quietly chipping away at the confidence needed to stand tall in rooms where decisions are made.

When asked if they had the essential qualities needed to succeed in the highest corporate ranks (i.e. business acumen, dedication, leadership skills) the answers from our panel were telling. While men and women believed roughly equally that they have what it takes in terms of dedication and leadership skills, the question of acumen — of having the "right stuff" to make those tough calls at the top — reveals a surprising divide.

Men were 17% more likely than women to express confidence in their business acumen, highlighting a gap that begs the question: What is driving this disparity in confidence, and how can leaders striving for a more balanced boardroom begin to effect positive change?
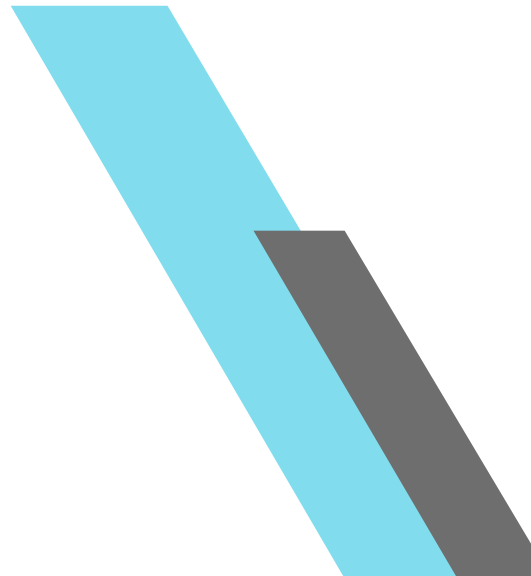
Age of Ambition

Gen Z is charging the gates of the corporate fortress with unmatched ambition: this group was **14%** more likely than their older peers to be aiming for the C-suite and **36%** more likely to be eyeing an eventual spot on a corporate board.
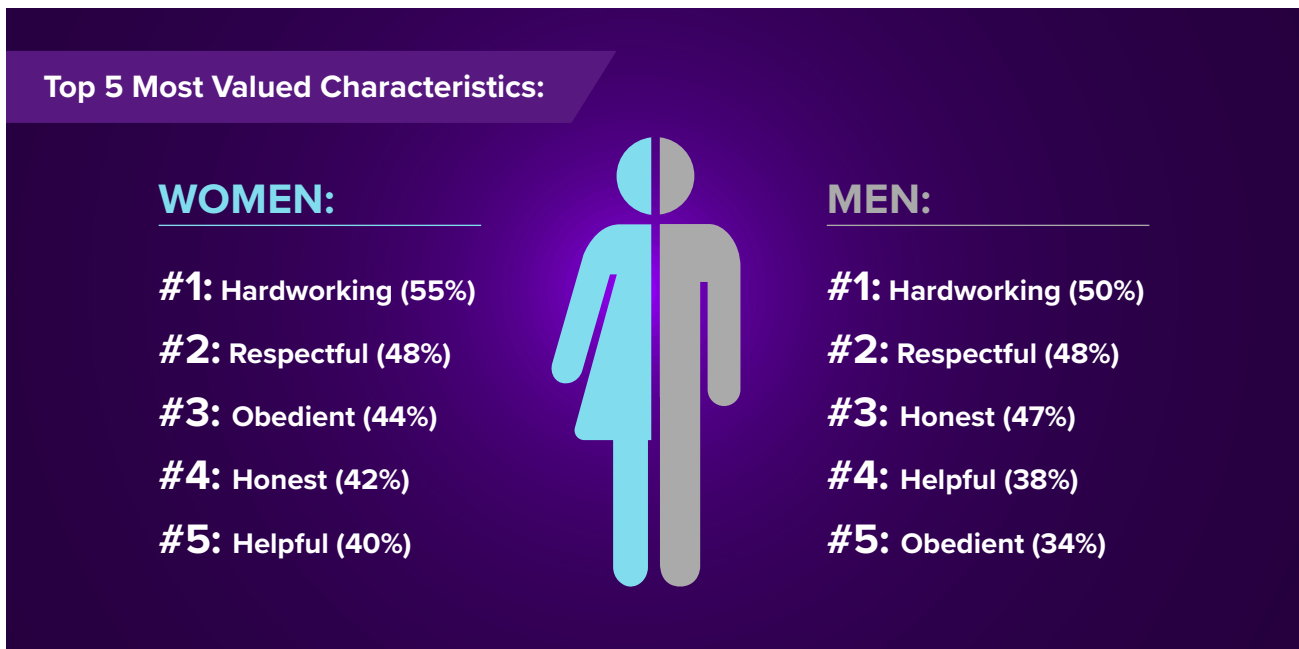
At the same time, this group was **47%** more likely than average to feel they wouldn't be able to attain this goal in their current company, indicating a potentially pressing need for today's corporate leadership to nurture and make space for this generation's ambitions.

Smiling More

To understand the factors at play, we need to begin with the earliest influence on us all: childhood. The messages we receive during these formative years lay the groundwork for how we perceive ourselves and our roles in society. And interestingly, when exploring what it meant to be a well-behaved or "good" child growing up, the divergence in societal expectations for boys and girls is starkly evident.

When asked the top five qualities that were valued in their household growing up, women in leadership recall a childhood where being "hardworking" (55%), "respectful" (48%), and "obedient" (44%) topped the list of virtues.

The most commonly prized qualities in men weren't wildly different, with one glaring exception:

Top 5 Most Valued Characteristics:

WOMEN:

#1: Hardworking (55%)

#2: Respectful (48%)

#3: Obedient (44%)

#4: Honest (42%)

#5: Helpful (40%)

MEN:

#1: Hardworking (50%)

#2: Respectful (48%)

#3: Honest (47%)

#4: Helpful (38%)

#5: Obedient (34%)

While men and women were encouraged to be hardworking, respectful, honest, and helpful in roughly equal numbers, women were 29% more likely to say obedience was expected of them.

A deeper dive reveals further differences:

Men were **267%** more likely than women to say they were encouraged to be "brave"

Women were **100%** more likely than men to say they were encouraged to be "quiet" or "submissive"

Men were **62%** more likely than women to say they were encouraged to be "confident"

Women were **48%** more likely than men to say they were encouraged to be "agreeable"

This extreme variance in childhood messaging highlights a significant societal directive — one where the encouragement of compliance over assertiveness potentially begins to narrow the professional paths accessible to women.

Echoes of Childhood

Women were **55%** more likely than men to say they often heard the phrase "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar" growing up.

They were also **94%** more likely than men to say they were often told they should "smile more" — over half (55%) of men have never been told this.

Men were **88%** more likely than women to say they were never told "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" growing up.
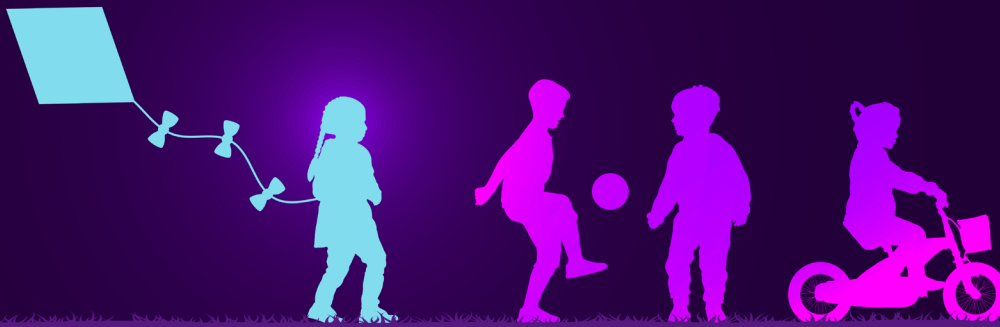
These differences underscore a societal preference for sweetness over substance from women, starting at an early age and leading to potential discomfort as they transition into corporate life, where assertiveness is admired and very often rewarded.

In fact, within our panel, those who described their personal communication style as "direct and assertive" over "empathetic and collaborative" were 33% more likely than average to hold jobs at VP level or higher.

But of course, societal messaging doesn't lose its influence after childhood, nor does society stop selectively delivering messages according to gender. As we grow into adulthood, the echoes of these early lessons persist — and those impressed upon to be agreeable above all else can become easy targets for unsavory behavior, even in the workplace.

Remarkably, nearly half (47%) of women in leadership roles report that they've received unprofessional comments about their appearance in a professional setting, making them 88% more likely to experience this than men and hinting at the broader challenge of being taken seriously on merit alone.

Unfortunately, this treatment extends beyond comments to considerably more distressing encounters. Over a third of women in leadership have had a mentor (36%) or a boss (40%) make unwanted advances toward them in a workplace setting, making them over 150% more likely than men to have experienced these intrusions.

Penalizing Parents

The professional landscape presents additional hurdles for women balancing family and career, given that they are quite often the "default parent" at home. Women were 143% more likely than men to say they've had to pass up a valuable professional opportunity due to childcare responsibilities. And men were 26% more likely to say that when there is a conflict of professional responsibilities with their partner, their career takes precedence by default.

51% of women in leadership positions who have children say they've been questioned about their ability to balance family and professional responsibilities when applying for a job or promotion, compared to only 33% of men with children. And this heightened scrutiny can translate into tangible career setbacks.

30% of women with children say their employers pressured them to take accommodations (such as reducing hours or workload, or taking on less difficult projects) upon returning to work post-parenthood, nearly double the rate among men with children (16%).

The majority (73%) of those who were pressured to take such accommodations confessed that it was difficult to regain their previous career momentum afterward, regardless of gender.

Not-So-Fun Facts

Women were **TWICE as likely** as men to say they were passed over for a promotion while they were on parental leave.

Black or African-American women were **29%** more likely than average to have experienced this.
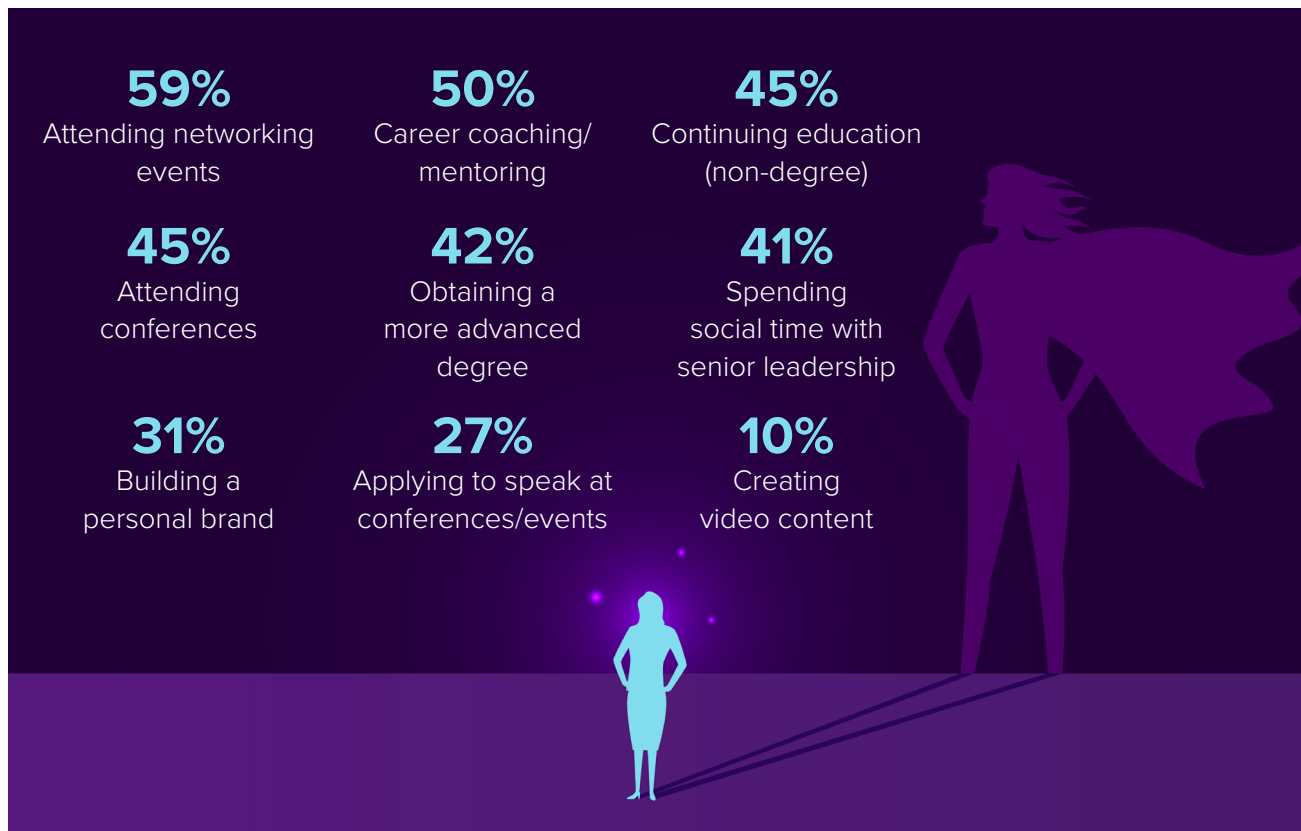
Girls Just Wanna Have Influence

In the pursuit of leadership and influence, actions speak louder than words. Our data sheds light on the proactive steps women are taking to elevate their careers — and the disproportionate challenges they face along the way.
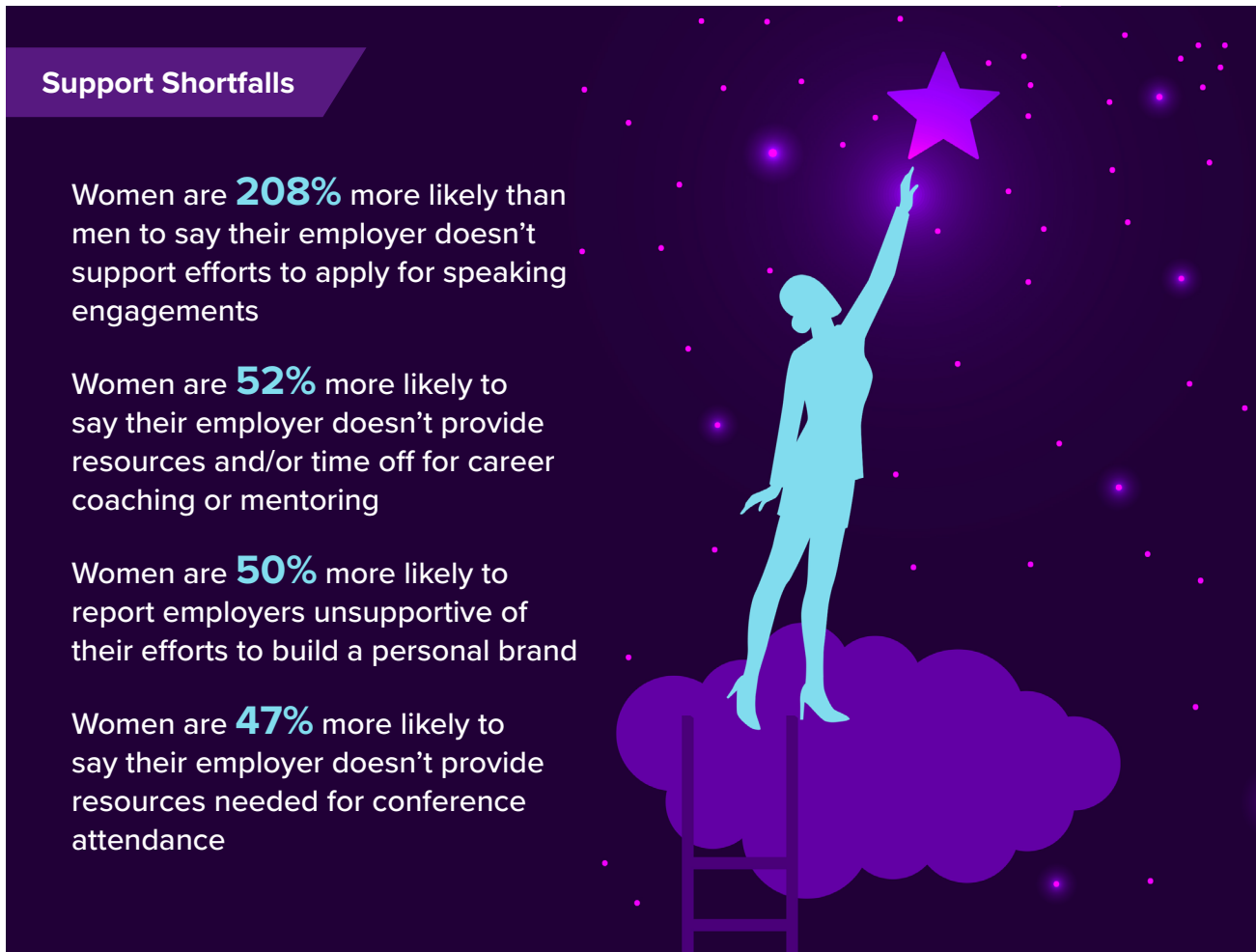
We asked business leaders to outline the activities they felt would be most beneficial to their career ambitions:

59%
Attending networking events

50%
Career coaching/ mentoring

45%
Continuing education (non-degree)

45%
Attending conferences

42%
Obtaining a more advanced degree

41%
Spending social time with senior leadership

31%
Building a personal brand

27%
Applying to speak at conferences/events

10%
Creating video content

For the activities they felt would be useful, we dug deeper into the frequency with which they're engaging in each. Interestingly, while men and women engage in most of these activities at comparable rates, specific barriers seem to disproportionately impact women's participation.

For instance, despite the perceived value, women were 21% more likely than men to have never applied for a speaking slot at a conference or event, underlining a significant gap in public representation and professional visibility. In a data point that may be corollary, those raised with an emphasis on being "quiet" (a group in which women are overrepresented by a ratio of 2:1) were 57% less likely than average to say they've recently applied to speak at a conference/event.

Disparities extend well beyond personal action into the realm of tangible employer support, in the form of resources and/or time away from regular duties. Women report less support from their employers for career-building endeavors nearly across the board. But perhaps most telling is their 208% greater likelihood to report a lack of employer support for applying to speak at conferences, a critical platform for thought leadership and industry influence.

Support Shortfalls

Women are **208%** more likely than men to say their employer doesn't support efforts to apply for speaking engagements

Women are **52%** more likely to say their employer doesn't provide resources and/or time off for career coaching or mentoring

Women are **50%** more likely to report employers unsupportive of their efforts to build a personal brand

Women are **47%** more likely to say their employer doesn't provide resources needed for conference attendance

This imbalance can be felt both inside and outside the office, with women in leadership 42% more likely than their male counterparts to report a spouse or partner who isn't supportive of professional opportunities involving after hours work.

The data also uncovers a more nuanced aspect of professional development: socialization with senior leadership. Women report a stark disconnect in social opportunities, with 41% confessing that when such opportunities occur, they often take place in settings that feel inaccessible or alienating. Another 21% report that no such opportunities exist at all.

This sense of exclusion from golfing trips and late-night drinks not only limits networking prospects, but further solidifies the gender divide in corporate culture.

The Social Divide

Women are **62%** more likely than men to report a complete absence of social opportunities with senior leadership

Men are **13%** more likely than women to report spending time socially with senior leadership within the last 3 months

" We have company 'hangs' at our CEO's house to socialize in a non-office setting, but what's challenging outside of these provided times is that the entirety of senior leadership is male and older. I know that they often socialize together, but I've never gotten the invite and don't think I ever will given that I am a younger woman. They occasionally invite younger male managers."

The Sound of Bias

Some disparities in the workplace aren't as tangible as being left out of social opportunities or not being able to expense conference travel; instead, they can take the form of subtle differences in the way our interactions are perceived by those around us. The way we speak and are heard in the workplace isn't just about conveying information; it's a key factor in shaping our professional identities and influencing our career trajectories.

Despite the stereotypical male reputation for direct and assertive communication, the majority of both men (64%) and women (74%) see themselves as more "empathetic and collaborative" when given a choice between the two, with men 38% more likely to identify as "direct and assertive."

However, the gaps become more evident when we look at the feedback they receive from others. 38% of women who adopt a more direct demeanor feel their coworkers see them more negatively than they do men with a similarly direct style of communication.

The comparison data appears to validate this suspicion. Women who identified as assertive were 50% more likely to have been told they were "too aggressive" and 68% more likely to have been told they were "too intimidating" than men who identified themselves the same way. Incidentally, men were a whopping 74% more likely than women to say they've never been told *either* of these things.

These insights expose the double standard applied to women's assertiveness and highlight the critical need for a shift in corporate culture — one where women can lead authentically, without conforming to a narrow set of expectations.

Intersectional Interactions

Those of East Asian heritage with a direct/assertive communication style face a heightened challenge, being **72% more likely** to be deemed "too aggressive"
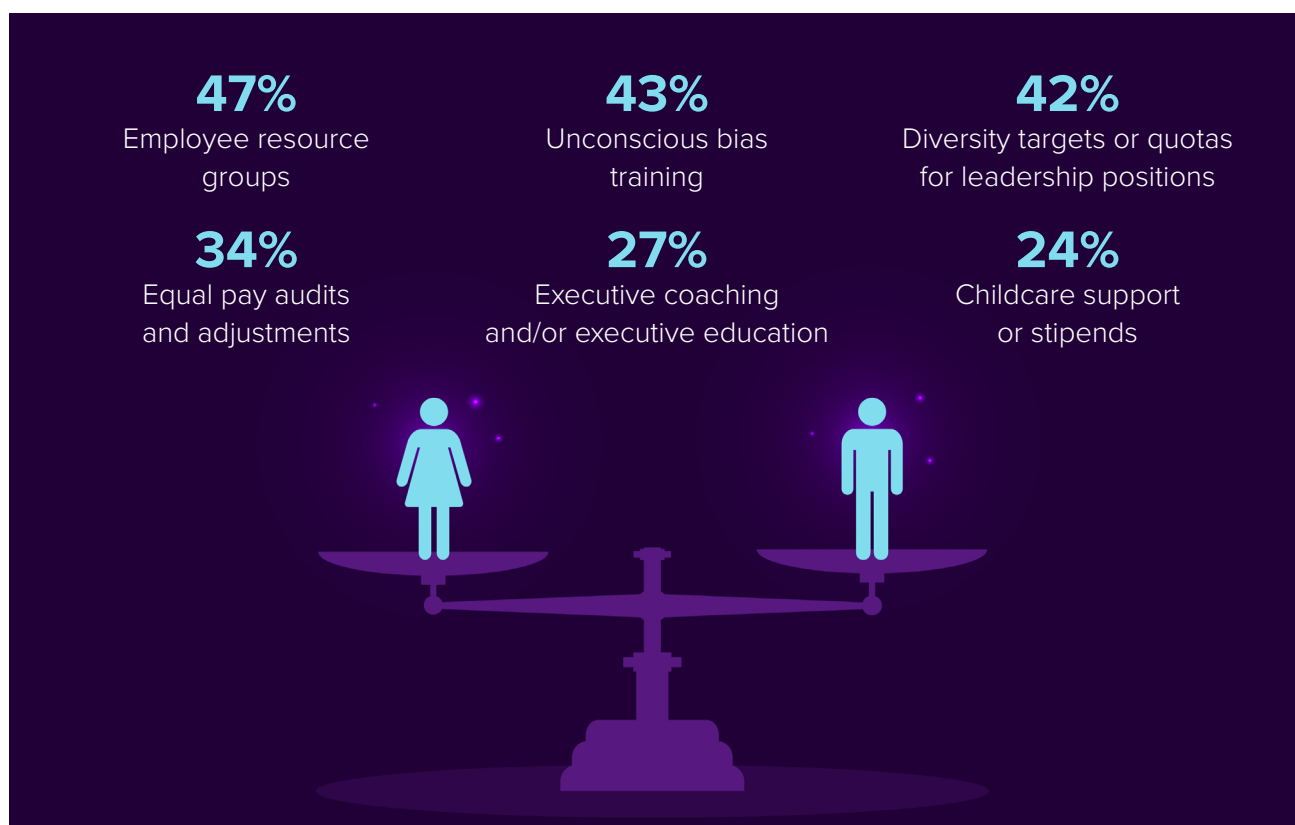
The Ripple Effect

In their efforts to level the playing field, some companies are doing more than just stepping up to the plate — they're completely rewriting the rulebook. 38% of business leaders say their companies have taken innovative measures to improve gender parity in the workplace, but it's noteworthy that men were 16% more likely to say this than women. This gap in perception may suggest a lack of clear organizational visibility into such efforts — or perhaps the differing standards by which progress is measured.

The most common measures our panelists said their companies have already implemented include:

47%
Employee resource groups

43%
Unconscious bias training

42%
Diversity targets or quotas for leadership positions

34%
Equal pay audits and adjustments

27%
Executive coaching and/or executive education

24%
Childcare support or stipends

Not all industries are moving at the same pace: for example, business leaders working in tech were 47% more likely than average to say their company has implemented equal pay audits. And there is plenty of other excellent progress being made in the corporate world that we can amplify and emulate.

When asked about the most creative solutions they've seen applied to improving gender equity in the workplace, at their own company or another, our panel had some fantastic insights to share:

Making Strides

"One innovative approach I've seen is implementing blind hiring processes that anonymize applicant information to mitigate unconscious biases and promote gender equality in recruitment."

"My firm offers the same amount of leave to fathers as they do to mothers. This may allow a father to take time to care for a young baby while his wife returns to work or seeks resources/help/enables the mom to share the responsibilities of having a new baby in the house—even when she is not the one employed at the firm. Our firm supports whole families."

"A specific training program focusing on women in technology. Women in the company were permitted to apply throughout the company and were paid to undergo training. Upon completion they were given positions in technology within the company."

"Beyond training and education for unconscious bias, ensuring that pay is appropriate has been the best solution that I have seen. I don't know that I would call it creative, but I would consider it most effective to have an impact on what a person is earning."

"Blind interviews, where the candidate is completely obscured until selected. That way no one knows the gender, race, age, etc until a choice is made."

"My company has a majority (sic) women and has recently implemented an annual pay equity review and compensation report as part of our review/promotion/merit increase/bonus cycle."

86% of women and 70% of men say they would be more likely to apply or accept a role with a company if there was no gender disparity evident on the leadership team.

Improving the situation doesn't necessarily mean reinventing the wheel. A lot of the most effective methods to improve gender parity go back to basics. Women agreed that the most effective ways organizations can promote equality include enforcement of zero tolerance policies against discrimination and harassment (65%), keeping a flexible work environment (61%), and implementation of transparent salary and promotion practices (60%).

No matter how forward-thinking their policies, leaders who rely on a "do as I say, not as I do" mentality might find employees don't feel comfortable taking advantage of them: half of women say one of the most effective ways organizations can promote gender equality is to ensure senior employees set a good example when it comes to work/life balance.

Whatever the decided approach, striving for equity is the right thing to do. But it's also good for business, and those who ignore half the population are risking both brand reputation and access to top talent.

86% of women and 70% of men say they would be more likely to apply or accept a role with a company if there was no gender disparity evident on the leadership team. This trend continues with board representation, where 82% of women and 68% of men say they're more likely to join companies that showcase gender balance at the top.

Furthermore, a company's commitment to gender equity significantly influences perceptions of their innovativeness and forward-thinking: 84% of women and 67% of men say they associate visible gender equity efforts with innovation.

Equally important is the role of gender diversity in enhancing professional events. An impressive 82% of women and 57% of men state they are more likely to attend conferences where women are well-represented on the speaking roster, highlighting a shared, if quite uneven, appreciation for diverse perspectives in thought leadership and industry dialogue.

While this data shows a substantial and encouraging base of support among men for the principle of equality, it's also clear that women still disproportionately bear the burden of advocacy. The gap in engagement and perception between men and women underscores the need for men to participate just as actively and passionately in gender equity initiatives as their female counterparts.
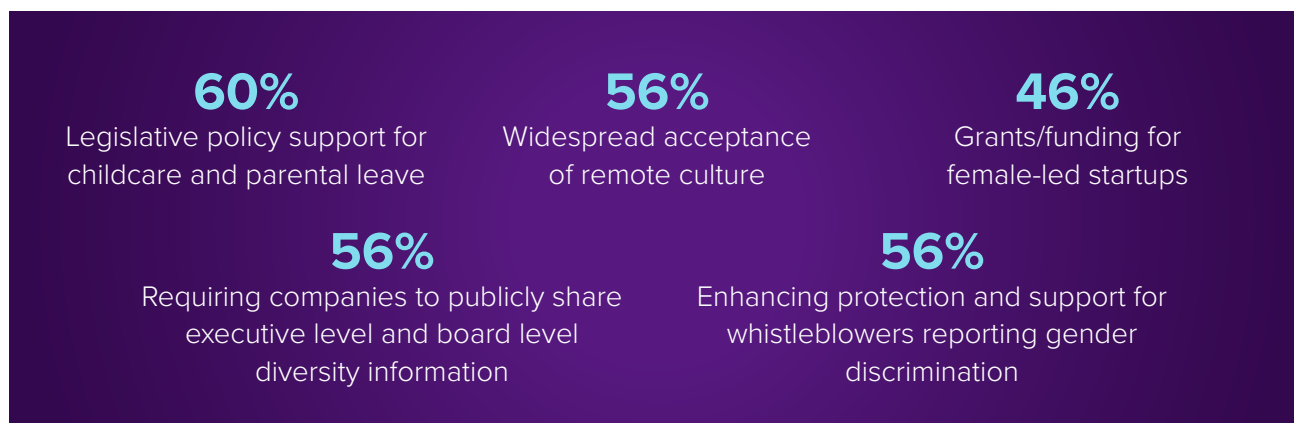
When There Are Nine

Supreme Court Justice and feminist pioneer Ruth Bader Ginsburg famously said, when asked when there would be enough women on the Supreme Court, "When there are nine." She went on to explain that people were frequently shocked when she said this, but that there had often been nine men, and nobody had ever asked questions.

We still have a lot of work to do before we find gender equity, much less what Justice Ginsburg envisioned, as the norm across the executive teams and boards of the corporate landscape. But exactly how much?

Our survey asked business leaders to predict how long it will take before women make up at least half of executive team and corporate board representation. Optimistically, 16% of women believe it could happen within 5 years, with a more significant portion, 30%, estimating it within a decade. Men's responses were even more hopeful, with 22% seeing this milestone achievable in 5 years or fewer.

That doesn't mean we should collectively sit around and wait, however — there is plenty of work to be done within local, regional, national, and global communities to speed up the process. Women agree that the most impactful societal steps toward advancing this goal would include:

60% Legislative policy support for childcare and parental leave	**56%** Widespread acceptance of remote culture	**46%** Grants/funding for female-led startups
56% Requiring companies to publicly share executive level and board level diversity information	**56%** Enhancing protection and support for whistleblowers reporting gender discrimination	

And in a possibly cliché but painfully accurate expression most of us have heard before, getting ahead is partially about what you do and partially about who you know. This puts those responsible for holding networking events such as conferences, workshops, and meetups in a unique position to facilitate equal access to the power of networking.

Women pointed to highlighting female speakers (63%) and ensuring a safe environment (62%) as the most impactful actions to increase female attendance and participation at conferences and networking events. Other significant steps include offering scholarships for women (49%), partnering with women's organizations (58%), and providing childcare onsite (57%).

And it's not just about filling seats with more women, it's also about who's speaking when the mic goes live: 82% of women say they are more likely to attend an event if women are well-represented on the speaking roster. Event planners who want to see a healthy bottom line should take note.

Conclusion

There are crystal clear indications that the future is fiercely inclusive, and that companies getting creative with tackling gender disparity are doing much more than just ticking diversity boxes. They're setting themselves apart as trailblazers, and in the long run, they'll win all the way from the top of the brand funnel to the business' bottom line.

The most innovative leaders of today aren't content to wait on the cusp of change — they're ready to architect it themselves, rolling up shirtsleeves and building workplaces where equality is no longer a lofty goal, but the very ground we walk on.

ABOUT KICKSTAND

Kickstand is a global marketing agency specializing in support of high growth technology brands. Offering a data-first approach to PR and services that include media and analyst relations, research, content, crisis communications, and influencer marketing, Kickstand helps build well-defended market leaders in some of today's most innovative industries including mobility, robotics, AI, cybersecurity, fintech, insurtech, supply chain and logistics, sales and marketing tech, and ecommerce. For more information about our approach and how we help brands scale and successfully exit, visit **www.meetkickstand.com**

ABOUT WEDNESDAY WOMEN

Wednesday Women is a company dedicated to raising visibility for executive women leaders on social media and beyond (keynotes, panels, and podcasts). It is the trusted resource for tech-savvy professionals and top-tier companies to learn about, celebrate, and be inspired by women execs — without demanding more of the women themselves. Follow Wednesday Women on LinkedIn (or at **wednesdaywomen.org**) for weekly featured leaders, events, and more.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY
The Balancing the Boardroom survey was conducted between February 14 - 20, 2024. Kickstand surveyed a total of 622 office workers (defined as doing at least 75% of daily work on a computer) employed full-time in a management role or higher. The study was conducted at 95% confidence with a +/- 4% margin of error. The most populous industry representation was seen from — but was in no way limited to — healthcare and pharmaceuticals, technology/IT, education and academia, finance and banking, and retail/ecommerce.