

Women in the workplace 2017



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More companies are committing to gender equality. But progress will remain slow unless we confront blind spots on diversity—particularly regarding women of color, and employee perceptions of the status quo.



Women remain underrepresented at every level in corporate America, despite earning more college degrees than men for 30 years and counting. There is a pressing need to do more, and most organizations realize this: company commitment to gender diversity is at an all-time high for the third year in a row.

Despite this commitment, progress continues to be too slow—and may even be stalling. *Women in the Workplace 2017*, a study conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, looks more deeply at why, drawing on data from 222 companies employing more than 12 million people, as well as on a survey of over 70,000 employees and a series of qualitative interviews. One of the most powerful reasons for the lack of progress is a simple one: we have blind spots when it comes to diversity, and we can't solve problems that we don't see or understand clearly.

Many employees think women are well represented in leadership when they see only a few. And because they've become comfortable with the status quo, they don't feel any urgency for change. Further, many men don't fully grasp the barriers that hold women back at work. As a result, they are less committed to gender diversity, and we can't get there without them.

Many companies also overlook the realities of women of color, who face the greatest obstacles and receive the least support. When companies take a one-size-fits-all approach to advancing women, women of color end up underserved and left behind. This year we take a deeper look at women of color to better understand the distinct challenges they face, shaped by the intersection of gender and race.

This article presents highlights from the full report and suggests a few core actions that could kick-start progress.



Taking a closer look at the corporate pipeline

[As in years past](#), we examined the corporate pipeline, starting from entry-level professional positions and leading all the way to the C-suite. Two themes emerge this year:

Inequality starts at the very first promotion. This is even more dramatic for women of color. Women remain significantly underrepresented in the corporate pipeline. From the outset, fewer women than men are hired at the entry level, despite women being 57 percent of recent college graduates. At every subsequent step, the representation of women further declines, and women of color face an even steeper drop-off at senior levels. As a result, one in five C-suite leaders is a woman, and fewer than one in 30 is a woman of color. Moreover, compared with the modest gains women made in prior years, there are signs this year that [women's progress may be stalling](#).

Women are not leaving their companies at higher rates than men, and very few plan to leave the workforce to focus on family.

Compared with men of the same race and ethnicity, women are leaving their companies at similar rates: white women are leaving as frequently as white men, and we see the same pattern among women and men of color. However, there is a large racial gap: people of color are significantly more likely to leave their organizations.

Women and men also have similar intentions to stay in the workforce. Roughly 60 percent of all employees plan to remain at their companies for five or more years. Moreover, among those who are planning to leave, about 80 percent intend to find a job elsewhere and remain in the workforce. Notably, just as many men as women say they'll leave to focus on family, and the number for both genders is remarkably low: 2 percent or less.



Changing the workplace experience

Based on the results of a survey of more than 70,000 employees from 82 of this year's participating companies, three trends that disadvantage women are clear:

Women experience a workplace skewed in favor of men. On average, women are promoted at a lower rate than men. The biggest gender gap is at the first step up to manager: entry-level women are 18 percent less likely to be promoted than their male peers. This gender disparity has a dramatic effect on the pipeline as a whole. If entry-level women were promoted at the same rate as their male peers, the number of women at the senior vice president and C-suite levels would more than double. And the disparity in promotions is not for lack of desire to advance. Women are just as interested in being promoted as men, and they ask for promotions at comparable rates.



Perhaps unsurprisingly, women are less optimistic about their prospects. They are less likely than men to aspire to be a top executive. And even the women who aspire to be a top executive are significantly less likely to think they'll become one than men with the same aspiration.

Women of color, particularly black women, face even greater challenges.

The intersection of race and gender shape women's experiences in meaningful ways. Women of color face more obstacles and a steeper path to leadership, from receiving less support from managers to getting promoted more slowly.

For instance, although women in general are more likely than men to report they never interact with senior leaders, black women are the most likely of all to report they never have senior-level contact. This may affect how they view the workplace and their opportunities for advancement. Perhaps because of the challenges they face in the workplace, for example, black women are also the most interested in going out on their own. Compared with other groups of women, they're significantly more likely to say they intend to start a business when they leave their current job. And yet: despite facing more pitfalls to advancement, women of color have higher ambitions to be a top executive than white women.

Women and men see the state of women—and the success of gender-diversity efforts—differently.

Men are more likely to think the workplace is equitable; women see a workplace that is less fair and offers less support. Men think their companies are doing a pretty good job supporting diversity; women see more room for improvement. Indeed, nearly 50 percent of men think women are well represented in leadership in companies where only one in ten senior leaders are women. And perhaps unsurprisingly, [men are less committed to gender-diversity efforts](#), and some even feel that such efforts disadvantage them: 15 percent of men think their gender will make it harder for them to advance, and white men are almost twice as likely as men of color to think this.

A road map to gender equality

Companies need a comprehensive plan [for supporting and advancing women](#). Building on findings from previous years—and incorporating new insights into what top-performing companies are doing—companies should start with these core actions:

- Make a compelling case for gender diversity.
- Invest in more employee training.
- Ensure that hiring, promotions, and reviews are fair.
- Give employees the flexibility to fit work into their lives.
- Focus on accountability and results.

Additionally, it is critical that companies understand their particular pain points and tackle them directly. For most if not all companies, this includes addressing the distinct barriers women of color face and getting sufficient buy-in from men. Until they do, companies' gender-diversity efforts are likely to continue to fall short.

Efforts to achieve equality benefit us all. [Diversity leads to stronger business results](#), as numerous studies have shown. When the most talented people can rise to the top, regardless of what they look like and where they're from, we all end up winning.

Extract from *Women in the Workplace 2017*, by LeanIn Org and MacKinsey.