

JOAN C. WILLIAMS & RACHEL DEMPSEY

What FOUR PATTERNS  
WORKING WOMEN  
NEED TO KNOW

Works for  
Women

at Work

FOREWORD BY ANNE-MARIE SLAUGHTER



# *What Works for Women at Work*



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# What Works for Women at Work

*Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know*

Joan C. Williams and  
Rachel Dempsey

FOREWORD BY ANNE-MARIE SLAUGHTER



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*Dedicated to the Wise Women, without whom we could not have written this book, in friendship and with gratitude:*

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The women who were interviewed for this book represent a wide range of ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Joan C. Williams interviewed 67 women for The New Girls' Network. These women were roughly 40 to 60 years of age and at the top of their fields. They worked in business, medicine, academia, government, and the legal profession. Three ran their own businesses. Eleven identified themselves as women of color, specifically as black (or African American), Latina, and Asian (or Asian American). The interviews were conducted over the phone between June 2, 2010, and November 6, 2012.

For the National Science Foundation Project, 60 women-of-color scientists were interviewed by Erika V. Hall, a PhD candidate at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. The scientists interviewed represent a variety of scientific disciplines. Most of the women worked in academic settings. They are identified as black (or African American), Latina, and Asian (or Asian American). These women were roughly 30 to 60 years of age. The interviews were conducted over the phone between June 4, 2012, and October 5, 2012.



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# Foreword

ANNE-MARIE SLAUGHTER

Joan C. Williams and Rachel Dempsey, mother and daughter, have written a book that every working woman should read. It is also a book that every man who works with women should read. If women act on the prescriptions in these pages and men begin to understand the deep culturally embedded biases and assumptions that mean a book like this still needs to be written, the workplace will be a better place, the United States will be more competitive, and the intertwining of work and family life will be easier for all caregivers.

*What Works for Women at Work* is a project by The New Girls' Network, an all-star list of "Fortune 500 executives, entrepreneurs, bestselling writers, partners at major consulting firms, and rainmakers at some of the biggest law firms in the world" that Joan C. Williams, a law professor, put together. These women are not representative of the entire female American workforce, in either class or racial or ethnic terms, but they do include women of color, who face what Joan and Rachel call the "double jeopardy" of race and gender discrimination and have their own distinct tales to tell. Above all, these women are the face of female success.

Yet all these women, and frankly every woman I know who has ever worked in either a paid or volunteer capacity, recognize the



four patterns of behavior that create the primary obstacles to women's advancement to leadership positions across every industry:

1. Prove-It-Again!
2. The Tightrope
3. The Maternal Wall
4. Tug of War

I am part of the first generation of women who were actually advantaged, at least in some circumstances, by our gender, thanks to the sacrifices and drive of the women a generation ahead of me—women like Joan C. Williams. By the time we entered the labor force in the late 1980s and early 1990s, university faculties, law firms, businesses, and government agencies were actively looking for women. The women they hired had to meet the same hiring criteria that men did, but if they were above the bar, they often had a leg up on their male colleagues, at least at the outset. In my own case, all-male law faculties were starting to look for women when I went on the law-teaching market in 1990; 20 years later, Hillary Clinton wanted to break the glass ceiling at the Policy Planning office, which was a “big think” job that no woman had ever even been considered for.

But even if overt gender discrimination has decreased dramatically, and women in the middle class are starting to outearn and rise higher than their mates, these four patterns ring so true, not for entering the workforce but during the ascent to leadership positions. We have all seen women held to higher standards of performance while male colleagues are given the benefit of the doubt for slipups and promoted on potential, the core of the “Prove-It-Again!” pattern. We have all seen women who are criticized for being too assertive when they act like men and too passive if they act like (traditional) women, which Joan and Rachel call “The Tightrope.” Toward the end of my two years in government, when lots of jobs were turning over at the midpoint of the administration, I and other women I worked with tried to ensure that women



candidates were considered for promotion. Over and over again, I would hear, “She’s smart and has gotten a lot of things done, but she has sharp elbows.” “Sharp elbows” is code for “she insisted on pushing her point or her position and won the day,” behavior that in a man would be lauded.

Many of us live with the third pattern: “The Maternal Wall.” Every time someone says, “Women today can do everything that men can do,” the response should be, “Yes, absolutely, as long as they don’t have children.” Far too many women are still being asked to make significant trade-offs between their careers and their families, but when was the last time you or anyone else asked a man how he was going to manage his career once he had children?

The final pattern is the “Tug of War,” in which women judge each other in ways that hurt our collective march forward. No one ever talks about daddy wars or dogfights (actually, we do talk about dogfights, but not pejoratively). Most of us can recall a situation in which another woman seemed more determined to shut us out of a largely all-male group than to help us in.

So as Joan and Rachel write, out of the 127 professional women they interviewed, only five said that they had not encountered these patterns, or not recently. We know that the evidence that Joan and Rachel have assembled from scores of scientific studies is true and present in our lives. But another part of us really doesn’t *want* to focus on these patterns. We don’t *want* to see our world full of male bias against us. We know, like, and respect most of the men we work with. We know that they don’t actually *see* these patterns.

Indeed, the studies Joan and Rachel draw on show why so many men are blind: we are living and working in a world shaped by deeply, deeply embedded assumptions about gender roles. These assumptions are laid down from infancy onward and create a set of filters in our brains that condition our interpretation of virtually all human interaction. Only with cleverly designed experiments in the relatively new field of experimental social psychology are we able to tease them out.



The good news is that men can learn. Once in a meeting in Washington, D.C., I made a point that was generally ignored until a well-respected younger man made the same point, at which point everyone jumped on it. Joan and Rachel call this the “stolen idea” phenomenon; I have always heard it called the “butterfly syndrome,” in which a woman makes a remark that stays on the table like a caterpillar until a man says the same thing and it becomes a butterfly. At any rate, I pulled aside the younger man who had picked up my thought after the meeting and told him that because he was already working for Hillary Clinton and over the course of his career he was going to work with many other women, it was important for him to understand what had just happened. I described the exchange in the meeting as I and the other women at the table had experienced it. He took it in, thought about it, and nodded. I phrased my advice in terms of something that would help him work more effectively with women over the course of his career, and he took it and learned from it in that spirit.

That is why every man who works with women, supports women, or parents girls should read this book. Men who get it can be enormously helpful by making other men aware of their biases and of course by promoting deserving women. I would never have succeeded in my career without strong male mentors dedicated to supporting strong women. More and more men are also now seeing the workplace through their wives’ eyes as their wives encounter the four behavior patterns in this book.

Men should read this book to understand; women should read this book to act. Because the best thing about *What Works for Women at Work* is that it crystallizes these four patterns of behavior in order to advise all working women *what to do about them*. It is a practical “how-to” manual for women trying to figure out what concretely to do when they realize that something is wrong in their careers, that they are not advancing as fast as the men around them or have been turned down for a promotion they wanted, and either don’t understand what is wrong or don’t know what to do about it. Chapter after chapter offers specific, actionable suggestions drawn



from women who have been there and succeeded. It's a book by and for Rachel as much as Joan.

The continual theme through all the valuable advice offered in this book is balance: balance between masculine and feminine, principle and pragmatism, niceness and authority, self-promotion and selflessness, and work and family. Balance should also be the watchword for all of us in reading this book. We know that its descriptions of bias against women, even in 2012, are true. But we will not succeed if we approach our lives angry and embittered. So we must balance awareness and activism with getting it done as professionally as we know how. This book will help us get there.



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# *Preface*

## *Joan's Story*

This book started when I began reading a field of research that changed my life. That field, called experimental social psychology, led me to leave my job of 25 years and move my family 3,000 miles across the country. Only then did my career really take off and did I get rid of a heavy load of anger that was warping my personal as well as my professional life.

For years, I had been respected at work—but, to be honest, disliked. Now, I am the first to admit that I'm no Bill Clinton. Sometimes I speak up when I should keep quiet, and sometimes I keep quiet when I should speak up. If I believe in something, you'll hear about it, and if I think something is unfair, I'll say so. Not a shrinking violet. But I saw men around me who were less politically adept than I was—and they did just fine. I was a selfish prima donna. They were smart and quirky.

As I immersed myself in social psychology, I found this dynamic described with eerie precision. Reading the studies was such a “scales-from-eyes” experience that I saw my whole life in a different light—one that inspired me to start an organization called The Center for WorkLife Law, which I still direct today, and gave me the courage to move my family from Washington, D.C., where I



was miserable, to San Francisco, which I adore. Moving was a big deal. My husband, a Washington lawyer, had to give up his executive director position at a major Washington think tank he had helped to build. My ninth-grade son, who had just entered a new school, had to start all over again in his sophomore year of high school. Rachel left for college the year we moved but felt torn away from her high school friends nonetheless.

Here's the insight that moved me: the workplace I left had a very specific role designated for white women like me. (Expectations were different for black women—itsself an interesting pattern.) White women were expected to be helpful, to serve on a lot of committees, and to be supportive and deferential.

"Mike knows everything," one (brilliant) colleague once said to me, of her mentor, who was sitting right next to her at the time. Years later, when her reputation began to supersede his, she came to me for advice: Mike had begun to undercut her. Her prominence was interfering with her designated role as cheerleader and helpmeet, and she had come to understand why I was so unpopular.

Typically, I do not talk about my own experiences, because to do so carries with it the risk of being seen as a "whiner." But gender bias at work is something worth talking about. Sixty-eight percent of women believe that sex discrimination exists in the workplace, according to a 2010 study by Catalyst.<sup>1</sup> This includes 63 percent of architects and between two-thirds and three quarters of female lawyers.<sup>2</sup> Seventy-three percent of women professionals in Washington, D.C., felt that men have more opportunities than women do.<sup>3</sup>

This book is about when to take risks, and this is one I am willing to embrace.

After we moved to San Francisco, I began to wonder whether I was the only woman whose experience these studies described to a tee. After all, they typically are paper-and-pencil studies of college students performed in a university lab. Whether they describe what happens in real workplaces is controversial.<sup>4</sup>

To answer this question, I did something that had never been



done. I consolidated hundreds of studies to identify, instead of an amorphous laundry list, the four crisp patterns that provide the framework for this book. I call these four patterns Prove-It-Again!, the Tightrope, the Maternal Wall, and the Tug of War, and each represents its own particular challenge for women as they navigate in the sea of office politics. Let me explain each in detail:

1. *Prove-It-Again!* is exactly what it sounds like: women have to prove themselves over and over again much more so than men in order to be seen as equally competent. Prove-It-Again! is *descriptive bias* that stems from assumptions about the typical woman.<sup>5</sup>
2. The *Tightrope* is *prescriptive bias*, which stems from assumptions about how women *should* behave. The Tightrope describes a double bind: women often find that if they behave in traditionally feminine ways, they exacerbate Prove-It-Again! problems; but if they behave in traditionally masculine ways, they are seen as lacking social skills.<sup>6</sup>
3. The *Maternal Wall* consists of both *descriptive bias*, in the form of strong negative competence and commitment assumptions triggered by motherhood, and *prescriptive bias*—disapproval on the grounds that mothers should be at home or working fewer hours. Women with children are routinely pushed to the margins of the professional world.
4. The *Tug of War* occurs as each woman tries to navigate her own path between assimilating into masculine traditions and resisting them. Women's different strategies divide them. Some women are tomboys, who just need access: all they want to do is to play the game as the boys play it. Other women want to preserve more of the traditions of femininity. Women's different strategies often pit them against each other, as do workplaces that communicate that there's room for only one woman. All of these pressures often lead women to judge each other on what's the right way to be a woman.



These patterns add up to the sobering truth that office politics are trickier for women than for men. “I think you have to have just emotional intelligence to be able to judge what situation needs what strategy,” said a woman scientist.

Once I crystallized the four patterns, my first step was to create a game called Gender Bias Bingo, which can be found at [www.genderbiasbingo.com](http://www.genderbiasbingo.com). The game described the patterns and asked women scientists to document any experiences that seemed to fit. I received 400 e-mails in the first three days the site was up. What I learned was this: the experimental studies do appear to describe everyday workplace politics for many women.

I developed a lecture called “The Four Patterns of Gender Bias,” and the response was electric. As soon as I started to describe the patterns, women’s eyes got big, and they began to nod. When I gave the talk to 200-plus people at a reunion of Yale alumnae, I walked out of the auditorium to find one woman crying. “You just described my life.” This was a common reaction.

But my lecture did not have the desired effect. It was supposed to empower women, but it just depressed them. Just giving a name to the experiences they found so frustrating wasn’t enough; a common reaction was, “What’s the use?” And then I realized the single most important truth this book offers: women need to be politically savvy than men in order to survive and thrive in their careers. Political savvy does not completely insulate you from gender bias, warns social psychologist Jennifer Berdahl. “As savvy as [women] may be, they may not be able to avoid bias and its devastating effects on their careers.”<sup>7</sup> Fair enough. Savvy is not sufficient, but often it’s necessary: more often for women than men, it is a threshold requirement.

One problem: I’m not major-league savvy. That’s why I assembled about 20 of the wisest women I know to help me write the book. My initial plan was to meet only once, but we bonded and ended up meeting twice a year for two years. The group includes Fortune 500 executives, entrepreneurs, bestselling writers, partners at major consulting firms, and rainmakers at some of the big-



gest law firms in the world. These are the key members of The New Girls' Network. This book is theirs as much it is ours. I cannot thank them enough.

I had two goals. The first was to find out whether the experimental literature that had resonated so strongly with me resonated with other women, too. The second was to gather the strategies indubitably successful women had used to get where they are today. So I interviewed the key members of The New Girls' Network, as well as other women they recommended—basically, any savvy woman I could get my hands on. The interviews were simple. After describing the four patterns, I asked just two questions: (1) “Does any of that sound familiar?” and (2) “What strategies have you used, or seen others use, to ensure that these patterns did not derail your career?”

My next step was to address a nagging worry: how does the experience of gender bias differ by race? Relatively few experimental studies explore this, as compared with the hundreds of studies on “gender” alone (which tend to yield information about the experience of white women).<sup>8</sup> So I got a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant to study the experience of women of color, with the help of Erika Hall, a PhD candidate in management and organizations at Northwestern University. Erika conducted the NSF interviews. I am very grateful for her help and her insights. Of the initial 67 interviews of The New Girls' Network, 16 percent were women of color. But all of the NSF interviews were of women of color, making 56 percent of all interviewees women of color when both sets of interviews were combined.

These interviews confirmed that the experimental studies describe many women's experience of office politics. When I asked women whether anything in the four patterns sounded familiar, one said, “Every syllable.” Another woman said, “Oh, God, you're in my head.” Of the 127 women interviewed, only five—and not a single woman of color—said they had not encountered one or more of these patterns. Three of the five had founded their own businesses. Note that I do not have a random sample, so it's impossible



to tell if these women's experiences match those of women in general. But it's clear this is news many women can use.

Another major message, rarely if ever noted, is that women experience bias of quite different types. Most women did not report all four types of bias: only 13 percent of white women did, and 10 percent of the women of color. Tightrope bias was most common. Nearly three-fourths (73 percent) of all women interviewed reported it. Next came Prove-It-Again!, reported by 68 percent of women. Maternal Wall came next, reported by 59 percent of mothers. Tug of War came in last—though it was still reported by a majority of women (55 percent). All of this highlights a social science finding that has received far too little attention: what works for women often is different from what works for men.<sup>9</sup>

Women of color were more likely to report each of the four patterns of bias than white women were. The biggest gap concerned Tug of War bias: 59 percent of women of color, but only 50 percent of white women, reported it. Next came the Tightrope, reported by 77 percent of women of color and 68 percent of white women. The Maternal Wall came third, reported by 63 percent of mothers of color and 56 percent of white mothers. Prove-It-Again! bias showed the smallest gap: 64 percent of white women reported it, as compared with 70 percent of women of color. Remember, though, that most of the women of color were scientists; we cannot tell to what extent these differences stem from race and to what extent they stem from science.

All this makes office politics more challenging for women than for men. Women have to prove themselves over and over again. They have to navigate a tightrope between being “too masculine” and “too feminine.” Having children just compounds both those problems. And gender bias often ends up creating tricky and freighted relationships among women themselves. With all this going on for women but not for men, women have to be politically savvy than men in order to survive and thrive.

The final step in this process was to hire Rachel Dempsey to help me write the book, which offers savvy-in-a-bottle to help women



navigate their careers. She was the obvious choice because I knew she would write a heartbreaking work of staggering genius. (She's my daughter.) I also chose Rachel because I wanted to coauthor this book with a much younger woman. Although I had been careful to include a broad range of ages in *The New Girls' Network*, everyone I interviewed was a highly successful career woman, so none were under 30. Including the voice of younger women was important because I was determined to preemptively strike back against a common dynamic that emerges when women try to give each other advice.

My hope is that this book will avoid the Tug of War that often emerges between different generations when they talk about careers. Reaching out across generations requires a lot of effort and some sacrifice. Women of a certain age (mine: I am 61) tend to have been more willing than younger women to assimilate into masculine traditions—otherwise, we would not have felt comfortable spending our lives in rooms filled with men. Younger women often feel differently. A woman professor clearly described this phenomenon: “I’m on kind of a backlash mission almost. I wear dresses, I bake cookies for my group meetings, I bring my child to class with me. I’ve just stuck it out there and said, ‘I’m a woman, I’m someone’s mother.’ And you get the whole package. It is kind of a conscious choice on my part that I’m not going to compete as a boy because I’m not a boy.”<sup>10</sup>

It’s time for women to stop judging each other about what they believe to be the right way to be a woman. In workplaces still dominated by men, all women make compromises. If we begin to judge each other’s compromises, the opportunity for women to help each other vanishes. *What Works for Women at Work* is designed to offer the kind of advice a good mentor offers her mentee. But good mentoring is reciprocal: this book is also designed around the premise that younger women offer insights to older women as well as vice versa.

While this book is designed to bridge generational divides, the intended audience is not only younger women. Another lesson we



learned is that younger women tend to get more Prove-It-Again! bias, while older women often meet the Tightrope—the “what a bitch” pattern I encountered—as they get more accomplished and, as a result, more threatening. But the differences between younger and older women are easy to exaggerate. I found older women at the height of their careers who still felt they had to prove themselves constantly and younger women faulted for being too “outspoken” or for “having rough elbows.”

So that’s why I wrote this book.

After I moved to California, I found that my new workplace actually wanted me precisely because I had achieved some prominence. The atmosphere was just incredibly different. For the entire first year, I walked around amazed: I was no longer a bitch.

Your life may be very different from mine. Your personality may be very different. Your career may be very different. I don’t know in which ways this book will help you. But, based on my interviews, it will.

## *Rachel’s Story*

My journey toward writing this book started when I was a kid. For years, all I understood of Joan’s work was that it kept her away from me. Not that my mom wasn’t (and isn’t) an excellent mother: my brother and I have always come first. She was home at 5:30 every day she wasn’t traveling (which she did quite a lot), stayed home with us when we were sick, came to our school plays, and even helped sew elaborate costumes. But I was more likely to remember the soccer games she missed for a business trip than the ones she came to with orange slices and Gatorade. It seemed to me the ultimate irony that my mother’s life work of fighting for family-friendly policies and greater work-family balance took her away from her own family. And as a smart-ass 10-year-old with two lawyers for parents, I didn’t hesitate to point that out.

In retrospect, I might have been noticing something else as well.



Even as a child, I saw how passionately my mother cared about her work, but I also saw for all that her work inspired her, drove her, and made her whole, she was unhappy at her job. “Love the work; hate the job” was how she put it. I heard bits and pieces about her experience without understanding much other than that the place she left me for didn’t even seem like that much *fun*. That made it even harder for me to understand why she spent so much time there.

When I was a junior in high school, she decided to finally do something about her situation, accepting an offer for a visit at UC Hastings that seemed likely to turn into a job. Unfortunately, the semester she spent in San Francisco was, for me, a particularly rocky one in a generally rocky adolescence. I felt abandoned and got angry; she felt punished for pursuing her own happiness after a lifetime of putting it second (or third or fourth). We spent my senior year of high school on terms that could diplomatically be described as tense.

It wasn’t until I went to college that my perspective began to shift. A few things happened at once: with distance, I started to see my mother as a person outside of myself. As I took on something resembling adult responsibility, I started to see how heroically she had juggled her responsibilities to make time for our family. And as she became noticeably happier in her new life in San Francisco, I began to understand the toll her former situation had taken on her and the extraordinary sacrifices that had kept her there so long.

At this point, I feel nothing but lucky to be Joan’s daughter. But despite the strength of our relationship, the decision to write this book together might have been braver than either of us realized at the time. Around the time I quit my first postcollege job to backpack around South America and write, Joan was beginning to think about writing the four patterns of gender bias into a book. She was looking for a journalist who could write accessibly and with humor about complicated topics.

“How am I ever going to find someone to help me write this thing?” she asked.



“What about me?” I answered.

I had been joking, but she took me seriously. Before leaving on my backpacking trip, I had gone through several rounds of interviews for a position in Google’s legal department and was waiting to hear back from them. When Joan first proposed that I help her with the book, it was a backup plan.

I was in a tiny town in southern Bolivia where the Internet came and went when I realized that working with her was actually my first choice. I withdrew my name from consideration for the job at Google and committed to the project.

Joan would disagree, but it was crazy of her to offer me the job. I was 24 and almost entirely uncredentialed. I’d never written anything longer than my senior thesis. And if it didn’t work out, she would have the New Girls to answer to.

It was also crazy of me to accept her offer. I turned down a prestigious and well-paid job to write a book that, at the time, we weren’t even sure would be published. I ran the risk of the kind of gaping hole in my resume that this economy won’t tolerate. And I had absolutely no idea how to write a book.

But, in the end, I felt that, as a young feminist, I had a valuable perspective to add to the New Girls’ stories that Joan or any other writer she might hire would be likely to miss. I worry that the incredible progress made by feminists of earlier generations has made us complacent: things are better, and people are afraid to ruffle any feathers, so we’re stalling out at good enough. This is in part because of the dynamic that develops when older feminists feel that young women are flip about hard-won battles and young feminists feel that older women are chasing after ghosts of sexism long dead. I hope together Joan and I have begun to bridge the generation gap. More importantly, I was incredibly grateful for the opportunity to be able to work alongside my mother. After decades of watching her struggle with these issues, they’ve become my issues, too.

The New Girls’ Network meeting where we presented the first draft of the manuscript was one of the most frightening things I



had ever done. The women in that room had entrusted me with their stories, and I wanted to tell them well. But as a young woman and Joan's daughter, I was well aware that I had better produce something excellent. Luckily, everyone has been tremendously supportive. I can't thank the New Girls enough for their faith in me and their commitment to the project.

I wrote this book for the most selfless reasons and the most selfish reasons. Through my mother, I've seen how difficult it can be to deal with the pressures professional women face, from the strain of work-family conflict to the constant slow grind of everyday sexism. If this book makes things a little bit easier for any working woman out there, I can feel that I've done my job. But my motives aren't entirely noble: these issues become more real for me every year. I write this book with an urgency that comes from knowing that it's my own future I'm describing and that the work we do now will determine how that future turns out.

I can't believe how lucky I am to have had a mother who taught me to take risks and fight for the things I believe in. I hope this book serves as a guide for other women to do the same.



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# *Introduction: It's Not (Always) Your Fault*

*The test for whether or not you can hold a job should not be the arrangement of your chromosomes.*

— BELLA ABZUG

Jennifer is a consultant at a large management consulting firm. Since graduating from business school, Jennifer has worked hard, played by the rules, and thrived professionally. Things are going great for her: a few years ago, she was promoted to the prestigious position of director. Having achieved a measure of job security, she and her husband—a lawyer at a big law firm in town—decided to have a baby and got pregnant. She took off the full six months allowed at her company; her baby is now 11 months old.

Recently, though, Jennifer found out that her compensation is lower than her co-worker Mike's, even though he started after her and brings in less business to the firm. Jennifer, who has never really seen herself as different from the men she works with, realizes that she might have made a mistake in not asking for an increase in compensation earlier. She goes to her boss, Rick, to discuss the matter. To her surprise, instead of being supportive, he tells her he's heard some concerns from other people in her department but reassures her he has her best interests at heart: "You're a valuable part of the team. I know there were questions among the committee about whether your performance is sustainable, but



I'll be sure to bring up your contributions when we're deciding on compensation for next year."

Surprised by Rick's easy dismissal of her concerns, Jennifer goes to her mentor, Jane, for help. Jane, who does not have children, tells Jennifer there's not much she can do about it. "Once you have children," Jane says, "it gets harder and harder to balance everything. You just need to work extra hard to prove you're willing to do what it takes to stay in the game."

Jennifer leaves Jane's office feeling more unsure of herself than ever. She's starting to think there's more going on than meets the eye—but what can she do about it that won't make things worse?

As recently as a decade or so ago, gender discrimination was so obvious it was all but impossible to ignore. In 1982, Ann Hopkins was denied a promotion to partner at the accounting firm Price Waterhouse because, as male co-workers said, she needed to "walk more femininely, talk more femininely, dress more femininely, wear make-up, have her hair styled, and wear jewelry."<sup>1</sup> In 1997, Goldman Sachs financial analyst Cristina Chen-Oster was sexually assaulted by a co-worker after a business meeting that took place at a Manhattan strip club called Scores.<sup>2</sup> Sex discrimination cases this egregious are dwindling. Some holdouts certainly exist, but the age of the Boom Boom Room—of referring to female employees as "whores" and "playboy bunnies" and of holding meetings in men's clubs—is largely past.<sup>3</sup>

"Twenty years ago, it used to be visible to any woman," said a longtime consultant. "We were forced to wear a skirt. It was so overt. We were expected to get the coffee." Another woman, who started working in finance in the 1980s, remembered being made to go in the back door and up the back elevator to attend a meeting in a club that didn't admit women. As recently as 10 years ago, she said, she would regularly be the only woman at corporate golf tournaments. When she won, the prize was a men's shirt.

These days, litigation and changing cultural standards have eliminated many of the more blatant examples of sexism in the professional world. Unfortunately, that doesn't mean it's disappeared.



For this book, we interviewed over 125 women about their experiences with gender bias: women at the top of their fields in law, in business, in politics, in science; married and unmarried women; mothers and women without children; women in their 30s and women in their 70s.

“For the younger women who look at me and think, ‘Why are you dredging up history?’” said one executive about her efforts to talk to young women about gender bias, “my response is, ‘You know what? I hope you are so lucky that you make it through this life with no unfortunate encounters like those I’ve just described. But, in case you do, you should be able to identify them and understand what is occurring.’”

Which takes us back to Jennifer, who is facing bias of several distinct types. The bias she’s facing may seem subtle, but it’s having a huge effect on her career. In short succession, she ran into each of the basic patterns of bias:

*Prove-It-Again!*—Women are forced to prove their competence over and over, whereas men are given the benefit of the doubt. *Why didn’t Rick acknowledge that Jennifer had more seniority and brought in more business than Mike?*

*The Tightrope*—Women risk being written off as “too feminine” when they’re agreeable and “too masculine” when they’re aggressive. *Did Rick think Jennifer was too assertive in asking about her compensation?*

*The Maternal Wall*—Women with children are routinely pushed to the margins of the professional world. *Is Rick worried that that Jennifer might have lost her commitment to work now that she has a child—or does he think she should?*

*The Tug of War*—All of the above pressures on women often lead them to judge each other on the right way to be a woman. *Are Jane’s judgments shaped by her own choices?*

The conventional advice is that women’s careers derail because they don’t have enough ambition, because they don’t ask, because



they choose children over career—in other words, because they're not enough like men. This advice can hurt women's careers, because while women who *don't* ask get in trouble for failing to make it clear what they want, women who *do* ask get in trouble for failing to fulfill people's expectations about how a woman should act. Take Jennifer: she followed the advice that's out there and was left wondering where she went wrong. This book is for Jennifer and women like her.

## *The Stubborn Gap at the Top*

In the past several years, there's been a renewal of interest in the gender gap: why it's still there and what to do about it. Women like Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and former Obama administration official Anne-Marie Slaughter have jump-started an important conversation by bringing attention to an issue that many people hoped would resolve itself: while women have made extraordinary strides in the professional world, something's going wrong at the top.<sup>4</sup>

The good news is, in many ways, women are doing better than ever. Women outnumber men in college by about 57 to 43 percent, and a 2010 study found that young, single women in urban areas actually earn median salaries about 8 percent higher than comparable men.<sup>5</sup> In an influential article (and later a book) called "The End of Men," journalist Hanna Rosin suggests the possibility that the "modern, postindustrial economy is simply more congenial to women than to men."<sup>6</sup>

The problem? As women get older, advance up the corporate ladder, and begin to have families, their advantage not only disappears, it turns into a striking handicap. As of 2011 only 3.6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs were women—16 white women, 2 women of color, 17 men of color, and 465 white men.<sup>7</sup> That's one table of women in a restaurant packed with 27 tables of men. Professional women in other fields are in better shape, but not by much. In 2010, women made up 47 percent of first- and second-year law firm associates but only 15 percent of full-fledged partners in the United States,



a number that has been fixed for the last 20 years.<sup>8</sup> In science and technology, the numbers are even worse: women constitute a mere 22 percent of software engineers and only 6 percent of chief executives at top technology companies.<sup>9</sup> We can talk about equality until we're blue in the face, but the numbers are pretty sobering.

So how does this happen? The answer is twofold. First, even if the disadvantages women now face in the workplace are small compared with disadvantages women faced a century (or even a decade) ago, relatively small problems have surprisingly large effects over time. Very small differences in how men and women are treated can lead to huge gaps in pay, promotions, and prestige, a phenomenon often called the *accumulation of disadvantage*. Psychologist Virginia Valian writes that “the well-meaning advice often given to women—not to make a mountain out of a molehill—is mistaken. That advice fails to recognize that mountains are molehills, piled one on top of the other.”<sup>10</sup> She describes a meeting from the perspective of an outsider: John asks Monique to get the coffee, Rahul interrupts Cara. In those apparently inconsequential interactions, the outsider is left with a distinct impression of who is respected and powerful within the group: “people who were equal in my eyes when it began are [now] unequal.”<sup>11</sup> Because small instances of bias like these are cumulative, women like Jennifer (from our original story) sometimes don't start to feel the effects of bias until they are already established in their careers.

“It's not until women have been around a long time that they start to say, ‘Oh. Now I kind of get what you 50-year-olds have been talking about,’” said a consultant.

We're also just beginning to recognize some of the most powerful patterns of gender bias that kick in as women move up the ladder in their careers. New research shows that motherhood is the strongest trigger for bias: women with children are 79 percent less likely to be hired, only half as likely to be promoted, and earn a lot less money than women with identical resumes but without children.<sup>12</sup> The same results don't hold for fathers. In a country where 82 percent of women become mothers, that puts women at a



huge disadvantage in the workplace relative to men.<sup>13</sup> Yet we talk a whole lot about women's *choices* surrounding motherhood and very little about the pressures driving them out of positions of leadership or the workplace in general. In order for things to change, we need to recognize and start to break down the Maternal Wall.

Another theme that's conspicuously missing from the way we talk about gender is that bias against women often translates into conflict among women. The resulting Tug of War has been taboo, silenced by the quest for sisterhood. Talking about conflict among women seems to confirm negative stereotypes about women as catty and petty. And we know instinctively that, as an underrepresented group in many industries, infighting isn't going to get us anywhere, so the impulse is to hush it up.

But the Tug of War exists, and denying it hasn't worked. When there's only room for a few women at the top, women will scramble to take those spots. And when women are conscious of being judged, some will be quick to jump on the other women they think are hurting their cause, whether it's because they feel those women are acting too much like men or because they're reinforcing stereotypes of femininity. When women receive the message that their hold on power is tenuous, they do what they feel is necessary to protect their futures.<sup>14</sup> Gender bias is built into office politics such that, as long as people pursue self-interest within that system, men will find it easier to get ahead than women. The problem is not a few rotten apples. It's the barrel.

Our basic message is simple: it's not your fault that the men at your company consistently progress up the career ladder more quickly than women do. It's not your fault that last year's review said you needed to speak up for yourself, and this year's review says you need to stop being so demanding. It's not your fault that you came back from maternity leave ready to dive back in, only to find yourself frozen out of major assignments. And it's not your fault that the woman you thought was your mentor has been arguing *against* the promotion you seek. Plenty of things may happen to you that *are* your fault, but gender bias isn't one of them.



### UNDERSTANDING SUBTLE BIAS

Some bias — notably Maternal Wall bias — is both strong and blatant. But today, much bias is subtle.

Even subtle bias can have a strong effect. Inspired by research from Alice Eagly (coauthor of the excellent book *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders*), a group of scientists built a computer simulation of a fictional company with 500 employees at the bottom and only 10 at the very top. Each employee was assigned an evaluation score and promoted according to who had the highest score. The scientists gave the male employees in the simulation 1 percent higher scores, on average, to represent the effects of gender bias. After a relatively short time period, only about a third of the top positions — and a full 53 percent of the positions at the bottom — were held by women. When the bias variance was upped to 5 percent, only 29 percent of the positions at the top were held by women and 58 percent of the positions at the bottom.<sup>a</sup>

## *Why (Almost) Everything Women Are Told about Work Is Wrong*

This isn't the first book to offer advice on how to change women's disadvantage in the professional world. There's a ton of business literature that offers a ton of advice: Ask for more money! Network more! Stop being such a bitch! Stop being such a doormat!

Most books focus on what women are doing wrong. But many of the obstacles women encounter stem from factors out of their control. A good example of well-meaning but misleading advice literature is *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office*, published in 2004 and in many ways still the most influential book in the genre. *Nice Girls* takes the Man Up approach, telling women that we're all girls at heart and that when we're challenged, we tend to flee, "take a step back into girlhood and question our self-worth."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the



book *Women Don't Ask*, which made a splash when it was released in 2003, proposes that women's woes stem from their failure to ask for raises and promotions. Authors Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever point to the negotiation gap they identify between men and women and argue that women need to ask more if they want to get ahead.<sup>16</sup>

This advice is popular for a reason. Rather than pointing to the institutions, it tells women there's something easy they can change in themselves. It also reflects the popular assumption that all of women's problems stem from the fact that they're too girly. But women are expected to jump into compassionate roles inconsistent with what we expect from leaders. Women are expected to be nice, to be modest, to work collaboratively, and to be understanding. These are habits that don't fit with the established image of a leader.

The problem with books like *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office* and *Women Don't Ask* is that they forget that not all women are Nice Girls. Women who are direct, are self-assured, and know their own worth encounter gender bias, too. As Babcock and Laschever themselves recognize, women face tight boundaries for what is considered acceptable female behavior, and "when women stray—or stride—across those boundaries they face penalties for violating society's expectations."<sup>17</sup>

If you've ever been called a bitch for sanctioning a subordinate who was out of line or suddenly become invisible to a man you've contradicted, this probably sounds familiar. Women often face backlash for "acting like men"—doing things like asking for a raise or raising their voices. In a chapter called "Scaring the Boys," Babcock and Laschever address what happens when women *do* ask: "Women may be perceived to be doing good work only as long as they are toiling away at less important jobs. Once they qualify for and start asking for more important, and therefore more 'masculine' jobs, their work may begin to be devalued and their 'personal style' may suddenly become a problem."<sup>18</sup>

So advice literature that assumes that all women are "too femi-



nine” and just need to man up is misleading. (Note that here, and throughout the book, we use “masculine” and “feminine” to describe stereotypes about how men and women should behave—not to imply that men and women should or do conform to these categories.) So is another strain of women’s leadership literature, the Taming the Shrew subgenre, which encourages women to soften their masculine traits. In *Taming Your Alpha Bitch*, published in 2012, authors Christy Whitman and Rebecca Grado teach women to become “femininely empowered”: “By making the choice to abandon the fruitless quest for dominance and superiority, you gain the power to tune out the comparing, competing, fear-based mental chatter that keeps you from enjoying life experiences as they unfold.”<sup>19</sup> Jean Hollands, author of *Same Game, Different Rules*, teaches women to cry in meetings, punctuate their speech with “ums” and stutters, and “wear softer-looking clothes.”<sup>20</sup>

Again, this advice is useful to a relatively narrow band of women—those who tend to be so aggressive that it’s unlikely that any level of softening would undermine their authority and effectiveness. For everyone else, it can be positively perilous.

Simple formulas are highly misleading, not only because different women face different problems but because different women can face different problems at different points in their careers. The truth is that women have to be politically savvy to survive and thrive in historically male careers.

## *Denial Doesn't Help: The Superstar Parry*

Even as some women publicly address the issue of persistent gender inequality, other women insist that talking about discrimination is a dead end. When Carly Fiorina was appointed CEO at Hewlett-Packard, she famously said, “I hope that we are at the point that everyone has figured out that there is not a glass ceiling.”<sup>21</sup> When asked to clarify, she backtracked—sort of: “The reason I wouldn’t deal with gender when I became CEO of H.P. is that I believed in a