



## Overcoming Inequality: Three Pitfalls Young Women Should Avoid

By Dr. Maura Cullen

As the global workforce becomes more competitive, issues of diversity and building more inclusive organizations and communities take the forefront. The demographic of the average American college campus has changed. 54% of the 10.8 million students enrolled on are now female. Young women are 30% more likely to pursue a college career than young men. Those female students tend to study more, take less time off, earn higher grades, and graduate with more advanced degrees than their male counterparts.

Though much has changed since the first feminist letters were penned in the seventeen hundreds, women still face unique challenges in traditionally male dominated arenas. What are those challenges and how can they be overcome?

### **Low Self Esteem**

When first year college students were asked to rate their own intellectual self confidence, two-thirds of male participants rated themselves within the top two tiers "above average," and "highest 10 percent" while fewer than half of the female respondents placed themselves that high. [i]

Lack of confidence is a key factor in sabotaging women's success. It increases emotional stress which leads to psychological and physical health concerns. Also, when you project discomfort or uncertainty others often perceive you to be unprepared, immature, or unqualified. If you're a woman entering the workforce the last thing you need is potential employers are reading your discomfort as inability.

Know your own value and don't be afraid to showcase your achievements and abilities. Making people aware of your success and accomplishments is an essential component of breaking the glass ceiling that women experience in the work world. For many women, this showcasing may feel like boasting and self-promoting and goes against a more collaborative team approach. Studies have shown that while women are more collaborative in their efforts, men prefer singular achievement and competition. To get ahead in today's competitive work environment, you must be able to clearly outline why you are best suited for a particular job or task, otherwise the job will go to the person who does.

### **Male Domination**

Though the number of women in high paying, powerful positions is growing, the work environment is still dominated by men. A couple of examples: The Supreme Court currently is occupied by 8 men and 1 woman, and there are 83 male senators vs. 17 women. A bright note, while only 38 women have been in the senate, nearly half of those are serving now.

As a young woman entering the work force, you should prepare to meet some resistance and old attitudes for even at our highest levels of government sexism still exists.

While preparing yourself with an appropriate degree is essential, one of the best things you can do is find a mentor, a woman working within your chosen field from whom you can learn. Chances are, she's broken through (or found ways around) many of the obstacles you will face. Learn the lingo, the attitudes, and approaches others in the business have used to get ahead. Adopt them to fit your own style and you'll be one step ahead.

## Overcoming Inequality:

Men can also serve as powerful mentors and allies. Some of the most passionate feminists are men who have taken a stand in eradicating gender bias and discrimination. Finding a mentor that has a vested interest in your success regardless of their gender is critical.

### **Earning Obstacles**

Based on the latest statistics from the Department of Labor, women typically earn 76 cents to every dollar a man earns when both work full time. Combine that with the fact that most women are primary caregivers who have to take time away from work for family reasons with the fact that women generally live longer than men (6 years on average), women still earn significantly less than men over the course of their lifetimes. Women pay higher insurance premiums because they are expected to live longer and are further discriminated by having lower premium payouts in retirement. These results in a disproportionate number of women living in poverty after retirement compared to their male counterparts.

So is it all doom and gloom for young women entering the workforce? Absolutely not. Higher education is the first step to empowering women to be successful in their own right, and has been proven to increase a person's earning potential. Though women do still face challenges, those challenges can be overcome through education, faith in your abilities, and identifying a mentor to assist you along the way.

[i] College Women Still Face Many Obstacles in Reaching Their Full Potential, Linda Sax; Chronicle of Higher Education, Vol. 54, Issue 5. 9-28-2007.

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