
Article

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Women in the Workplace 2018

By [Alexis Krivkovich](#), [Marie-Claude Nadeau](#), [Kelsey Robinson](#), [Nicole Robinson](#), [Irina Starikova](#), and [Lareina Yee](#)

Progress on gender diversity at work has stalled. To achieve equality, companies must turn good intentions into concrete action.

Companies report that they are highly committed to gender diversity. But that commitment has not translated into meaningful progress. The proportion of women at every level in corporate America has hardly changed. Progress isn't just slow. It's stalled.

That's what we found in *Women in the Workplace 2018*, a study conducted by McKinsey in partnership with LeanIn.Org. In the fourth year of our ongoing research, we probe the issues, drawing on data from 279 companies employing more than 13 million people, as well as on a survey of over 64,000 employees and a series of qualitative interviews.

Women are doing their part. For more than 30 years, they've been earning more bachelor's degrees than men. They're asking for promotions and negotiating salaries at the same rates as men. And contrary to conventional wisdom, they are staying in the workforce at the same rate as men.

Now companies need to take more decisive action. This starts with [treating gender diversity like the business priority it is](#), from setting targets to holding leaders accountable for results. It requires closing gender gaps in hiring and promotions, especially early in the pipeline when women are most often overlooked. And it means taking bolder steps to create a respectful and inclusive culture so women—and all employees—feel safe and supported at work.

This article presents highlights from the full report and presents six actions that could spark progress.

Revisiting the pipeline

Based on four years of data from 462 companies employing more than 19.6 million people, including the 279 companies participating in this year's study, two things are clear: one, women remain underrepresented, particularly women of color. Two, companies need to change the way they hire and promote entry and manager-level employees to make real progress.

Women remain underrepresented

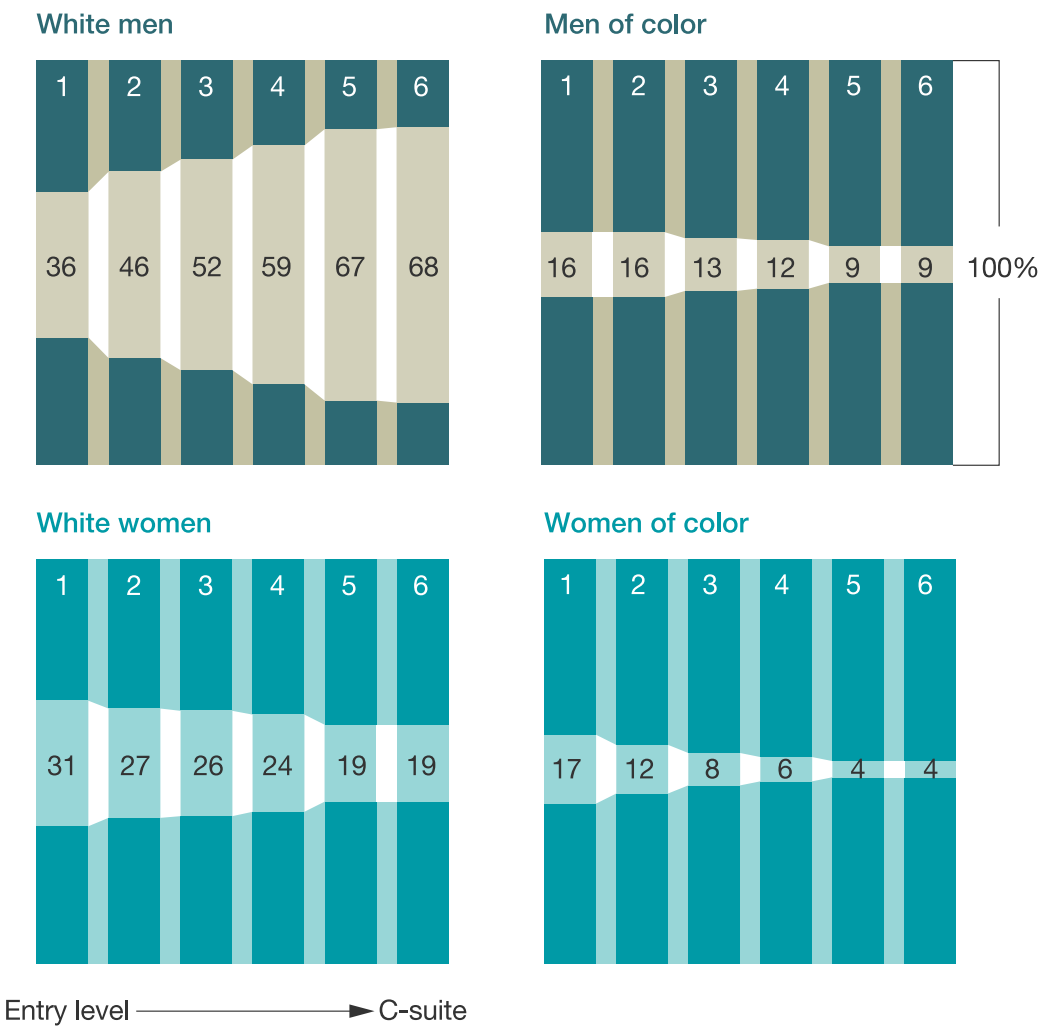
Since 2015, [the first year of this study](#), corporate America has made almost no progress improving women's representation. Women are underrepresented at every level, and women of color are the most underrepresented group of all, lagging behind white men, men of color, and white women (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1

For the fourth year in a row, the underrepresentation of women in senior management cannot be explained by attrition.

Representation by corporate role, by gender and race in 2018, % of employees

1 = Entry level 3 = Senior manager/director 5 = Senior vice president
2 = Manager 4 = Vice president 6 = C-suite



McKinsey&Company | Source: 2018 LeanIn.Org and McKinsey Women in the Workplace study

For the fourth year in a row, attrition does not explain the underrepresentation of women. Women and men are leaving their companies at similar rates, and they have similar intentions to remain in the workforce. Over half of all employees plan to stay at

their companies for five or more years, and among those who intend to leave, 81 percent say they will continue to work. It's also worth noting that remarkably few women and men say they plan to leave the workforce to focus on family.

Hiring and promotion will be crucial to progress

The two biggest drivers of representation are hiring and promotions, and companies are disadvantaging women in these areas from the beginning. Although women earn more bachelor's degrees than men, and have for decades, they are less likely to be hired into entry-level jobs. At the first critical step up to manager, the disparity widens further. Women are less likely to be hired into manager-level jobs, and they are far less likely to be promoted into them—for every 100 men promoted to manager, 79 women are (Exhibit 2). Largely because of these gender gaps, men end up holding 62 percent of manager positions, while women hold only 38 percent.

Exhibit 2

Men are more likely to be hired into manager-level jobs, and they are far more likely to be promoted into them.

Promotion rates by gender

For every
100 men
promoted to
manager ...



... only
79 women
are promoted
to manager



McKinsey&Company | Source: 2018 LeanIn.Org and McKinsey Women in the Workplace study

This early inequality has a profound impact on the talent pipeline. Starting at the manager level, there are significantly fewer women to promote from within and significantly fewer women at the right experience level to hire in from the outside. So even though hiring and promotion rates improve at more senior levels, women can never catch up—we're suffering from a "hollow middle." This should serve as a wake-up call: until companies close the early gaps in hiring and promotion, women will remain underrepresented.

If companies continue to hire and promote women to manager at current rates, the number of women in management will increase by just one percentage point over the next ten years. But if companies start hiring and promoting women and men to manager at equal rates, we should get close to parity in management—48 percent women versus 52 percent men—over the same ten years.

Considering an uneven playing field

Many factors contribute to a lack of gender diversity in the workplace. This year, our report took a closer look at some of them. Beyond issues such as managerial support and access to senior leaders, it's interesting to look at a few areas that play a role—including everyday discrimination, sexual harassment, and the experience of being the only woman in the room.

Everyday discrimination

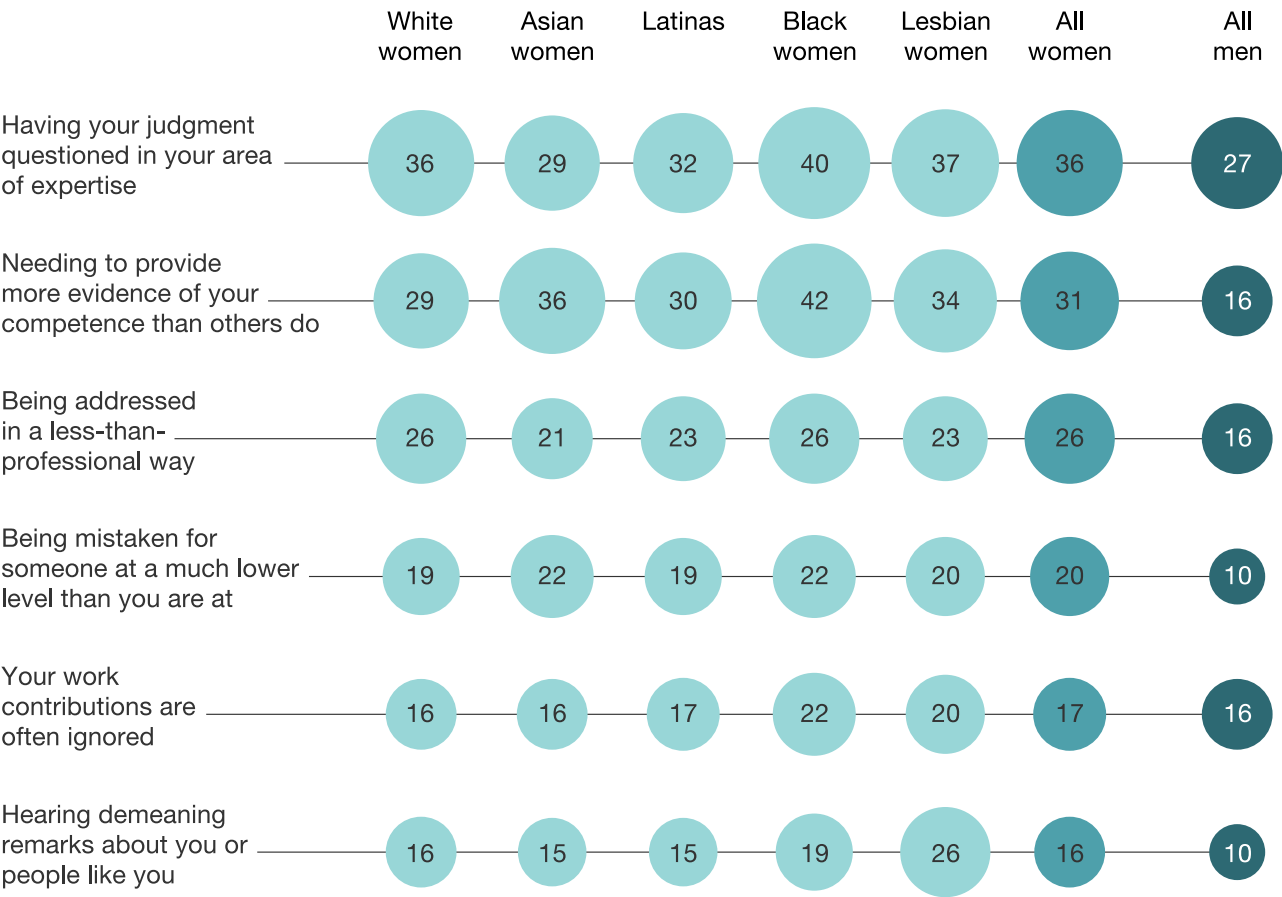
Everyday sexism and racism, also known as microaggressions, can take many forms. Some can be subtle, like when someone mistakenly assumes a coworker is more junior than they really are. Some are more explicit, like when someone says something demeaning to a coworker. Whether intentional or unintentional, microaggressions signal disrespect. They also reflect inequality—while anyone can be on the receiving end of disrespectful behavior, microaggressions are directed at people with less power, such as women, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people.

For almost two-thirds of women, microaggressions are a workplace reality (Exhibit 3). Most commonly, women have to provide more evidence of their competence than men and have their judgment questioned in their area of expertise. They are also twice as likely as men to have been mistaken for someone in a more junior position. Black women, in particular, deal with a greater variety of microaggressions and are more likely than other women to have their judgment questioned in their area of expertise and be asked to provide additional evidence of their competence.

Exhibit 3

Most women, but particularly black women, face microaggressions, and these encounters add up over the course of a career.

Employees who have experienced microaggressions during the normal course of business, %



McKinsey&Company | Source: 2018 LeanIn.Org and McKinsey Women in the Workplace study

Lesbian women experience further slights: 71 percent have dealt with microaggressions. The nature of these encounters is often different for them: lesbian women are far more likely than other women to hear demeaning remarks in the workplace about themselves or others like them. They are also far more likely to feel like they cannot talk about their personal lives at work.

These negative experiences add up. As their name suggests, microaggressions can seem small when dealt with one by one. But when repeated over time, they can have a major impact: women who experience microaggressions view their workplaces as less fair and are three times more likely to regularly think about leaving their jobs than women who don't.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment continues to pervade the workplace. Thirty-five percent of women in corporate America experience sexual harassment at some point in their careers, from hearing sexist jokes to being touched in a sexual way.^[1]

For some women the experience is far more common. Fifty-five percent of women in senior leadership, 48 percent of lesbian women, and 45 percent of women in technical fields report they've been sexually harassed. A common thread connects these groups: research has found that women who do not conform to traditional feminine expectations—in this case, by holding authority, not being heterosexual, and working in fields dominated by men—are more often the targets of sexual harassment.

Ninety-eight percent of companies have policies that make it clear sexual harassment is not tolerated, but many employees think their companies are falling short putting policies into practice. Only 62 percent of employees say that in the past year their companies have reaffirmed sexual harassment won't be tolerated, and a similar number say that they've received training or guidance on the topic. Moreover, only 60 percent of employees think a sexual-harassment claim would be fairly investigated and addressed by their company—and just one in three believe it would be addressed quickly.

There are also stark differences in how women and men view their company's efforts to create a safe and respectful work environment. Only 32 percent of women think that disrespectful behavior toward women is often quickly addressed by their companies, compared with 50 percent of men. Women are far less confident that reporting sexual harassment will lead to a fair investigation. And they are twice as likely as men to say that it would be risky or pointless to report an incident.

These numbers indicate the urgent need for companies to underscore that bad behavior is unacceptable and will not go overlooked. Leaders at all levels should set the tone by publicly stating sexual harassment won't be tolerated and by modeling inclusive behavior. HR teams should receive detailed training so they know how to

thoroughly and compassionately investigate claims of harassment, even if they involve senior leaders. And companies would benefit from putting an audit process in place to ensure that investigations are thorough and sanctions are appropriate.

The ‘Only’ experience

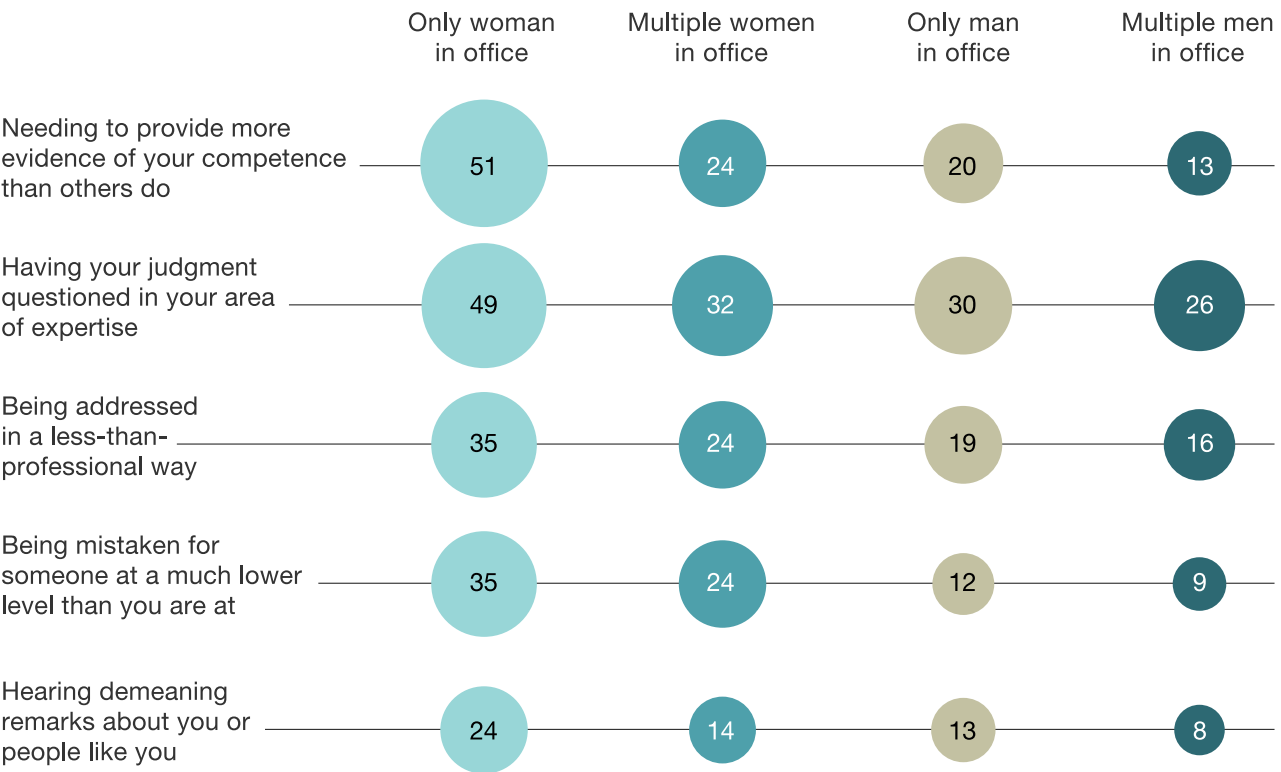
Being “the only one” is still a common experience for women. One in five women say they are often the only woman or one of the only women in the room at work: in other words, they are “Onlys.” This is twice as common for senior-level women and women in technical roles: around 40 percent are Onlys.

Women who are Onlys are having a significantly worse experience than women who work with other women. More than 80 percent are on the receiving end of microaggressions, compared with 64 percent of women as a whole. They are more likely to have their abilities challenged, to be subjected to unprofessional and demeaning remarks, and to feel like they cannot talk about their personal lives at work (Exhibit 4). Most notably, women Onlys are almost twice as likely to have been sexually harassed at some point in their careers.

Exhibit 4

Women who are the **only** female at their management level are having a significantly worse experience than women who work with more women.

Employees who have experienced microaggressions during the normal course of business, %



McKinsey&Company | Source: 2018 LeanIn.Org and McKinsey Women in the Workplace study

Far fewer men are **Onlys**—just 7 percent say that they are often the only or one of the only men in the room—and regardless of their race and ethnicity, they face less scrutiny than women **Onlys**. By and large, white men who are **Onlys** have a better experience than any other group of **Onlys**, likely because they are broadly well represented in their company and are a high-status group in society.

Women **Onlys** have a more difficult time. Because there are so few, women **Onlys** stand out in a crowd of men. This heightened visibility can make the biases women **Onlys** face especially pronounced. While they are just one person, they often become a stand-in for all women—their individual successes or failures become a litmus test for what all women are capable of doing. With everyone’s eyes on them, women **Onlys** can

be heavily scrutinized and held to higher performance standards. As a result, they most often feel pressure to perform, on guard, and left out. In contrast, when asked how it feels to be the only man in the room, men Onlys most frequently say they feel included.

Being an Only also affects the way women view their workplace. Compared with other women, women Onlys are less likely to think that the best opportunities go to the most deserving employees, promotions are fair and objective, and ideas are judged by their quality rather than who raised them. Not surprisingly, given the negative experiences and feelings associated with being the odd woman out, women Onlys are also 1.5 times more likely to think about leaving their job.

Mapping a path to gender equality

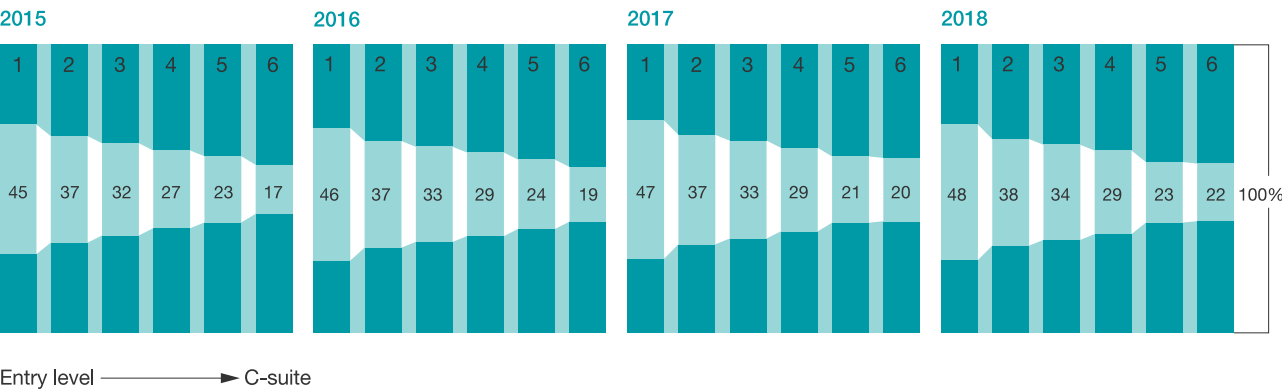
The vast majority of companies say that they’re highly committed to gender and racial diversity—yet the evidence indicates that many are still not treating diversity as the business imperative it is. That’s apparent in the lack of progress in the pipeline over the past four years (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5

Looking back over the last four years, the agonizingly slow improvement in women’s representation in senior management becomes apparent.

Representation of women by corporate role 2015–18, % of employees

1 = Entry level 2 = Manager 3 = Senior manager/director 4 = Vice president 5 = Senior vice president 6 = C-suite



McKinsey&Company | Source: 2018 LeanIn.Org and McKinsey Women in the Workplace study

Take gender diversity as an example. In contrast with what companies say about their commitment, only around half of all employees think that their company sees gender diversity as a priority and is doing what it takes to make progress. Around 20 percent of employees say that their company's commitment to gender diversity feels like lip service. And few companies are making a strong business case for gender diversity: while 76 percent of companies have articulated a business case, only 13 percent have taken the critical next step of calculating the positive impact on their business.

There are six actions companies need to take to make progress on gender diversity. Without action on these fronts, the numbers will not move:

- Get the basics right—targets, reporting, and accountability.
 - Ensure that [hiring and promotions are fair](#).
 - Make [senior leaders](#) and managers champions of diversity.
 - Foster an inclusive and respectful culture.
 - Make the Only experience rare.
 - Offer employees the flexibility to fit work into their lives.
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We know many companies—especially those that participate in this study—are committed and taking action. But this year's findings make it clearer than ever that companies need to double down on their efforts. This report includes concrete, evidence-based steps that companies can take right now that will make a major difference. We hope companies seize this opportunity. We can't get to equality until they do.

This is an edited extract from Women in the Workplace 2018, a study undertaken by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey. It builds on the Women in the Workplace reports from 2015, [2016](#), and [2017](#), as well as similar research conducted by McKinsey in 2012. For more information, visit [womenintheworkplace.com](https://www.mckinsey.com/womenintheworkplace).

1. It is important to note that the prevalence of sexual harassment reported in this research may be lower than what some working women experience. This survey focuses on full-time employees in the corporate sector versus the full economy, and given the nature of sexual

harassment, it is often underreported.

About the author(s)

Alexis Krivkovich and **Irina Starikova** are partners in McKinsey's Silicon Valley office; **Marie-Claude Nadeau** and **Kelsey Robinson** are partners in the San Francisco office, where **Nicole Robinson** is a consultant and **Lareina Yee** is a senior partner.