

Breaking Boundaries: How Women Can Conquer Men's Worlds and Break Through the Stereotypes

1. More femininity in business: why the market is longing for women

“Your training was world class today. It’s amazing how you managed to keep a horde of men at bay like that.” Mr. P – head of department at a medium-sized IT company – puts his beer down at the bar and rests his forearms possessively on the counter. The sleeves of his white shirt are casually rolled up. His tie hangs loosely around his neck. “It’s a great pity that you don’t have a single woman on your team,” replies his conversation partner Mrs. L “Why is that?” Mr. P’s facial expression changes. The corners of his mouth twist into a cynical grin. He leans over closely to Mrs. L and speaks in a muted tone: “Now just between you and me, nothing against you, but do we really need women on the ‘baboon hill?’ Space is already tight enough here. If things go on like this, it soon won’t be men calling the shots in companies, but women.”

An unusual sight: women on the baboon hill

Mrs. L looked incredulous, almost amused. She realized that Mr. P was unfortunately not an original individual case because before she could contradict him, Mr. S – a manager in the same company – intervened uninhibitedly in the conversation: “Territory remains territory. If women just barge into our world without being asked, they shouldn’t be surprised when we defend our territory.”

Sound like a table conversation or a fabrication? Hardly – it’s actually a true story told by the author. What at first might make some people’s mouths dry like crispbread is unfortunately still part of everyday life in German businesses. **Women who work in male-dominated industries and want to be successful encounter obstacles that seemingly date back to the age of Neanderthals.** However, one thing is certain: **Moving into previously unfamiliar territory requires a certain amount of preparation on both sides.**

The countdown is on: The FemDax is coming!

It’s official: The market is longing for women. The economy is finally becoming more feminine! **Women are conquering male-dominated sectors of the economy and bringing a breath of fresh air, excitement, and diversity to the previously male-dominated business world.** This trend is becoming increasingly apparent and is unstoppable. It is no secret that women are increasingly in demand on the job market. Women are more and more often being hired in sectors and positions that were previously dominated by men. And for good reason: Women bring valuable qualities, skills, and talents that companies appreciate. Their creativity is needed. Women are simply an enrichment for classic male domains!

However, we are miles away from a new female stock market index – the FemDAX – which would consist only of companies managed by women. The path to a successful career in a so-called “male sector” is often rocky and paved with numerous obstacles. When women enter male domains, they face challenges that are far greater than small molehills. These cannot be fully solved by the controversial and hotly debated women’s quota. So, before we loudly call out to

women with the words, **“Ladies, what are you waiting for? It’s time to unleash your power on the market and enrich the business world!”** we must remember that there’s still a lot to do!

Everyday business life for women: Teflon suit or high heels?

One of the biggest challenges for women is gaining the respect of male colleagues. Exceptional commitment and negotiation skills are required to be accepted and taken seriously. **Women often have to work much harder to achieve the same level of success as their male colleagues.** Even when women achieve more than their male colleagues, they often receive less recognition. This is not only unfair, but also an obstacle to career development. Unfortunately, there is also still a gap between the salaries of men and women in many industries and countries.

The increasing female presence in male-dominated industries also has an impact on the outdated role models of women and men in society. **Quick-wittedness and a healthy dose of humor are required to take the wind out of the sails of stereotypes, prejudices, and slanting comments.** Because in male-dominated areas, prejudices and stereotypes spare no-one and that is also quite human. People are pigeonhole thinkers. We like to think in stereotypes. Especially women who work in typically male-dominated sectors such as STEM, IT, the automotive industry, Tech companies, or mechanical engineering, etc., are often pigeonholed. Unfortunately, they still must listen to prejudices that women in technical professions don’t really do as well as men. Despite this, there are countless successful women in the IT and technology sectors who prove that this assumption is completely unfounded.

Macho attitudes: dealing with the permanent female guest

Is this another book about quotas for women? Another book about why men are mean guys and make life difficult for women in business? Not really. In my heart of hearts, I like men quite a lot. And I can even understand them. Einstein once put it very aptly: “Some men make a lifelong effort to understand the nature of a woman. Others deal with less difficult things, such as the theory of relativity.” In other words, **it is understandably not always easy for men when previously male-dominated areas of work are now also “populated” by the fairer female sex.** Why should something that is often a challenge between men and women in normal everyday life be left out of the business world? It takes time and mutual understanding for men and women to better understand and support each other. This often requires some rethinking and the development of new skills on both sides. It is not always easy to switch immediately.

Of course, it is extremely tempting to simply say: “Guys, you finally have to change! You have to accept that we women are at the forefront now. Get rid of your archaic role models and come with us into the modern world!” But between you and me: **Strong men are not afraid of strong women. And clever women let men be heroes.** It’s hard enough to want to change someone. Instead, we can approach each other in a positive, curious, benevolent and cooperative way. We can learn from each other and support each other. **Ultimately, it’s about whetting everyone’s appetite for working together to shape the business world and seeing our differences as a wonderful enrichment.**

Hey sister, why are you sabotaging your success?

So far, we have only shed light on one part of the unpleasant truth. Here comes another part of the drama: It is **not uncommon for women in male-dominated industries to stand in their own way and sabotage their own success**. The list of self-sabotaging behaviors is too long to present here fully. But even a small excerpt is often enough to catch us in the act, wake us up, and get us to stop pointing the finger only at men. So here is an excerpt from the undisputed perennial favorites: **Women like to copy the behavior of their male colleagues in a Teflon suit, play the snarky alpha female, and forget that their feminine elegance is an undisputed success factor**.

Women often give in to the Sleeping Beauty illusion. They want to be discovered before they draw attention to themselves and their successes. A major problem with this illusion is that women are less willing to promote themselves and highlight their achievements. This can lead to them receiving fewer pay raises or promotions than their male counterparts, who are often more confident and proactive when it comes to making a splash. This is one of the reasons why women continue to earn less.

Women also tend to underestimate themselves significantly more often than their male colleagues and often have doubts about their abilities and qualifications. This can lead to them avoiding positions or projects for which they would be suitable. Another challenge is that women often receive less support and mentoring than their male colleagues.

Women still have fewer networks in the business world than men, which is why some doors remain closed to them.

Women have made incredible progress in the business world in recent decades. They have reached top positions in companies and achieved tremendous success in many industries. But while the number of successful women is increasing, one phenomenon also seems to be becoming more common: competition and cattiness among women. Women are often taught to compete against other women in order to get attention from men. In many cases, women are even encouraged to perceive other women as a threat and to stand up to them. Women can sometimes feel alone and isolated for this reason when working in a male-dominated industry, even if they have contributed to this environment themselves. Why don't we finally let the drama go and help each other succeed?!

The power of attraction: how women can seduce the male-dominated business world

But I have good news for you! There is hope when yin meets yang. **Not only do women have the potential to thoroughly shake up the male world of business, but they also have the potential to be very successful in male-dominated industries, thanks to the power of their femininity**. And they can use their grace, their cunning, and their feminine qualities with finesse to overcome the hurdles that still exist for women with feminine elegance and ease.

Opposites always attract – this is a saying that many of us are familiar with. The proverb describes the idea that it is precisely the differences in personalities, interests, and backgrounds that seduce and attract us. But is this really true or is it a persistent rumor? One thing is clear: Two alphas, hardheaded individuals, or stage hogs will definitely get in each other's way in the long run.

But no matter what the answer is, the nice thing is that we can often consciously use contrasts to generate attention, to make a complete artwork exciting and interesting, to provoke and, of course, to turn the spotlight onto something that

becomes special because of its rarity. When high heels meet heroes, it can create a very exciting constellation which women can use to make a successful start in male-dominated industries. Even if there are supposedly still many hurdles for women in male-dominated industries, even if we sometimes stand in our own way and it feels like driving with the handbrake on, we must not forget one thing: **The market is longing for women and for YOU!**



**“You mustn’t put your head down
at the first boo. Stand tall and
keep going!”**

2. Prejudices, stereotypes, and weird come-ons: challenges for women in male-dominated industries

Too beautiful for the job? Why Frankfurt's bank towers are too small for some beauties

At 10:30 a.m. on a Tuesday morning, I once again find myself in the impressive lobby of a renowned investment bank. A gentleman, who is introduced to me as my interview partner, greets me warmly. Wearing my elegant skirt, a simple top, and my high-heeled shoes, I step into the elevator next to him. I immediately notice that I am at least a head taller than him.

When the elevator doors open on the 17th floor, I am greeted by a breathtaking panoramic view of Frankfurt. The actual interview begins in a stylishly furnished room. My male counterpart, who presents himself to me as a potential team leader, asks me a plethora of questions and carefully examines each of my answers.

After an intense hour, he gives me the most absurd feedback I've ever received: "Unfortunately, I can't hire you. Although you fulfill all our technical requirements and would be ideal for this position, you are too attractive. As I have an all-male team, no one would get any work done if you were here."

Confusion, disbelief, anger – all the emotions were swirling inside me. Should I burst out laughing or stifle my tears? At that moment, I was overwhelmed by the urge to flee. And this was supposed to be the start of my career in finance?

"When you walk into a meeting as a woman for the first time, a 'knowledge check' is carried out to test how competent you are. They also check what background a woman has. Does she have a family, is she married, does she have children? By then your head will already be spinning. You're quickly pigeonholed into certain categories." – Doris

Pigeonholes in our heads: how stereotypes and prejudices influence our behavior

No one wants them, everyone has them: prejudices. They are these little beasts that we all hide in our mental cutlery drawer, even if we claim to be free of them. They are like **our brain's express menu: "Drawer open, preconceived opinion out, drawer closed!"** But are we the bad guys in the schoolyard of opinions? No, not really. According to the clever minds researching prejudice, this is a completely natural "autopilot" mode of our thinking. It saves us from constantly pondering the diversity of the world. When we think about an entire group, we speak of stereotypes; when we look at individuals, we speak of prejudices. And then there is "subtyping".ⁱ For example, when everyone thinks, "Women and politics? Doesn't fit!" and then suddenly Angela Merkel appears. And the reaction? "Well, she's just the exception that proves the rule." We use tricks like this to hold on to our prejudices, no matter how much evidence shows us otherwise. And that, dear readers, is stubbornness of the highest order!

The latest UN report from 2023ⁱⁱ reveals that despite increased awareness of gender equality, deep-rooted prejudices against women have persisted unabatedly over the last ten years.

The Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) shows that there has been no progress in the prejudices affecting women in politics, education, business, and physical integrity. The results are alarming: 87% of women and 90% of men support at least one prejudice. Many doubt the value of women in democracy, see men as better politicians, favor higher education for men, and believe that men should be favored for jobs and leadership positions.ⁱⁱⁱ

Stereotypes have a direct impact on our self-confidence and our ability to perform. They are like little performance thieves that sneak into our heads and whisper to us: “Hey, you can’t do it as well as the men!” and poof, they’re already messing up our performance. If a woman is constantly told that she doesn’t have what it takes, then she will perform like a master of mediocrity! You don’t think so? Well, that’s how it is! And it often hits us women harder. This was proven in studies in which all participants were given a simple task and a stereotypical message such as “Men are usually better at this task” (with the implicit message “Women are therefore usually worse”) or “Men are usually worse at this task” (with the implicit message “Women are therefore usually better”) and vice versa. In the positively formulated prejudice for men (men are usually better), there was an increase in performance for men, but a dramatic decrease in performance for women, who received the implicit message that they would probably perform poorly at the task.^{iv}

Avoiding prejudice is about as easy as drinking a glass of water in a handstand – darn hard and with messy consequences! If we try to suppress these stubborn little thoughts, they often turn into a rebellious teenager who does exactly what they shouldn’t – paradoxically, they come back even stronger. In fact, trying to consciously suppress certain prejudices can sometimes lead to a boomerang effect. But how do you control them? The first and most important step in breaking down everyday prejudices is to recognize them and accept that no one is completely free of them. A wonderful strategy is to work with and remember dazzling role models. For example, if we believe that women and politics don’t go hand in hand, we simply pull Angela Merkel out of our hat. By learning about and surrounding ourselves with positive role models, we manage to outsmart these stubborn prejudices and broaden our horizons. Many of the clever people I coach confirm that it works. Of course, it also works the other way around, by thinking of people who contradict a certain stereotype. And what about if you don’t have a role model in your company yet? Then congratulations! The stage is yours. You have the opportunity to explore new territory and become a female role model for your colleagues.

“I’ve learned never to let anyone bring me down. If you want to go your own way in a male domain, then go for it, no matter what others say about you.” – Stefanie

Stereotype showdown! The most common clichés about women in business

Women in the business environment and especially in very male-dominated industries can encounter various stereotypes and prejudices. Here are some classics that we are confronted with as women and that can be real stumbling blocks in the business jungle if we don’t know how to deal with them.

Cry quietly, Chantal! When women are accused of being emotional

Let’s start with my absolute favorite classic, ladies. I’ve often heard the saying myself: “**Women are too emotional for business.**” I feel a bit called out! My manager at my first job in the financial sector said to me on my last day at work, “Ms. Leinweber, the worst moment for me was when you cried in my office.” At that moment, it was absolutely absurd for me to push away my parting tears. Are women even allowed to be emotional? Or are we completely overloading our dear male colleagues with it?

Let's face it: The prejudice that we women are more emotional than men and may therefore react inappropriately or allow our decisions to be influenced by emotions is as trivial in a male-dominated working environment as well-frothed milk in a latte macchiato. But why are emotionality and intuition so helpful? They play a central role in decision-making. Intuitive decisions can be just as good as rational decisions in terms of quality.

For this reason, as soon as women come to me for coaching or training, I first ask them to make an emotional decision 'from the gut' and put their intellect on the back burner for a moment. And I don't do this because these women couldn't also make the right decision intellectually. Rather, I do it because women who have often been confronted with the prejudice that they are "too emotional" forget that smart decisions are not made solely based on our reasoning. There may only be 30 centimeters between our head and our heart, but this is one of the most important ways we can ensure that solutions really work. And studies also prove this: They clearly show that managers who rely on a combination of instincts and heuristics when making decisions make just as good of decisions as managers who make their decisions exclusively rationally, with the help of numbers, data, and facts.^v **Reason and emotion are therefore not necessarily mutually exclusive, as is often wrongly assumed. It is very possible to take a very well thought-out, rational position with great emotional passion or to back up a gut decision with figures, data, and facts.**

"Sometimes it's good to listen to your gut feeling. I notice for myself that I think less rationally at such times and listen more to my heart than to my mind." – Stefanie

The fact is that emotions are a natural part of being human, regardless of gender. Men can be just as emotional as we are. They may not shed their tears in the office, but they can just as easily turn red with anger at a meeting or do a happy dance when the employee share price goes through the roof. Who said that emotions are only associated with tissues? Women are not automatically more emotional than men and there is no scientific evidence that women are less rational or competent in decision-making processes.

But are we allowed to live out our feelings unfiltered in business? Of course we are! Why not? **You don't have to exercise emotional restraint. Feel free to let your hair down if you and your male counterpart can live with the emotional consequences.** However, my experience shows that people who have no access to their emotional life are overwhelmed by emotional outbursts. So, ask yourself a different question: What is the point of showing my emotions openly in a situation? And does it help the other person? Empathy can absolutely be helpful, for example, when communicating with two male colleagues who are at odds with each other. Unfortunately, tears in a business meeting put male colleagues in a state of absolute stress. When women cry, the warning light immediately seems to go on in some men's heads. Red alert! State of emergency! That doesn't mean you should push your emotions away. Find a safe space during these moments which could overwhelm your counterpart. Let your emotions run their course so that you can move on freely afterwards.

“When I get into conversations with men, I always get branded from the start: ‘Blonde’. Yes, okay, I’m a blonde and I can still do it. Why not!?” – Stefanie

Logarithm code cracked! When complex technical puzzles become female!

Another classic prejudice that is particularly prevalent in STEM fields and that women often hear is that **women are less competent in technical fields**. Despite progress in many areas, there are persistent prejudices that women have no interest in IT, engineering, mathematics, mechanical engineering, automotive, and technology. In fact, around 40 percent of Germans are still of this opinion.^{vi}

But where does this prejudice come from? **From a neuroscientific perspective, men and women have the same average intelligence level**. However, the reality is that the female brain has often been misrepresented as less efficient in certain areas, such as mathematics and science [\(see also Chapter 4: The female brain in a hormonal frenzy: why women think differently to men and how everyone benefits\)](#).

Nowadays, however, we know that the supposed difference in the mathematical and scientific abilities of girls and boys disappears by the time they are teenagers. Women are just as capable as men of solving complex mathematical problems and generating scientific knowledge.^{vii}

Here, too, we need to be very careful of the notorious gender bias because contrary expectations that are placed on us women have an effect on the assessment of our own abilities! An interesting finding from a Tel Aviv University study found that women who were reminded that their gender was considered more maternal and warm-hearted prior to math tests performed worse on the tests. These results provide an interesting look at how expectations and preconceptions (such as child over career) actually impact women’s performance and ability in mathematical tasks.^{viii}

But do we women feed this prejudice ourselves? Do we deny our competence even though we have it? Interestingly, there is actually a difference across genders in how we assess our own skills.

Women tend to underestimate their abilities more often and systematically rate their mathematical skills lower than men, even if they have the same level of performance.^{ix} Does it have to be that way, ladies?

We can juggle numbers and rock algorithms, just like our male colleagues. When it comes to competence, we are on an equal footing! Let’s stop underestimating our mathematical skills and show off our intellect in all its glory! Show your male colleagues that you are not only a technical star, but also a brilliant mathematician and engineer! You can shine with your technical, mathematical, and professional knowledge as well as analytical skills because competence knows no gender!

“I have encountered many prejudices: Women don’t understand anything about technology or are less competent, less resilient, less assertive, too emotional in business. And that’s nonsense, of course. We women are just as competent, experienced, and knowledgeable as men.” – Sabrina

The misunderstanding of the gentle Rambo: when women have no negotiating skills

Let’s move on to the most absurd prejudice, which, as a very assertive and decisive woman, is number 3 on my personal hit list: **Women are not assertive and are weak negotiators.** Women and negotiations – a subtle dance between diplomacy and assertiveness. On the one hand, it is said that we are not assertive enough, on the other hand, we should not behave too aggressively. But do assertiveness and negotiation always mean banging your fists on the table, swinging a verbal club, and following through to the bitter end? Many women simply dislike this Rambo tactic because we often have another driving force: We want to be liked. For many of the people I coach, “asserting yourself” sounds like brutality, violence, manipulation, and “I win, you lose!” and that’s not nice, friendly, or at all feminine. Women negotiate in a “nicer” way. But is this enough to be successful in business? Let’s take a closer look, ladies!

Women negotiate differently than men. We women have the edge when it comes to creating a pleasant atmosphere for discussions and strengthening business relationships for the future. We prepare ourselves more thoroughly for negotiations by collecting more arguments and thinking carefully about what counterarguments our negotiation partners might put forward. Men pay less attention to substantive aspects and like to use negotiations to engage in power struggles. Men have a more poker-like mentality and a competitive negotiation style, while we women are less focused on winning and often choose a cooperative negotiation style.^x **In non-competitive situations, women and men generally achieve similar results.** However, when competition arises in a situation, the negotiation results of men increase significantly, while those of women remain unchanged. **For us women, the main priority is not necessarily the (financial) result, but rather maintaining a diplomatic approach to our negotiating partners.**

But does this mean that women automatically shy away from salary negotiations and even perform worse? Not necessarily. A study investigated whether women refrain from asking for salary increases out of fear of disagreement or conflict. Women are just as willing and courageous as men when negotiating salary increases. However, only 16 percent of women (over 40 years of age) were granted their wish – in contrast, the success rate for men was 25 percent higher. Female employees (under 40), on the other hand, were able to achieve the same salary increases as their male colleagues of the same age.^{xi} Do “younger” women negotiate better? Or is it about completely different factors, such as the personal strengths of the respective negotiating partner?

I know many assertive women of all ages who are very skilled in negotiations and have a strong inner attitude. They don’t mess around. They make decisions. A certain stubbornness along the lines of “I won’t take no for an answer” is also characteristic. **Women just use more subtle strategies to assert themselves and get what they want.** Sometimes we manage to complete negotiations before they even start, according to the tactic of ‘fait accompli’. A sneaky tactic? Be honest, ladies: We create dozens of fait accompli every day at home and in our private lives. Why not in business too? Because our male colleagues will no longer like us? On the contrary! **Men accept assertive women as equal partners. And sometimes it’s wiser to ask for forgiveness instead of permission.** But even a polite and confident smile can cause some negotiating partners to lose their nerve and talk their heads off.

“Men often claim that women are less physically and mentally resilient. When men find out that a new woman is joining the team, they take a close look at her. If the woman is seen as attractive, comments are often made below the belt. On the other hand, women who are seen as less attractive are often not respected at all.” – Jenny

Bossy is not ladylike! How female leadership skills are underestimated

At the sad number 4 spot on the stereotype charts is the prejudice that **women are not strong leaders**. We women are supposed to be less bossy? There are numerous examples of high-profile female leaders who disprove this prejudice. Women like Angela Merkel, Christin Lagarde, Susanne Klatten, and many more show that women are extremely strong leaders. To portray women as worse bosses is just as absurd as claiming that men are better at understanding the assembly instructions for a piece of IKEA furniture! The prejudice is based on a number of false assumptions. One of these is that leadership is correlated with certain masculine characteristics such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and authoritarian behavior. This stereotype assumes that women are less likely to possess or apply these traits and are therefore seen as less strong leaders and instead associated with passive or supportive positions.

Another argument used to substantiate this prejudice is the lower presence of women in management positions, but there are many other reasons for this! In March 2023, the proportion of women in management positions across Germany was around 24%.^{xii} This means that a whopping 76% of managers wear ties instead of high heels and go by the names Andreas, Michael, and Christian instead of Katja, Antje, and Nicole.^{xiii} No wonder, ladies, that we sometimes think we're in the wrong movie! We women still have a lot of work to do to turn the term “female leadership” into more than just a buzzword.

“I am a female manager. My job is to lead my team and move the business forward. There's no room for matters of the ego!” – Elena

However, it is wrong to measure leadership strength solely by the number of management positions held. Classifying talent by gender alone is also too short-sighted, as it leaves out women's individual qualities and strengths. **Actual leadership strength depends on a variety of factors, including personal qualities, experience, and the ability to motivate and inspire people.** However, according to a study by the Norwegian Business School, there are certain qualities that are more common in women. We women outperformed men in four of the five categories studied: 1. the ability to take initiative, be clear, and communicate; 2. the ability to innovate, be curious, and have an ambitious vision; 3. the ability to support, accommodate, and include coworkers; and 4. the ability to set goals, be thorough, and follow through. But ladies, I must be fair at this point. The study did find that men are superior in one criterion. They are better at dealing with work-related pressure and stress than women.^{xiv}

Women therefore lead confidently, authentically, and in harmony with their feminine qualities, abilities, strengths, and resources. **Female leadership emphasizes topics such as empathy, cooperation, appreciation, the ability to listen to the wishes and conflicts of employees, promoting trust among each other, prudence, caring, creating a more harmonious working environment, and much more. And women are indescribably good at that!** So dear ladies, before we get annoyed by the prejudice that women are supposedly weaker leaders, we should focus our energy on establishing our very own leadership styles and leading in our own successful way. After all, who wants to follow in the footsteps of stereotypical clichés?

Between daycare and conferences: the balancing act between motherhood and professional success

Perhaps the worst prejudice at the absolute bottom of the list is the stereotype: **“When women have children, they are out of the picture”**. I’ve often heard that women in my coaching sessions have been confronted with things like, “Well, she’ll probably only come back part-time,” or, “Surely the next child won’t be far off!” Is motherhood supposed to hinder a woman’s commitment to business? Both a child and a career? Unthinkable! That sounds a lot like Germany in the 50s! It’s still completely alien to me. I come from the former GDR, where it was expected that women worked full-time even with child(ren). My mother always worked full time and still lovingly looked after her daughters. Women felt no pressure to justify themselves if they were mothers and also had a profession to ensure their independence. For many women, working was an essential part of their self-image.

“For me, it’s normal for mothers to work full-time. My mother and my American host mother both worked full-time and successfully raised children. If we women and mothers accept old role models and don’t actively promote diversity in the workforce, nothing will change.” – Elena

There are many exciting studies about successful working mothers who pursue a career and the positive effects this has on their environment. An interesting Harvard study^{xv} shows that denying mothers the opportunity to have a successful career is counterproductive – not only for the future of their children, but also for society at large. The study examined the relationship between the mother’s employment and the employment of the adult daughters and sons, as well as the impacts on their overall households in 29 industrialized countries. As an example, women who were daughters of a working mother were significantly more successful in the workplace. In addition, women with working mothers earned more than women who came from more traditional households. **Adult daughters of working mothers were more likely to be employed and more likely to have managerial responsibilities.** And men who were raised by a working mother made a greater contribution at home. In the home, sons of these mothers spent more time caring for family members, whereas daughters spent less time on housework.^{xvi}

Child OR career? Or child AND career? The following study^{xvii} shows that there is still a lot for companies and politicians to do: 44% of the women surveyed are reluctant to pursue a career with a child because the options for returning to work have not been optimally designed by the company, reconciling work and private life is unthinkable for women under these circumstances, and a potential overload is to be expected. Over 60% of the women surveyed find it difficult to reconcile child and career, regardless of whether their partner helps with childcare and how care work is divided up at home. Every second woman confirms that starting work after parental leave is perceived as more difficult. Almost half of all women have experienced discrimination in the company due to their motherhood. Every fourth woman without children believes that they could not have children in their company without problems. And around 45% of women believe that the decision to have a child will or has negatively affected their career.

For me, mothers are the most extraordinary people on this planet. And there are clear advantages to having mothers work in companies: They are stress-tested organizers, diplomats, and problem solvers. Their experience in dealing with the needs of their children has given them skills that also prove beneficial in the work environment. Mothers are often masters in efficient time management. They are planning geniuses, have learned to set priorities, and complete their tasks on time. Mothers are so resilient that they could climb Mount Everest and organize a child's birthday party at the same time. They also have natural empathy and interpersonal skills that help them build positive relationships with colleagues and customers. No wonder they are absolute "premium employees"!

"Men often have difficulties with strong women because they are still stuck in the old ways of thinking in which women are responsible for the household and children. It also depends on how men were brought up and what ideas their mothers taught them." – Jenny

No one can get out of their skin and be completely free of prejudice, neither men nor women. They are like stubborn chewing gum on the sidewalk – they stick and are difficult to remove. We often can't find our way through this jungle of unfair allegations without a machete and can't see the bigger picture because we get too lost in the details. **But if we don't know exactly where to start, it's always best to start with ourselves: with our mindset and with the role we play in our lives and the stories we want to tell ourselves in the future.** The traditional woman is a thing of the past. Let's pulverize the prejudices and look fabulous at the same time! Negotiations are won, feelings are lived out profitably, the boardroom is conquered by women, technical and mathematical logarithms are cracked, and maternal care is combined with professional success. We can prove that women don't need to be pigeonholed to be successful, even in male-dominated business sectors! What are we waiting for? Let's go, girls!

ⁱ Siegele, D. (2020). Then girls won't become astronauts. Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologie-heute.de/gesellschaft/artikel-detailansicht/40754-dann-werden-maedchen-keine-astronautinnen.html>. Accessed: 03.07.2023

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3. Those who understand women can also divide by zero: the secret desires of women in male-dominated industries

When roosters put up their crests and secret wishes remain flightless

Another all-male meeting – well, not quite. I was also sitting at the table. It always started in the classic way and by now I could set a timer for the script that this male-dominated meeting would follow and the competitive showdown that would occur: It started with one of the colleagues throwing a thesis into the room. Something like: “Yesterday I set a new record time for running!”

The other male colleagues immediately jumped at this, each needing to outdo one another with their own sporting performance. “That’s nothing!” shouted one of them. “I ran a half marathon last week and was one of the first five runners to finish!” Another, who wasn’t sporty, trumpeted: “Oh boys. Calm down! I was programming late into the night last night and saved the entire release of our software system!”

The atmosphere in the room became increasingly tense and the testosterone levels seemed to rise. I secretly wished we could finally get down to business, because valuable time was being wasted on what I considered unproductive activity with the alpha males patting each other’s hairy chests. I didn’t want to get involved in this round of “who’s outdoing who here?”. Why should I? We wanted to find a solution to the current product plight TOGETHER at the meeting. Oh, how much I would have liked the “who’s the best” mentality to give way to a “what can we achieve together” mentality. But I found it difficult to assert myself against the dominant energy in the room. Unfortunately, in this meeting, my wishes remained secret and I did not make them known to the large group of men. What a pity!

If women could express their secret wishes to their male colleagues and superiors, some men’s jaws would drop. The things that unfortunately often remain hidden should really be addressed. This is the only way a meeting or workplace can change, dear ladies. But I also know how difficult it can be to openly say what you want in a male-dominated environment. We often worry that we might be ridiculed, steamrolled, misunderstood, or rejected. This chapter should therefore give you the courage to think about what you would like from your male colleagues and superiors and to express this openly. Here are a few classics that my wonderful interview guests have shared with me and which you are welcome to add to with your (soon no longer) secret wishes.

Watch out for the mating dance: why meetings would be much nicer without cockfights

Dear men, we women know that you have great skills, and we appreciate your strengths. But every now and then, we wish that the jockeying and pointless power struggles between male colleagues would stop, especially when we women are present. It often happens that men try to demonstrate their dominance or strength in a business context, be it through loud behavior, excessive self-confidence, or the constant highlighting of personal successes or achievements.

This type of behavior often makes us women feel uncomfortable or uneasy and rarely generates the desire to enter the “who’s the strongest” competition. Quite simply, many women find it too ridiculous. Nevertheless, we sometimes don’t dare to end these tussles. And if we women intervene, this is often “overheard”. Our contribution in this situation is neither desired nor helpful. And this gives us the feeling that our opinions are not valued in this setting.

We women don’t want cockfighting; rather, we want open and respectful communication. By being aware of the impact their behavior can have, and at least in the company of women, refraining from pointless displays of strength or dominance, men can create an atmosphere of respect and productive interaction. And that, gentlemen, will not only improve the working environment for women, but will have a positive impact on the entire company. So dear ladies, if you have male colleagues who display this kind of behavior, feel free to speak to them about it after the meeting, invite more female colleagues to the next meeting, or let your sense of humor do the talking and point out that the men will have to offer you a little more in order for you to award the title of “most beautiful cock”.

“I often have the feeling that when I walk into a room where my male colleagues are, the dynamic changes. It suddenly seems more hierarchical and I feel like the men treat me differently. I wish that men would accept us in the same way as their male colleagues and not treat us differently.” – Stefanie

Business blackout: Oops, we forgot the ladies!

Women always have one clear request of their male colleagues and superiors: **Please don’t forget to invite us to those crucial meetings and recognize the expertise we bring to the table!**

Unfortunately, being excluded from important meetings is a common problem that women encounter in the business environment. Sometimes this happens unknowingly when male colleagues forget to invite their female counterparts. But there are also situations where exclusion is intentional.

Personally, I can remember a few incidents where I was not invited to important meetings. The reason was usually the same: “Oh, I must have forgotten you on the email distribution list. But you’re of course welcome to join us spontaneously!” Such an incident may seem like a minor matter at first glance, but the consequences can be far-reaching. The exclusion of women has fatal consequences – not only for the business climate, but especially for the women themselves. The feeling of exclusion conveys to women that their opinions are not valued and that they are not seen as equal partners in the business ([see Chapter 7: The nasty tricks of men: when men make business life difficult for women](#)).

It is our wish that our expertise is valued and that we can contribute just as confidently as our male colleagues. This is not only a question of fairness, but also a decisive factor for the economic success of a company.

If all team members are actively involved in meetings and their ideas and perspectives are valued, more innovative solutions will undoubtedly emerge. Women often have a different perspective and approach that can provide valuable impetus. We want a corporate culture that promotes all talents equally and encourages an open exchange of ideas. If we focus on the expertise and creativity of everyone involved, we can achieve great things together. And as a little reminder to the gentlemen: Our email address is definitely on the intranet!

“It often happens that things are communicated behind closed doors, and as a woman you don’t even notice. This is common in certain industries and situations where women are simply not included for some reason. What a shame that men claim this exclusive “best buddy” club for themselves”– Laura

No more bullies! Women want fair competition instead of nasty tricks

Even if we women are said to shy away from competition, I personally can only say: I love the challenge! Why shouldn’t we give ourselves the opportunity to compete fairly in a healthy competition? Fair competition motivates me to do my best and constantly improve. **I see competition as an opportunity to grow both personally and professionally.** But I can’t deny that some of my female colleagues have already experienced that fairness in competition can be a very elastic concept and that nasty tricks and underhand tactics often prevail.

It is frustrating and demotivating when we are confronted with nasty tricks aimed at putting obstacles in our way. Such unsportsmanlike conduct not only undermines confidence, but also affects productivity and team cohesion. There are times when I wonder why certain men think that fair play in business is just “nice-to-have” and that nasty tricks should instead dominate the rules of the game.

The effects of these unfair tactics can be far-reaching and sometimes make us women seem more competitive than we actually are. However, I firmly believe that we should not be discouraged. Instead, there is another crucial aspect that we want in business: fair competition and friendly collaboration, without nasty tricks! It’s not too much to ask that everyone in business pulls together without trying to outdo each other. **A corporate culture based on fair competition and friendly cooperation creates a positive environment in which women and men can develop their talents and skills without having to constantly look over their shoulder.**

“I would like us to understand again what it means to be human. We should accept our weaknesses, but also recognize and use our unique strengths.” – Sabrina

From deal-making to dating: Get rid of weird sayings and come-ons

“What do you do in your private life after work?” This question is an absolute classic. I’ve heard it countless times. And, of course, I’m not talking about invitations to an after-work drink with all my team colleagues, which I’ve always enjoyed attending. It seems that business and private life cannot always be separated, even in matters of pleasure and love: **After all, 78% of respondents in a study believe that true love can definitely be found in the workplace.** 89% have felt attracted to a colleague at some point. And a remarkable 85% of those surveyed have had extramarital affairs in the office.^{xvii}

Whether it is appropriate to date in the workplace is up to each individual to decide. **It is absolutely improper when women receive inappropriate invitations to private meetings, sexualized pictures, texts or films, or are sent lewd emails and text messages.** We women in business don't just want to work fairly with each other, we also want to go about our work without weird remarks and come-ons. It is unfortunate that we are still confronted with such challenges. For some of us, even a supposed and perhaps well-intentioned compliment such as, "Your legs are particularly beautiful in that dress," is enough to make us feel harassed and uncomfortable. Harsh and derogatory misogynistic statements such as, "She used her tit bonus to get ahead," are unfortunately not uncommon either.

"The manner in which compliments are given plays a big role. A simple, 'You look great in that dress,' is a nice compliment. But if there is a subliminal message, it can be problematic. Women are often better at reading between the lines, which sometimes leads to misunderstandings." – Elena

Slippery comments, mocking jokes, or underground sayings, which some woman or another might laugh off, often bothers the sensitive women among us longer and more thoroughly. We don't want to be seen as objects or involved in inappropriate conversations.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with an after-work beer with the team. And if you're ready to find the love of your life at work, you're welcome to throw yourself into the fray, fully aware of the consequences. But one thing is absolutely clear: We women want to be valued respectfully as colleagues. We want to work together as equals – a culture in which men and women are equally respected and recognized. **Respectful communication is not negotiable for us, but rather a clear obligation so that each of us can feel safe and valued.** Gentlemen are welcome to share off-color jokes, raunchy comments, or smug jokes among themselves.

Show me the money, honey! Why it's high time for equal pay

Let's be honest, ladies: The demand for "equal pay for equal work" has been a hotly debated topic for some time now. This debate often fizzles out because there is a certain lack of transparency in many companies about which salary levels are set for different positions. While things are different in American companies, in Germany there is unfortunately still uncertainty about the monetary framework for women's professional activities.

According to recent studies on the gender pay gap, women still earn 18% less per hour worked than their male colleagues.^{xvii} There are many reasons for this! Women in board positions are the exception here, as they surprisingly earn more than their male colleagues.^{xvii} However, as only 14% of publicly-owned German companies have women on their board, this is a drop in the ocean.^{xvii} But in the business world, women play just as valuable of a role in success as men. They bring expertise, leadership skills, and a spirit of innovation. Their contributions are crucial to the success of companies.

Women in business want their performance to be valued fairly and remunerated accordingly, regardless of gender. After all, equal effort should have equal financial value. **A fundamental element of fair pay is, of course, transparency within salary structures.** Companies should establish a culture of openness and fairness in which employees receive clear information about their salaries and promotion opportunities **(see: 12. Best practice: How companies can promote women in male-dominated industries through targeted measures).** This benefits both women and men in the company! And it puts more money in the pockets of both.

“What I would like to see from men is communication at eye level, in which differences are seen as an opportunity. We should fight together for the cause, endure conflicts, and focus on the best ideas and solutions instead of prioritizing ego issues.” – Elena

Children don't cost IQ: Women want the same career opportunities after parental leave

Many women decide to take parental leave after the birth of a child in order to focus on their family and accompany their child through the precious first year of life. But after this time off, they often want to return to work and continue their career. They want one thing above all: the same opportunities and possibilities that existed before parental leave and the chance to take on meaningful and challenging tasks instead of meaningless work. Unfortunately, however, it is still normal in some companies that these wishes go unheeded. **When women return to work after maternity leave, it is not uncommon for their previous tasks to have been distributed among other colleagues, their positions to have been filled by other colleagues, and for the working environment to have changed in such a way that it is not always easy to reclaim previous responsibilities. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to assign mothers tasks that are far below their actual capabilities:** tidying the filing cabinet, coordinating day-to-day operations, or tasks that have nothing at all to do with their previous work. Such things are often assigned to mothers who are “only” there part-time anyway. A sad picture emerges when women have previously taken on management roles and do not immediately return to full-time work. The idea of part-time managers? Outrageous!

It is frustrating and demotivating when women in the business world feel that their competence and performance is devalued or questioned because they are mothers. We want the same chances and opportunities we had before parental leave and to be able to pick up our careers where they left off. After parental leave, rather than striving for meaningless tasks, we long to dive back into engaging and challenging projects. **As if changing diapers, singing nursery rhymes, or pushing a buggy has strained a woman's intelligence and caused her IQ to plummet dramatically!** Perhaps a refresher course is needed, or further training is required – but we women are undoubtedly open to this.

“It was difficult for me to find my way back into working life after my first child. The conditions were simply not right. But children shouldn't mean the end of your career. That's the wrong approach!” – Jenny

Flexibility is also welcome in male domains. For example, important meetings should ideally be scheduled at times that are feasible for all employees. Of course, there may be situations where quick coordination is required, but one thing is certain: As flexible, efficient, and powerful as mothers are at work, they are also willing to take these appointments seriously. Unless, of course, they are scheduled without consideration for family matters.

It is important that companies support women during this phase and offer them the same development opportunities and career prospects as their male colleagues.

The quota women label: why our skills, not our gender, should be in the spotlight

It's still there: the women's quota, which was certainly introduced with noble intentions. Whether it is effective and how well it works, however, remains questionable. But for us women, it often has an undesirable aftertaste, especially when we are given the label "quota woman". **This little label of "token woman" can make us feel like we are not taken seriously or that our achievements are downplayed.** It is undoubtedly frustrating and demotivating when we feel that our competence and performance are devalued in the business world.

"How often do you hear the saying: 'She only got the job because she's a woman!' We need to get away from this label, otherwise it will stay with us for life. The person in a position shouldn't be there just because of their gender, but because they are professionally qualified or have the necessary skills." – Laura

We don't want to have the impression that we only found our place in the company through a quota system and that our skills and extensive experience were not up for discussion at all. That's like buying a sofa on sale in a furniture store even though you don't like the pink color! For us women, it's about developing our talents and doing outstanding work. We want recognition based on our skills, commitment, and results. We don't need special treatment because our performance, expertise, and skills are in no way inferior to those of our male colleagues. It's about being valued and respected for what we can bring to the professional arena, which fits perfectly with the saying: **The best candidate should get the job!**

Instead of concentrating on quotas and gender distribution, companies should focus on the individual skills and contributions of their employees. Women want their success and expertise to be visible in the company and not to be influenced by stereotypes or prejudices. Rather, we want to be ourselves. Authenticity plays an important role in the well-being and satisfaction of us women in a male working environment. And one thing is clear: When companies recognize and encourage this, the entire working environment becomes much more creative – without quota labels and Barbie associations!

"I recently had lunch with a male colleague and a group of women. He found it unusual that he couldn't have a say in the topics of conversation, as they were completely new to him. That showed him how many women in the working world often fare when men dominate." – Elena

Well, have you taken a closer look at your own wishes in this section? Here's the secret: **A wish only comes true when you express it.** That's the ultimate trick. Many women in my coaching sessions describe the situations listed in this chapter and are frustrated because their wishes and needs are not recognized. Of course, our counterpart can steadfastly ignore an expressed desire, but much more often it is simply because they have not been asked about it. Silently complaining and bickering to ourselves won't get us anywhere, ladies. Nor does the attitude: "Why do I have to ask for it at all? Couldn't the other person have noticed on their own?" Men are often blind to silent signals and quite honestly, our male colleagues and superiors are not there to guess our wishes. **Every woman has the right to say what she wants and needs.** And we should make use of this more often! Are you ready to make your wishes known openly?