MINERVA

unobstructed journeys

DISMANTLING BARRIERS TO GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Foreword

At Minerva, we have been measuring gender diversity in leadership in BC for nearly a decade. Our Face of Leadership™ Scorecard has been used to showcase progress in organizations. Yet women are still underrepresented at all levels of leadership and, across all industries in our province.

This represents a missed opportunity. Without diversity in leadership, we miss opportunities to attract the best staff at a time of talent scarcity and an aging workforce[1]. We miss the opportunity to build healthy workplace cultures which foster employee happiness, retention, and productivity. We miss crucial perspectives and skill sets shown to increase innovation, decrease risk, and improve economic growth. Most crucially, we miss the ripple effect of women's leadership on progressing equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Our recent survey shows that in BC, many people believe we have reached gender equality in the workplace, and that opportunities to reach leadership positions are equitable across genders.

Sadly, we know this isn't true.

We know that women experience a series of barriers throughout their careers which makes it more challenging, if not impossible, to progress at the same rate as their male counterparts. This is especially true for women with intersecting identities - Indigenous and Black women, women of colour, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, women with disabilities and immigrant women.

Evidence tells us that these barriers to advancement start upon entering the workforce, where young women are surprised to find that it is not an even playing field; or at their first opportunity for promotion, where their skill sets are judged differently. Women in our leadership courses speak of the current pressures they face in showing up as their true selves or trying to fit into workplace cultures based on outdated norms and expectations. Even in their late-careers, women still deal with discrimination and a lack of opportunities.

While measuring the numbers of women in leadership positions is important and gives us a snapshot of the current state, it doesn't go far enough to expose the barriers and identify action points where we can collectively drive change.

Unobstructed Journeys is the start of a new conversation at Minerva – one that goes beyond anecdotes to provide current data to understand women's career experiences in BC. Our aim is that, alongside our partners, supporters, and wider community, we create better workplaces now, and for the workforce of the future.

We look forward to doing it with you.

Tina Strehlke, CEO

Gillian Buergin, Board Chair

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Land Acknowledgment

Our office is located on the traditional, unceded lands of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səlilwəta?ɬ Nations. We also routinely work on the lands of Stk'emlupsemc te Secwepemc and Lheidli T'enneh Nations.

The Minerva BC team is committed to building right relations with Indigenous peoples and to learn and unlearn our own colonial practices. We are especially committed to elevating the visibility, influence, and contribution of Indigenous women – who have always been leaders in their communities.

We encourage our team members, participants, board members, and partners to learn about the lands they are on and consider their relationship and responsibilities to the land and its original inhabitants.

About this Report

Minerva BC commissioned Mustel Group to conduct an online survey with a random sample of 800 BC adults; 600 women and 200 men, 18 years and over. Data was collected from those who have been in the workforce in the past ten years. Minor weighting was applied to the data to match the sample to Statistics Canada census data in terms of gender, age, and region.

Research

This report includes both quantitative and qualitative findings from the online survey, as well as secondary research to expand upon our findings.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

All charts, tables, and graphs reflect primary data collected from the online survey.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

All quotes within the report are verbatim or with marked adjustments for ease of comprehension. They are derived from responses provided by survey participants.

SECONDARY RESEARCH

Due to the sample size of our general population survey, we are unable to report specific barriers experienced by some equity-deserving groups. Supplementary research was obtained to provide broader context and details on workplace barriers, experiences, and inequities.

Terminology

WOMEN AND MEN

In this report, we use the terms 'women' and 'men' to describe people who identify as such. We recognize and value people with gender identities that exist between and outside of this binary.

EQUALITY VS EQUITY

Equality means that everyone is given the exact same thing. Equity recognizes that individuals and groups have different circumstances and provides what is necessary for them to achieve an equal outcome. Both terms have been used in our survey and in this report. We believe that equitable workplace practices are needed to achieve workplace equality.

key
findings

Most women and men in BC believe there is gender equality in the workplace. Yet, the numbers tell a different story. In almost all categories, women say they have fewer opportunities and experience more barriers than men. The summary below introduces key findings in this report, while the following pages further explore the issues and opportunities for women in the workplace in British Columbia.

ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES IS UNEQUAL

Women are less likely than men to have access to opportunities which can help to advance their careers. For women in leadership positions, 57% have participated in leadership training versus 68% of men and only 46% feel included by peers in leadership circles. While 70% of men report having equal opportunity to their peers to lead assignments, just over half of women reported the same.

GENDER BARRIERS PERSIST

Age discrimination is experienced by 23% of women, regardless of their age, compared to only 12% of men. Just under half (45%) of women who are self-employed cite workplace barriers as having influenced their decision to work independently, and almost half (46%) of women employed in workplaces with a majority of men workers have had their competence questioned due to gender.

LACK OF ENGAGEMENT ON GENDER EQUITY AWARENESS

Despite facing more barriers and fewer opportunities, only 29% of women say their workplaces are engaging in awareness building on gender equity. The majority are not implementing policies that promote gender equity or gathering and sharing data on gender representation.

SOME BARRIERS ARE MORE PRONOUNCED BY AGE AND CAREER STAGE

While many of the issues women face are present throughout their careers, some are felt more acutely at a particular age and stage. One third of women under the age of 35 have had their competency questioned because of their gender, and 32% of women with children at home report downplaying parental responsibilities to progress in their careers.

SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACES HELP WOMEN ADVANCE

In workplaces where gender equity is a focus, 70% of women report that men are actively engaged in closing the gender gap. And while most women do not have a workplace sponsor, of those who do, the vast majority (91%) cite it as helping them progress in their career.

making the
invisible, *visible*

Making the Invisible, Visible

> You can't fix a problem if you don't think it exists.

Minerva BC recently commissioned a survey of 600 women and 200 men to learn more about their experiences at work. Findings showed that 70% of women and 76% of men in BC believe we have achieved gender equality in the workplace. That is, most people believe that no matter one's gender, there is equal treatment, access, and advancement in the workplace.

Further survey data, however, tells a different story. In almost all categories, women revealed they face more barriers and are presented with fewer opportunities than their male coworkers.

Equally concerning, less than a third of women (29%) and 39% of men, report that their workplaces actively engage in awareness building on gender equity through initiatives such as implementing policies that promote gender equity and gathering and sharing data on gender representation.

The truth is that women still experience inequality in the workplace. We know this from current research and the experiences women share in our leadership development programs. Women occupy more low-level positions and fewer senior-level positions than men[2]. They are less likely to have access to career advancement opportunities, are more likely to have their talent questioned, and are more likely to face workplace discrimination[3]. Women leaders that have advanced despite these barriers still outline gender bias and structural disadvantages at higher levels of leadership [4].

These experiences are compounded for women who experience additional forms of discrimination based on their identity. Women with disabilities often experience questions about their competency and are undermined in the workplace, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals experience more demeaning microaggressions, South Asian women are twice as likely to report unfair treatment despite being among the most qualified workers in the country[5], and Indigenous women earn 35% less than non-Indigenous men[6] while also being undervalued and subject to culturally inappropriate behaviour [7].This has substantial consequences for these women and their employers [8].

"

Nothing has changed, really in 50 years. The younger women all face the same discrimination and sexism that we did. I talk to younger women, and they're so discouraged and demoralized."

Only 29% of women reported their workplace is engaged in awareness building on gender equity.

> So why, with so many obvious barriers, do the majority of people in BC think we've achieved gender equality at work?

People tend to believe that individual success is based on merit – that we control our own path to success. As a result, gender inequality has often been treated as a women's issue and the focus has been how to "fix" women. And while women can and should take steps to build their networks, overcome limiting beliefs, and develop an authentic leadership style, more must be done to remove the organizational and structural barriers, not just the personal barriers, that hold women back.

As an organization dedicated to advancing the careers of women in BC, we wanted to explore the experiences of women in the province to understand and directly address the barriers they face. While we recognize that careers rarely progress in a straight line, they should not include obstacles that hold anyone back from achieving their career goals.

"

We are still a long, long way off. It is not a quick fix, gender inequity is built in to our earliest social contexts, and our language, almost every aspect, we thought our grandmothers and mothers had "won" that fight - not quite true, and young women today I think face a particularly difficult road...they are potentially the most educated cohort in history but we see [women] politicians receiving death threats and hate mail, women in policing, the military, firefighters still coping with the same old stuff."
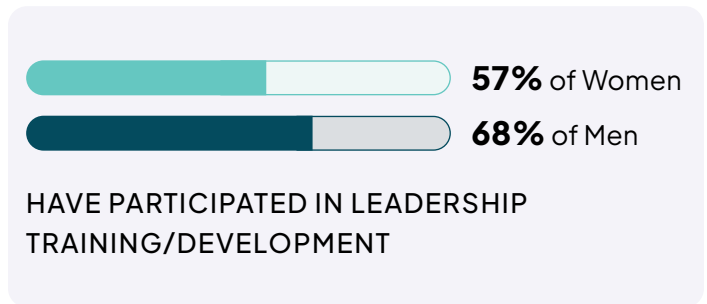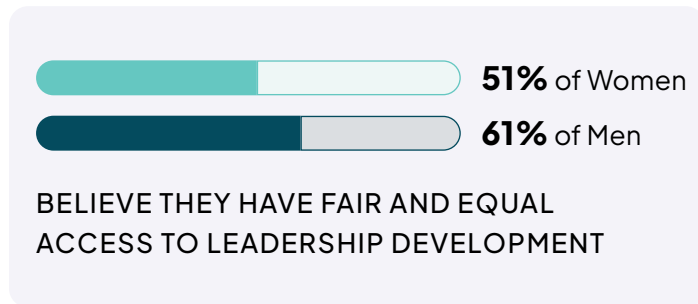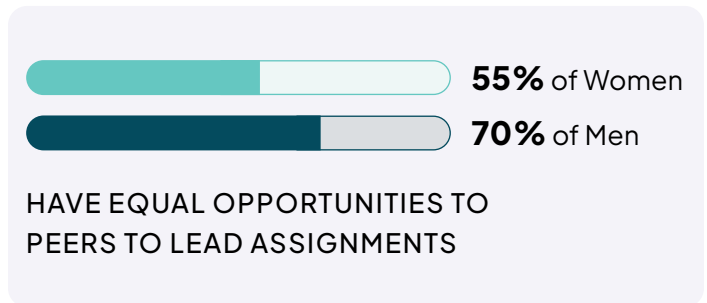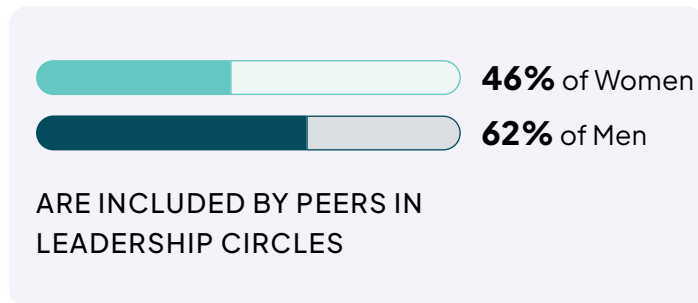
what women are experiencing in the *BC workplace*

Unequal access to career advancement opportunities

Despite entering the workforce at almost the same rate as men[9], women are still more likely to hold entry-level positions, and less likely to hold senior positions than men. To advance in their careers, women need access to skill-building experiences, yet only half of women in BC, who are in leadership roles, believe they have fair and equal access to leadership development opportunities or peer networks.

46% of Women
62% of Men

ARE INCLUDED BY PEERS IN LEADERSHIP CIRCLES

55% of Women
70% of Men

HAVE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES TO PEERS TO LEAD ASSIGNMENTS

51% of Women
61% of Men

BELIEVE THEY HAVE FAIR AND EQUAL ACCESS TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

57% of Women
68% of Men

HAVE PARTICIPATED IN LEADERSHIP TRAINING/DEVELOPMENT

66

**I was told not to apply for a leadership position while on mat leave with my first child because I was "not ready for the role" and when I asked them why they thought I wasn't ready, they didn't have a valid reason."**

Women have to perform to higher standards than men

> Data shows that, as a society, we still believe men are better suited to leadership positions than women[10]. Women must exceed expectations at work to prove they are equal to their peers[11].

In BC, a third of women (33%) have had their competency questioned, faced negative remarks, or experienced exclusionary behaviour because of their gender before they were 35. For 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, the number is highest at 37%. Furthermore, risks taken by women, as compared to those by men, are often scrutinized to a greater extent if they don't work out[12] and less than half of women feel they can take risks in their career.

43%

of Women

56%
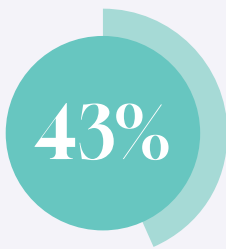
of Men

BELIEVE THEY CAN TAKE RISKS IN THEIR CAREER

❝ **I have encountered greater expectations for women by the organization."**

❝ **Being a straight white male has provided me with advantages over co-workers who aren't. I haven't needed to prove myself as much."**
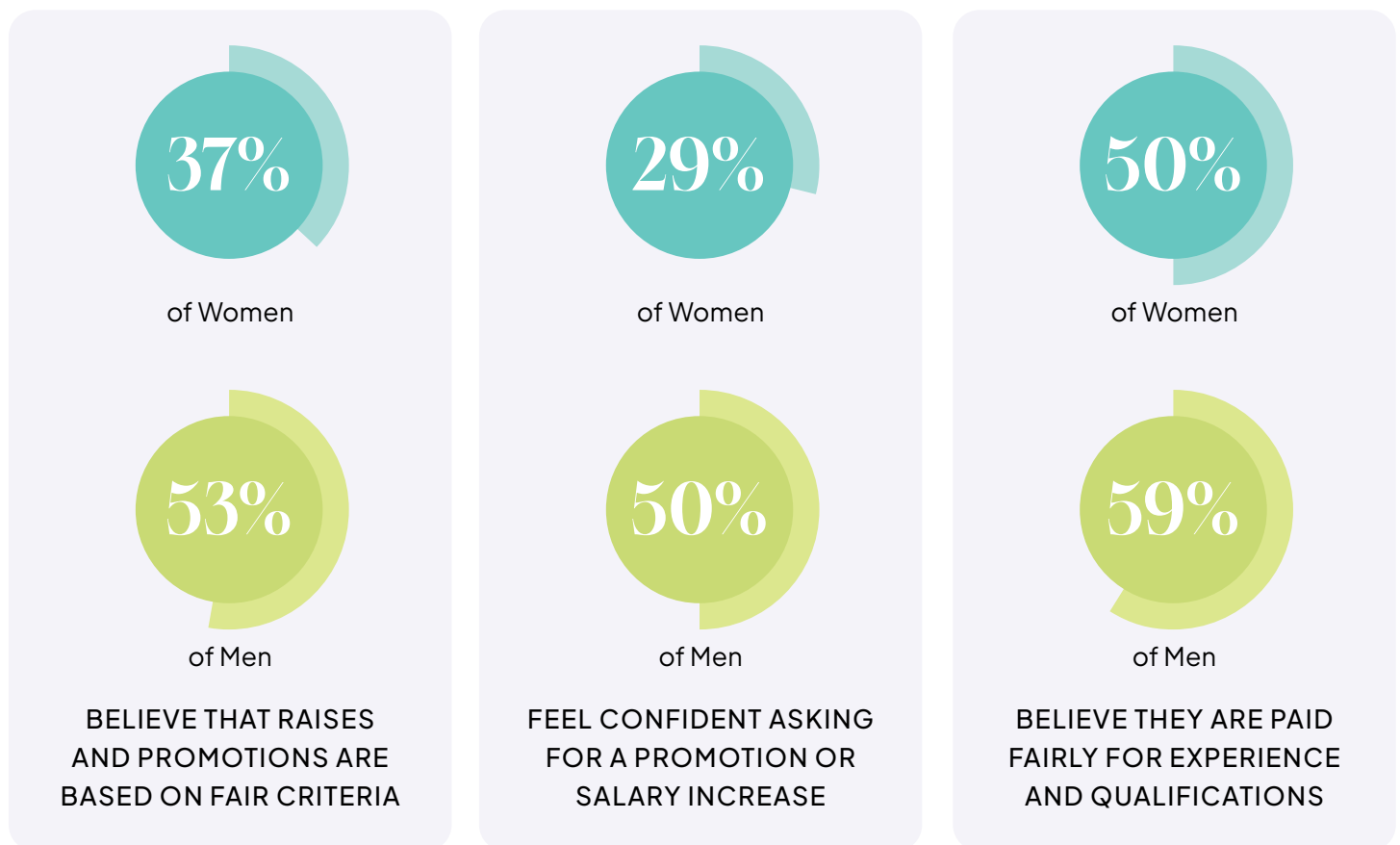
A third of women had their competency questioned because of their gender before they were 35.

Women lose out because of the gender pay gap

British Columbia has one of the highest pay gaps in Canada with women earning 17% less than men for comparable work – and the gap is greater for women with disabilities, Indigenous women, Black women, and women of colour[13]. Only half of women in BC believe they are paid fairly for their experience and qualifications. They are also less likely to challenge pay inequity by asking for a raise. While the new Pay Transparency Act will support progress on this issue, Kasari Govender, BC's Human Rights Commissioner, suggests that "this legislation only inches us further along—when what we really need are strides towards a more equal economy."[14]

37%
of Women

53%
of Men

BELIEVE THAT RAISES AND PROMOTIONS ARE BASED ON FAIR CRITERIA

29%
of Women

50%
of Men

FEEL CONFIDENT ASKING FOR A PROMOTION OR SALARY INCREASE

50%
of Women

59%
of Men

BELIEVE THEY ARE PAID FAIRLY FOR EXPERIENCE AND QUALIFICATIONS

"

Men are still seen as the 'major breadwinner' but this is no longer true. Women are often the sole earner for the family, but they do not have the same gender equality in the workplace for comparison salary and opportunity. A man does not have to prove himself as hard as a woman, nor does he have to argue for equal pay."

Ageism is encountered at every age and stage

While ageism is often thought to be discrimination targeted at older employees, research has found that for women, the intersection of age and gender can result in a 'never-right' age bias throughout the career life cycle[15]. In BC, 23% of women experience discrimination based on age and this is consistent across all age groups. By comparison, only 12% of men have faced age discrimination.

> "I'm a manager in retail. The number of customers of all genders that assume I am not in charge because I am a woman would astound you. It happens almost daily. I have almost 24 years of experience and when I am in a meeting setting anyone who doesn't know me will undervalue anything I have to say because I am a woman."
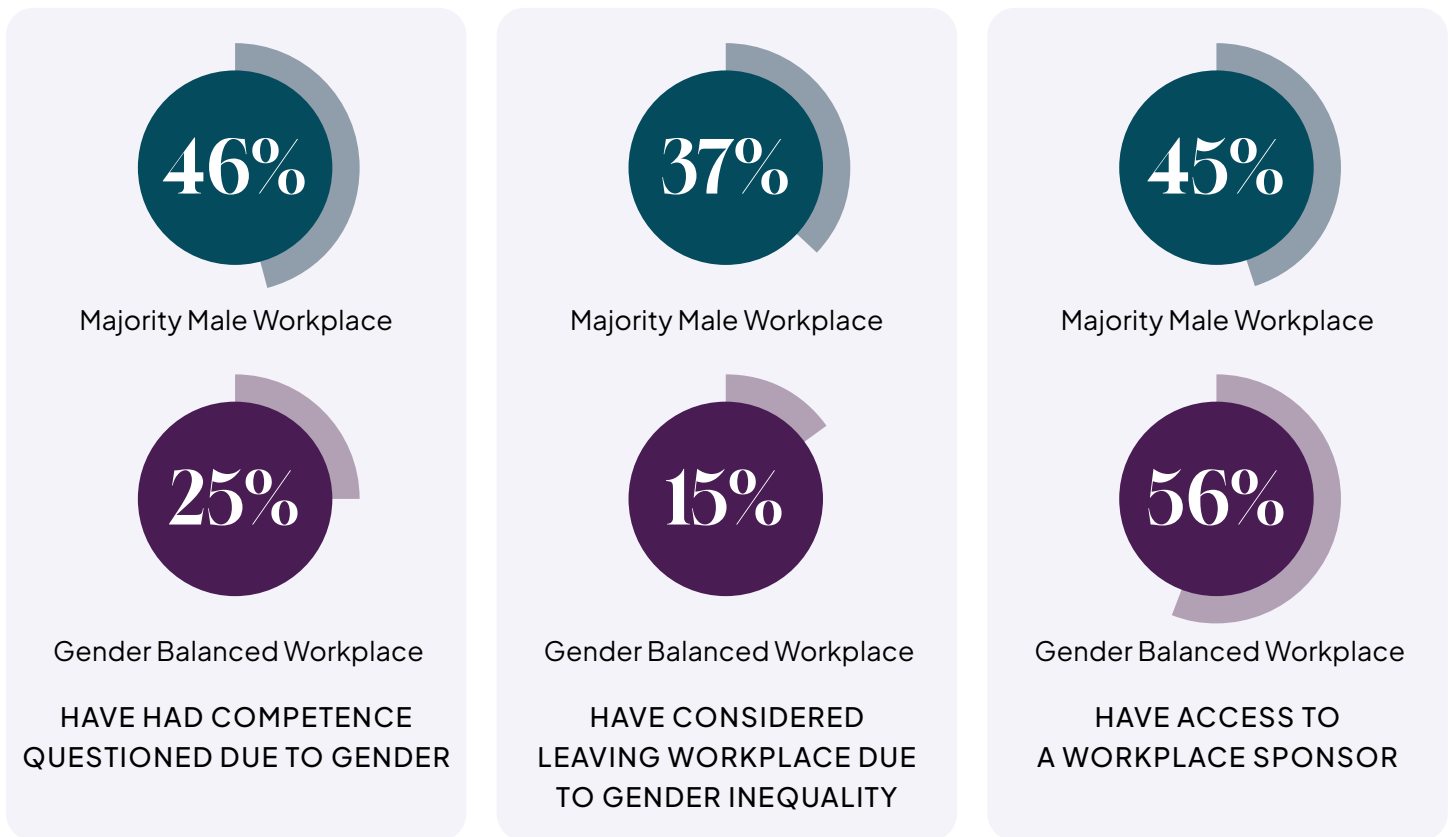
In BC, **women are twice** as likely as men to experience age discrimination.

Added pressure for women in majority male workplaces

Success in majority male workplaces often requires women to adopt masculine traits and behaviours. Women must conform, or risk being excluded by their peers. This is known as the "old boys club" and it still exists in many workplaces, particularly those that employ more men than women.

These workplaces create compounding issues.

Women are more likely to consider leaving the workplace because of gender inequality. They are also more likely to have their competence questioned, face negative remarks, and experience exclusionary behaviour. Alongside this, they are also less likely to have access to a mentor or sponsor to support them in these challenging career environments.

46%
Majority Male Workplace

37%
Majority Male Workplace

45%
Majority Male Workplace

25%
Gender Balanced Workplace

HAVE HAD COMPETENCE QUESTIONED DUE TO GENDER

15%
Gender Balanced Workplace

HAVE CONSIDERED LEAVING WORKPLACE DUE TO GENDER INEQUALITY

56%
Gender Balanced Workplace

HAVE ACCESS TO A WORKPLACE SPONSOR

❝

Women have to fight harder to secure a deserved salary, even at the highest levels of leadership. Women have to fight harder to have their ideas heard."

❝

It would be nice if the men in upper management, middle management and in executive roles would recognize that women can do non-traditional roles and can lead. "

Caregiving responsibilities continue to impact women's careers

Almost one-third (32%) of women that have children at home, report downplaying parental responsibilities to progress in their careers.

Only one in ten men report feeling the same pressure. In addition, 34% of women under the age of 55 who left the workforce did so because of caregiving responsibilities. By contrast, no men cited caregiving as a reason for leaving the workforce.

"

Being a parent limits your participation which negatively impacts advancement. Women for the most part still take the bigger role in raising their children."

"

The most common issue that I've observed is inadequate accommodation and consideration for family obligations. That may apply to both women and men, but women bear the brunt of it."


34% of women under the age of 55 who left the workforce did so because of caregiving responsibilities.

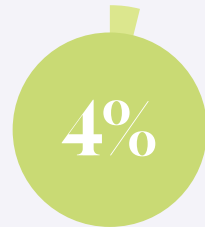# Workplace barriers lead many to self-employment

Almost half of women in BC (45%) who left traditional employment reported that workplace barriers such as issues with workload and hours, lack of advancement opportunities, and poor leadership informed their decision to work independently.

"

I changed careers due to gender inequity in my previous workplace. I am now self-employed and choose to work with clients who are focused on results and not identity."

45%

of Women

4%
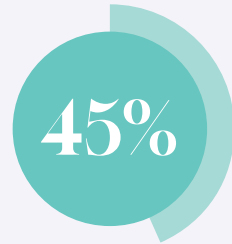
of Men

WORKPLACE BARRIERS INFLUENCED DECISION TO PURSUE SELF-EMPLOYMENT

women's journeys to leadership *today*

Persistent Gender Bias on the Path to Advancement

> Women in BC have been graduating high school at higher rates and achieving higher numbers of college diplomas and bachelor's degrees than men for years[16]. Yet they aren't advancing as quickly as men, are paid less than men, and are over-represented in lower-level jobs.

What are some of the persistent visible and invisible barriers holding women back in their careers?

1. WOMEN DO NOT EXPECT INEQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE.

Research shows that upon entering the workforce, many women do not believe their gender will affect their career and that the conditions to thrive in the workplace will match those of school and university[17]. When they face barriers at work, they blame themselves for their failure to progress and thrive in the way they expected[18].

" Many women spend a great deal of time and energy not only dealing with gender inequity in the workplace (and the world) but also trying to counteract these inequities through personal and professional development."

2. SUCCESS MODELS ARE BASED ON MEN.

In most workplaces, the model of effective leadership is based on traits and behaviours associated with stereotypical masculinity[19]. This sets the standard to which employees are compared and results in undervaluing different leadership styles, bias in hiring, and obstacles to advancement. Women must work harder to be seen as good leaders, and often try to conform to a leadership mould which can feel inauthentic.

" [In my workplace] a really bright, articulate woman with lots of experience and knowledge was seen as bossy and abrasive. A comparable man wasn't."

3. EVERYDAY SEXISM.

Throughout their careers, women are subjected to microaggressions[20] based on socially prescribed, binary gender roles. Some common examples include being interrupted, having their comments dismissed, being subjected to comments about their domestic responsibilities or their appearance, being mistaken for someone more junior, and having less challenging work assigned.

> " There is some secret code that labels a woman more confrontational, more opinionated, and less 'steady' than a man in an executive position."

4. WOMEN HOLD RESPONSIBILITY FOR SOLVING EQUALITY ISSUES.

Most people believe that opportunities are equal, but gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, and other factors result in people having different outcomes and experiences at work. Women are twice as likely to spend time on initiatives related to equity diversity and inclusion: employee resource groups, organizing events, and recruiting underrepresented groups[21]. The responsibility falls on women to not only raise these issues, but to solve them.

> " Women may be the ones who most directly suffer the negative consequences of gender inequity, but it is not solely a woman's problem. It's everyone's problem and men need to be part of the solution."

let's create
unobstructed
journeys to
leadership
for women.

what's working and what more can *we do?*

While our study identified a series of barriers to overcome, we found encouragement as women described what has been working for them and what more is needed to move us closer to our vision of women and girls, in all their diversity, having equal power in decision-making spaces.

Awareness and open discussion

Evidence shows that raising awareness of gender inequities goes a long way to tackling them. Women need organizations to ensure gender equity is achieved at all levels, and this starts with increasing knowledge and understanding.

"

It has been valuable to work in a team that is relatively comfortable talking about equity and inclusion, and open to learning."

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Increase accountability by collecting data on diversity over time, comparing it to other organizations or benchmarks, setting goals, and sharing the numbers openly.

2. Train leaders how to facilitate conversations about equity, diversity, and inclusion.

3. Talk to women in your organization to understand what is working, and not, in terms of career growth, flexibility, and culture.

Creating a culture of inclusion

Creating a culture that supports gender equality is an ongoing job that belongs to everyone in an organization. When leaders practice equity, they are creating an environment where all employees feel respected, valued, and safe to be themselves and to use their talents at work. The benefit goes beyond advancing women in leadership - it creates better workplaces for all[22].

"

Training in leadership for all genders helps reduce the bias. Understanding that we all bring something valuable to the table regardless of gender is important."

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Create a culture where advancing gender equality is a shared responsibility.

2. Learn how to minimize and interrupt biased behaviour and microaggressions.

3. Evaluate and reward leaders on their inclusion-focused values, behaviours and results.

Mentorship and sponsorship

Mentors and sponsors help employees get the critical feedback, skills, and experience they need to progress. But mentorship programs for women must go beyond relationship-based mentoring (focused on knowledge and support) and provide more access to powerful sponsors who provide proactive-career support. While only 35% of women report having a workplace sponsor, of those who do, the vast majority (91%) cite it as helping them progress in their career. It is essential to design mentorship and sponsorship programs with an intersectional approach.

"

As a leader I need to find people to look up to and to have access to those people to gain information as I need it to grow."

"

Being given challenging and high impact projects, showing my ability in delivering those projects and given recognition by superiors and management [has supported my advancement in the workforce]."

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Be intentional in the design of mentorship programs so they result in career advancement outcomes for all women.

2. Encourage every senior leader to sponsor at least one woman to increase visibility, raise her profile, and extend her network.

3. Expand your leadership model to embrace and reward different leadership styles.

Supportive community

Beyond formal mentor and sponsor roles, women reported a supportive network helped in advancing their careers. Research suggests these are essential for women leaders, who are more likely to land leadership positions and higher pay if they have an inner circle of close women contacts[23].

"

Working with a supportive team of women who recognize the patriarchal systems [has had the greatest impact on my advancement]"

"

For the majority of my career I have been lucky enough to have women in senior leadership positions. These women have advocated for me, supported me and encouraged me throughout my career."

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Train leaders how to proactively support employee's career development.

2. Create opportunities for women in your workplace to connect and learn from each other, - for example through employee resource groups.

3. Pay for memberships to women's industry associations and sponsor attendance at women's conferences and events.

Equitable policies and practices

When asked to describe any workplace practices or policies that have supported their advancement in the workplace, the most common response from both women and men was flexible working hours. When asked to further identify what policies and practices they believe would add value to supporting and retaining women in the workplace, 71% of women identified flexible working hours, and over 50% identified paid family illness days, hybrid work or the ability to work from home, job sharing or part-time work, and personal time for mental health.

> "
>
> I have been fortunate to work in companies that supported me and others with flexible hours and days off, allowed me to take extended time off to deal with newborns, and provided me with good mentorship early in my career. I have tried to carry that forward by offering my employees 4-day work weeks, flexibility in the schedule, and encouraging continued education."

> "
>
> Our boss focused on advocating for our team and ensuring we are paid reasonably, have access to the resources we need, and are provided opportunities for growth. She is a strong advocate for young women."

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Look for evidence of inequality and be transparent in your hiring, promotion, and compensation practices. Gender bias can be deeply embedded in HR processes and organizational culture without any intended discrimination.

2. Leverage employee resource groups: consult with them on changes to policies and practices and create avenues for them to engage with senior leaders.

3. Eliminate the wage gap by setting salaries based on the benchmark for the job, regularly auditing total compensation for gender bias, and introduce pay transparency.

Leadership training

Every career path has skills that are important for promotion. Ensuring women are getting the critical skills, experiences, and feedback they need to progress is core to any gender equity strategy. Women generally get less leadership training, and more personal (and less actionable) feedback, than men. Look for leadership training that goes beyond tactical skills to programs that enable supportive networks and development of an authentic leadership style. At the same time, ensure leaders understand the visible and invisible obstacles women experience at work so they can help remove them.

What part will you play?

" As an introvert who values fairness, I always found it hard to be heard and given opportunities for advancement in an environment where the loudest always wins. Through [leadership programs] I learned to ask for what I need and deserve, which helped, but most importantly I learned about personal values and living in alignment with them."

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Accelerate women's learning, development, confidence, and networks so that when opportunities arise, there are more candidates ready for promotion.

2. Train managers to understand and recognize visible and invisible gender bias.

3. Ensure that all managers are skilled at providing fair and effective feedback to all employees.

Minerva's role

We are committed to our role as a skilled driver and enabler of change

Minerva BC is a Vancouver-based charity that is dedicated to advancing the leadership of women and girls. For over two decades, we have helped women across British Columbia expand their capacities through education, mentorship, and leadership training.

Recognizing the unique barriers self-identifying women face, we also work together with businesses and the wider community to break down visible and invisible barriers in the workplace and replace them with attitudes and systems that are supportive of women's achievement. We do this through our three levers for change:

CHALLENGING BIAS

Minerva is dedicated to building knowledge that centres women's perspectives and challenges gender stereotypes, strengthening accountability by sharing knowledge and data, and increasing engagement in the spaces of gender equity and inclusion in the workplace.

DEVELOP AND SUPPORT SELF-IDENTIFIED WOMEN AND GIRLS TO BE LEADERS

Minerva's programs enable women and girls to chart their own leadership journeys by defining their values, developing key skills, and building their power base – a network of influential and supportive peers and mentors.

ACTIVATE INCLUSION IN ORGANIZATIONS

Minerva is dedicated to equipping organizational leaders with the knowledge, skills, and practices to deliver on their commitments to gender equity.

Read more about our role as a driver and enabler of change in our 2023–2026 Strategic Plan.

Join us.

Methods

Minerva BC commissioned Mustel Group to conduct an online survey with a random sample of 800 BC adults; 600 women and 200 men, 18 years and over. Data was collected from those currently in the workforce, as well as those not currently working, but who have worked in the past ten years. Data collection occurred between February 7 to March 1, 2023. Minor weighting was applied to the data to match the sample to Statistics Canada census data in terms of gender, age and region.

All quotes within the report are verbatim or with marked adjustments for ease of comprehension. They are derived from responses provided by survey participants.

Supplementary academic and grey literature was obtained to provide broader context and details on workplace barriers, experiences, and inequities.

Gratitude

Minerva BC is grateful to Dr. Victoria Gay, Evi Mustel and the Mustel Group, the Minerva Board of Directors, and the individuals who reviewed early versions of this report. Thank you for helping make this report possible, and driving towards our vision where women and girls, in all their diversity, have equal power in decision-making spaces. We are also proud to partner with Global BC on this project.

Many of the barriers referenced in this report were identified by Michelle P. King in her book, **The Fix**. We are grateful for her collection of research and pleased to collect data representing the realities for women in our province.

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