

Enabling women's career progression

Why organizations should support women's career development and what can be done to help women reach senior roles

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Contents:

- 1 Executive summary
 - 2 The business case for women's career progression
 - 3 The career progression framework
 - 4 What drives career progression?
The survey results
 - 5 Where do women progress most in their careers?
 - 6 Practical issues that impact on career progression
 - 7 The impact of individual motivation
 - 9 The impact of childcare and household responsibilities
 - 10 The impact of the "make or break" years
 - 11 Debunking the myth of presenteeism
 - 12 How women can get ahead in organizations
 - 12 Conclusion
 - 13 References
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Executive summary

Supporting women's career progression in the workplace is not just the right thing to do; it can help companies create a competitive advantage. This report, which follows a white paper on women in leadership (Wichert, 2012), reveals the findings of new evidence-based research into career progression in five countries. It explains the drivers of career progression and how these relate to individuals, the work environment and the corporate culture.

The report provides clear action points that enable women, their managers and Human Resources (HR) practitioners to improve women's career progression, as well as practical advice to help women get ahead in the workplace. It also sheds light on the context of career advancement, with survey insights into the career impact of having children and how parents are managing their childcare and household responsibilities.

Key findings from the report include:

- The 11 different factors across three levels in organizations that can ultimately determine whether women will progress through the hierarchy into senior roles. For senior managers who want to encourage and enable women's career progression, these are the key areas on which to concentrate.
- Of the 11 factors in our career progression framework, the three most important drivers for women's career progression are undertaking critical job assignments, being an active and politically-skilled networker, and proactively seeking new opportunities and taking calculated risks while doing so.
- Women in the emerging economies of Brazil and China are making better progress in their careers than women in the US, the UK and Japan. They have greater access to – or they more actively look for – the critical job assignments that are important for career progression.



- Being a parent can impact your career progression in a positive way. Surprisingly, the career benefits of parenthood seem stronger for mothers than for fathers in this five-country study.
- For both spouses, having help with childcare and household responsibilities is linked to career progression. However, many more women than men in this study undertake the majority of childcare and housework responsibilities.
- The “make or break” years, when important career shaping events tend to occur for men and women, are between the ages of 28-45. Although women score higher on career progression-related factors, men still achieve more promotions during these years.
- Working long hours in an office is not necessarily directly related to career progression. However, our research indicates it is related to important career-enabling factors.

About the career progression survey

In 2012, research from IBM revealed a career progression framework that shows how 11 different factors, across three levels, play a significant role in women’s career advancement.

To validate this framework, we conducted a Career Progression Survey in five countries – Brazil, China, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States – collecting data from 2,500 respondents, who were all employed in professional and managerial roles across a range of industries. The sample group comprised an even split of 250 men and 250 women in each country.

In this report, we will reveal the findings from the survey and implications for women’s career progression.

The business case for women’s career progression

Gender diversity has become an organizational imperative, not just because it promotes equal opportunities for women, but because there is growing evidence that, in situations such as times of economic turbulence and for companies that are badly governed, it often is linked to better business performance. Organizations with more women on their boards outperform their competitors with a 42 percent higher return on sales, 66 percent higher return on invested capital and 53 percent higher return on equity (Joy et al., 2007).

Senior management teams that are diverse and inclusive succeed because typically they are better placed to understand the requirements of customers and stakeholders, they are more open to new ideas and, as a result, they are more likely to make better decisions.

How and when women (and men) make it to the top are determined by career progression. Knowing that we are moving forward in our careers is an important motivator for many, and it is not just common sense, it is also supported by research. A series of independent studies conducted on a global data set of worker opinion comprising more than 20,000 employees from over 20 countries demonstrates the importance of growth and career development opportunities in relation to a host of important organizational outcomes. In emerging economies, for example, growth and development opportunities emerged as the number one reason for employees in the high-tech industry to join their current organization; for employees in the finance sector it was the second most important reason, following compensation (Rasch, 2012).

The expectation of “a promising future” at one’s organization emerged as the third most important factor that made employees stay with their employers, following work-life balance and having confidence in the future of the organization (IBM, 2011).

Career progression opportunities therefore play an important role in both employee attraction and retention across the world. In addition, a separate analysis that examined the significantly higher stress levels reported by women highlighted the reduced likelihood of promotion and the lack of clear career paths as a uniquely female source of stress that increases the overall amount of stress reported by women (IBM, 2011).

Furthermore, growth and development opportunities consistently emerge as among the top drivers of employee engagement. High levels of employee engagement are now accepted as a desired state, following numerous studies showing that employee engagement is linked to higher levels of customer satisfaction and stronger organizational performance against a range of financial metrics (IBM, 2012).

Creating an inclusive work environment should be a strategic priority for each organization. It can help your organization build a distinctive and compelling reputation as a world-class employer and foster women’s leadership talent. Such an organizational culture can provide the social infrastructure that gives women access to the same career support as men.

The career progression framework

Our research has shown that 11 different factors, across three levels, play a role, to varying degrees, in determining whether a woman will progress through the organizational hierarchy into senior roles.

The three levels relate to:

- The individual woman herself and her career management behaviors.
- Her immediate work environment and her access to important career resources.
- The wider organizational context and the predominant organizational culture.

Figure 1 shows the three levels and their corresponding factors.



Figure 1: The 11-Factor, 3-Level Framework of women’s career advancement

The inner level highlights what women can do for themselves in order to help their career progression: career planning, seeking opportunities, networking and self-promotion. These actions can help a woman increase her visibility, become better known in senior management circles and build a strong reputation.

The middle level concerns a woman's immediate work environment and the access she has to three important career resources: mentors and sponsors, a supportive supervisor, and critical job assignments.

The outer level highlights four organizational factors that can impact on women's career advancement: supportive work-life culture, objective HR processes, work-life balance and flexible working, gender bias and stereotype free environment.

What drives career progression?

The survey results

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for a successful career, but our study reveals that the top three drivers for women's promotions over the last five years are largely related to a woman's own career management behaviors (the inner level of our career progression framework). In order of importance, the top three drivers are:

- Undertaking critical job assignments¹ (accounting for 25.7 percent of promotions achieved over the last five years).
- Being an active and politically-skilled networker (17.5 percent).
- Proactively seeking new job opportunities and being prepared to take calculated risks while doing so (10.9 percent).

When it comes to actual promotions, our analyses show that critical job assignments are substantially more important for women than for men. The top three drivers for men's career progression are supervisor support (14.6 percent), followed by networking (12 percent) and critical job assignments (11.9 percent). Indeed, women can be held back if they do not have access to critical job assignments in the workplace.

While the actual number of promotions over the past five years is the most objective assessment of women's career progression and success, being satisfied with one's career progression opportunities is an important factor in helping ensure that women join and then stay with their current employers, as highlighted in the research studies mentioned earlier on.

Interestingly, women's satisfaction with the progression opportunities at their current company is driven mostly by external factors (the middle and outer level of our framework):

- Objective HR processes (accounting for 17.6 percent of one's satisfaction with career progression opportunities).
- Mentor and sponsor support (15.9 percent).
- Supervisor support (13.4 percent).

Furthermore, work-life balance did not play a major role in driving women's career progression. However, as we saw earlier, work-life balance is linked to employees' retention, which is a pre-requisite to having women progress to senior roles.

Where do women progress most in their careers?

Our Career Progression Survey reveals that women in the emerging economies of Brazil and China are making better progress in their careers than women in the US, the UK and Japan.

Figure 2 shows the actual number of promotions for women in each country. It also highlights the level of “expectation,” i.e., whether respondents felt they would be promoted in the next 12 months, together with the level of “satisfaction” they had with their available promotion opportunities.

In an emerging market, where organizations are growing quickly, there are likely to be more opportunities for career progression. While this may go some way to explaining why Brazil and China top our table, if we dig deeper into the data, we also see that women in Brazil and China report:

- Higher ratings on all of the individual career management behaviors (they are more positive in planning their career, seeking opportunities, networking and promoting themselves).
- Greater support in their immediate work environment (they are more likely to have a supportive supervisor, and in Brazil they are also likely to have more mentor support).
- A more favorable organizational culture to the extent that they report the existence of more objective HR processes and fewer “spill-over” effects from work to home and vice versa.

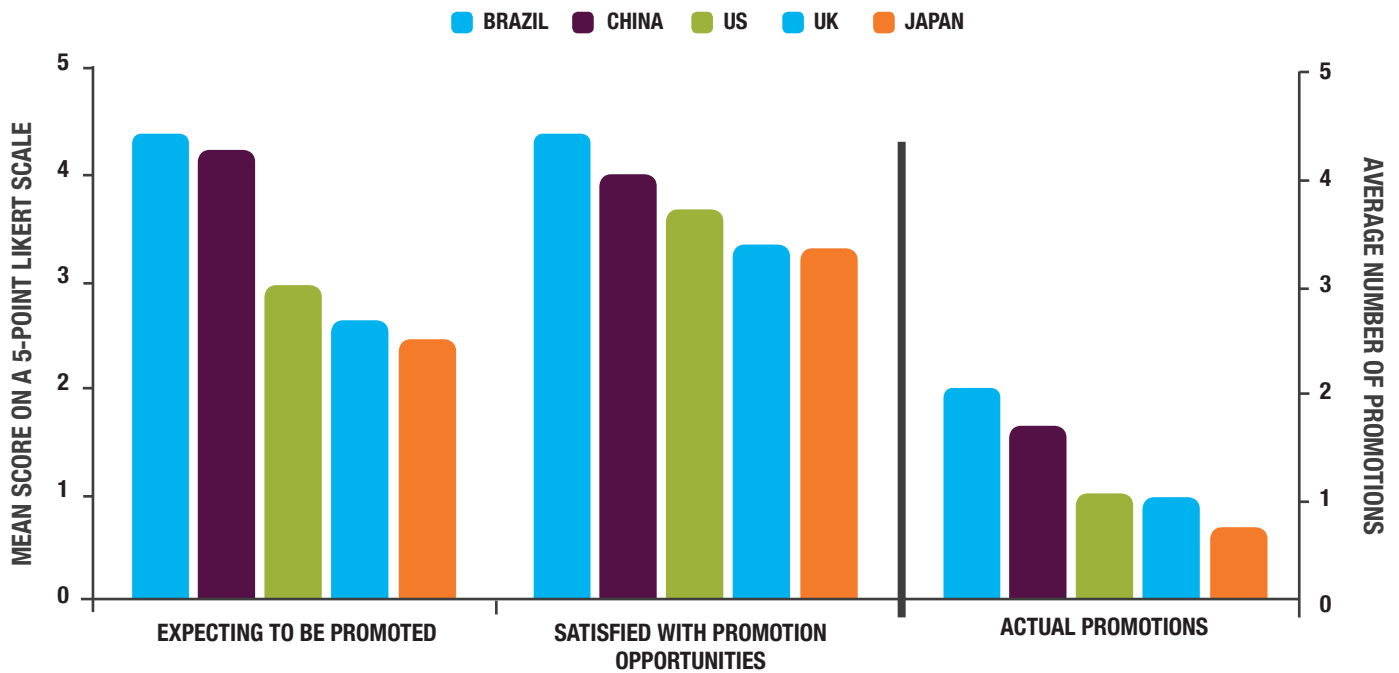


Figure 2: In which countries do women progress the most?

However, women in Brazil and China also report less manager support for work-life balance and significantly lower overall work-life balance than women in the US, UK and Japan.

Crucially, as Figure 3 shows, women in Brazil and China have greater access to – or they more actively look for – the critical job assignments that are so important for career progression. Women in Japan report the lowest ratings across the 11 factors examined in this study.

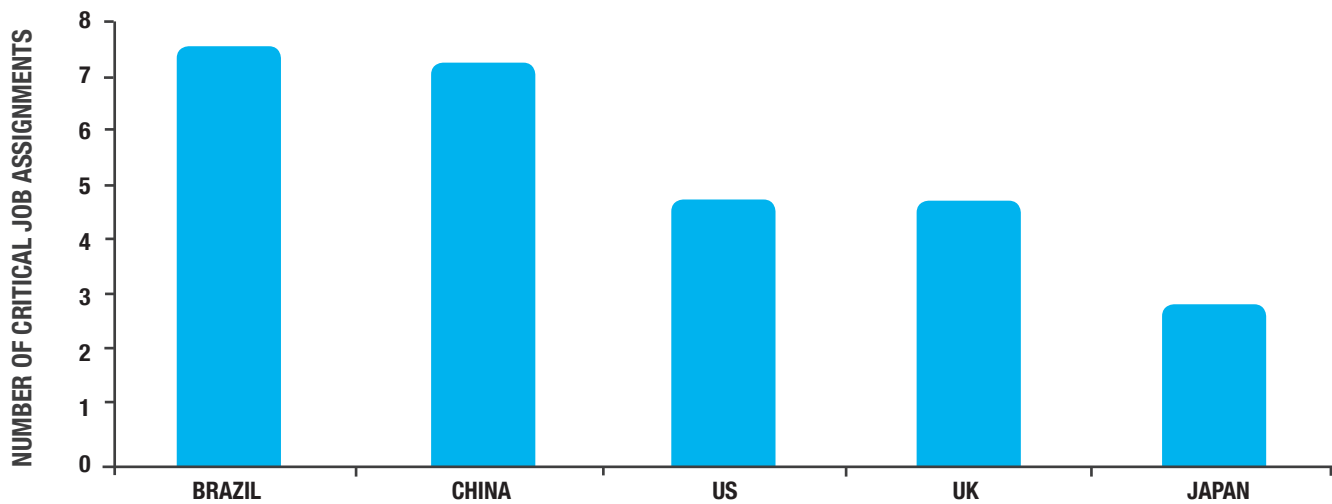


Figure 3: Number of critical job assignments, across the five countries surveyed

Practical issues that impact on career progression

Issues such as childcare and housework can impact on an individual's ability and motivation to progress their career. Using our study, we can put some of these into context. Our study reveals that being a parent can impact your career progression in a positive way. Surprisingly, the career benefits of parenthood seem stronger for mothers, than for fathers.

Figure 4 shows data for mothers, non-mothers, fathers and non-fathers. Senior male leaders are typically married with children so, as may be expected, fathers appear to be more successful than non-fathers in terms of career progression.

What is unusual here is that mothers are not only doing much better than non-mothers, they are also achieving a similar number of promotions to fathers. They have higher expectations of being promoted and greater satisfaction with the promotion opportunities they have available.

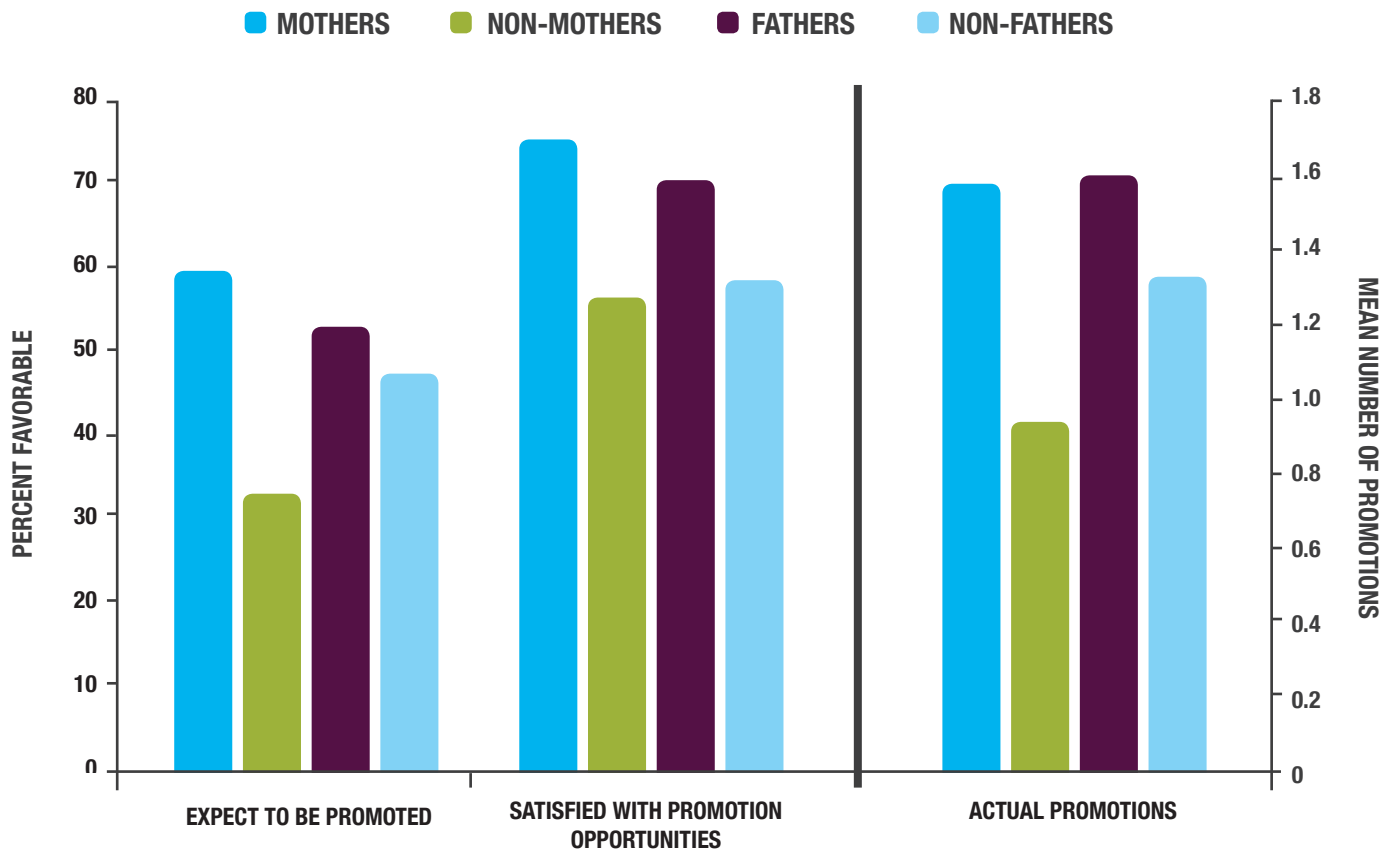


Figure 4: The impact of having children on career progression

The impact of individual motivation

Figure 5 highlights the “career anchors” – or the motivating factors – of mothers and non-mothers. The largest differences, where mothers score higher than non-mothers, can be seen in the factors which depict career and success as important motivators, e.g., to work as a general manager, to progress to a leadership role and to make money.

This suggests that the mothers in our sample are extremely motivated to progress in their careers, and this may explain why they succeed. Our study indicates that if mothers in professional and managerial roles have decided to return to work, they may have done so because they are serious about continuing to progress their careers.

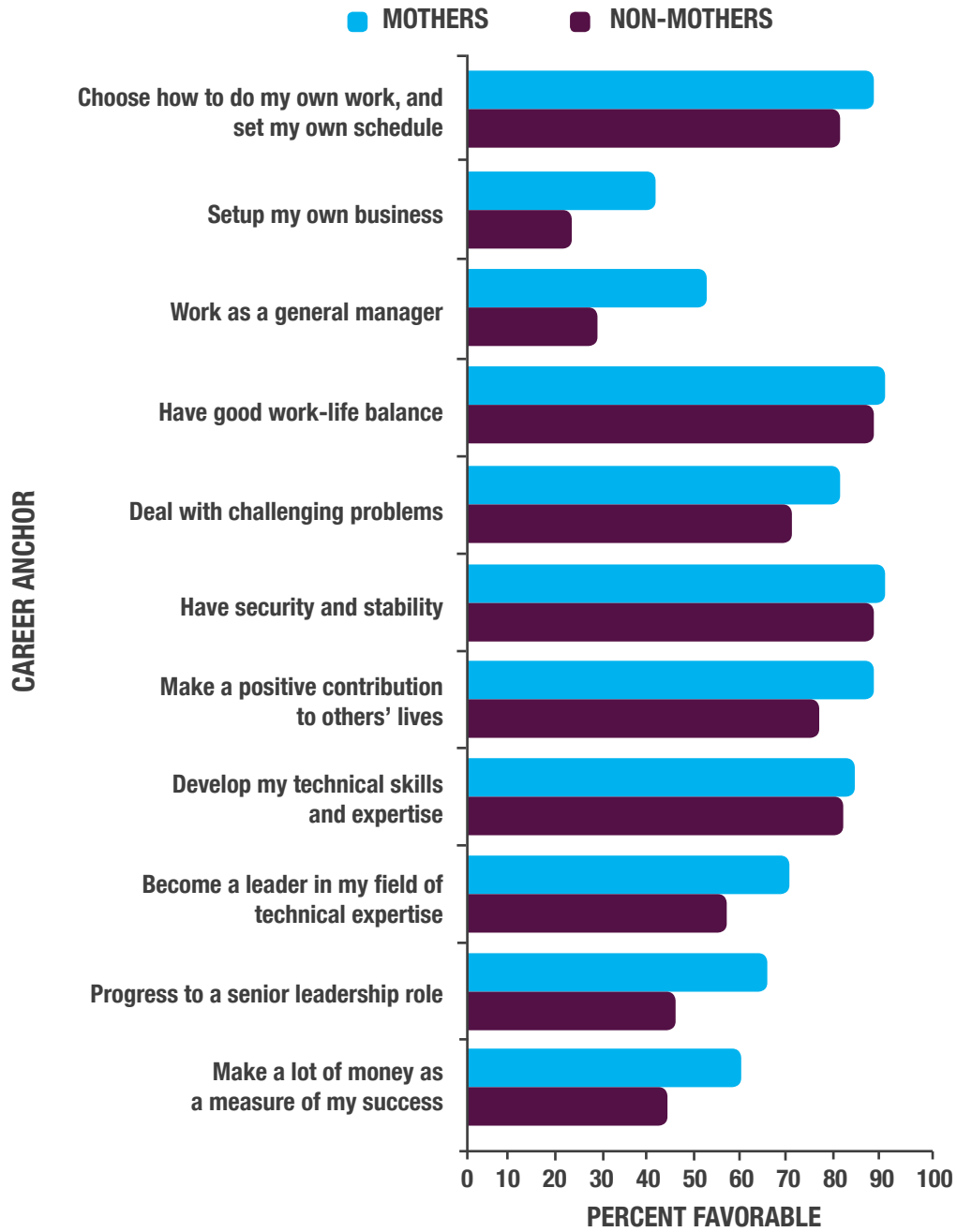


Figure 5: The “career anchors” of mothers and non-mothers

The impact of childcare and household responsibilities

Figures 6 and 7 show the childcare and household arrangements for mothers and fathers in the sample group.

Figure 7 shows that significantly more women undertake the childcare and housework responsibilities themselves. Clearly, getting help with these responsibilities can enable women to work longer hours, which can support career progression.

For both parents, having childcare arrangements are closely linked to career progression. Perhaps unsurprisingly, our data shows that parents who receive help with childcare and household responsibilities are more likely to get a promotion than those who shoulder the responsibilities themselves.

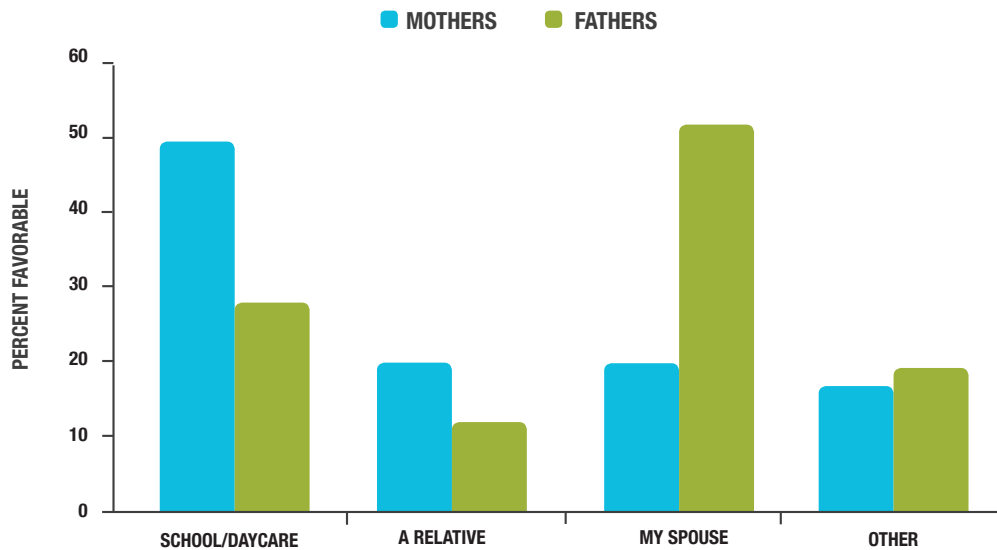


Figure 6: Who looks after your children while you are at work?

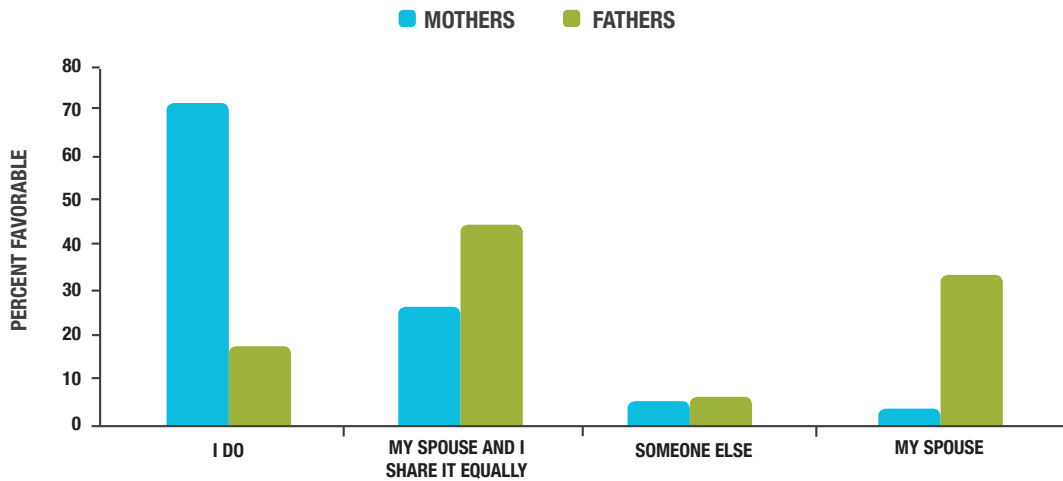


Figure 7: Who provides the majority of the childcare and housework when you are at home?

The impact of the “make or break” years

Important career shaping events – which are often associated with a full commitment to the organization – tend to occur, for men and women, between the ages of 28-45. It is during this time that those with talent and commitment are noticed and earmarked for greater things. These have been referred to as the “make or break” years (Mason and Mason Ekman, 2007).

For some people, the stage in their lives when they are starting to progress to mid-management level and are being considered for high-visibility projects can coincide with the time at which they are ready to have children.

Our research reveals that mothers in their make or break years score higher on all career progression-related factors than their male counterparts (with the exception of perceived work-life balance and manager’s support for work-life balance). *Figure 8* shows that mothers are more likely to plan their careers, to have a mentor, to promote themselves and to be satisfied with their career progression opportunities.

Yet, despite this, in the factors that really count – such as having a good reputation, being visible in the organization and, importantly, in the number of actual promotions over the last five years – men still do better than women. This may indicate that despite women’s best efforts, an inherent “mother bias” is still holding women back. The main winners in the “make or break” years are, therefore, men with children.

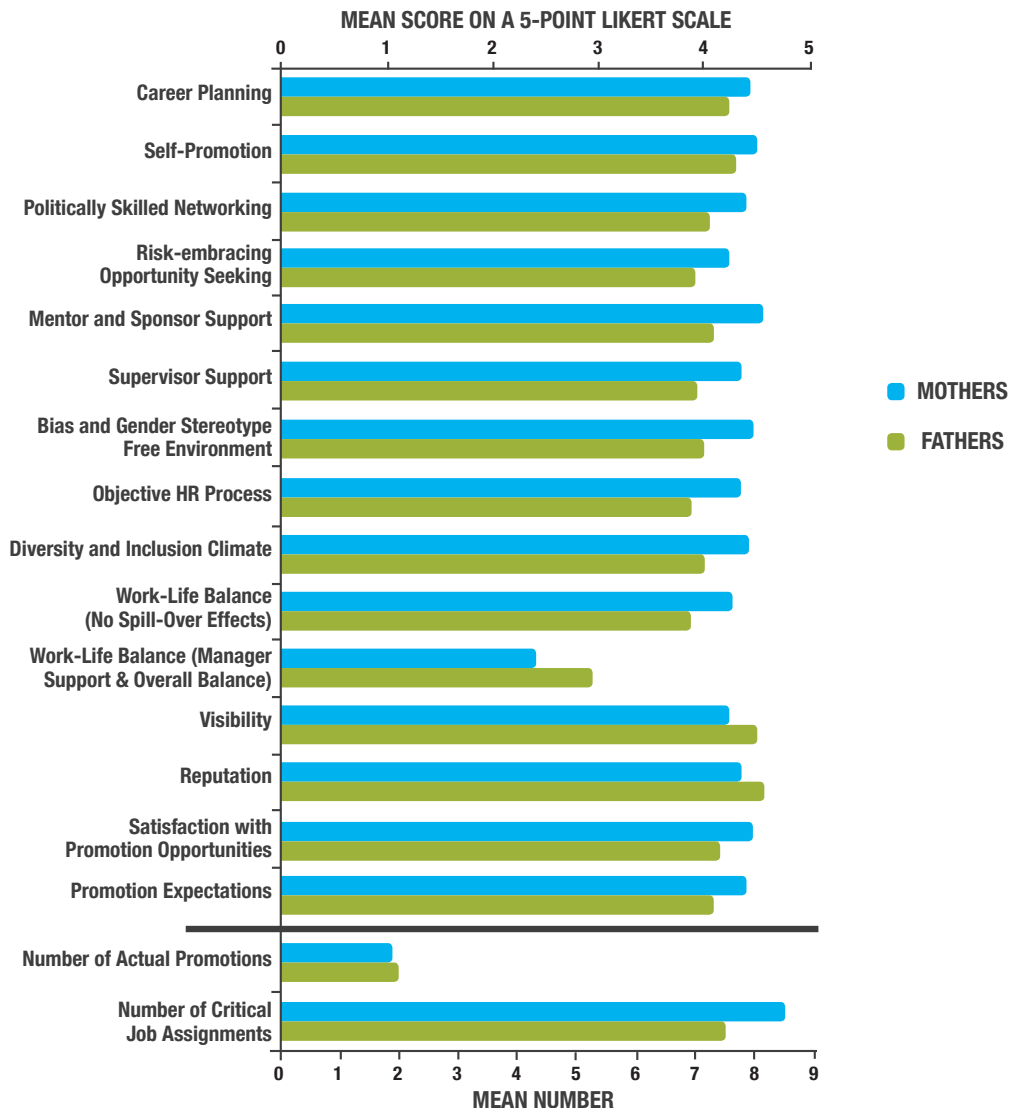


Figure 8: Career progression factors in the “make or break” years

Debunking the myth of presenteeism

Our study shows that working long hours in an office is not directly linked to career progression. We can therefore debunk the myth that presenteeism leads to promotion.

However, working more hours is related to important career-enabling factors. When you work longer hours, whether you are male or female, you are more likely to:

- Undertake networking.
- Find mentors and sponsors who want to support you.
- Be more risk-embracing and proactive in looking for new opportunities.
- Be more visible in your organization.
- Actively share your achievements.

You are also less likely to have downward job moves.

Figure 9 shows that employees in Japan tend to work the longest hours, followed by China and the US. Employees in Brazil and the UK work the shortest hours. In general, women tend to work fewer hours a week on average than men.

Men with young children work slightly fewer hours than those without. However, women with young children work slightly longer hours than those without. This may be due to greater sharing in childcare responsibilities between spouses who are in professional and managerial jobs.

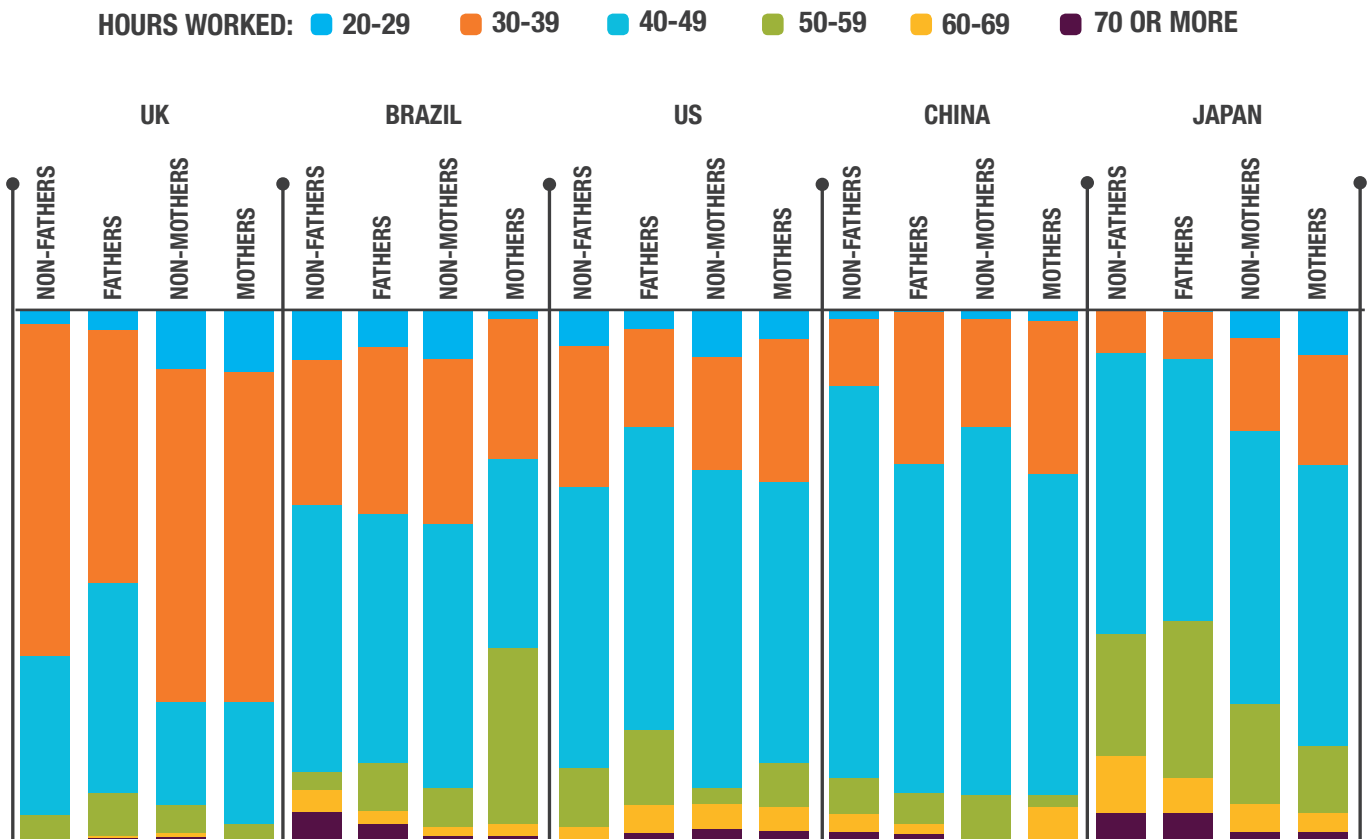


Figure 9: Gender differences in hours worked, for parents and non-parents

How women can get ahead in organizations

Our advice for professional women looking to make it to the top is:

- Establish your overall career goals and be aware of what roles and projects will provide you with the necessary skills, knowledge and contacts to achieve your ultimate ambition. Be aware that some roles (such as international assignments or operational roles) may be more difficult to combine with caring for children. It is worth trying to undertake these assignments earlier in your career.
- Develop a curiosity for different parts of an organization and be prepared to try new things. Look for challenging assignments and be prepared to take a risk with a new role even if it initially looks daunting.
- Networking really is as important as existing research makes it out to be. Find ways of building one-to-one relationships with people who are important to your career and keep them up-to-date on your progress.
- Find yourself an effective mentor. Psychosocial support is great, but we know that the really effective mentors share information about unwritten organizational rules and provide access to powerful networks and high-visibility assignments. Be selective in your choice of mentor and ask for the information you are currently not getting.
- Ask for support from your line manager and make sure that they are supportive of with your career plans. Their support and buy-in is important.
- Take the necessary steps to be more visible in the workplace to progress your career. If you are not visible in the organization, you may find yourself excluded from powerful networks that can provide access to influential individuals as well as valued organizational knowledge and assets.

Conclusion

The Career Progression Survey across five countries has shown that career progression is determined by a number of different factors relating to the individual, their work environment and the culture of the organization.

Wider societal factors – such as attitudes toward working mothers, the availability of childcare provision and government regulation – are likely to have an impact on women's career progression. However, what is clear is that the 11 factors outlined in our framework are easily in the power of an organization to address.

The three key factors for women's career progression are:

- Undertaking critical job assignments.
- Being an active and politically-skilled networker.
- Proactively seeking new job opportunities and taking calculated risks when doing so.

The three key factors for women's satisfaction with career progression opportunities are:

- Objective HR processes.
- Supervisor support.
- Mentor and sponsor support.

Organizations keen to gain the benefits of gender diversity should:

- Be more strategic in giving women access to critical job assignments. Make sure that staffing policies and selection processes help women get access to important, career-enhancing job assignments such as operational roles, international assignments and turnaround projects. Educating managers about potential, and often unintentional, bias against appointing women and mothers to certain projects or roles can help to increase access to these career-enhancing experiences.
- Conduct ongoing readiness assessments with women as part of their annual reviews to understand whether a high-visibility assignment that may not have been possible for a woman in the past due to childcare responsibilities may now have become a possibility due to a change in personal circumstances (e.g., additional childcare, children have gone to boarding school, spouse is now ready to move abroad).
- Set up mentoring schemes that give talented female

managers access to influential and well-connected senior managers who can help open doors and point to career opportunities. It is important to evaluate the effectiveness of these mentoring schemes on a regular basis.

- Recognize the role of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and her or his senior management team in creating an organizational culture where women's and mothers' talents are recognized and valued. A truly engaged top team can increase women's access to important resources such as critical job assignments, mentors and supervisor support as nurturing female talent will be seen as a priority at each level of the organization.
- Invest in spotting talent both earlier and later than the make-or-break years. By identifying talented women before they reach the make-or-break years, organizations can support mothers through this challenging time and increase the likelihood of retaining them. Also, by extending the age bracket of those deemed to have talent beyond the age of 40, organizations can spot talented women who are ready to take on demanding roles again once their children have grown up.
- Help women to decode the political landscape by providing additional induction, mentoring and training for new roles.
- Review maternity and childcare support arrangements to help women to overcome the challenges of balancing childcare or household responsibilities.
- Support flexible working. It has to become acceptable for both women and men to work from home and to be more flexible in how they work. We are no longer talking about part time versus full time. It is about working in a way that suits the individual and the organization. To bring about this change, organizations will need to learn to trust individuals and to provide development in areas such as flexible thinking and team interaction.

All of these actions can help to facilitate women's career progression. In order to achieve sustainable change and underpinning all these recommendations there needs to be an inclusive organizational culture which builds on and values difference. This will only be achieved through a change of attitude at the top and by appreciating the merits of different leadership styles.

A final thought. Employing successful senior women is increasingly becoming a source of competitive advantage. Bear in mind that competitors are likely to become more aggressive in their attempts to lure away talented women. If you have them, make sure you hang onto them.

About the author

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Ines Wichert, Ph.D., formerly Senior Psychologist and lead for women in leadership research and product development, Kenexa, is a chartered occupational psychologist with many years of industry experience. She holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from the University of Cambridge. Her new book, "Where Have All the Senior Women Gone? 9 Critical Job Assignments for Women Leaders", was published by Palgrave Macmillan. Ines regularly speaks and writes on the topic of women leaders for, among others, BBC News, Fortune 500 Most Powerful Women's Summit, The Sunday Times, The Guardian, and The Financial Times. Before joining Kenexa, Ines worked for a number of global HR consultancy firms where she specialized in talent management and leadership development solutions for global clients across a wide range of industries.

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1 Critical job assignments: Nine high visibility work assignments have been identified that can help women to break through the glass ceiling and build a more fulfilling career. These are: early “stretch” tasks, international roles, operational roles, managing people, working in an unfamiliar environment, creating a new business venture internally, acting as an organizational change agent, running a turnaround project and joining the executive team. For more, see Dr. Ines Wichert’s book: “Where Have All the Senior Women Gone? 9 Critical Job Assignments for Women Leaders”. 2011. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.



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