

# Tracking the pesky myths that blame women for the glass ceiling

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For too long myths about women in the workplace have reigned supreme; and they go something like this. Women aren't ambitious and they don't want the top job. Furthermore, [women don't help other women](#), and they (all women?!) lack confidence; and just [need to negotiate](#).

It's quite a damning list to label half of the world's population with, especially when we know that these myths are simply not true. But why is there still a cottage industry built around them; and why are they still being perpetuated as truths?

Even as these 'myths' are being disproven, they are generally self-serving to those seeking to keep them alive. The myths blame the working women, and not an organisation's culture for the dearth of women in senior positions. By presupposing [what women do and don't want](#) through these myths, they become a handy way to explain away inequality as something that has actually been 'chosen' by women.

Catalyst has been [tracking](#) nearly 10,000 MBA male and female graduates from top business schools across the world for almost ten years to test out some of the beliefs and hypotheses out there about women in the pipeline and to separate the 'myths' from reality. From these studies, we have found many interesting findings.

"Do women aspire to be in the top jobs?" Over 95 per cent of women and 97 per cent of men said yes. Women and men [aspire equally](#) after the top in their careers.

However if [flexible work options](#) are not available, then career aspirations for both men and women drop, but women (57 per cent) were almost twice as likely as men (28 per cent) to downsize their aspirations without access to a flexible work arrangement. We also know, from working with companies, that a [working culture](#) can greatly impact aspirations over time.

If women are ambitious for the top roles, then we wanted to find out if they were doing the right things to advance or

whether their own behaviour was limiting their advancement. Once again, [the research](#) showed that, absolutely, women are doing all the right things. For instance, women have [more mentors](#); however, this was not translating into advancement. Why is this?

We looked at the [top nine tactics](#) that men and women apply to advance. Of these, two benefited women the most, gaining access to powerful others (e.g. [having a sponsor](#)) and making their achievements visible and known. Interestingly for men, they did not need to make their achievements known, but instead 'working longer hours' benefited them more than women. The one tactic that benefited both men and women was 'gaining access to powerful others'.

Another common myth we uncovered is that women are not advancing due to a gap in confidence, but rather an opportunity gap. Women are receiving fewer of the '[hot jobs](#)', i.e. those mission-critical, often international assignments which provide visibility to senior management. Instead they receive projects with smaller teams and smaller budgets, impacting their internal visibility and their ability to find an influential sponsor. Seventy percent of development happens in on-the-job experiences (only 10 per cent is on formal development programmes).

For too long, there's been a focus on '[fixing the women](#)'. While there are development opportunities for all, let's not make it about gender. Let's rather focus on addressing the systemic barriers that are holding women back.

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*Notes:*

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