

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Women's 'confidence problem'? It's so much more

By Amy Blackstone, Special to the BDN

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As the Virginia Slims slogan asserted decades ago, we women have come a long way, baby. ABC reporter Claire Shipman and BBC anchor Katty Kay make this point in their [recent piece in The Atlantic](#). While there's reason to celebrate, Shipman and Kay argue that women's lack of confidence prevents us from receiving the full workplace recognition and rewards we have earned.

The Atlantic piece begs the question, "Do women have a problem with confidence, or does our culture have a problem with women?" It seems the answer is a bit of both. While women's confidence may be holding them back, the cultural problems of workplace harassment and discrimination, unrealistic work-ethic expectations and contradictory ideals pushed on women employees play a significant role as well. Attention to both sources of gender-based workplace inequality will go a long way toward eradicating the problem.

The facts of women's progress are undeniable. Today, [women earn more than half of graduate and undergraduate degrees](#). A [smaller proportion](#) of working-age women participate in the labor force (57.7 percent in 2012) compared with men (70.2 percent in 2012), but women's participation has increased dramatically from the [40.8 percent that it was in 1970](#).

Despite these gains, there remains a dearth of women in leadership roles. [Women make up just 5 percent of CEOs at the top 1,000 American companies](#). And even when factors like job tenure, industry and occupation, work patterns, race and marital status are accounted for, [women still earn an average of 80 percent what men earn](#).

Women's lack of confidence may be a problem we should work to overcome, but it's not the only problem that's relevant.

Harassment and discrimination also drive gender-based inequalities at work. Studies show that as many as [70 percent of women](#) are subjected to such problematic workplace behaviors as unwanted touching, leering, and exposure to offensive sexual jokes and materials. Environments where women are subjected to such behaviors are unlikely to support women as leaders.

Indeed, it is women in positions of authority at work who are most vulnerable to sexual harassment. I conducted a study with colleagues at the University of Minnesota, and we found that [women supervisors were 138 percent more likely to be sexually harassed](#) at work when compared with women who did not hold supervisory roles. Even if women had all the confidence in the world and unlimited authority at work, they would still face a climate where they are likely to be harassed simply because they are women.

A related problem that feeds gender-based workplace inequality is the cultural pressure on women

simultaneously to be ideal workers and achieve the ideals of femininity. These two sets of ideals are often in conflict. Women must be competent, confident and feminine. Workplace behaviors that lead to success run counter to the cultural ideals of femininity to which women are told they should aspire.

Assertive women who ask for what they have earned may be punished for even asking. [One study](#) found that men were far less willing to work with a woman who attempted to negotiate for herself than they were to work with a man who had done the same. Thus while men are expected to advocate for themselves, ask for what they deserve and are respected for doing so, expectations for women differ.

The case of Jill Abramson, former executive editor for The New York Times, offers one such example. Abramson's leadership style has been [criticized for being brusque and pushy](#). She also [asked for a raise](#) when she learned her salary was less than the male executive editor who preceded her. She was then fired.

How many male leaders who ask for equal pay and are direct, assertive and confident get described as "pushy"? How many are fired for it?

The solution to all of these problems begins long before women enter the workforce. We must start early by treating girls and boys equally in the classroom. [Studies show](#) boys receive more intellectual encouragement and more attention from classroom teachers than girls. We also know girls' confidence plummets during early adolescence. Supporting efforts to build girls' confidence is crucial.

In the workplace, we should credit women for their successes and urge them to credit themselves. Studies show women tend to credit others when they succeed rather than owning their accomplishments.

Finally, we should challenge ourselves to examine our own responses to working women. When we invite them to lead us and recognize their confidence for what it is – simply, confidence – we will then have come long way.

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