

Gender inequality at work starts with entry-level promotions

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There's been no shortage of news coverage about the "glass ceiling" that keeps women from reaching positions in senior leadership.

But a recent report from [LeanIn.org](#) in collaboration with McKinsey has found that the biggest problem women face at work actually happens much earlier, at the first promotion from entry-level to manager. They're calling it the "broken rung."

The findings are part of a report, called "Women in the Workforce," is in its sixth year. This year's edition acknowledges that while companies have made progress in the top levels of leadership—44% of companies have three or more women in their C-suite compared to 29% of companies in 2015, says the report—full gender equality is still decades away, due to a significant gap in the pipeline.

Inequality starts at almost immediately

The gap stems from a lack of promoting and hiring entry-level women to manager positions, says [LeanIn.org](#) co-founder and CEO Rachel Thomas. Citing the report, which she co-wrote, Thomas notes that for every 100 men who are promoted and hired to manager positions, only 72 women are promoted and hired. That gap is worse for black women and Latinas, with just 68 Latinas and 58 black women promoted for every 100 men.

"Our goal is to put out a report every year that will shine a light on some of the barriers and systematic biases that women face—and to get beyond the numbers, too," says Thomas. "These findings are so critically important. The big thing we want organizations to hear this year is 'go look at your own data.' If you have a broken rung—and odds are that you do—at that first step up to manager, you will not get to parity."

When women get stuck in entry-level positions, the disparity extends beyond the first level of management. The number of women continues to decrease through every level onwards, which means that women can never catch up. Even as hiring and promotion of women into senior leadership roles improves, with fewer women in the pipeline overall, the gender gap only gets worse.

What can companies do to level the playing field?

The study suggests five concrete steps for companies that want to fix their broken rung.

Those include setting goals to get more women into first-level management. “Organizations need to treat diversity like a real business priority. Set goals and make them public. Set metrics so people know how far they are from the goal and if they’re making progress. Hold leaders accountable,” says Thomas.

The report also recommends requiring diverse slates of candidates for hiring and promotions, noting that when two or more women are included as candidates for a position, the likelihood that a woman is chosen rises.

What can individuals do?

Though systemic changes are necessary, women who work at companies that don’t have a commitment to diversity and diversity-friendly hiring and promotion practices can advocate for themselves for a first-level management promotion.

Communications coach and creator of “[Ask Like an Auctioneer](#)” course Dia Bondi suggests breaking down their ambitions into a goal, a move, and an ask. She gives an example: “If you’re a high-performing individual contributor, let’s say a product manager, and your goal is to be at director-level in four years, maybe one big move you need to make now is to find a senior leader to be a sponsor before your next performance review.” Asks made of that sponsor could include advice about navigating the review conversation or to taking on a side project with them to showcase leadership skills. Bondi also recommends communicating your career ambitions upfront. She notes that women should also be especially thoughtful about building their professional community of mentors and sponsors. “In between big asks, what are you doing to curate that community? Do your sponsors and mentors know the impact of the advice they’re giving you?”

A solvable problem

“It’s chagrining to realize that women are left behind so early, and then effectively can never catch up. But it feels like a very solvable problem,” says Thomas.

“We’re talking about entry-level candidates. It shouldn’t be that difficult to put processes in place where you can promote your entry-level candidates up to that first level more equitably. Same with hiring. These are candidates with pretty short track records, and in a lot of ways, fairly similar track records,” she says.

Thomas notes that fixing the “broken rung” for only one group of women isn’t enough.

“In ten years from now, if we’ve gotten to equality for white, straight women but not all women? That’s not going to be a success.”

Companies will have to champion diversity in all forms, and push against deep-rooted unconscious bias. But pursuing an equitable workplace can only lead to good things for both companies and employees—and to a future free of both glass ceilings and broken rungs.