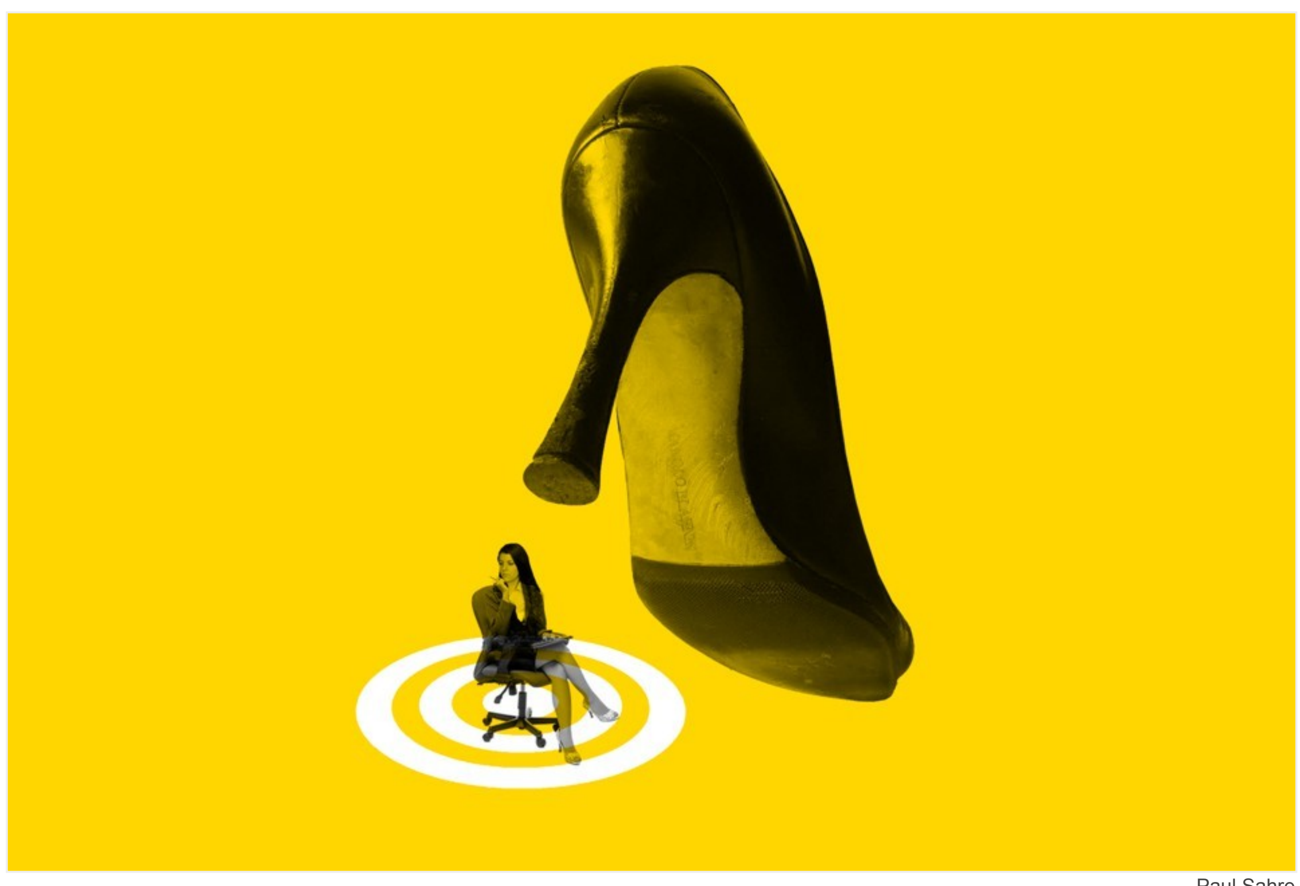
Why Do Women Bully Each Other at Work?

Research suggests that conditions in the workplace might be to blame.



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SEPTEMBER 2017 ISSUE | BUSINESS

Updated on August 3, 2017

THE BITCHES, as Shannon saw it, came in three varieties. She categorized them on her personal blog, in a post titled "Beware the Female BigLaw Partner."

First was the "aggressive bitch"—a certain kind of high-ranking woman at the firm where she worked who didn't think twice about "verbally assaulting anyone."

When one such partner's name appeared on caller ID, Shannon told me, "we would just freak out."

Next was the two-faced "passive-aggressive bitch," whose "subtle, semi-rude emails" hinted that "you really shouldn't leave before 6:30." She was arguably worse than the aggressive bitch, because you might never know where you stand.

Last but not least, the "tuned-out, indifferent bitch," Shannon wrote, "is so busy, both with work and family, that they don't have time for anything ... This partner is not trying to be mean, but hey, they got assignments at midnight when they were associates. So you will too.

"There obviously are exceptions," she added. "But there aren't many."

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You would expect someone like Shannon, who asked that I use only her first name, to thrive in an elite law firm. When she graduated in the mid-2000s from the University of Pennsylvania Law School—having helped edit the constitutional-law journal and interned for a district-court judge—she had her pick of job offers. She knew that by going to a big firm she was signing on for punishing hours, but she had six-figure student loans to pay off and hoped her outgoing personality would win over bosses and potential mentors.

It didn't quite work out that way.

The firm's pace was as frenzied as she'd feared. Partners would assign projects late in the day, she said, sometimes forcing associates to work through the night only to

announce in the morning that the assignment wasn't needed after all. When Shannon wanted to leave at the early hour of 7 p.m., she would sneak out of her office, creep past the elevators, and take the stairs down to evade her bosses. She took up smoking to deal with the stress.

Early on, Shannon noticed a striking dynamic. Though her law-school class had been roughly split between the genders, the firm had very few female partners. This wasn't unusual: At the time, just 17 percent of all law partners in the country were women, and they've only notched up a few percentage points since then. And, at least at her firm, no one seemed to like the handful of female partners. "They were known as bitchy, bossy, didn't want to hear excuses," Shannon told me.

She once spotted a female partner screaming at the employees at a taxi stand because the cars weren't coming fast enough. Another would praise Shannon to her face, then dispatch a senior associate to tell her she was working too slowly. One time, Shannon emailed a female partner—one of the passive-aggressive variety—saying, "Attached is a revised list of issues and documents we need from the client. Let me know of anything I may have left off."

"Here's another example" of you not being confident, the partner responded, according to Shannon. "The 'I may have left off' language is not as much being solicitous of my ideas as it is suggesting a lack of confidence in the completeness of your list."

Shannon admits that she can be a little sensitive, but she wasn't the only one who noticed. "Almost every girl cried at some point," she says. Some of the male partners could be curt, she said, but others were nice. Almost all of the female partners, on the other hand, were very tough.

Still, the senior women's behavior made sense to her. They were slavishly devoted to their jobs, regularly working until nine or 10 at night. Making partner meant either not having children or hiring both day- and nighttime nannies to care for them. "There's hostility among the women who have made it," she said. "It's like, 'I gave this up. You're going to have to give it up too.' "

After 16 months, Shannon decided she'd had enough. She left for a firm with gentler hours, and later took time off to be with her young children. She now says that if she were to return to a big firm, she'd be wary of working for a woman. A woman would judge her for stepping back from the workforce, she thinks: "Women seem to cut down women."

Her screed against the female partners surprised me, since people don't usually rail against historically marginalized groups on the record. When I reached out to other women to ask whether they'd had similar experiences, some were appalled by the question, as though I were Phyllis Schlafly calling from beyond the grave. But then they would say things like "Well, there was this one time …" and tales of female sabotage would spill forth. As I went about my dozens of interviews, I began to feel like a priest to whom women were confessing their sins against feminism.

Their stories formed a pattern of wanton meanness. Serena Palumbo, another lawyer, told me about the time she went home to Italy to renew her visa and returned to find that a female co-worker had told their boss "that my performance had been lackluster and that I was not focused." Katrin Park, a communications director, told me that a female former manager reacted to a minor infraction by screaming, "How can I work when you're so incompetent?!" A friend of mine, whom I'll call Catherine, had a boss whose tone grew witheringly harsh just a few months into her job at a nonprofit. "This is a perfect example of how you run forward thoughtlessly, with no regard to anything I am saying," the woman said in one email, before exploding at Catherine in all caps. Many women told me that men had undermined them as well, but it somehow felt different—worse—when it happened at the hands of a woman, a supposed ally.

Even a woman who had given my own career a boost joined the chorus. Susannah Breslin, a writer based in Florida, yanked me out of obscurity years ago by promoting my work on her blog. So I was a bit stunned when, for this story, she told me that she divides her past female managers into "Dragon Ladies" and "Softies Who Nice Their Way Upwards." She'd rather work for men because, she says, they're more forthright. "With women, I'm partly being judged on my abilities and

partly being judged on whether or not I'm 'a friend,' or 'nice,' or 'fun,' " she told me. "That's some playground BS."

Other women I interviewed, meanwhile, admitted that they had been tempted to snatch the Aeron chair out from under a female colleague. At a women's networking happy hour, I met Abigail, a young financial controller at a consulting company who once caught herself resenting a co-worker for taking six weeks of maternity leave. "I consider myself very pro-woman and feminist," Abigail said. Nevertheless, she confessed, "if I wasn't so mindful of my reaction, I could have been like, 'Maybe we should try to find a way to fire her.' "

Study participants said female bosses are "emotional," "catty," or "bitchy."

Of course, these are just anecdotes. I also heard positive stories about female co-workers, including from prominent women in fields like foreign policy and journalism who described how other women had mentored them or acted as unofficial support groups. (I've been fortunate to have both of those experiences myself.) What's more, research suggests that women actually make better managers than men, by certain measures.

Yet, fairly or not, many women seem to share Shannon's fear that members of their gender tend to cut one another down. Large surveys by Pew and Gallup as well as several academic studies show that when women have a preference as to the gender of their bosses and colleagues, that preference is largely for men. A 2009 study published in the journal *Gender in Management* found, for example, that although women believe other women make good managers, "the female workers did not actually want to work for them." The longer a woman had been in the workforce, the less likely she was to want a female boss.

In 2011, Kim Elsesser, a lecturer at UCLA, analyzed responses from more than 60,000 people and found that women—even those who were managers themselves —were more likely to want a male boss than a female one. The participants

explained that female bosses are "emotional," "catty," or "bitchy." (Men preferred male bosses too, but by a smaller margin than the female participants did.)

In a smaller survey of 142 law-firm secretaries—nearly all of whom were women—not one said she or he preferred working for a female partner, and only 3 percent indicated that they liked reporting to a female associate. (Nearly half had no preference.) "I avoid working for women because [they are] such a pain in the ass!" one woman said. In yet another study, women who reported to a female boss had more symptoms of distress, such as trouble sleeping and headaches, than those who worked for a man.

Some people find these studies literally incredible. (When the *ABA Journal* published an article about the legal-secretary survey, angry readers demanded a retraction. The journal wrote a follow-up piece about the controversy and issued a mild apology for the hurt feelings.) And indeed, it is hard to believe that women would hold a fierce bias against members of their own gender. Perhaps in part because it's such a thorny topic, this phenomenon tends to be either dismissed (nothing to see here) or written off as inevitable (women are inherently catty). But in fact, psychologists have been attempting to explain it for decades—and the sum of their findings suggests that women aren't the villains of this story.

I WASN'T LOOKING for bitchy behavior when I walked into an upscale restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., one night last fall, but it found me. I was there for a small get-together of female executives. Several of the women grimaced when I introduced myself as a journalist, so when I approached a cluster of them, I opened by saying that they didn't have to be interviewed if they didn't want to be.

At that, a middle-aged blonde in a leopard-print jacket looked at me and said, "When you go to your shrink, do you say, 'Nobody likes me! Nobody wants to talk to me'?"

I blinked in disbelief, then asked her whether she had ever gotten pushback for her communication style.

The woman, Susan, said her brusqueness is actually an advantage at the financial-services firm where she works as an adviser, a very *Mad Men*–esque environment, as she described it. “I have a different way of communicating that’s more like a guy,” she said. “I played a lot of sports, and I expect us to knock around a bit and still be friends at the end of the game. Guys like me.”

The fratty environment doesn’t seem that great for other women in her office, though. Most of the financial advisers at her firm are men, but most of the assistants are women—a situation Susan called “a hotbed of badness.” “There’s a finite amount of space that these women get,” she said. “They’re in their little prison and they’re all eating each other up.”

As it turns out, researchers have competing theories as to why this happens—why women sometimes find themselves trapped and sniping at one another.

Joyce Benenson, a psychologist at Emmanuel College, in Boston, thinks women are evolutionarily predestined not to collaborate with women they are not related to. Her research suggests that women and girls are less willing than men and boys to cooperate with lower-status individuals of the same gender; more likely to dissolve same-gender friendships; and more willing to socially exclude one another. She points to a similar pattern in apes. Male chimpanzees groom one another more than females do, and frequently work together to hunt or patrol borders. Female chimps are much less likely to form coalitions, and have even been spotted forcing themselves between a female rival and her mate in the throes of copulation.

Benenson believes that women undermine one another because they have always had to compete for mates and for resources for their offspring. Helping another woman might give that woman an edge in the hot-Neanderthal dating market, or might give her children an advantage over your own, so you frostily snub her. Women “can gather around smiling and laughing, exchanging polite, intimate, and even warm conversation, while simultaneously destroying one another’s careers,” Benenson told me. “The contrast is jarring.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, Benenson's theory is controversial—so much so that she says she feels sidelined and "very isolated" in academia.*

If Benenson is right, women would have to struggle mightily to repair their poisonous dynamic, since it is biologically ingrained. But many other researchers think women aren't hardwired to behave this way. Instead, they argue, bitchiness is a by-product of the modern workplace.

In the late 1980s, Robin Ely, then a graduate student in the Yale School of Management, set about trying to understand why women's office interactions sometimes turn toxic. "My most difficult relationship at work had been with a woman," Ely told me, "but women had also given me the most amazing support." She didn't buy either of the prevailing stereotypes about women—that they are nurturing earth mothers or manipulative traitors. Instead, her hypothesis was simply that "women, like all human beings, respond to the situation they're in."

To test this idea, Ely cracked open a law-firm directory and picked some male-dominated firms, where no more than 5 percent of partners were female, and some other firms where women were slightly better represented in the top ranks. Then she asked the female lawyers at both types of firms how they felt about their female colleagues.

No matter where they were, the attorneys endured a grueling work environment. But in the overwhelmingly male firms, competition between women was "acute, troubling, and personal," Ely said. Compared with the women in firms where they were better represented, women in the male-dominated settings thought less of one another and offered weak support, if any. Female partners in those firms were "almost universally reviled," Ely said. One young lawyer described her boss as "a manipulative bitch who has no legal talent."

Perhaps the most enduring takeaway was this: Women in the male-dominated firms believed that only so many of them would make it into the senior ranks, and that they were vying with one another for those spots. Ely, who is now a business professor at Harvard, had hit upon a dynamic known as tokenism. When there

appear to be few opportunities for women, research shows, women begin to view their gender as an impediment; they avoid joining forces, and sometimes turn on one another.

Think of the "cool girl" who casually notes, "All my friends are guys"—as though it just naturally happened that way. Or the overachiever who saves her harshest feedback for her female colleagues, while the men in the office get sports talk and fist bumps. Women like Susan, the financial adviser I met in Washington, "get along with men better," as she put it, because it pays to get along with whoever's at the top.

AROUND THE SAME TIME Ely conducted her tokenism study, a Dutch psychologist named Naomi Ellemers was working as an assistant professor in Amsterdam and trying to understand the near-total absence of senior women in academia. Women then made up just 4 percent of all full professors in the Netherlands. Ellemers thought perhaps biased men were keeping women from advancing.

Ellemers put together a list of all the female professors in the country and mailed them (as well as a sample of male professors) a survey about their relationships with their colleagues. Her findings suggested that women were actually part of the problem. The female professors described themselves as just as "aggressive" and "dominant" as the men did; they felt unsupported by their female colleagues, and didn't want to work with other women.

Eleven years later, Ellemers surveyed doctoral students and university faculty members in Amsterdam and Italy and found similar results. Although the junior men and women were in fact equally committed to their work, the female professors thought the younger women were less dedicated. Ellemers called these senior women—who coped with gender discrimination by emphasizing how different they were from other women—"queen bees," repurposing a term first coined in the 1970s by researchers at the University of Michigan.

After these studies were published, Ellemers was disheartened to read news articles trumpeting them as proof that women are nasty by nature. “Some journalists are very happy to make headlines that women are catty to each other,” she told me ruefully. She thought about giving up on this line of research, but a student of hers, Belle Derks, persuaded her to keep probing.

Along with some of their other colleagues, Ellemers and Derks conducted a small study in 2011 for which they asked 63 Dutch policewomen—who are far outnumbered by their male colleagues—to recall a time they had experienced sexism at work. That reminder prompted many of the officers to emphasize the ways they’re not like other women and to downplay the prevalence of sexism. In other words, thinking about how bad it is to be a woman made certain officers not want to be seen as women. And it wasn’t just something women did: In another small study, when Derks and other researchers prompted Surinamese immigrants in the Netherlands to recall an instance of discrimination against their group, many expressed lower opinions of one another and behaved more stereotypically Dutch.

With that, Ellemers and Derks believed they had pinpointed the conditions in which queen bees emerge: when women are a marginalized group in the workplace, have made big sacrifices for their career, or are already predisposed to show little “gender identification”—camaraderie with other women. (Think of former Yahoo chief Marissa Mayer’s quote about another of her old jobs: “I’m not really a woman at Google; I’m a geek at Google.”) Women like this, Ellemers says, “learned the hard way that the way to succeed in the workplace is to make sure that people realize they are not like other women. It’s not something about these women. It is the way they have learned to survive in the organization.”

It’s worth noting that some of Ellemers and Derks’s findings are not very robust. But other researchers have since published work that echoes theirs. Michelle Duguid, a Cornell University management professor, has explored something called “favoritism threat,” or women’s concern that they’ll seem biased if they help one another. In a working paper, Duguid showed that “token” women who had helped other women in the past avoided doing so again when given the chance. In a

separate study, she found that token women in “high prestige” settings were more reluctant to recruit female candidates to join their team than were women who worked in less prestigious settings or had more female colleagues.

As Joan C. Williams, a distinguished professor at the UC Hastings College of the Law, put it to me: “Women are people. If the only way to get ahead is to run like hell away from other women, some women are going to do that.” And research suggests that this kind of distancing occurs in minority groups as well, which means these dynamics may be doubly hard on women of color, since they face both gender and racial bias.

Even levelheaded, feminist women can exhibit elements of queen-bee behavior at times, and they don’t have to be in senior positions. The biggest issue I heard about is what’s known as “competitive threat,” which is when a woman fears that a female newcomer will outshine her. She might try to undermine her rival preemptively—as happened to one woman I interviewed, whose work friend spread rumors that she was promiscuous and unqualified. Or she might slam her rival with demeaning comments, as has happened to seven in 10 respondents to a 2016 survey of women working in the tech industry. “I had two female colleagues who suggested I try to look ‘less pretty’ to be taken more seriously,” a respondent wrote. “One suggested a breast reduction.”

This kind of behavior can take a toll. My friend Catherine had always been the most unflappable and cheerful in our group, but about six months into her stint with a queen bee, she began feeling like “a terrified puddle of a human being,” she said. She felt sick to her stomach and had trouble eating her lunch at work. “Whenever the phone rang, my legs would shake,” she said. “Anytime we were on a call and her voice came on, I shuddered.”

About 15 years ago, Margarita Rozenfeld, who is now a leadership coach in Washington, D.C., found herself reporting to a queen bee. Rozenfeld’s boss was just in her early 30s, but her clothes and demeanor made her seem much older. She had high expectations for everyone on the team, including Rozenfeld, and she would grumble when her subordinates didn’t exhibit the same relentless ambition she had.

One day on her way to work, Rozenfeld tripped on the parking-garage steps and twisted her ankle. It swelled as the day wore on, and she worried that it would get

even worse. She wasn't particularly busy, so she knocked on her boss's door and asked whether she could leave early to see a doctor. Her boss asked Rozenfeld to come in and close the door.

"You know, I had high hopes for you," Rozenfeld remembers her saying. Her boss questioned why "you feel like you can leave" when "things like this happen."

"But I feel like I'm not going to be able to walk," Rozenfeld said.

"I will tell you something about my career and how I got to be where I am today," her boss continued. "Do you know how many times I worked with men who basically sexually harassed me? Did you know that man over there missed his kid's high-school graduation because he was working on a proposal? And you have a sprained ankle and you think it's okay to leave?"

As tears welled in her eyes, Rozenfeld realized that she was never going to be the kind of worker her boss wanted. Six months later, she quit.

COMPLICATING ALL OF THIS is that, well, bitchiness is in the eye of the beholder, and the term *queen bee* sometimes gets flung at women who are just trying to do their job. You could call it managing while female: Many studies have shown that people—men and women alike—can't tolerate so much as a hint of toughness coming from a woman, even when she's in charge.

The most notorious double standard is that women can't break into important jobs unless they advocate for themselves and command respect. But they're also reviled unless they act like chipper and self-deprecating team players, forever passing the credit along to others. Laurie Rudman, a social psychologist at Rutgers University, said the "poster woman" for this predicament is Hillary Clinton, who, according to surveys, was more popular when in office than when she was vying for office. Writing in *The Boston Globe* last summer, former Vermont Governor Madeleine May Kunin noted the dramatically lower behavior bar set for Donald Trump than for Clinton: " 'Boys will be boys,' but girls must be goddesses."

Rudman first witnessed this tendency when she was a grad student at the University of Minnesota, where she sat on a hiring committee for an open professor position. The female candidates touted their records by saying things like "I'm so fortunate I found so-and-so for my mentor," Rudman told me. One male candidate, meanwhile, waltzed in, folded his arms, and declared, "I'm going to change the face of psychology within the next five years." The committee picked the man.

"It's very difficult for women to ask for power," Rudman said. "If you stick your neck out and say 'I'd like to be considered for this promotion,' somebody's revving up a chain saw in the background."

When women do slip outside the lines and behave assertively, other women are sometimes the ones who blast them for it.

After Rudman earned her doctorate, she began researching why women can't get away with behaving the way men do. Her work helps explain why male bosses can be frank, while female managers are stuck serving up compliment sandwiches to soften their criticism. In one of her experiments, women who doled out honest feedback were liked less and considered less hirable than similarly candid men. Other academics have argued that workers just don't respect female bosses as much as male ones—which prompts the bosses to treat the workers worse, which causes the workers to think less of their bosses, and so forth.

Rudman found that some women's disparagement of other women can be explained by what's called "system justification," a psychological concept in which long-oppressed groups, struggling to make sense of an unfair world, internalize negative stereotypes. Women simply don't have the same status in American life that men do. So when people think, *Who do I want to work with?*, they subconsciously leap to the default, the historically revered—the man. Some women

look around, see few women running things, and assume that there must be something wrong with women themselves.

Indeed, Kim Elsesser, the UCLA lecturer whose study unearthed a preference for male bosses, pointed out another interesting wrinkle in that study: Participants were biased against women only when they were asked about the gender they preferred to work for in general. "When participants were asked about their current bosses, the bias disappeared," Elsesser said.

When women do slip outside the lines and behave assertively, other women are sometimes the ones who blast them for it. In one series of studies, Rudman asked participants to pick teammates for a round of computerized *Jeopardy*. They could choose among insecure and confident men and women. A cash prize was offered, so it behooved the participants to pick someone competent. But while the confident contestants of both genders were seen as more capable than the insecure ones, the female participants were nonetheless torn between the insecure woman and the confident one.

Rudman says that in general, research shows men are more biased against women at work than women themselves are. But in this case at least, the male participants didn't hesitate to pick the confident woman over the insecure one, and had no preference between the confident man and the confident woman. Not a single female participant, on the other hand, chose the confident woman over the confident man. "I could not believe it!," Rudman exclaimed, letting out a long "Wooooow."

She saw this as a sign of what psychologists call the black-sheep effect, in which people are harder on rule-breaking members of their own group than they are on the deviants of other tribes. As Rudman told me this, I played a mental highlight reel of the various times in my life when a man had completely dropped the ball on a team project, and I'd excused him as either a nutty professor or a devilish rogue who couldn't be bothered with tedious details. He was the mischievous Peter Pan to my businesslike Wendy: *I'll handle it myself, you scamp!* If a woman behaved this

way, though, I'd be more likely to draft a dozen never-sent emails asking her what her problem was.

Some writers and researchers argue that true queen bees are extremely rare, and that the concept has been co-opted by misogynists to show how awful women supposedly are. Even Carol Tavris, one of the social psychologists credited with coining the term *queen bee*, has been quoted rejecting the concept. "I hate it," she told the *Today* show in 2013.

In 1974, Tavris had published an article in *Psychology Today* in which she and two colleagues, Graham Staines and Toby Epstein Jayaratne, wrote:

> There is a group of antifeminist women who exemplify what we call the Queen Bee syndrome … The true Queen Bee has made it in the "man's world" of work, while running a house and family with her left hand. "If I can do it without a whole movement to help me," runs her attitude, "so can all those other women."

When I called her at her home in Los Angeles, Tavris said that her theory had since been misinterpreted, carved into a cudgel for bashing women. If women are their own worst enemies, after all, why should people push for women's workplace advancement? She regrets that giving "a catchy name" to a complex pattern of behavior helped launch queen-bee-ism as "a thing"—one that has endured despite all the gains working women have made since the 1970s. After publishing that paper, she moved on to examine other topics in psychology.

I could understand why Tavris would want to distance herself from this research—who wants to throw more chum to the internet's sexist trolls? And given the complexity of the queen-bee phenomenon, its prevalence is impossible to determine. Still, queen bees are clearly a real thing, and ignoring the problem won't make it go away. Maybe by understanding its causes, we can finally start to address them.

The key point to remember, according to Naomi Ellemers and other researchers, is that queen-bee behavior arises under certain circumstances—like when a woman believes that the path to success is so narrow, she can barely squeeze through herself, let alone try to bring others along with her.

She glared at me and turned bright red. Then she screamed at me like I had never been screamed at before.

When I'd initially emailed Tavris for an interview, she had written back, "Your request makes me sad." But as I described the experiences of the women I had interviewed, she acknowledged that in some contexts, women do sometimes bully one another—just as members of other discriminated-against groups would.

Toward the end of our conversation, Tavris complimented Ellemers's research. How we behave at work depends on "how safe we feel at work," she said. "Does our work give us a chance to thrive? Or are we feeling thwarted at every step?"

I ONCE WORKED WITH a queen bee—a woman a couple of decades my senior. (She outranked me but wasn't my supervisor.) Soon after I started, she and I were alone in our shared workspace. It was a busy day, but I needed to ask her a question about an internal process. I waited until late afternoon, then asked.

She glared at me and turned bright red. Then she screamed at me like I had never been screamed at before by someone I'm not related to. (Later, when I complained about her, my boss said, by way of explanation, that the office was a family-like environment.)

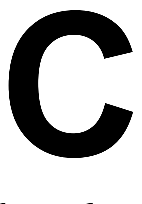
That was probably our worst encounter, but it wasn't the only bad one. She would seethe at me for things beyond my control and complain about me to my boss. Once, I let out a sigh after a frustrating phone call, and she lambasted me for seeming entitled. Another co-worker overheard and told her to cool it.

"I'm sorry, but she had a tone!" she responded, like a baroness exasperated by the impertinent help.

I began to have stomachaches and cold sweats when I walked into work. Still, I couldn't quite hate the woman. She was obviously miserable in her job, and every time I looked in her stress-deadened eyes, I saw a little of myself.

Is this the ghost of future Olga?, I sometimes wondered. Is this what happens when the totally normal, societally sanctioned choices you've made—work hard; have children; slave away for a promotion; go on a little vacation, not too long!; come back and work even harder—don't add up to the life you envisioned? You said the right thing at the meeting, didn't you? You helped on the important project. Why *not* you, then? It would be enraging.

The truth is, I too sometimes feel like the day is just too exhausting, that I cannot possibly handle one more thing with grace. I like to think I haven't taken it out on my colleagues. But my queen bee had a rougher go of it than I did, climbing her way up before *Lean In*, before '90s-style sensitivity training. She probably experienced the kind of sexism that doesn't take a Sarah Lawrence degree to sniff out, the kind where your male equals call you "sweetie" or tell you, up front, that you don't belong. I had to ask myself, *How many years of treatment like that would it take for me to become mean like her?* Ten years? Twenty? Or would it require only the right opportunity—like an unusually bad day, when no one else is around?



URIOUS TO KNOW what career gurus have to say about dealing with queen bees, I took a spin through some of the top-selling "getting ahead" books aimed at women. What I found was eye-opening, but not in the way I'd hoped.

For example, the 2014 "revised and updated" version of *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office*, which was originally published in 2004, notes that women "often wind up making mountains out of molehills, much to the consternation of their male colleagues." The authors of the 2006 book *The Girl's Guide to Being a Boss (Without Being a Bitch)* offer a long tale of woe from a woman with a bitchy boss,

then write simply that if you (the boss) feel that you are a bitch, you should take an anger-management course. Problem solved.

In *Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman*, former CNN Vice President Gail Evans recommends avoiding workplace tension by not having any contact with colleagues outside the office. If an emotion somehow surfaces during work hours, a true executive-track gal stuffs it back down. "If you can't help but become angry with a female co-worker," Evans writes, "for the sake of the rest of us, keep it to yourself."

Even when workplace bullying becomes severe, employment lawyers told me, women are less likely to sue for gender discrimination if their tormentor is another woman, since people tend to assume that women look out for one another. (One lawyer said that this is why companies often appoint members of "protected classes," such as minorities and women, to human-resources roles. Having someone from one of these groups handle a firing can make it harder to sue for wrongful termination.)

Still, the answer can't be to simply capitulate to queen bees, as some of the women I interviewed suggested. Even if you later quit, you only foist your awful boss on the next underling. At another women's networking happy hour, I met a woman named Marie, who, when I asked whether she had ever clashed with a female boss, burst into knowing laughter. At a previous job as a defense-industry analyst, Marie had had two bosses, a man and a woman. She was assigned to cover Haiti when the 2010 earthquake struck, forcing her to work long, difficult hours. The male manager praised her, but the woman made her a target. When Marie forgot to close a quotation mark in a report, her female boss denounced her as a plagiarist and eventually pushed her out. Marie's takeaway: "You should not outshine the boss."

Nurses might have a better solution. Their profession is rife with female bullying, but a group of nurses has floated an idea in which hospitals would have financial incentives to eliminate staff infighting. According to this plan, levels of bullying would be measured, publicly reported, and factored into the payments hospitals get from the federal government for providing quality care.

Better support for working moms could help, too. From my reporting, it seemed that while having family-friendly policies was important, having a boss who bought into those policies mattered just as much. One woman I spoke with, for example, was technically allowed to work from home when her kids were sick, but her older female manager would make her feel bad about it every time, thus negating the point of the policy.

Employers could also make more of an effort to show talented women that they're valued, since women who feel optimistic about their career prospects are less likely to tear one another down. "We need to change our society so that it becomes normative for women to see other women succeeding in all kinds of roles," Laurie Rudman says. Indeed, industries that are new and therefore lack entrenched social roles tend to be where this type of change takes place.

Toward the end of our conversation, Rudman emphasized how important it is for high-achieving women to own their success rather than chalking it all up to mentors and luck, even if doing so comes with a price. Stereotypes about how female leaders should behave, Rudman said, will only change when enough of us defeat them. I felt like I was talking with the hip, feminist aunt I never had.

"Have you felt resistance to your success?" she asked me.

Occasionally, I said, thinking of a handful of times people had wondered, a little too pointedly, how I'd scored one career win or another.

And what, she asked, did I do about it?

"I said I just got lucky," I replied, "or came up with some excuses."

"YAAAAA!" she cried. "See? See? So do you think women should rethink that strategy? Should maybe women start being stronger in our confidence?"

I admitted that it was a good idea, but that "something is keeping me from acting in a more confident way, even though that would be good for women in general."

“It *would* be good for women as a whole,” Rudman said. “But individual women have to be shot down first. And you don’t want to be one of those. And I don’t blame you.”

Someone has to be the first, though—to behave confidently, to risk knee-jerk bitterness from our colleagues as a result, and to not hold it against them. But it would be easier if we could do it as a hive.

** This article has been updated to better reflect Benenson's characterization of her academic isolation.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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