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**Why Aren't Women Advancing At Work? Ask a Transgender Person. Having experienced the workplace from both perspectives, they hold the key to its biases.**

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Fifty years after *The Feminine Mystique* and 40 years after Title IX, the question of why women lag in the workplace dogs researchers and lay people alike. While women are entering the professions at rates equal to men, they rise more slowly, and rarely advance to the top. They’re represented in smaller numbers at the top in fields from science to arts to business.

Some suggest that there is something *different* about women—women have stalled because of their personal choices, or their cognitive and emotional characteristics, whether innate or socialized. Another possibility is that the obstacles to women’s advancement are located within their environments—that they face barriers unique to their gender.[1](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119239/transgender-people-can-explain-why-women-dont-advance-work%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnote-1)

[It’s been shown, for example, that both women and men attribute women’s success more often to luck, and attribute men’s more often to ability. Women also received fewer rewards for sharing opinions and taking leadership roles. One study showed that a female fellowship applicant had to be 2.5 times more productive than the average male applicant to be deemed equally competent.](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119239/transgender-people-can-explain-why-women-dont-advance-work%22%20%5Cl%20%22footnote-1)

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But while bias has been experimentally demonstrated, it’s hard to study in the real world: Just as it’s hard to isolate a single environmental pollutant’s effect on human health, it’s been near impossible to isolate gender as a variable in the real world and watch how it affects a person’s day-to-day experience.

Until now. Trans people are bringing entirely new ways of approaching the discussion. Because trans people are now staying in the same careers (and sometimes the very same jobs) after they change genders, they are uniquely qualified to discuss the difference between how men and women experience the workplace. Their experience is as close to the scientific method as we can get: By isolating and manipulating gender as a variable and holding all other variables—skill, career, personality, talent—constant, these individuals reveal exactly the way one’s outward appearance of gender affects day-to-day interactions. If we truly want to understand women at work, we should listen carefully to trans men and trans women: They can tell us more about gender in the workplace than just about anyone.

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Ben Barres is a biologist at Stanford who lived and worked as Barbara Barres until he was in his forties. For most of his career, he experienced bias, but didn’t give much weight to it—seeing incidents as discrete events. (When he solved a tough math problem, for example, a professor said, “You must have had your boyfriend solve it.”) When he became Ben, however, he immediately noticed a difference in his everyday experience: “People who don't know I am transgendered treat me with much more respect,” he says. He was more carefully listened to and his authority less frequently questioned. He stopped being interrupted in meetings. At one conference, another scientist said, "Ben gave a great seminar today—but then his work is so much better than his sister's." (The scientist didn't know Ben and Barbara were the same person.) “This is why women are not breaking into academic jobs at any appreciable rate,” he [wrote](http://www.theage.com.au/national/how-the-sex-bias-prevails-20100514-v4mv.html#ixzz3BXBN2SNG) in response to Larry Summers’s famous gaffe implying women were less innately capable at the hard sciences. “Not childcare. Not family responsibilities,” he says. “I have had the thought a million times: I am *taken more seriously.”*

This experience, it turns out, is typical for transmen. For her book [*Just One of the Guys? Transgender Men and the Persistence of Gender Inequality*](http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/J/bo9743256.html), sociologist Kristen Schilt interviewed dozens of FTM (female to male) transgender individuals. One subject noted that when he expresses an opinion, everyone in a meeting now writes it down. Another noted, "When I was a woman, no matter how many facts I had, people were like, “Are you sure about that?’ It’s so strange not to have to defend your positions." When they suggested women for promotions, other men said, “Oh! I hadn’t thought about her”—they were able to promote women because their advice was taken more seriously. Personality traits that had been viewed negatively when they were women were now seen as positives. “I used to be considered aggressive,” said one subject. “Now I'm considered 'take charge.' People say, ‘I love your take-charge attitude.’"

The effects of FTM transition, however, aren’t universally positive. Race, it seems, has the ability to overshadow gender when it comes to others’ esteem. Black transmen, for instance, found they were perceived as a “dangerous” post transition. One subject said he went from being “obnoxious black woman” to “scary black man”—and was now always asked to play the “suspect” in training exercises.

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What happens when the opposite transformation takes place—when a man becomes a woman? Joan Roughgarden is a biologist at Stanford who lived and worked as Jonathan Roughgarden until her early fifties, and her experience was almost the mirror image of Barres’s. In her words, “men are assumed to be competent until proven otherwise, whereas a woman is assumed to be incompetent until she proves otherwise.” In an interview, Roughgarden also noted that if she questioned a mathematical idea, people assumed it was because she didn’t understand it. Other transwomen have found changes not only in perceptions of their ability, but also their personality. In Schilt’s work with transwomen for a forthcoming book, she found that behaviors transwomen had as men were now seen as off-putting. What was once “take-charge” was now “aggressive.” And they had to adapt; the transwomen quickly learned that “being the same way in the world would be detrimental to your career.”

Unlike those of us who have only experienced the world a single gender, Schilt’s subjects were able to see very clearly that “men succeed in the workplace at higher rates than women because of gender stereotypes that privilege masculinity, not because they have greater skill or ability." Bias is a hard thing to acknowledge. “Until a person has experienced career-harming bias,” wrote Barres in his response to Summers, “they simply don’t believe it exists.” And people tend to think the problem is located elsewhere: “Everyone thinks that there's bias *out there*, but ‘I'm not that person,’” says Schilt.

But, says Schilt, bias is both more pervasive and less invidious. And addressing it is going to take more than just waiting around for the old guard to retire: The “fantasy of a demographic shift just isn’t true,” Schilt says. ”It’s our culture. It's how we organize gender, separate by gender, men's rooms and women's rooms—it's so ingrained in us that these things are different. And it's not just men, it's also women who have the same ideas.” The experiences of trans people are bringing these factors to light in a wholly new and unclouded way.

Of course, the sample size is small here. And there’s no perfect agreement on cause-and-effect. Chris Edwards, a trans advertising executive, says that post-transition, he was given greater levels of responsibility—but he thinks it’s because the testosterone he took changed his behavior. He became less timid and more outspoken—and was seen, at work, as more of a leader. Indeed, some suggest that transmen might experience these workplace benefits partly because, post-transition, they are happier and more comfortable, and that this confidence leads to greater workplace success. But if that’s the case, one would expect that transwomen, armed with this same newfound confidence, would see benefits. The opposite seems to be true.

To truly understand trans people’s experiences of workplace gender bias, more research is needed. But the window to do so may be closing, as people are able to change genders at younger and younger ages. Puberty-inhibiting medications are becoming more mainstream, meaning young trans people can choose to suppress the development of secondary sexual characteristics from a relatively early age. (The treatment became available in the U.S. in 2009.) A child who identifies with the opposite gender and seeks treatment is now able to experience the world, for most of their life, as that gender alone.

And the group of trans people who are vocal on the subject is already fairly small; many seem to feel they have much larger issues facing them. When asked how people react when she describes the different treatment she receives as a woman, Roughgarden responds simply, “I don't bring it up.” Ultimately, Schilt says, it’s not trans people’s responsibility fix gender bias. Roughgarden agrees. “We're trying make a life,” she says. “We have to live in our actual roles, we can't sit in a coffeehouse and complain about how this is the world. This *is* the world and we have to live in it. We have to navigate it.”

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