

Intentional Invisibility: Professional Women and the Navigation of Workplace Constraints

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Abstract

Drawing on an in-depth case study at a large nonprofit organization, we find, in line with previous scholarship, that women professionals continue to face biased expectations at work and at home. We leverage data from interviews and participant observation to identify a new strategy that women use to navigate professional constraints created by the second shift and workplace double binds: “intentional invisibility.” Intentional invisibility refers to a set of risk-averse, conflict-avoidant strategies that women professionals in our study employ to feel authentic, manage competing expectations in the office, and balance work and familial responsibilities. We find women across the organization reporting intentionally remaining behind the scenes in attempts to avoid backlash and maintain a professional status quo. While intentional invisibility allows women to successfully navigate gender unequal professional and personal landscapes, it could simultaneously present an additional challenge to career advancement.

Keywords

organizations, occupations and work, sex and gender, professionals, qualitative methods

Introduction

Research on the persistence of gender inequality in the workplace focuses on two explanations for women’s underrepresentation in the top tier of organizations: structural barriers to promotion (e.g., Elliot and Smith 2004; Gorman and Kmec 2009; Kanter 1993; Miller 1976) and gendered behaviors internalized through socialization (e.g., Coltrane 1996; Helgesen 1990). Scholars concur that there is a recursive relationship between structure and socialization (Alvesson and Billing 1997; Ridgeway and Correll 2004), meaning that in organizations, one’s position impacts one’s behavior and vice versa. Yet, little is known about the processes through which organizations encourage and employees adopt specific behavioral strategies that contribute to gender inequality. Our research advances this growing scholarship (e.g., Blair-Loy 2009; Reid 2015; Williams and Dempsey 2014) by theorizing how women select strategies to respond

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to structural constraints in the workplace, and how the strategies they select may unwittingly reinforce extant inequalities.

We use in-depth interview and observational data from two cohorts of a women's professional development program at a large nonprofit organization in the western United States to examine how professional women strategically balance workplace and familial demands. We find that women facing structural constraints, such as unequally distributed household responsibilities and gender-biased organizational policies, adopt a low-risk strategy of conflict avoidance that we call "intentional invisibility." Women in our sample demonstrate three interrelated motivations for embracing intentional invisibility: they use it to resolve dissonance between professional and personal identities; straddle the double bind they face at work, in which women are penalized for assertiveness while professional advancement requires it; and accommodate a disproportionate share of familial responsibilities. Although our data alone cannot support a causal link between intentional invisibility and long-term career outcomes, when considered alongside research demonstrating the importance of visibility to professional advancement (e.g., Correll and Mackenzie 2016; Ibarra 2012; King et al. 2017; Leahey 2007; Simmard et al. 2008), our findings suggest that this strategy for navigating workplace bias may be detrimental to gender parity.

Background

Gendered Barriers in the Workplace

Women have entered the U.S. workforce in droves since the mid-twentieth century. Middle-class, educated women, in particular, have seen substantial gains as they have infiltrated managerial and professional positions (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004). Yet, even as they have entered previously male-dominated occupations, white-collar women remain underrepresented in top-level professional positions (Ely and Rhode 2010). A historical explanation for the underrepresentation of women in senior positions was the "pipeline" problem—that not enough qualified women were available to make the transition to positions of power (Eagly and Carli 2008). However, as gender-equal rates of entry across many workplaces have failed to result in equal representation at senior levels (Kulis, Sicotte, and Collins 2002), the pipeline hypothesis has been increasingly discredited. Likewise, the popular metaphor of the "glass ceiling," which implies that women seeking career advancement come up against a barrier impeding access to top positions, does not map onto the ongoing, complex barriers to advancement that women face. By blocking access to leadership, the glass ceiling allegedly resigns women to a professional plateau or encourages them to "opt out" of the race altogether (Belkin 2003), but evidence that women self-select out of competitive career tracks is weak (Goldin 2006). Furthermore still, the linear metaphor suggesting that women have only one juncture in their careers where they are stymied fails to encapsulate the range of persistent and subtle barriers that women face *throughout* their career paths.

Instead, researchers have begun to converge on the argument that it is pervasive, structural problems that are at the root of women's underrepresentation (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2011; Monroe and Chiu 2010). This argument has pushed scholarship toward "subtle" and "unseen" barriers as a way of explaining the scarcity of women in positions of senior leadership (DeRue and Ashford 2010; Ibarra and Petriglieri 2007; Kolb 2013). To describe the barriers impeding women's career trajectories, Eagly and Carli (2007) replace the singular image of the glass ceiling with one of a labyrinth: Although women are no longer uniformly barred from the C-suite, their paths to leadership are riddled with biases, discrimination, and other obstacles. In this updated metaphor, women do not merely leave organizations or stagnate professionally when they encounter an obstacle. Instead, women who find themselves caught in a convoluted web are forced to navigate it continuously as they confront recurring instances of organizational bias.

Navigating Structural Constraints

As women navigate biased organizations, gender is constantly operating as a “background” identity that shapes individual choices, organizational processes, and institutional beliefs and arrangements (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). In professional settings, widely shared expectations about gender leave women in a conundrum. On one hand, women are expected to fit into environments that are predominantly structured with men in mind (Acker 1990; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Williams 2000). On the other hand, when women *do* conform to expectations about the masculine, ideal worker, these behaviors are not well received (Rudman and Glick 2001; Rudman et al. 2012). As a result, women are stuck in a double bind, where those who demonstrate masculine traits face backlash while those who lack them risk being dismissed (Eagly and Carli 2007).

The double bind manifests across the professional hierarchy. At more senior levels of professional organizations, abstract ideals are more strongly associated with stereotypically masculine traits, such as assertiveness and dominance, than in lower levels of management and administration (Acker 1990; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). For example, many professional development training programs routinely advise women toward masculine typed behavior, such as interjecting at meetings, speaking with authority, and self-promoting. Yet, when women do these things, especially from positions of power, they are deemed “control freaks” (Eagly and Carli 2007) and chided for not being modest enough (Kendall and Tannen 1997). Meanwhile, women in the workplace are expected to be more likable than men, and are penalized for being “deceitful, pushy, selfish and abrasive” when they violate feminine norms (Heilman et al. 2004). As Eagly and Carli (2008) point out, this creates a no-win situation where women are thought of as not having the “right stuff” for powerful jobs regardless of whether they act in communal or agentic ways.

Alongside the double bind, women face “the second shift”—after confronting workplace challenges, they return home to a disproportionate amount of familial responsibilities (Hochschild 1989). Research has shown time and again that this inequality in unpaid domestic labor remains a roadblock to women’s advancement in the paid labor force (Bianchi et al. 2012; Coverman 1983; Sayer 2005; Sayer, Suzanne, and John 2004). Even in heterosexual families in which both partners work full time, wives report doing twice as much housework and child-care as their husbands do (Coltrane 1996). Together, these inequalities at home and in the workplace produce a “frozen” middle-management tier comprised of women who are not leaving the workforce, but also are not likely to ascend to leadership in their professional environments (Yee et al. 2016).

To address these complex and often competing structural constraints, professional women across contexts employ a range of navigational tools. While the labyrinthine obstacles facing professional women are well documented, less is known about women’s navigational strategies. Scholars have highlighted the importance of cultivated identities in allowing people to navigate the organizations they are embedded in (Ibarra 1999; Ibarra and Petriglieri 2007; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006; Ramarajan and Reid 2013, 2016). Many organizations expect employees to perform a kind of idealized professional identity (Acker 1990; Britton 2000; Williams 2000) that rewards work prioritization (Blair-Loy 2009; Kellogg 2011) and penalizes family prioritization (Cooper 2000). Indeed, despite the proliferation of new kinds of “flexible” work, women are often marginalized when they select family-friendly work arrangements (Glass 2004; Hochschild 1997; Kelly et al. 2010). To reconcile competing work and nonwork expectations, many women professionals choose between *accepting* organizational pressures, *passing* as someone they are not, or *revealing* their true identities despite consequences (Ramarajan and Reid 2016).

The Current Study: Structural Constraints and Intentional Invisibility

While women are constrained by biased organizations, their individual choices and preferences, cultivated during years of socialization within gendered structures, also contribute to inequality (Cech and Blair-Loy 2010; Correll 2001, 2004). Faced with professional norms that encourage masculine behavior, many women choose to modify their behaviors and networks to match those of male counterparts (Blair-Loy 2009; Davies-Netzley 1998; Ramarajan and Reid 2013, 2016; Reid 2015). Our study reveals an alternative strategy that some professional women embrace when confronted with conflicting organizational and familial expectations.

We contribute to the growing body of work on how women navigate biased organizations by examining how women use intentional invisibility to respond to workplace bias while rejecting masculine professional norms. Unlike *accepting*, *passing*, or *revealing*, intentional invisibility offers women a way to balance professional and personal demands while projecting an authentic sense of self. By remaining behind the scenes and valuing communal, collaborative work, women who embrace intentional invisibility reject—rather than seeking to embody—the masculine norm of the ideal worker. The women in our study who embrace invisibility often acknowledge that doing so may limit their opportunities for advancement, but nonetheless turn to the strategy to avoid conflict, project an authentic self, and gain a sense of stability.

Although research demonstrates the importance of visibility to professional advancement (Correll and Mackenzie 2016; Ibarra 2012; Simmard et al. 2008), we found, in keeping with past research, that even as women expressed professional ambition, they were unlikely to seek visibility (King et al. 2017). The women in our sample recognized that seeking visibility is a conventional strategy for climbing the organizational ladder, but described remaining behind the scenes as a personally satisfying and professionally strategic option. Our data show three interrelated motivations for embracing intentional invisibility in spite of its potential costs. First, intentional invisibility enabled women in the professional development program we tracked to avoid conflict with both their managers and the teams they managed within the context of a biased organization. Second, women in our sample used invisibility to reconcile their personal identities with their workplace selves, reporting that staying behind the scenes felt more authentic than assuming the spotlight. Finally, remaining invisible allowed women to quietly pursue feminist goals and aspirations at work without falling behind on the feminine demands of their modern partnerships.

We focus on participants' stated preferences for and interpretations of invisibility to add nuance to accounts of how women navigate biased organizations. The women in our organization were not passively pushed and pulled by organizational tides; they were active agents making daily tactical choices in interactions with coworkers and long-term strategic choices in light of organizational structures. At the same time, the women we followed did not create the workplace labyrinth that they were obliged to navigate, and they were not at liberty to redesign it from the ground up. By emphasizing women's preferences and choices, we do not mean to suggest that they are responsible for the unequal work environments they inhabit or the curtailed career trajectories they may experience. Attaining gender parity in top-tier professional positions will require changing organizational processes and reducing unconscious biases in workplace interactions (e.g., Acker 1990; Correll et al. 2014; Heilman 2012; Kanter 1993). Until such sweeping changes are made, however, it is important to recognize that women's daily workplace practices may impact their career attainment, earnings, and satisfaction in predictable and unintended ways (Rudman and Phelan 2008).

Data and Method

We collected data for this project over two years (October 2013–September 2015) as part of a case study of a women’s professional development program at a large multidivision nonprofit organization in the western United States.¹ The program was designed by the organization’s Human Resources (HR) Department in consultation with the research team to create gender awareness among women employees and equip them with tools for combating gender bias at work. Whether the program effectively equipped women to combat bias is not the focus of this paper. Instead, we treat the program as a unique site for studying gender in the workplace, as program meetings were a space where women’s professional attitudes, perceptions, and experiences were foregrounded.

Once the program launched, HR took the organizational lead while the research team positioned ourselves as nonintrusive observers and interviewers. The HR team recruited women employees to serve as facilitators of discussion circles. These facilitators, in turn, recruited five to 10 other women employees to join their circles. In many cases, facilitators recruited members who shared a common characteristic or an interest in a common theme, such that there were circles organized for women with young children, women of color, and women dealing with aging parents. In other cases, facilitators tapped their professional networks to recruit diverse circles, whose only commonality was a shared interest in professional development. Across all circles, facilitators were expected to schedule seven meetings covering predetermined topics, such as negotiation and implicit bias. Circle members watched an educational video before arriving at each meeting and spent approximately two hours during the meeting discussing their views and experiences related to the topic. The first program cohort convened from October 2013 to June 2014 and included 140 women, while the second cohort met from October 2014 to June 2015 and included 196 women (see Table 1 for participant characteristics).

Across each cohort, the research team collected systematic observational and interview data.² We selected three circles from each cohort to observe throughout the year, chosen to capture diversity in terms of age, race/ethnicity, and career stage of participants. In Cohort 1, researchers followed (1) a circle of midcareer women of color, (2) a circle of predominantly white women advanced in their careers, and (3) a racially diverse circle of early career mothers with young children. For consistency, we selected circles to follow in Cohort 2 that matched these compositions as closely as possible. For each selected circle, one author attended and audio-recorded all discussion meetings and wrote extensive field notes. In addition, each author interviewed the facilitators and three randomly selected members of the circle they followed at the start and end of the program. To capture the experiences of participants in circles that were not selected for observation, we attended program-wide trainings and social events and interviewed 10 randomly selected participants at the start and end of the program. In total, we observed 36 circle meetings and 15 program-wide meetings. We conducted 86 interviews, including 41 participants interviewed at the start and end of the program and four interviewed once (see Table 2 for interview respondent characteristics). Interviews averaged about an hour and were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. The findings we present in this paper draw only from those respondents whom we both observed in circle meetings and with whom we conducted in-depth interviews, amounting to data from more than 75 hours of observation and 66 interviews.

Observational and interview data were analyzed using the qualitative software package Dedoose. We analyzed the data using thematic analysis, an inductive form of analysis oriented toward identifying patterns in qualitative data (Charmaz 2003; Gibbs 2007). Select transcripts were read by all authors and discussed in analytical team meetings to ensure rigor and coder consistency. Using an inductive approach, we first developed an initial coding scheme to identify emergent topics and themes. We iteratively revised the coding scheme as additional interviews

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Program Participants by Cohort.

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Age (<i>M</i>)	46	40
Parent ^a	70%	53%
Relationship Status ^a		
Single/Noncohabiting	17%	29%
Cohabiting	12%	9%
Married	71%	62%
Race ^b		
White	68%	76%
Black	3%	5%
Asian	10%	11%
Hispanic	7%	1%
Other—All other responses	1%	2%
Multiple responses	11%	6%
Hispanic	—	11%
Education		
High School	0	0
Associate's/Some college	1%	4%
Bachelor's	17%	34%
Master's	54%	44%
PhD or Professional	29%	18%
Years in organization (<i>M</i>) ^a	10	7
Manages others	73%	63%
Income ^c		
0–49,999	—	3%
50–99,999	—	52%
100–149,999	—	32%
150,000 or greater	—	12%
<i>N</i>	138	177

^aAmong Cohort 1, parental status, relationship status, and organizational tenure were only asked on the postprogram survey, which 86 participants completed.

^bCohort 1 participants saw “Hispanic” as an available race category and were not asked separately about Hispanic origin. Cohort 2 participants were asked to report their race and Hispanic origin separately; for Cohort 2 participants, the race category “Hispanic” includes those who selected “Some other race (please specify)” and wrote in “Hispanic,” “Latina,” and so forth as their race.

^cCohort 1 participants were not asked to report their income.

were coded. Multiple rounds of coding revealed a set of strategies that, drawing on our participants’ own words, we identified as related to “invisibility.” We probed the data to better understand the rationales motivating participants to seek invisibility. We mapped variation across participants’ characteristics, engaging with existing theory and empirical research to contextualize workplace strategies.

Our data allowed us to track how women across varied backgrounds and identities navigate workplace barriers. Throughout our findings, we discuss how women’s intersectional identities—including their race, sexual orientation, age, seniority, and education—inform their embrace of invisibility. However, we limit our focus in this paper to one key axis of variation: family composition. Across other characteristics, women with partners and children were drawn to conflict-avoidance in the workplace more consistently than their single and childless counterparts. While workplace navigation strategies vary across many dimensions of difference, we found

Table 2. Interview Respondent Characteristics.

Age (<i>M</i>)	45
Parent	71%
Relationship Status	
Single/Noncohabiting/Divorced	24%
Cohabiting	7%
Married	69%
Race ^a	
White	47%
Black	4%
Asian	9%
Hispanic	13%
Other—All other responses	4%
Multiple responses	2%
Education ^b	
High School/Some college	4%
Bachelor's	36%
Master's	36%
PhD or Professional	22%
Years in organization (<i>M</i>)	11
<i>N</i> ^c	45

^aInterview respondents were asked to self-report their race or ethnicity at the end of the interview. Nine respondents (20 percent) either opted not to self-report race or were not asked to.

^bEducational attainment is missing for one interview respondent.

^cInterviews were conducted with 45 unique program participants. Of these, four respondents completed a single interview, and 41 respondents completed interviews at the start and end of the program, for a total of 86 interviews.

familial demands to be the most commonly invoked rationale for remaining behind the scenes in the office.

Findings

Our data reveal how women experience and interpret workplace barriers and, in turn, seek to overcome them. We use the term “intentional invisibility” to describe a set of strategies that professional women in our sample used to navigate the workplace while remaining largely behind the scenes. While we use the term as an analytic category, our use closely tracks how program participants described their own ideals and experiences. Participants across the organization, in varying career and personal circumstances, drew on strikingly similar strategies to avoid workplace conflict, attain a feeling of authenticity within their professional roles, and balance work with familial responsibilities. While our data cannot speak directly to the efficacy of the strategies women adopted with regard to professional advancement, we demonstrate how the professional pathways women take may lead to low visibility among women across an organization.

Avoiding Conflict within a Biased Structure

The women in our study identified gendered barriers to advancement and job satisfaction in multiple registers: workplace policies that conflicted with parental responsibilities, supervisors and supervisees who conveyed gender biases, and double standards embedded in performance evaluations, for example. In their unequal work environments, women often reduced their visibility to avoid conflict, which they saw threatening to distract from their core professional

responsibilities. Diana, for instance, works as a software engineer in a division of the organization where men are overrepresented at the management level. More than once, she has walked into meetings where the men around the table assume she is a secretary rather than an engineer. While Diana recalls that these moments stressed her out when she was younger, as she has gained experience and seniority, she has come to “get a kick out of it.” Now, she tries to advance by “just being the professional person I need to be” instead of reacting to bias. Diana explains,

I’ve never been a fan of, and I’ve never joined, like the Society for Women Engineers . . . That seems counter to the cause, in my mind, like calling attention to things in a way. We’re just engineers, we don’t have to be women in engineering.

Diana describes such groups as “self-isolating,” and worries that advocating for women in her field would detract from her core professional identity as an engineer. For Diana, keeping a low profile and being quietly competent allow her to incrementally advance in her career without risking the backlash or interactional discomfort that calling attention to her presence as a woman might.

Similar to Diana’s strategy for deflecting attention from her gender within a male-dominated field, women across divisions of the organization sought to minimize the visibility of feminine-typed “issues” such as pregnancy and maternity leave. Jane, who works as an administrator in a male-dominated division, has a senior colleague who had a baby on Wednesday and came back to work on Monday. Jane wondered about her colleague’s quick return,

Is it because it’s a sexist environment? . . . Is it because she feels like she has to [come back to work immediately] to be able to compete as a woman? Or is it just because she loves what she does and felt like she was up to it?

Jane’s colleague had the option of taking a longer maternity leave—in fact, the organization has a better than average parental leave policy. Yet, in Jane’s analysis, taking a longer leave might have created a competitive disadvantage for her colleague “as a woman.” Taking advantage of ostensibly egalitarian policies such as parental leave is fraught, and in Jane’s view, her colleague chose to navigate this gendered situation by creating as little disruption as possible.

Women often tried to minimize their visibility specifically when they recognized gender bias. In moments of heightened bias, many women—such as Jane’s colleague, according to Jane—felt particularly vulnerable to backlash and did not want to stick out as women. Gloria, for instance, has worked in a male-dominated field in corporate and nonprofit settings for the past 35 years. Gloria tells us that she has no doubt “that strong women in the workplace are still perceived as bitches.” She recognizes this stereotype as unfair, and in the privacy of her circle voices her resistance to it. In her office, though, rather than rebel, she has learned to adapt her own behavior, assuming a more passive demeanor, to avoid the pejorative label: “One of my personal goals and self-learning over the course of the past 35 years is that I had to moderate my very strong personality and strong opinions on things.”

When Gloria stays quiet in meetings or thanks her colleagues for doing things that should be routine, it is not because she is shy, lacks confidence, or is used to taking the ingratiating position. Instead, she knowingly subdues what she considers her natural tendency to come on strong for the sake of professional advancement. Gloria is far from alone among the women we spoke to in reducing her visibility to avoid being perceived as bitchy. Jackie describes filing a complaint about a supervisor’s sexual harassment as a “naïve” career mistake; Carly showed up for an office “clean-up party” that her male supervisor had organized only to find that he had not bothered to show up and that the only volunteer cleaners were women, but she wrote off the experience by saying that while she “was a little bit frosted,” she knows her boss is serially forgetful

and that “we all have our roles.” Although women routinely recognized gendered barriers in their workplaces, they viewed quietly proceeding with work as the most strategic way of responding.

Women such as Gloria, Jackie, and Carly sought to minimize the gendered issues they faced and to reduce their visibility as women to manage the complex, often conflicting, barriers and biases they encountered daily. Indeed, program participants employed intentional invisibility in a range of everyday interactions, from team meetings to office cleanups, with bosses and the teams they managed. This strategy, though, was most apparent when discussing workplace contexts where women were in leadership positions. Women’s descriptions of their own leadership and their definitions of ideal leadership often explicitly referred to invisibility as a goal to which they aspired. Whether within their immediate work team, their division, the organization more broadly, or even their family, women across both cohorts we tracked aimed to embody leadership without putting themselves in the spotlight. For example, Martha, a supervisor who managed a male-dominated division, explained, “. . . there is the stereotype of the leader, leading from the front as opposed to pushing from the rear. And I think some people don’t necessarily recognize what I will call ‘soft leadership.’” For Martha, soft leadership meant subtly enabling others to succeed by pushing them toward goals. Stephanie, likewise, defined leadership as an unselfish pursuit, saying “[A good leader is] a person that is not walking out of the room taking all the credit, and really empowering others to be successful.”

By describing invisibility as a positive leadership characteristic, women were able to assign value to the workplace strategies that they and their colleagues adopted to avoid backlash. Janice, a woman in her 40s who holds a PhD, offers a definition of ideal leadership that is typical of program participants:

Strong leadership is not only leading by example, but in such a way that other people can learn it, other people can do it. And the leader becomes part of a team. They become almost invisible, as part of the team—except as a resource.

In Janice’s account, good leadership requires stepping aside to allow others to advance. A good leader is available to help the team as a resource that team members can utilize, but is otherwise indistinguishable from the team. Mary, a technology services specialist, likewise noted,

I’ve seen people excel in leadership who are in very invisible roles; they’re very much behind the scenes. But they are so good at what they do, and they are so willing to go there, to do what needs to be done.

In Mary’s account, an excellent leader is not a foreperson who delegates to a team and takes credit for a finished project, but rather a worker doing unglamorous, unrecognized tasks.

Participants often recognized that the high value they placed on invisibility contradicted organizational norms. Cathy has worked as a fundraiser long enough to see time and again that

women, particularly, who are really efficient in their work, they get stuff done, they meet their deadlines, they hit their numbers, they move things forward—they get stuff done . . . when it comes to mind for them to think about a promotion they’re passed over for those who maybe have a better sense of big picture.

Nevertheless, Cathy says that one of the leadership skills she is working to develop is “[learning] to cover up more, and shut my mouth once in a while.” Cathy defines ideal leadership in a way that fits with her everyday workplace strategies for reducing her exposure to backlash. She knows that earning a reputation as someone who quietly “gets stuff done” is not the obvious path to promotion, but she defines her goals to align with the strategy of invisibility, explaining, “I

ultimately made the choice to kind of stop looking for promotions and just find jobs that were rewarding to me.”

To craft careers that felt rewarding, women sought to reduce the chances for interpersonal conflict and to increase opportunities for friendly relationships within their work teams. Embracing invisibility within leadership positions facilitated these goals by fostering collaboration and complemented other strategies for mitigating potential conflicts with colleagues, such as excusing offensive remarks or softening critiques. Thus, when a man said to Sharon after leaving a meeting, “God, I’m glad I’m not married to you!” her takeaway was, “I must have been projecting more sternness than I knew I was capable of.” She thereafter worked to change her conference room demeanor. Maureen, for her part, embraced a definition of bias as a decision-making error after her circle watched a video on the topic because it would give her a way to educate male coworkers without accusing them of misconduct: “So you’re not saying to someone, ‘You’re prejudiced.’ It doesn’t become such a negative. It just, it’s a way of looking at things. You’re biased towards pink, not blue, or hair up vs. hair down.” Sharon, Maureen, and their peers developed nonconfrontational responses to gendered situations to limit their vulnerability, and to define leadership in a way that incorporates intentional invisibility as a positive trait.

The Authenticity of Invisibility

In addition to mitigating the risk of interactional conflict, embracing invisibility offered a way for women in the program to reconcile professional and personal identities into an “authentic” self. Many women associated seeking visibility with aggressiveness or self-promotion, and they considered these traits to be at odds with their character and values. While discussing a professional development module about navigating power dynamics within workplace relationships, Nanette’s circle debated techniques for using body language to communicate authority. When a colleague proposes that taking up more space with grand gestures or erect posture could be helpful, Nanette rebuts by advocating for “just trying [different techniques] out and seeing what fits. I mean I’m never going to be big, I just never am.” Nanette concedes, “I could be bigger than I am. And maybe a little bit bigger would be helpful and useful,” but she attributes her usual passive body language to a personality characteristic that “just never” will be completely altered. “Being big” comes more easily to some of the other members of Nanette’s circle, but they nonetheless question whether it is a desirable behavior. When the group challenges the ethics of compensating for weak content with a confident presentation in a meeting, Gloria retorts, “I know men who do!” With her comment, Gloria suggests that perhaps circle members should lower their ethical standards to those of their male counterparts, but she also codes “being big” as a masculine behavior. Another circle member goes further by describing “being big” in animalistic terms, likening the proposed strategy for increasing visibility in meetings to the recommended strategy for warding off an aggressive mountain lion. Women in this circle acknowledge that changing their body language might increase their visibility and impact in meetings, but they reject the strategy nonetheless as inauthentic, arguably unethical, and certainly unfeminine.

In lieu of “being big,” many women preferred to be less visible to remain true to their authentic personalities and align their actions with their ethics. Karen, a midlevel manager, explained that what differentiated authentic from inauthentic leadership was humility: “Real leaders don’t really have to say what their title is, or have to brag about their accolades or whatever. It is just inherent, and your work should speak for itself.” For Karen and other women, discomfort with titles and self-promotion was also supported by a belief that such approaches were signs of overcompensation. A member of a different circle, Tanya, likewise said in an interview,

Not that there is anything wrong with people who want to promote themselves and make money and have great titles—it's just that I was very uncomfortable with the word "leadership" until I was able to redefine it for myself.

Like many women interviewed, Tanya viewed the conventional definition of leadership, and the form most commonly used in organizations, as including self-promotion and a profit-driven mindset. While Tanya hedged that there was nothing wrong with this style, her discomfort indicated otherwise. Other women discussed fears of losing themselves if they took on a more executive style, often framing the latter as an overly masculinized approach. For leadership to feel authentic to Tanya, it demanded less selfish motives.

Similarly, during a circle meeting, Maxine described herself as a person "who values integrity and authenticity." To that end, she questioned whether she could be both authoritative and likable as a leader, concluding that she wanted her team to think, "We are so fair that you should want to view us as authentic and approachable, but you should also respect us and not push us to be authoritative with you." In Maxine's view, being authoritative was a last resort and could be avoided through a fair, authentic, approachable workplace style. As a leader, Maxine believed that if she was well-liked and respected, such behaviors would serve the same end as being directly authoritative. A third circle member from senior management in development, Lucy, explained that she did not want women to have to take on the characteristics of men in the workplace. These characteristics may involve being more authoritative, she told us, but they would drive her crazy because they are "cold and rational, and they aren't compelling, passionate or interesting." For Maxine, Tanya, and Lucy, elements of what they viewed as a masculine workplace style felt similarly wrong. Maxine recoiled from authoritarianism, Tanya could only see herself as a leader according to an alternative definition that excluded self-promotion and monetary motives, and Lucy regarded executive leadership as cold and boring.

But an adoption of intentional invisibility was not just about framing traditional, executive workplace behaviors as inauthentic. For many women, framing success in the workplace to comply with feminine norms was fitting. Women are normatively expected to be communal rather than individualistic (Eagly and Carli 2008), and our participants' descriptions of the mechanics and goals of a good workplace reflected this expectation. The norm that women ought to be communal bore on how participants thought managers should oversee their teams. Louise, who supervises a small team in HR, explained that teams should be talented and diverse, and that leaders should not enforce a hierarchical order. Louise believes that she should prioritize the group over the potential personal gains of ascending a hierarchy.

Likewise, the communal orientation that Louise refers to shapes the *why* of intentional invisibility. In her interview, Louise explained that nonhierarchical, collaborative groups are ideal because, "whatever the mission of the group or the organization [is, it] can be best realized by having that really strong, supported group." Other participants agreed that leaders should pursue organizational goals rather than seek self-promotion. Program participants further espoused this mission-oriented, communal approach to leadership by contrasting it with a more executive, self-promoting style. Janine, a midlevel manager, explains that she has trouble respecting leaders who do not put others first: "[Leaders] can really have just the most brilliant idea, but if it's at the expense of people it doesn't do anything for me." Similarly, Robyn, in senior management, notes that a professional approach that values promotion and self-advancement makes her uncomfortable: "Even women who are very career-oriented aren't necessarily the most satisfied from those type of positions, and their goal is not necessarily endless promotion." Robyn goes on to explain that women leaders may approach their work differently than men. "[Women] are not always going to consider something a win just if we got more of something numbers-wise. A lot of us are in this because of something that's more heart-related."

According to Robyn, while men may rely more heavily on numbers and statistics as markers of success, women value and measure their professional success in other ways. This sentiment is reflected in responses we heard throughout interviews, suggesting that women reject masculine-typed workplace behaviors in favor of a more communal and less self-promotional work style. Together, distaste for masculine workplace behaviors and a preference for a communal approach made *invisibility* the most effective tool at many women's disposal. And by positioning invisibility as intentional, authentic, and effective, the women in our sample were rejecting—rather than failing at—professional advancement.

Other women dealt with similar deliberations between the leadership they saw around them and the leadership that they wished to embody themselves. Again, key to this negotiation between ideal and actual was the tool of invisibility. Meredith, a circle member who worked in health services, says that she is comfortable being outspoken. She is not sure, however, that being “the person in the room who says the thing that everyone else is thinking” is an effective strategy. “Maybe the goal for me is to figure out how to be smart about [speaking out]; how to be more political about it, without losing my voice and without getting burned out.” Meredith values speaking her mind and has the skills to do so, but senses that it might stunt her career advancement. Earlier, she practiced a more assertive, visible workplace style, but in the face of negative feedback, is seeking to learn a less visible strategy. Others who generally turn to behind-the-scenes strategies likewise justify the choice by arguing that a direct, executive style would be self-defeating. Amy, a midlevel employee, explains that she has a difficult boss: He neither thrives as a manager nor completes his own work successfully. Rather than confronting him, Amy shares with her circle that she is “controlling her boss by playing low, by being ingratiating . . . Sometimes you do it strategically and it elevates your status.” Rather than risk repercussions for directly addressing her boss's insufficiencies, Amy uses an invisible tactic to improve her professional standing.

Even when women's behaviors aligned with executive norms, they tended to humbly reframe their strategies as examples of invisibility. Gretchen, a senior administrator, admires a woman who can take control but maintain “the niceness of it, the dealing with people [kindly].” While few would object to managers treating team members kindly, Gretchen's admiration for control tempered with niceness reminds her that she ought “to take a step back, because I tend to control.” Even for a leader, control was to be softened or modulated, rather than embraced. Likewise, even though April finds an executive negotiation style to be effective when shopping for a car, she feels uncomfortable breaching interactional norms with her assertiveness. April recounted to her circle that she approached the male salesperson at the car dealership in a very authoritative manner that was “not her” at all, and she ended up getting a very cheap deal. However, after the deal was made, she apologized to the male salesperson because she felt she had emasculated him. She thought to herself, “I'm being such a bitch!” and felt she had to apologize and explain that this was not really her, but was the game she had to play. The executive style that April and Gretchen's coworker employed adhered to the rules of the game and proved effective, but was interpreted by the women as inauthentic and unethical. April and Gretchen, like many women in the program, would prefer to minimize their guilt and ambivalence by practicing a less assertive behavioral strategy.

Other women feared the reactions of their team members were they to take on a more confrontational, assertive style. Sally, who holds a PhD and oversees an Information Technology (IT) Services team, recounted a time when she confronted her colleagues about an issue with a project and worried she was “being an ass.” Sally's circle members and workplace peers reassured her that she was in the right when she stood up for herself, but she nonetheless cites the experience as a time “when I felt first-hand the extent of the double standard for women who are otherwise reserved.” Program participants experienced or witnessed interactions where women who too visibly took control were sanctioned. As a result, invisibility was not

necessarily a default, but rather became an intentional strategy that women employed to avoid backlash or a feeling of inauthenticity.

The Paradox of the Modern Partnership

The women in our sample spanned a number of characteristics including age, race, and career stage. Yet, among these characteristics, family composition stood out as the central differentiator of women's leadership strategies, with mothers with children at home most strongly embracing invisibility. For many women who participated in the professional development program, remaining behind the scenes was an intentional strategy for navigating workplace biases. But for women with families, intentional invisibility offered, in addition, a vital way of ensuring stable employment and a stable family life.

Carly, who was married with two young children, exemplified this balancing act. Carly was unhappy in her current job. After returning from maternity leave, she reduced her hours to 75 percent but felt that she still had a full-time workload and decreased status within her department. Carly wanted to go back to working full time but told her circle that she had not "acclimated the husband yet." Her husband was working freelance in the technology sector, and, therefore, had a flexible schedule, but Carly did not want to limit his career opportunities by saddling him with responsibilities such as transporting the kids between activities. Even though Carly earned substantially more than her husband, she thought "his per capita rate of income would be really high in theory—but that is only if he actually got a job." While she laughed about his sporadic employment with her circle, she also structured her career around his risky path. She maintained a flexible but low-status 75 percent schedule with a reliable salary and benefits in the hope that her husband might win big by joining a startup tech company. She served as her family's breadwinner, but endured career dissatisfaction and low mobility to meet her family's needs. Carly's position as a caretaker constrained her from pushing for a full-time, high-status role in her organization or elsewhere.

Like Carly, Sandra curtailed an upward professional trajectory to better reconcile her professional and familial responsibilities. Sandra had moved from a corporate job to the nonprofit sector and was thriving in an upper-level administrative position. However, when one of her children was diagnosed with a medical condition that would require more hands-on adult supervision, she moved to a lower stress, and lower prestige, staff position within the organization. Sandra, like her husband, continued to work full time. Her salary and benefits remained integral to her family. But in scaling back her ambitions, she felt more capable of creating the mental and emotional space for managing her family's evolving needs. Sandra and Carly, like many of their peers, took for granted that they would maintain employment throughout marriage and childrearing. They also shared an accompanying assumption that they could outsource many household responsibilities, including childcare, to maintain a full-time work schedule. While these women differ from those a generation ago who might have left the workforce to care for their families, they nonetheless continue to bear the gendered burden of maintaining family stability by being constantly available to deal with caretaking and family contingencies. To do so, they crafted careers around flexibility and stability while their husbands pursued riskier, and potentially more rewarding, ambitions.

Some women feared or had experienced backlash from their partners if they started valuing ambition or risk-taking in their careers. Mary's story is emblematic of this dynamic. Mary, who had a husband and two young children, felt increasingly empowered over the course of the program. After years in middle management, she had recently discovered and hoped to act on a desire to climb the professional ladder. However, during her circle's fourth meeting, Mary came in with a "cautionary story" for the group. Since joining the group, she had put into practice and begun to move full-speed ahead with her professional development plans. Mary explained, however, that this new approach to her career had jolted things at home:

In my mind, I was becoming the person I wanted to be. I was taking professional development classes and talking to people and practicing it in my real life. And one day, I saw my husband getting increasingly upset with me. So finally I said to him, "Did I do something?!" and he said, "I don't even know who you are anymore! You're making all of these plans, you're talking about going back to school, you're doing this and that, and you're not present, you're not here for us. We used to talk about things that would impact the two of us." I realized in that moment, "Oh, I guess there's a reality."

Mary's spouse felt disturbed and alienated by his wife's increasingly ambitious career aspirations. Although Mary continued to participate in the program, a change in her fervor and demeanor was noticeable following this event.

Similarly, Divya, who holds a PhD and directs a division within the organization, explicitly articulates the challenges of balancing professional aspirations with personal responsibilities. She feels that the expectations of her as a wife and a mother precluded her from being able to focus on and achieve her career goals:

I think that if I had been a man, I would perhaps been able to achieve more professionally. And that's for no other reason except holding myself back, too. And there's also the biological thing. You know, you have a kid, you step out of the workplace. You have a spouse who has a professional career. You sort of support many things in your life without putting your profession first . . . I think we're talking about single-minded focus on your career. And I think that for me, being a woman and taking on all the expected roles, that I have never focused single-mindedly on my work. There are lots of competing things: walking the dog, making sure the kids are fine; you know, making sure you have dinner or cleaning up after dinner. You know, keep up 101 things in mind.

Compared with women with children, we found that women who did not have families to support approached their careers with less risk aversion. A sizable minority of circle participants who fit these criteria noted concerns other than stability and flexibility when discussing their careers. While they, too, embraced invisible leadership and expressed worries about being inauthentic or unlikable if they practiced executive leadership, concerns for these women about job security and flexibility were largely absent. These women were also aware of their comparative freedom to pursue their careers. Larissa, a rising midlevel manager in her late 30s, discussed how much easier it was for her to work long hours and get ahead compared with her female colleagues who were also mothers. As she and her spouse had decided not to have children, she felt freed to make riskier "reach" decisions with her own career.

For women with children, invisibility was one deliberate tool for managing conflicting expectations. Within the modern partnership, women are free to, and, indeed, may be required to, pursue a career. However, many find that they can only pursue their ambitions to a point to ensure stability. Specifically, to continue with their careers while also meeting familial obligations, these women selected an invisible style that allowed them to be effective workers while staying out of the spotlight and avoiding negative backlash both in and out of the workplace.

Discussion

Most of the women in our study were highly educated, middle- and upper-class professionals from dual-income households. Many identified as leaders in their careers and had access to outsourced help for their household and care work. Yet, even among this self-selected set of ambitious and advantaged women, we found that many embraced "intentional invisibility." Despite being aware of executive professional styles, these women found that a less visible approach to navigating the workplace helped them maintain their professional position without putting it at risk.

Our findings shed light on broader trends in women's career advancement, deepening our understanding of how and why women's professional and economic gains in recent decades have not been commensurate with their human capital. Scholars largely agree that pervasive, structural problems underpin women's underrepresentation. At work, women face a labyrinth riddled with biases, discrimination, and other obstacles throughout their careers (Correll et al. 2007; Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2011; Ibarra et al. 2013; Monroe and Chiu 2010). At home, women continue to share a disproportionate burden of familial and caregiving responsibilities (Bianchi et al. 2000, 2012; Coverman 1983; Sayer 2005; Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004). We show that women embrace invisibility as a conflict-avoidant strategy that allows them to feel authentic and maintain stability at work and home without challenging feminine expectations. Our findings suggest that regardless of the impact intentional invisibility may have on career advancement in the long run, the strategy appeals to diverse women who find themselves caught within biased organizations.

To resolve the puzzle wherein professional women limit their own visibility, we show first that the women in our study encountered bias, backlash, and constraints in their workplace environments. Participants described a range of nonconfrontational and vulnerability-minimizing "invisible" responses that they had developed to counter inequality and interactional discomfort in the workplace. But unlike other forms of executive workplace norms that felt inauthentic, navigating the labyrinth in this way allowed these women to accomplish organizational goals while also avoiding the backlash that individual self-promotion or assertiveness might have engendered.

We, in addition, demonstrate that despite being ambitious and career-driven, the women in our study approached their work with an eye to fortifying their families for possible contingencies. Indeed, our data show how the responsibility many women bear for ensuring the well-being of their families serves as a multilevel barrier that encourages them to stay out of the spotlight. For example, women such as Sandra and Carly took for granted that they would have careers through marriage and childrearing with access to paid help to maintain a full-time work schedule. However, both women also bore the burden of maintaining family stability and being available to deal with contingencies in ways that their husbands simply did not. Women saw their career stability as a way of freeing their husbands or partners to pursue riskier, but potentially more lucrative or fulfilling, opportunities. Together, the personal and organizational pressures that these women faced made invisibility an optimal strategy.

Still, while we suggest that intentional invisibility may have consequences for individual women's advancement and gender parity in the workplace more broadly, our conclusions are tempered by our awareness of selection challenges and methodological limitations. First, our study precludes us from examining all the dimensions along which workplace navigation strategies might differ for women from different backgrounds and intersectional identities. The women who participated in the professional development program were predominantly white and middle or upper class, and had opted to work within the same large organization. Likewise, because women self-selected into the organizationally sanctioned program, our research design could have led us to observe women less inclined than others to challenge the gender norms in their workplace. Given selection bias, we acknowledge that invisibility might not be a dominant strategy for all women, but rather, a strategy preferred by status-conforming women less interested in "rocking the boat." We hope that future research on organizational interventions and inequality will be attentive to the interpretive and behavioral strategies that diverse women employ across unequal settings.

In addition, we did not track long-term career outcomes and, thus, cannot speak to the causal impacts of invisibility. To the extent that this workplace strategy contradicts conventional professional norms, invisibility could stymie the career advancement of those who practice it; indeed, many participants who embraced invisibility were concerned about this consequence. However, it could be that this invisible, communal approach to work creates effective teams and successful

organizations, and will, therefore, benefit women professionals in the long term. Our findings suggest that regardless of the causal effects this strategy may have in the long run, intentional invisibility offers women an effective, adaptable set of strategies to maintain both professional and personal stability as well as feelings of authenticity and femininity.

While our data are not representative and do not speak to invisibility's long-term effectiveness, our findings suggest that women within biased organizations construct and employ novel strategies for reconciling professional and personal demands. By shifting attention away from barriers themselves and toward the women who negotiate them, we point to how the daily choices women make in the workplace bear on their sense of self and sense of stability. While women may seek to stay out of the spotlight in the workplace, here, we highlight how their preferences and decisions contribute to gender dynamics in the office and at home.

Conclusion

Although scholars of gender and leadership have a strong theoretical grasp on the ways in which organizations fail women, they have a weaker understanding of how women internalize and respond to these organizational constraints in ways that influence their career outcomes. Our analysis of women's aspirations and decision-making highlights both the nature of the challenges women encounter as well as the tools they can leverage to navigate these challenges. Particularly, in tracking women's professional aspirations alongside the strategies they employ daily to navigate workplace responsibilities and relationships, we find that women's use of "intentional invisibility" helps them as they continually confront and navigate maze-like barriers to professional advancement. Together, our findings demonstrate the importance of workplace policies that not only level the playing field, but also recognize the gendered baggage and toolkits that employees bring to the workplace.

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Notes

1. Women who participated in the professional development program were assured of confidentiality by both the Human Resources Department and the research team, and their discussion groups served as spaces for sharing personal experiences. Because of the importance of maintaining confidentiality, key details about the organization and program we studied are obscured throughout this article, and all names are pseudonyms.
2. In addition to observational and interview data, the research team fielded surveys at the beginning and end of the program to track changes in participants' views. Survey data are available upon request, but do not inform the findings reported in this paper.

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