

Book Review: *What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know* by Joan C. Williams and Rachel Dempsey

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book *What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know* by Joan C. Williams and Rachel Dempsey.

Keywords: Book Review | Gender bias | Workplace discrimination | Women

Article:

What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know. By Joan C. Williams, Rachel Dempsey. New York and London: New York University Press, 2014, 394 pp., 24.95 (cloth).

What Works for Women at Work is a clear exposition of research examining gender bias, and an advice book for professional women facing gender discrimination in the workplace that provides practical advice to recognize and overcome that discrimination. In addition to clearly describing a wide array of previous studies covering various aspects of gender discrimination and success in the workplace in a manner accessible to a lay audience, Williams and Dempsey illustrate these studies with the results of interviews with two groups of professional women. The first group they interviewed they called The New Girls' Network, and included 67 women who were at the top of their fields in business, academia, and other professions. The second group was 60 women of color scientists.

The book begins with a discussion of the relationship of authors Williams and her daughter Dempsey, whom Williams included as the voice of a younger generation of women, and an introduction describing the gender gap in economic achievement. Much of the book then focuses on describing four patterns of gender bias in the workplace, including multiple chapters describing each pattern, with practical advice on overcoming that type of bias. The first pattern is

the “prove it again” bias, when women are held to higher standards than men and asked to prove themselves more times than men to be seen as equally competent. The second pattern is the “tightrope” of expectations, in which women who act too feminine are seen as less capable but women who act too masculine are seen as too aggressive and lacking in social skills. The third pattern is the “maternal wall” of bias against mothers, and the fourth pattern is the “tug of war” of female rivalry in the workplace.

Williams and Dempsey present several practical suggestions for overcoming each pattern of bias; for instance, if accomplishments are not recognized in a prove-it-again pattern of bias, they suggest keeping careful records of accomplishments and taking on a specialized role in the workplace, among other strategies. They suggest taking on more masculine or feminine qualities to readers facing “tight rope” bias and, for those facing a “maternal wall,” explain how to demonstrate commitment to one’s job after having a child, while also demanding change at home in the division of housework and child care.

Some suggestions for overcoming bias will be controversial to some, such as advice to emphasize feminine qualities when dealing with more traditional men. The authors make a point to note that advice should only be taken by those for whom it is comfortable to do so. Furthermore, although the authors emphasize that gender bias is not the fault of individual women, they emphasize individualistic strategies with which to respond to bias, and do not offer practical suggestions for promoting institutional change that may benefit women more broadly.

After describing the four patterns, Williams and Dempsey turn to a discussion of race and gender, finding in their sample that women of color were more likely than white women to experience all four patterns of gender bias in the workplace. They also discuss differences in bias specific to African American, Latina, and Asian American women; their large sample of women of color allows this diverse description, a strength of the sample interviewed for the book. The authors then have two chapters discussing signs indicating whether readers should leave or stay at their jobs and strategies for doing so, a chapter summing up 20 lessons from the book, and a conclusion calling for institutional change to reduce gender bias more generally. Throughout the book, the authors also included several informative vignettes including lists of “comebacks,” or snappy and effective phrases to use when faced with specific types of biases in the workplace, profiles of various women and studies, and tips for success in the workplace and in balancing work and family.

Although their research into bias is not groundbreaking, the four categories described by Williams and Dempsey represent a new way of framing and organizing the types of bias that women encounter. Further, the several chapters dedicated to presenting advice to career women based on the results of studies of gender bias represent a novel and uplifting approach to this topic. This book will be of particular interest to scholars of work, gender, and the family; scholars who examine organizations and economic sociology; and professional women who are trying to overcome gender discrimination at the workplace.

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