

THE MILLENNIUM

PROJECT

GENERATION Y IS ON THE CUSP OF GREATNESS, YET EVEN WOMEN FROM THIS INNOVATIVE GENERATION ARE FIGHTING FOR THEIR DESERVED OPPORTUNITIES. WHAT WILL IT TAKE FOR THEM TO BE EQUALLY REPRESENTED AND PUSH THROUGH GENDER BIASES? ONE SOLUTION IS THE AVAILABILITY AND INFLUENCE OF POSITIVE OLDER FEMALE ROLE MODELS AND MENTORS FOR TOMORROW'S LEADERS.

By Robin Bradley Hansel

Amidst the typical concern about who will run the world tomorrow, one generation has stepped up to the plate. Known as millennials or Generation Y, these young adults are collectively the most achievement-oriented, optimistic and cooperative group in history. More than any other generation to date, millennials have fully embraced their access to advanced technology and higher education. These teens, college-aged students and young adults born during the 1980s and 1990s, tend to embody a heart for social activism, global service and environmental conservation.

The 2006 Cone Millennial Cause Study explored what this generation looks for in their careers. Of the 1,800 individuals surveyed, 79 percent reported they wanted to work for companies that care about their impact on society. Thirty percent indicated a specific desire to have a profession that helps to make the world a better place. Underneath all of that positive news, women still do not hold their fair share of seats at decision-making tables. Talented females in this compassionate generation are under-represented in positions of leadership in their schools, communities and professional settings.

The United States ranks 90th in the world in terms of women representatives serving in national legislatures. Women hold less than 19 percent of U.S. Congressional seats despite the fact that they are 51 percent of the population. They comprise a mere three percent of Fortune 500 CEOs and occupy only three percent of the clout positions in mainstream media. Women account for only 34 percent of all physicians and surgeons. In the legal profession, 47 percent of law students are female, but at law firms only 15 percent of equity partners and five percent of managing partners are women.

Without a stronger female influence across all sectors, is it any wonder that issues of gender discrimination persist despite the progress made over the years? Can women of older generations help encourage young millennials? M&V consulted an expert panel of best-selling authors, educators, industry leaders, speakers, filmmakers and young millennial innovators to help explore these questions and discuss possible solutions.

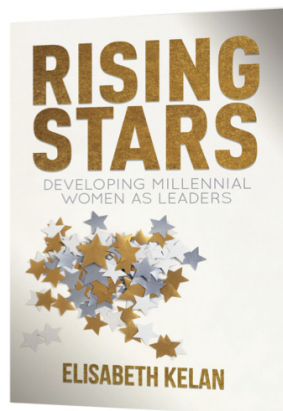
Lisa Bloom is a prominent attorney and award-winning legal analyst for NBC, CBS News, CNN and HLN. She is also the best-selling author of *Think: Straight Talk*

for Women to Stay Smart in a Dumbed-Down World. She would like to see women ages 30 and older modeling and mentoring the millennial generation, emphasizing confidence, decisiveness and courage. "One of the biggest problems we still face is the cultural pressure to be physically attractive and the rewards young women get from that compared to using their brains. We must push back and insist on being judged on our talents, ideas and achievements," said Bloom.

Jennifer Siebel Newsom encountered just that type of unevolved thinking from her agent, someone who should have been looking out for her best interest. Newsom is the writer, director and producer of the 2011 Sundance documentary film *Miss Representation*, which explores the effects that media, marketing and advertising can play on the objectification of women. "My first agent didn't take me seriously and went so far as to request that I take my Stanford MBA off my resume—he didn't want me to seem too threatening," said Newsom, also a speaker, former actress and advocate for women, girls and their families.

That type of behavior doesn't surprise Dr. Elisabeth Kelan, associate professor of the department of management at King's College ►

London and author of *Rising Stars: Developing Millennial Women as Leaders*. “Younger women today view gender as relevant for their grandmothers and mothers but surely not for them,” Kelan said. “However, on closer inspection, it is noticeable that gender inequality still exists, but it is more subtle than before. Younger women need to have the right tools in their toolkits to deal with it.”



A 1984 silver and two-time bronze Paralympic ski medalist, former White House official, corporate leadership expert and best-selling author, Bonnie St. John concurred. “Now that gender inequality is often more subtle, more structural and more unintentional, one of the biggest barriers is a lack of awareness. When millennial men and women get complacent about equality and assume the work has all been done, it seems as if the tide turns backward.”

St. John and her daughter, Darcy Deane, a University of Pennsylvania freshman, co-authored the book *How Great Women Lead: A Mother-Daughter Adventure Into the Lives of Women Shaping the World*. “My daughter tells me that men and women on campus often don’t see the way men can dominate meetings with their height, size or deep voices,” said St. John. “Inadvertently, men may be sexually harassing the women who must work beside them in organizations and yet no one calls ‘foul.’ The same young men and women who would espouse gender equality and volunteer to make change in Third World countries are often unaware of how thousands of small decisions and actions on a day-to-day basis can result in women being held back. It is crucial that millennials talk about gender inequality and make themselves more conscious.”

Unfortunately, there is a lack of dialogue, even among women, about barriers for female students and ways to empower them as leaders. “Many female millennials tend to perceive gender inequality as an off-campus issue rather than a pressing problem for college students. Although there is nothing I feel any less qualified to do because I am a woman, my future aspirations are daunting in the face of such widespread lack of awareness surrounding gender inequality among my own generation,” said Deane.

Does this limited discussion translate beyond college campuses and into the workplace? Is it possible that gender discrimination obstacles

can be so very subtle that women of this generation tend to miss it or even blame themselves?

Kelan, who researched the topic for her book, encountered this situation time and time again: younger women failing to recognize when gender subtext played a key role. One example is of a young woman assigned to administrative roles in her team despite her interest in strategy. “She thought that this was her individual problem because she simply did not have the right skills. Only later did she realize her boss had assigned her this role because he unconsciously made the assumption that women are good at clerical tasks. She talked with her boss about her ambitions, and her boss from then on gave her strategic roles that helped to foster her career. It goes to show how powerful it is to expose unconscious biases,” said Kelan.

So how can young women of the millennial generation better understand and overcome some of these workplace obstacles? By recognizing the issue at hand. Books like Bloom’s *Think* and Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* can help smart and hard-working women become more assertive and ambitious, which might not be inherent for all women.

A subconscious thought pattern also fuels this issue, according to Laura Lehmann, the founder of 20to30.com, an independent trans-media project that shares stories from global thinkers and shapers about their lives during their 20s and 30s. Think of a doctor or a police officer. Is the physician white? Is the officer a man? “Being aware of our individual subtle mental filters—present in each one of us—is one step toward opening up the conversation around discrimination, whether racial or sexual,” said Lehmann.

“People tend to promote people like themselves. As most companies are run by white men, it’s hard for women and people of color to break through the glass ceiling. But there is a lot more consciousness now that diversity is not only necessary but profitable for companies. Once they reach a certain number of women at the top, companies perform better,” Bloom concluded.

Lehmann, who is in her 20s, brings up another point. The men and women she interviewed are not less interested in leadership positions. They do not want to mold themselves to predetermined roles but craft their own leadership visions. One of the main issues is the current corporate and political structure and the lack of progress in matching employee needs in the 21st century, such as technology allowing for flexible work hours or working from home for new mothers.



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“One of the biggest challenges for young women today is that they look at the array of male-dominated leadership options and do not want to try to fit in or compete in that arena,” said St. John, who took her daughter, Deane, along when she interviewed women like orchestra conductor Marin Alsop, Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and stay-at-home mom Cathy Sarubbi for *How Great Women Lead*. Deane got a firsthand look at women leading as role models in all aspects of life and work, while maintaining their unique identity.

Another way millennials and women of all ages can support one another is through professional networking and mentorship. Femprofessionals brings professional women together in a positive and uplifting way to support each other in business, community and life. The organization has thousands of members throughout North America and is developing programs on collegiate campuses and for teen groups. But successful mentoring relationships need not always be exclusively with women. “I advise younger women to have a portfolio of role models whose traits, characteristics and behaviors they can combine with their own authentic selves. However, mentors are not enough. Recent research has shown that sponsors—individuals who can strategically influence your career by being power brokers—are even more vital than mentors for millennial women,” said Kelan.

When working on the film *Miss Representation*, Newsom relied on the help of female friends, mentors, a few good men and a lot of hard work, passion and collaboration. It goes to show what committed individuals can accomplish. The truth is women are capable of anything, but it can take a push from a mentor. “We, as women, often need someone to tell us to aim higher and to see ourselves as the star in our field. Upsizing your goals can often improve your life balance because you get more choices and more help,” said St. John. ■