

# The Real Reason Women Bully Each Other at Work (And Everywhere Else)

In [a recent article](#) written for *The Atlantic*, Olga Khazan asks, “Why do women bully each other at work?” In the article’s body, she details several studies and personal stories from women who have found their work environments to be quite hostile because the other women there behaved meanly toward them.

One of the stories details how an older female boss snapped at Khazan, but explained (after Khazan called her out) that she “communicated like a guy” because it helped her get along better with men, even if it meant stepping on the women.

Another story featured a young lawyer’s experience: even though she did quite well at her Ivy League law school and had a likeable personality, she found the working conditions – specifically the emotional conditions – to be less than desirable. At the law firm, there were only a few female partners, but they were the difficult ones. According to the young lawyer, they made almost all of their female subordinates cry at one time or another. The Ivy League grad quit after 16 months, saying that if she was to ever return to a big firm, she would not want to work for a woman.

This sentiment of not wanting to work for a woman is not a singular case. Khazan cites both Pew and Gallup polls which show that women do not want to work for other women. She also cites a journal (*Gender and Management*) study which found that women think other women make good bosses, but women do not actually want to work for other women, especially if they have more experience in the workforce. Additionally, a study of

law-firm secretaries found that women who reported to female bosses had more “symptoms of distress.” One woman quipped, “I avoid working for women because [they are] such a pain in the ass!”

Khazan does an effective job of establishing her premise—that women in the workplace often collide with other women. She offers a couple theories on why this might be the case (noting that questions on this front led some interview subjects to react “as though I were Phyllis Schlafly calling from beyond the grave”).

A professor of psychology, Joyce Benenson, holds the view that women are simply “cattier” biologically, as is visible in studies of male and female chimpanzees. However, Khazan calls this theory “controversial” and takes a different position. The article’s subtitle states Khazan’s overarching thesis: “conditions in the workplace might be to blame.” The researchers’ conclusion runs as follows:

*“With that, Ellemers and Derks [the study’s authors] 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. ... 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.”*

The part I found most interesting about this research – and the article as a whole – is that it places the blame for women’s behavior on externalities: male coworkers, perceived

threats, even other women... but not on the women themselves.

But is this the whole story? One might argue that it does not take a stressful workplace to bring out meanness in women of any age.

I frequently hear parents say that their young girls tend to be "cattier" than their boys, and they notice patterns, not just instances, of this behavior. However, what they tend not to say is what they are doing to correct this behavior and stop the pattern. Though parents know it is their job to instill certain values in their children, such as patience, fairness, and compassion, they often seem to be at a loss when it comes to correcting female clique-iness.

I am with Dr. Joyce Benenson on this one. Women tend to be catty to one another partly because it's in their nature to do so. In addition to biological factors, female bosses may be overcompensating with aggression in order to seem more like a male boss, or what they perceive a male boss to be like.

Fortunately, women are not the apes in Benenson's study, and, as Khazan suggested, it is well within the ability of women to change these dynamics. However, the missing first step (admitting that there is a problem) is key, and it requires some collective humility instead of faux confidence.

What do you think? Should women begin to look within and admit that exclusiveness is a vice with which most of them struggle? Or are exterior circumstances and social constructs truly to blame?

—

Olga Khazan's original article published by *The Atlantic* can be read [here](#).

[Image credit: Wikimedia Commons | CC Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license]