Empowered Women

SUMMARY: In many countries, changing workplace needs, women's educational advances, and the reduction of discrimination are resulting in more women at the top of their professions. Associations have a unique and important role to play in promoting women in the workplace and making their presence visible. Gender equity discussions are important considerations in policy decisions and external communication.

Forecasts

- Women are positioned to excel in the workplace based on their academic accomplishments and their fit for a complex, knowledge-based work environment.
- As women advance into higher levels of management, they will bring different values and approaches to the workplace. As leaders, women are perceived as being both more willing to compromise and more ethical and honest.
- Younger people in wealthy countries show signs that they will downplay gender as a defining characteristic, preferring gender-neutral clothing and being open to workplace gender equality.
- Issues of reproductive rights, equal pay, and workplace harassment will continue to keep gender equity in the political and social discourse.
- Women's status in both political and boardroom hierarchies will remain unevenly distributed on the global stage, amplifying philosophical and values clashes between countries and cultures.

Key Uncertainties

The strength of pushback or backlash against women's rights, especially in the areas of reproduction, pay, and recognition

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Whether advanced education will be devalued as women take a majority of degrees at all levels

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Results as women compete for more political positions

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The degree to which women are willing to fight within established organizational bureaucracies or choose instead to create their own structures and companies

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Supporting Trends

- **Educational rise of women.** Across all races, women now attend college in significantly larger numbers than their male counterparts and earn the majority of degrees from U.S. universities.
- **Blurring of strict gender roles.** Among those under age 34, gender rules and conventional gender stereotypes are fading.
- **Backlash against women's advances.** Researchers have found that women's rights are increasingly under threat. Global threats include gender-based violence, lack of reproductive rights, and exclusion of women from discussions about women's futures.
- **Persistent gender stereotypes.** According to a longitudinal study performed by psychologists in the United States, attitudes toward gender and gender stereotypes have changed little since the 1980s.
- **Algorithmic sexism.** Besides threatening more women's jobs than men's, automation risks infusing sexist biases throughout society's digital systems.
- **Women's professional standing.** Women are advancing in professional and management positions.
- **Global gender gap closing.** The World Economic Forum's annual Gender Gap Index found widespread progress in closing gender gaps since 2006, as measured by differences between men and women in health, education, economy, and politics—although there was regression in 2017.

Related Drivers of Change

- Higher Education 3.0
- The Splintered Society
- Diversity and Inclusion

Notable Data Points

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

As of 2018, women are estimated to make up **58% of people in American graduate education programs.**

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

WOMEN AT THE TOP

Among 1,500 top U.S. companies, **women made up only 5.1% of CEOs** and 11.5% of top executives as of 2016–2017.

Source: Pew Research Center

NOT IN STEM

According to a 2017 report, **women are still underrepresented in STEM occupations,** with women's share of computer workers actually declining since 1990.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

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Strategic Insights

- Associations' organizational structure and staff are often excellent examples of promoting women in the workplace and using their leadership skills to advantage. Being aware of best practices and sharing these with the industries associations represent can provide members with practical how-to's.
- Associations may want to consider developing both formal and informal women's networks that enable women to share concerns and successes as well as assist each other. Conferences and chapter meetings are excellent opportunities to foster these networks.
- Associations are in a unique position to make women's achievements visible—independent of their area of endeavor—through communication channels and conferences.
- Gender equity discussions are very much in the news and are present both explicitly and implicitly in many policy areas that affect associations and the workforces they represent. Boards should have a clear and stated position on gender considerations, which they can reference in making decisions.
- Training departments could offer modules on how men and women can make work environments more woman-friendly.
- Associations might consider how women's perspectives are handled both in internal decision-making processes and in advising the groups they represent. Beyond enabling women to succeed in the workplace, this approach promotes the value that women's perspectives can bring and may enable a wider range of solutions to problems and issues.

Timing

- **Stage:** Growth, but subject to fluctuation
- **Speed:** Moderate, with periods of stagnation and even regression

Potential Alternative Futures

- **Back toward the '50s:** The backlash is somewhat successful in shifting women's rights backward, dampening the percentage of women in the workplace as well as curtailing upward movement.
- **Women advance women:** Following men's playbook, women focus on advancing other women, creating networks and organizations that facilitate women's interests.
- **Who cares about academic degrees?** As women come to dominate academically, some groups and organizations downgrade the importance of academic credentials and instead rely on reputation and references.

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Take Action

- **Clarify your gender equity challenges.** Different fields have been historically male- or female-dominated, but gender patterns are changing as more women pursue higher education and more men are attracted to employment opportunities in service occupations. Even in fields where women are increasing their numbers, they often are underrepresented in senior positions. Know your demographic trends and identify your particular barriers to entry and advancement.
- **Promote women into association leadership.** Women may be well represented in committees and task forces yet underrepresented on boards. Women gravitate to association careers yet small and medium-sized associations are far more likely than major associations to choose women CEOs to lead them. Mentors and sponsors can help prepare and champion women into more prominent leadership roles.
- **Set inclusive job expectations.** Women often have to prioritize family over volunteer or staff responsibilities. Associations can gain their talents by becoming more flexible about travel demands, meeting timing, and tolerance for family emergencies.
- **Combat sexual harassment in conferences and workplaces.** Women continue to encounter hostile environments and inappropriate behaviors. Affirm your commitment to a safe and welcoming environment through stated policies and clear procedures for correcting infractions.
- **Recognize and reward women's contributions.** Do your traditional ways of valuing, nominating, and selecting candidates for prestigious awards, leadership positions, and high-profile speaking opportunities disadvantage women? Open up your processes and criteria to counter the perception that an old boy's network calls the shots.
- **Adopt an inclusive approach to gender identity.** Gender identification is becoming more fluid with each generation. More associations will experience members who are transitioning their gender, calling for greater sensitivity to how unexamined association practices as simple as member applications and profiles may become inappropriate.

Keyword Search

To continue researching this change driver, use combinations of these search terms: ***women, workplace, workforce, women's pay, gender equity, gender discrimination, backlash, reproductive rights, working mothers, gender stereotypes, gender trends, gender educational statistics***

Who Will Be Affected

The majority of employees in many associations are women. Some associations have a great track record of promoting women into volunteer and staff leadership positions; others have serious catching up to do. The glass ceiling cracked early for trade associations dominated by family businesses as daughters took over and continued their family's leadership in association affairs.

About ASAE ForesightWorks

ASAE ForesightWorks is a deliberate, evidence-based research program and emerging line of products to provide association professionals with a continual stream of intelligence about the changes facing the association industry, including:

- regularly updated action briefs;
- tools for applying insights from the research in your association;
- guidance in performing environmental scans; and
- opportunities to engage with peers around the research.

Ultimately, the program's mission is to empower association leaders to create a culture of foresight.

Check **asaecenter.org/ForesightWorks** and follow **@ASAEfdn** on Twitter for updates on new findings and events.

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