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Intentional Invisibility: Professional Women and the Navigation of Workplace Constraints

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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 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 non-profit 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. While 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

45professional positions (Cotter, Hermsen and Vanneman 2009). Yet,
46even as they have entered previously male-dominated occupations,
47white-collar women remain underrepresented in top-level professional
48positions (Ely and Rhode 2010). A historical explanation for the
49underrepresentation of women in senior positions was the “pipeline”
50problem—that not enough qualified women were available to make the
51transition to positions of power (Eagly and Carli 2008). However, as
52gender-equal rates of entry across many workplaces have failed to
53result in equal representation at senior levels (Kulis, Sicotte and Collins
542002), the pipeline hypothesis has been increasingly discredited.
55Likewise, the popular metaphor of the “glass ceiling,” which implies
56that women seeking career advancement come up against a barrier
57impeding access to top positions, does not map onto the ongoing,
58complex barriers to advancement that women face. By blocking access
59to leadership, the glass ceiling allegedly resigns women to a
60professional plateau or encourages them to “opt out” of the race
61altogether (Belkin 2003), but evidence that women self-select out of
62competitive career tracks is weak (Goldin 2006). Further still, the linear
63metaphor suggesting that women have only one juncture in their
64careers where they are stymied fails to encapsulate the range of
65persistent and subtle barriers that women face *throughout* their career
66paths.

67 Instead, researchers have begun to converge on the argument
68 that it is pervasive, structural problems that are at the root of women's
69 underrepresentation (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2011; Monroe and Chiu
70 2010). This argument has pushed scholarship towards "subtle" and
71 "unseen" barriers as a way of explaining the scarcity of women in
72 positions of senior leadership (DeRue and Ashford 2010; Ibarra and
73 Petriglieri 2007; Kolb 2013). To describe the barriers impeding
74 women's career trajectories, Eagly and Carli (2007) replace the
75 singular image of the glass ceiling with one of a labyrinth: though
76 women are no longer uniformly barred from the C-suite, their paths to
77 leadership are riddled with biases, discrimination, and other obstacles.
78 In this updated metaphor, women do not merely leave organizations or
79 stagnate professionally when they encounter an obstacle. Instead,
80 women who find themselves caught in a convoluted web are forced to
81 navigate it continuously as they confront recurring instances of
82 organizational bias.

83

84 *Navigating Structural Constraints*

85 As women navigate biased organizations, gender is constantly
86 operating as a "background" identity that shapes individual choices,
87 organizational processes, and institutional beliefs and arrangements
88 (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). In professional settings, widely shared

89expectations about gender leave women in a conundrum. On the one 90hand, women are expected to fit into environments that are 91predominantly structured with men in mind (Acker 1990; Jacobs and 92Gerson 2004; Williams 2000). At the same time, when women *do* 93conform to expectations about the masculine, ideal worker, these 94behaviors are not well received (Rudman and Glick 2001; Rudman et 95al. 2012). As a result, women are stuck in a double bind, where those 96who demonstrate masculine traits face backlash while those who lack 97them risk being dismissed (Eagly and Carli 2007).

98 The double bind manifests across the professional hierarchy. At 99more senior levels of professional organizations, abstract ideals are 100more strongly associated with stereotypically masculine traits, such as 101assertiveness and dominance, than in lower levels of management and 102administration (Acker 1990; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). For example, 103many professional development training programs routinely advise 104women towards masculine typed behavior, such as interjecting at 105meetings, speaking with authority, and self-promoting. Yet, when 106women do these things, especially from positions of power, they are 107deemed “control freaks” (Eagly and Carli 2007) and chided for not 108being modest enough (Kendall and Tannen 1997). Meanwhile, women 109in the workplace are expected to be more likeable than men, and are 110penalized for being “deceitful, pushy, selfish and abrasive” when they

111violate feminine norms (Heilman et al. 2004). As Eagly and Carli (2008)
112point out, this creates a no-win situation where women are thought of
113as not having the “right stuff” for powerful jobs regardless of whether
114they act in communal or agentic ways.

115 Alongside the double bind, women face “the second shift” – after
116confronting workplace challenges, they return home to a
117disproportionate amount of familial responsibilities (Hochschild 1989).
118Research has shown time and again that this inequality in unpaid
119domestic labor remains a roadblock to women’s advancement in the
120paid labor force (Bianchi et al. 2012; Coverman 1983; Sayer 2005;
121Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004). Even in heterosexual families in
122which both partners work full time, wives report doing twice as much
123housework and childcare as their husbands (Coltrane 1996). Together,
124these inequalities at home and in the workplace produce a “frozen”
125middle management tier comprised of women who are not leaving the
126workforce, but also are not likely to ascend to leadership in their
127professional environments (Yee et. al. 2016).

128 To address these complex and often competing structural
129constraints, professional women across contexts employ a range of
130navigational tools. While the labyrinthine obstacles facing professional
131women are well documented, less is known about women’s
132navigational strategies. Scholars have highlighted the importance of

133cultivated identities in allowing people to navigate the organizations
134they are embedded in (Ibarra 1999; Ibarra and Petriglieri 2007; Pratt et
135al. 2006; Ramarajan and Reid 2013, 2016). Many organizations expect
136employees to perform a kind of idealized professional identity (Acker
1371990; Britton 2000; Williams 2000) that rewards work prioritization
138(Blair-Loy 2009; Kellogg 2011) and penalizes family prioritization
139(Cooper 2000). Indeed, despite the proliferation of new kinds of
140"flexible" work, women are often marginalized when they select
141family-friendly work arrangements (Glass 2004; Hochschild 1997; Kelly
142et al. 2010). To reconcile competing work and non-work expectations,
143many women professionals choose between *accepting* organizational
144pressures, *passing* as someone they are not, or *revealing* their true
145identities despite consequences (Ramarajan and Reid 2016).
146

147THE CURRENT STUDY: STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND INTENTIONAL 148INVISIBILITY

149While women are constrained by biased organizations, their individual
150choices and preferences, cultivated during years of socialization within
151gendered structures, also contribute to inequality (Correll 2001; Correll
1522004; Cech and Blair-Loy 2010). Faced with professional norms that
153encourage masculine behavior, many women choose to modify their
154behaviors and networks to match those of male counterparts (Blair-Loy

1552009; Davies-Netzley 1998; Ramarajan and Reid 2013, 2016; Reid 1562015). Our study reveals an alternative strategy that some 157professional women embrace when confronted with conflicting 158organizational and familial expectations.

159 We contribute to the growing body of work on how women 160navigate biased organizations by examining how women use 161intentional invisibility to respond to workplace bias while rejecting 162masculine professional norms. Unlike *accepting, passing,* or *revealing,* 163intentional invisibility offers women a way to balance professional and 164personal demands while projecting an authentic sense of self. By 165remaining behind the scenes and valuing communal, collaborative 166work, women who embrace intentional invisibility reject – rather than 167seeking to embody – the masculine norm of the ideal worker. The 168women in our study who embrace invisibility often acknowledge that 169doing so may limit their opportunities for advancement, but 170nonetheless turn to the strategy to avoid conflict, project an authentic 171self, and gain a sense of stability.

172 While research demonstrates the importance of visibility to 173professional advancement (Correll and Mackenzie 2016; Ibarra 2012; 174Simmard et al. 2008), we found, in keeping with past research, that 175even as women expressed professional ambition they were unlikely to 176seek visibility (King et al. 2017). The women in our sample recognized

177that seeking visibility is a conventional strategy for climbing the
178organizational ladder, but described remaining behind the scenes as a
179personally satisfying and professionally strategic option. Our data show
180three, interrelated motivations for embracing intentional invisibility in
181spite of its potential costs. First, intentional invisibility enabled women
182in the professional development program we tracked to avoid conflict
183with both their managers and the teams they managed within the
184context of a biased organization. Second, women in our sample used
185invisibility to reconcile their personal identities with their workplace
186selves, reporting that staying behind the scenes felt more authentic
187than assuming the spotlight. Finally, remaining invisible allowed
188women to quietly pursue feminist goals and aspirations at work without
189falling behind on the feminine demands of their modern partnerships.

190 We focus on participants' stated preferences for and
191interpretations of invisibility to add nuance to accounts of how women
192navigate biased organizations. The women in our organization were
193not passively pushed and pulled by organizational tides; they were
194active agents making daily tactical choices in interactions with co-
195workers and long term strategic choices in light of organizational
196structures. At the same time, the women we followed did not create
197the workplace labyrinth that they were obliged to navigate, and they
198were not at liberty to redesign it from the ground up. By emphasizing

199women’s preferences and choices, we do not mean to suggest that
200they are responsible for the unequal work environments they inhabit or
201the curtailed career trajectories they may experience. Attaining gender
202parity in top tier professional positions will require changing
203organizational processes and reducing unconscious biases in
204workplace interactions (e.g., Acker 1990; Correll et al. 2014; Heilman
2052012; Kanter 1993). Until such sweeping changes are made, however,
206it is important to recognize that women’s daily workplace practices
207may impact their career attainment, earnings, and satisfaction in
208predictable and unintended ways (Rudman and Phelan 2008).

209

210DATA AND METHODS

211 We collected data for this project over two years (October 2013-
212September 2015) as part of a case study of a women’s professional
213development program at a large multi-division nonprofit organization
214in the western United States.[1] The program was designed by the
215organization’s Human Resources department in consultation with the
216research team to create gender awareness among women employees
217and equip them with tools for combating gender bias at work. Whether
218the program effectively equipped women to combat bias is not the
219focus of this paper. Instead, we treat the program as a unique site for
220studying gender in the workplace, as program meetings were a space

221where women’s professional attitudes, perceptions, and experiences 222were foregrounded.

223 Once the program launched, Human Resources took the 224organizational lead while the research team positioned ourselves as 225nonintrusive observers and interviewers. The HR team recruited 226women employees to serve as facilitators of discussion circles. These 227facilitators, in turn, recruited 5-10 other women employees to join their 228circles. In many cases, facilitators recruited members who shared a 229common characteristic or an interest in a common theme, such that 230there were circles organized for women with young children, women of 231color, and women dealing with aging parents. In other cases, 232facilitators tapped their professional networks to recruit diverse circles, 233whose only commonality was a shared interest in professional 234development. Across all circles, facilitators were expected to schedule 235seven meetings covering pre-determined topics, such as negotiation 236and implicit bias. Circle members watched an educational video before 237arriving at each meeting and spent approximately two hours during 238the meeting discussing their views and experiences related to the 239topic. The first program cohort convened from October 2013-June 2014 240and included 140 women, while the second cohort met from October 2412014-June 2015 and included 196 women (see Table 1 for participant 242characteristics).

243

244 <Table 1 about here>

245

246 Across each cohort, the research team collected systematic 247observational and interview data.[2] We selected three circles from each 248cohort to observe throughout the year, chosen to capture diversity in 249terms of age, race/ethnicity, and career stage of participants. In Cohort 2501, researchers followed 1) a circle of mid-career women of color, 2) a 251circle of predominantly white women advanced in their careers, and 3) 252a racially diverse circle of early career mothers with young children. 253For consistency, we selected circles to follow in Cohort 2 that matched 254these compositions as closely as possible. For each selected circle, one 255author attended and audio recorded all discussion meetings and wrote 256extensive field notes. In addition, each author interviewed the 257facilitators and three randomly selected members of the circle they 258followed at the start and end of the program. To capture the 259experiences of participants in circles that were not selected for 260observation, we attended program-wide trainings and social events 261and interviewed ten randomly selected participants at the start and 262end of the program. In total, we observed 36 circle meetings and 15 263program-wide meetings. We conducted 86 interviews, including 41 264participants interviewed at the start and end of the program and 4

265interviewed once (see Table 2 for interview respondent
266characteristics). Interviews averaged about an hour and were audio
267recorded and professionally transcribed. The findings we present in
268this paper draw only from those respondents whom we both observed
269in circle meetings and with whom we conducted in-depth interviews,
270amounting to data from over 75 hours of observation and 66
271interviews.

272

273 <Table 2 about here>

274

275 Observational and interview data were analyzed using the
276qualitative software package *Dedoose*. We analyzed the data using
277thematic analysis, an inductive form of analysis oriented toward
278identifying patterns in qualitative data (Charmaz 2003; Gibbs 2007).
279Select transcripts were read by all authors and discussed in analytical
280team meetings to ensure rigor and coder consistency. Using an
281inductive approach, we first developed an initial coding scheme to
282identify emergent topics and themes. We iteratively revised the coding
283scheme as additional interviews were coded. Multiple rounds of coding
284revealed a set of strategies that, drawing on our participants' own
285words, we identified as related to "invisibility." We probed the data to
286better understand the rationales motivating participants to seek

287invisibility. We mapped variation across participants' characteristics, 288engaging with existing theory and empirical research to contextualize 289workplace strategies.

290 Our data allowed us to track how women across varied 291backgrounds and identities navigate workplace barriers. Throughout 292our findings, we discuss how women's intersectional identities – 293including their race, sexual orientation, age, seniority, and education – 294inform their embrace of invisibility. However, we limit our focus in this 295paper to one key axis of variation: family composition. Across other 296characteristics, women with partners and children were drawn to 297conflict-avoidance in the workplace more consistently than their single 298and childless counterparts. While workplace navigation strategies vary 299across many dimensions of difference, we found familial demands to 300be the most commonly invoked rationale for remaining behind the 301scenes in the office.

302

303FINDINGS

304 Our data reveal how women experience and interpret workplace 305barriers and, in turn, seek to overcome them. We use the term 306"intentional invisibility" to describe a set of strategies that professional 307women in our sample used to navigate the workplace while remaining 308largely behind the scenes. While we use the term as an analytic

309category, our use closely tracks how program participants described
310their own ideals and experiences. Participants across the organization,
311in varying career and personal circumstances, drew on strikingly
312similar strategies to avoid workplace conflict, attain a feeling of
313authenticity within their professional roles, and balance work with
314familial responsibilities. While our data cannot speak directly to the
315efficacy of the strategies women adopted with regards to professional
316advancement, we demonstrate how the professional pathways women
317take may lead to low visibility among women across an organization.

318

319*Avoiding Conflict Within a Biased Structure*

320 The women in our study identified gendered barriers to
321advancement and job satisfaction in multiple registers: workplace
322policies that conflicted with parental responsibilities, supervisors and
323supervisees who conveyed gender biases, and double standards
324embedded in performance evaluations, for example. In their unequal
325work environments, women often reduced their visibility to avoid
326conflict, which they saw threatening to distract from their core
327professional responsibilities. Diana, for instance, works as a software
328engineer in a division of the organization where men are
329overrepresented at the management level. More than once, she has
330walked into meetings where the men around the table assume she is a

331secretary rather than an engineer. While Diana recalls that these 332moments stressed her out when she was younger, as she's gained 333experience and seniority she has come to "get a kick out of it." Now, 334she tries to advance by "just being the professional person I need to 335be" instead of reacting to bias. Diana explains, "I've never been a fan 336of, and I've never joined, like the Society for Women Engineers… That 337seems counter to the cause, in my mind, like calling attention to things 338in a way. We're just engineers, we don't have to be women in 339engineering." Diana describes such groups as "self-isolating," and 340worries that advocating for women in her field would detract from her 341core professional identity as an engineer. For Diana, keeping a low 342profile and being quietly competent allows her to incrementally 343advance in her career without risking the backlash or interactional 344discomfort that calling attention to her presence as a woman might.

345 Similar to Diana's strategy for deflecting attention from her 346gender within a male-dominated field, women across divisions of the 347organization sought to minimize the visibility of feminine-typed 348"issues" such as pregnancy and maternity leave. Jane, who works as 349an administrator in a male-dominated division, has a senior colleague 350who had a baby on Wednesday and came back to work on Monday. 351Jane wondered about her colleague's quick return, "Is it because it's a 352sexist environment? … Is it because she feels like she has to [come

353back to work immediately] to be able to compete as a woman? Or is it
354just because she loves what she does and felt like she was up to it?”
355Jane’s colleague had the option of taking a longer maternity leave—in
356fact, the organization has a better than average parental leave policy.
357Yet, in Jane’s analysis, taking a longer leave might have created a
358competitive disadvantage for her colleague “as a woman.” Taking
359advantage of ostensibly egalitarian policies like parental leave is
360fraught, and in Jane’s view, her colleague chose to navigate this
361gendered situation by creating as little disruption as possible.

362 Women often tried to minimize their visibility specifically when
363they recognized gender bias. In moments of heightened bias, many
364women—like Jane’s colleague, according to Jane—felt particularly
365vulnerable to backlash and did not want to stick out as women. Gloria,
366for instance, has worked in a male-dominated field in corporate and
367non-profit settings for the past thirty-five years. Gloria tells us that she
368has no doubt “that strong women in the workplace are still perceived
369as bitches.” She recognizes this stereotype as unfair, and in the
370privacy of her circle voices her resistance to it. In her office, though,
371rather than rebel, she has learned to adapt her own behavior,
372assuming a more passive demeanor, to avoid the pejorative label:
373“One of my personal goals and self-learning over the course of the past

374thirty-five years is that I had to moderate my very strong personality
375and strong opinions on things."

376 When Gloria stays quiet in meetings or thanks her colleagues for
377doing things that should be routine it is not because she is shy, lacks
378confidence, or is used to taking the ingratiating position. Instead, she
379knowingly subdues what she considers her natural tendency to come
380on strong for the sake of professional advancement. Gloria is far from
381alone among the women we spoke to in reducing her visibility to avoid
382being perceived as bitchy. Jackie describes filing a complaint about a
383supervisor's sexual harassment as a "naïve" career mistake; Carly
384showed up for an office "clean-up party" that her male supervisor had
385organized only to find that he had not bothered to show up and that
386the only volunteer cleaners were women, but she wrote off the
387experience by saying that while she "was a little bit frosted" she knows
388her boss is serially forgetful and that "we all have our roles." Though
389women routinely recognized gendered barriers in their workplaces,
390they viewed quietly proceeding with work as the most strategic way of
391responding.

392 Women like Gloria, Jackie, and Carly sought to minimize the
393gendered issues they faced and to reduce their visibility as women in
394order to manage the complex, often conflicting barriers and biases
395they encountered daily. Indeed, program participants employed

396intentional invisibility in a range of everyday interactions, from team
397meetings to office clean-ups, with bosses and the teams they
398managed. This strategy, though, was most apparent when discussing
399workplace contexts where women were in leadership positions.
400Women's descriptions of their own leadership and their definitions of
401ideal leadership often explicitly referred to invisibility as a goal to
402which they aspired. Whether within their immediate work team, their
403division, the organization more broadly, or even their family, women
404across both cohorts we tracked aimed to embody leadership without
405putting themselves in the spotlight. For example, Martha, a supervisor
406who managed a male-dominated division, explained, "…there is the
407stereotype of the leader, leading from the front as opposed to pushing
408from the rear. And I think some people don't necessarily recognize
409what I will call 'soft leadership.'" For Martha, soft leadership meant
410subtly enabling others to succeed by pushing them towards goals.
411Stephanie likewise defined leadership as an unselfish pursuit, saying
412"[A good leader is] a person that is not walking out of the room taking
413all the credit, and really empowering others to be successful."

414 By describing invisibility as a positive leadership characteristic,
415women were able to assign value to the workplace strategies that they
416and their colleagues adopted to avoid backlash. Janice, a woman in her
41740s who holds a PhD, offers a definition of ideal leadership that is

418typical of program participants: “Strong leadership is not only leading 419by example, but in such a way that other people can learn it, other 420people can do it. And the leader becomes part of a team. They become 421almost invisible, as part of the team—except as a resource**.”** In 422Janice’s account, good leadership requires stepping aside to allow 423others to advance. A good leader is available to help the team as a 424resource that team members can utilize, but is otherwise 425indistinguishable from the team. Mary, a technology services 426specialist, likewise noted, “I’ve seen people excel in leadership who are 427in very invisible roles; they’re very much behind the scenes. But they 428are so good at what they do, and they are so willing to go there, to do 429what needs to be done.” In Mary’s account, an excellent leader is not a 430foreperson who delegates to a team and takes credit for a finished 431project, but rather a worker doing unglamorous, unrecognized tasks.

432 Participants often recognized that the high value they placed on 433invisibility contradicted organizational norms. Cathy has worked as a 434fundraiser long enough to see time and again that “women, 435particularly, who are really efficient in their work, they get stuff done, 436they meet their deadlines, they hit their numbers, they move things 437forward—they get stuff done… when it comes to mind for them to think 438about a promotion they’re passed over for those who maybe have a 439better sense of big picture.” Nevertheless, Cathy says that one of the

440leadership skills she is working to develop is “[learning] to cover up 441more, and shut my mouth once in a while.” Cathy defines ideal 442leadership in a way that fits with her everyday workplace strategies for 443reducing her exposure to backlash. She knows that earning a 444reputation as someone who quietly “gets stuff done” is not the obvious 445path to promotion, but she defines her goals to align with the strategy 446of invisibility, explaining, “I ultimately made the choice to kind of stop 447looking for promotions and just find jobs that were rewarding to me.”

448 To craft careers that felt rewarding, women sought to reduce the 449chances for interpersonal conflict and to increase opportunities for 450friendly relationships within their work teams. Embracing invisibility 451within leadership positions facilitated these goals by fostering 452collaboration and complemented other strategies for mitigating 453potential conflicts with colleagues, such as excusing offensive remarks 454or softening critiques. Thus, when a man said to Sharon after leaving a 455meeting, “God, I’m glad I’m not married to you!” her takeaway was, “I 456must have been projecting more sternness than I knew I was capable 457of.” She thereafter worked to change her conference room demeanor. 458Maureen, for her part, embraced a definition of bias as a decision-459making error after her circle watched a video on the topic because it 460would give her a way to educate male coworkers without accusing 461them of misconduct: “So you’re not saying to someone, ‘You’re

462prejudiced.' It doesn't become such a negative. It just, it's a way of
463looking at things. You're biased towards pink, not blue, or hair up vs.
464hair down." Sharon, Maureen, and their peers developed non-
465confrontational responses to gendered situations to limit their
466vulnerability, and to define leadership in a way that incorporates
467intentional invisibility as a positive trait.

468

469*The Authenticity of Invisibility*

470 In addition to mitigating the risk of interactional conflict,
471embracing invisibility offered a way for women in the program to
472reconcile professional and personal identities into an "authentic" self.
473Many women associated seeking visibility with aggressiveness or self-
474promotion, and they considered these traits to be at odds with their
475character and values. While discussing a professional development
476module about navigating power dynamics within workplace
477relationships, Nanette's circle debated techniques for using body
478language to communicate authority. When a colleague proposes that
479taking up more space with grand gestures or erect posture could be
480helpful, Nanette rebuts by advocating for "just trying [different
481techniques] out and seeing what fits. I mean I'm never going to be big,
482I just never am." Nanette concedes, "I could be bigger than I am. And
483maybe a little bit bigger would be helpful and useful," but she

484attributes her usual passive body language to a personality 485characteristic that "just never" will be completely altered. "Being big" 486comes more easily to some of the other members of Nanette's circle, 487but they nonetheless question whether it is a desirable behavior. When 488the group challenges the ethics of compensating for weak content with 489a confident presentation in a meeting, Gloria retorts, "I know men who 490do!" With her comment, Gloria suggests that perhaps circle members 491should lower their ethical standards to those of their male 492counterparts, but she also codes "being big" as a masculine behavior. 493Another circle member goes further by describing "being big" in 494animalistic terms, likening the proposed strategy for increasing 495visibility in meetings to the recommended strategy for warding off an 496aggressive mountain lion. Women in this circle acknowledge that 497changing their body language might increase their visibility and impact 498in meetings, but they reject the strategy nonetheless as inauthentic, 499arguably unethical, and certainly unfeminine.

500 In lieu of "being big," many women preferred to be less visible in 501order to remain true to their authentic personalities and align their 502actions with their ethics. Karen, a mid-level manager, explained that 503what differentiated authentic from inauthentic leadership was humility: 504"Real leaders don't really have to say what their title is, or have to 505brag about their accolades or whatever. It is just inherent, and your

506work should speak for itself.” For Karen and other women, discomfort
507with titles and self-promotion was also supported by a belief that such
508approaches were signs of overcompensation. A member of a different
509circle, Tanya, likewise said in an interview, “Not that there is anything
510wrong with people who want to promote themselves and make money
511and have great titles—it’s just that I was very uncomfortable with the
512word ‘leadership’ until I was able to redefine it for myself.” Like many
513women interviewed, Tanya viewed the conventional definition of
514leadership, and the form most commonly used in organizations, as
515including self-promotion and a profit-driven mindset. While Tanya
516hedged that there was nothing wrong with this style, her discomfort
517indicated otherwise. Other women discussed fears of losing themselves
518if they took on a more executive style, often framing the latter as an
519overly masculinized approach. For leadership to feel authentic to
520Tanya, it demanded less selfish motives.

521 Similarly, during a circle meeting, Maxine described herself as a
522person “who values integrity and authenticity.” To that end, she
523questioned whether she could be both authoritative and likable as a
524leader, concluding that she wanted her team to think, “We are so fair
525that you should want to view us as authentic and approachable, but
526you should also respect us and not push us to be authoritative with
527you.” In Maxine’s view, being authoritative was a last resort and could

528be avoided through a fair, authentic, approachable workplace style. As 529a leader, Maxine believed that if she was well-liked and respected, 530such behaviors would serve the same end as being directly 531authoritative. A third circle member from senior management in 532Development, Lucy, explained that she didn't want women to have to 533take on the characteristics of men in the workplace. These 534characteristics may involve being more authoritative, she told us, but 535they would drive her crazy because they are "cold and rational, and 536they aren't compelling, passionate or interesting." For Maxine, Tanya 537and Lucy, elements of what they viewed as a masculine workplace 538style felt similarly wrong. Maxine recoiled from authoritarianism, Tanya 539could only see herself as a leader according to an alternative definition 540that excluded self-promotion and monetary motives, and Lucy 541regarded executive leadership as cold and boring.

542 But an adoption of intentional invisibility was not just about 543framing traditional, executive workplace behaviors as inauthentic. For 544many women, framing success in the workplace to comply with 545feminine norms was fitting. Women are normatively expected to be 546communal rather than individualistic (Eagly and Carli 2008), and our 547participants' descriptions of the mechanics and goals of a good 548workplace reflected this expectation. The norm that women ought to 549be communal bore on how participants thought managers should

550oversee their teams. Louise, who supervises a small team in Human
551Resources, explained that teams should be talented and diverse, and
552that leaders should not enforce a hierarchical order. Louise believes
553that she should prioritize the group over the potential personal gains of
554ascending a hierarchy.

555 Likewise, the communal orientation that Louise refers to shapes
556the *why* of intentional invisibility. In her interview, Louise explained
557that non-hierarchical, collaborative groups are ideal because,
558“whatever the mission of the group or the organization [is, it] can be
559best realized by having that really strong, supported group.” Other
560participants agreed that leaders should pursue organizational goals
561rather than seek self-promotion. Program participants further espoused
562this mission-oriented, communal approach to leadership by contrasting
563it with a more executive, self-promoting style. Janine, a mid-level
564manager, explains that she has trouble respecting leaders who do not
565put others first: “[Leaders] can really have just the most brilliant idea,
566but if it’s at the expense of people it doesn’t do anything for me.”
567Similarly, Robyn, in senior management, notes that a professional
568approach that values promotion and self-advancement makes her
569uncomfortable: “Even women who are very career-oriented aren’t
570necessarily the most satisfied from those type of positions, and their
571goal is not necessarily endless promotion.” Robyn goes on to explain

572that women leaders may approach their work differently than men.
573"[Women] are not always going to consider something a win just if we
574got more of something numbers-wise. A lot of us are in this because of
575something that's more heart-related."

576 According to Robyn, while men may rely more heavily on
577numbers and statistics as markers of success, women value and
578measure their professional success in other ways. This sentiment is
579reflected in responses we heard throughout interviews, suggesting that
580women reject masculine-typed workplace behaviors in favor of a more
581communal and less self-promotional work style. Together, distaste for
582masculine workplace behaviors and a preference for a communal
583approach made *invisibility* the most effective tool at many women's
584disposal. And by positioning invisibility as intentional, authentic and
585effective, the women in our sample were rejecting—rather than failing
586at—professional advancement.

587 Other women dealt with similar deliberations between the
588leadership they saw around them and the leadership that they wished
589to embody themselves. Again, key to this negotiation between ideal
590and actual was the tool of invisibility. Meredith, a circle member who
591worked in Health Services, says that she is comfortable being
592outspoken. She is not sure, however, that being "the person in the
593room who says the thing that everyone else is thinking" is an effective

594strategy. “Maybe the goal for me is to figure out how to be smart about 595[speaking out]; how to be more political about it, without losing my 596voice and without getting burned out.” Meredith values speaking her 597mind and has the skills to do so, but senses that it might stunt her 598career advancement. Earlier, she practiced a more assertive, visible 599workplace style, but in the face of negative feedback is seeking to 600learn a less visible strategy. Others who generally turn to behind the 601scenes strategies likewise justify the choice by arguing that a direct, 602executive style would be self-defeating. Amy, a mid-level employee, 603explains that she has a difficult boss: he neither thrives as a manager 604nor completes his own work successfully. Rather than confronting him, 605Amy shares with her circle that she is “controlling her boss by playing 606low, by being ingratiating… Sometimes you do it strategically and it 607elevates your status.” Rather than risk repercussions for directly 608addressing her boss’s insufficiencies, Amy uses an invisible tactic to 609improve her professional standing.

610 Even when women’s behaviors aligned with executive norms, 611they tended to humbly re-frame their strategies as examples of 612invisibility. Gretchen, a senior administrator, admires a woman who 613can take control but maintain “the niceness of it, the dealing with 614people [kindly].” While few would object to managers treating team 615members kindly, Gretchen’s admiration for control tempered with

616niceness reminds her that she ought “to take a step back, because I 617tend to control.” Even for a leader, control was to be softened or 618modulated, rather than embraced. Likewise, even though April finds an 619executive negotiation style to be effective when shopping for a car, 620she feels uncomfortable breaching interactional norms with her 621assertiveness. April recounted to her circle that she approached the 622male salesperson at the car dealership in a very authoritative manner 623that was “not her” at all, and she ended up getting a very cheap deal. 624However, after the deal was made she apologized to the male 625salesperson because she felt she had emasculated him. She thought to 626herself, “I’m being such a bitch!” and felt she had to apologize and 627explain that this was not really her, but was the game she had to play. 628The executive style that April and Gretchen’s co-worker employed 629adhered to the rules of the game and proved effective, but was 630interpreted by the women as inauthentic and unethical. April and 631Gretchen, like many women in the program, would prefer to minimize 632their guilt and ambivalence by practicing a less assertive behavioral 633strategy.

634 Other women feared the reactions of their team members were 635they to take on a more confrontational, assertive style. Sally, who 636holds a PhD and oversees an IT Services team, recounted a time when 637she confronted her colleagues about an issue with a project and

638worried she was “being an ass.” Sally’s circle members and workplace 639peers reassured her that she was in the right when she stood up for 640herself, but she nonetheless cites the experience as a time “when I felt 641first-hand the extent of the double standard for women who are 642otherwise reserved.” Program participants experienced or witnessed 643interactions where women who too visibly took control were 644sanctioned. As a result, invisibility was not necessarily a default, but 645rather became an intentional strategy that women employed to avoid 646backlash or a feeling of inauthenticity.

647

648*The Paradox of the Modern Partnership*

649 The women in our sample spanned a number of characteristics 650including age, race, and career stage. Yet among these characteristics, 651family composition stood out as the central differentiator of women’s 652leadership strategies, with mothers with children at home most 653strongly embracing invisibility. For many women who participated in 654the professional development program, remaining behind the scenes 655was an intentional strategy for navigating workplace biases. But for 656women with families, intentional invisibility offered, in addition, a vital 657way of ensuring stable employment and a stable family life.

658 Carly, who was married with two young children, exemplified this 659balancing act. Carly was unhappy in her current job. After returning

660from maternity leave, she reduced her hours to 75% but felt that she
661still had a full-time workload and decreased status within her
662department. Carly wanted to go back to working full-time but told her
663circle that she had not "acclimated the husband yet." Her husband was
664working freelance in the technology sector, and therefore had a
665flexible schedule, but Carly did not want to limit his career
666opportunities by saddling him with responsibilities like transporting the
667kids between activities. Even though Carly earned substantially more
668than her husband, she thought "his per capita rate of income would be
669really high in theory—but that is only if he actually got a job." While
670she laughed about his sporadic employment with her circle, she also
671structured her career around his risky path. She maintained a flexible
672but low status 75% schedule with a reliable salary and benefits in the
673hope that her husband might win big by joining a start-up tech
674company. She served as her family's breadwinner, but endured career
675dissatisfaction and low mobility in order to meet her family's needs.
676Carly's position as a caretaker constrained her from pushing for a full-
677time, high status role in her organization or elsewhere.

678 Like Carly, Sandra curtailed an upward professional trajectory to
679better reconcile her professional and familial responsibilities. Sandra
680had moved from a corporate job to the non-profit sector and was
681thriving in an upper-level administrative position. However, when one

682of her children was diagnosed with a medical condition that would 683require more hands-on adult supervision, she moved to a lower stress, 684and lower prestige, staff position within the organization. Sandra, like 685her husband, continued to work full-time. Her salary and benefits 686remained integral to her family. But in scaling back her ambitions, she 687felt more capable of creating the mental and emotional space for 688managing her family's evolving needs. Sandra and Carly, like many of 689their peers, took for granted that they would maintain employment 690throughout marriage and childrearing. They also shared an 691accompanying assumption that they could outsource many household 692responsibilities, including childcare, to maintain a full-time work 693schedule. While these women differ from those a generation ago who 694might have left the workforce to care for their families, they 695nonetheless continue to bear the gendered burden of maintaining 696family stability by being constantly available to deal with caretaking 697and family contingencies. To do so, they crafted careers around 698flexibility and stability while their husbands pursued riskier, and 699potentially more rewarding, ambitions.

700 Some women feared or had experienced backlash from their 701partners if they started valuing ambition or risk-taking in their careers. 702Mary's story is emblematic of this dynamic. Mary, who had a husband 703and two young children, felt increasingly empowered over the course

704of the program. After years in middle management, she had recently

705discovered and hoped to act on a desire to climb the professional

706ladder. However, during her circle's fourth meeting, Mary came in with

707a "cautionary story" for the group. Since joining the group, she had put

708into practice and begun to move full-speed ahead with her professional

709development plans. Mary explained, however, that this new approach

710to her career had jolted things at home:

711 *In my mind, I was becoming the person I wanted to be. I*
712 *was taking professional development classes and talking to*
713 *people and practicing it in my real life. And one day, I saw*
714 *my husband getting increasingly upset with me. So finally I*
715 *said to him, 'Did I do something?!' and he said, 'I don't*
716 *even know who you are anymore! You're making all of*
717 *these plans, you're talking about going back to school,*
718 *you're doing this and that, and you're not present, you're*
719 *not here for us. We used to talk about things that would*
720 *impact the two of us.' I realized in that moment, 'Oh, I*
721 *guess there's a reality.'*
722

723Mary's spouse felt disturbed and alienated by his wife's increasingly

724ambitious career aspirations. While Mary continued to participate in

725the program, a change in her fervor and demeanor was noticeable

726following this event.

727 Similarly, Divya, who holds a Ph.D. and directs a division within

728the organization, explicitly articulates the challenges of balancing

729professional aspirations with personal responsibilities. She feels that

730the expectations of her as a wife and a mother precluded her from

731being able to focus on and achieve her career goals:

732 *I think that if I had been a man, I would perhaps been able*
733 *to achieve more professionally. And that’s for no other*
734 *reason except holding myself back, too. And there’s also*
735 *the biological thing. You know, you have a kid, you step*
736 *out of the workplace. You have a spouse who has a*
737 *professional career. You sort of support many things in*
738 *your life without putting your profession first [...] I think*
739 *we’re talking about single-minded focus on your career.*
740 *And I think that for me, being a woman and taking on all*
741 *the expected roles, that I have never focused single-*
742 *mindedly on my work. There are lots of competing things:*
743 *walking the dog, making sure the kids are fine; you know,*
744 *making sure you have dinner or cleaning up after dinner.*
745 *You know, keep up 101 things in mind.*
746
747 Compared to women with children, we found that women who
748did not have families to support approached their careers with less risk
749aversion. A sizeable minority of circle participants who fit these criteria
750noted concerns other than stability and flexibility when discussing their
751careers. While they too embraced invisible leadership and expressed
752worries about being inauthentic or unlikable if they practiced executive
753leadership, concerns for these women about job security and flexibility
754were largely absent. These women were also aware of their
755comparative freedom to pursue their careers. Larissa, a rising mid-
756level manager in her late 30s, discussed how much easier it was for
757her to work long hours and get ahead compared to her female
758colleagues who were also mothers. As she and her spouse had decided
759not to have children, she felt freed to make riskier “reach” decisions
760with her own career.

761 For women with children, invisibility was one deliberate tool for 762managing conflicting expectations. Within the modern partnership, 763women are free to, and indeed may be required to, pursue a career. 764However, many find that they can only pursue their ambitions to a 765point to ensure stability. Specifically, in order to continue with their 766careers while also meeting familial obligations, these women selected 767an invisible style that allowed them to be effective workers while 768staying out of the spotlight and avoiding negative backlash both in and 769out of the workplace.

770

771DISCUSSION

772 Most of the women in our study were highly educated, middle 773and upper class professionals from dual-income households. Many 774identified as leaders in their careers and had access to outsourced help 775for their household and care work. Yet, even among this self-selected 776set of ambitious and advantaged women, we found that many 777embraced "intentional invisibility." Despite being aware of executive 778professional styles, these women found that a less visible approach to 779navigating the workplace helped them maintain their professional 780position without putting it at risk.

781 Our findings shed light on broader trends in women's career 782advancement, deepening our understanding of how and why women's

783professional and economic gains in recent decades have not been 784commensurate with their human capital. Scholars largely agree that 785pervasive, structural problems underpin women's underrepresentation. 786At work, women face a labyrinth riddled with biases, discrimination, 787and other obstacles throughout their careers (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 7882011; Monroe and Chiu 2010). At home, women continue to share a 789disproportionate burden of familial and caregiving responsibilities 790(Bianchi et al. 2000, 2012; Coverman 1983; Sayer 2005; Sayer, Bianchi 791and Robinson 2004). We show that women embrace invisibility as a 792conflict-avoidant strategy that allows them to feel authentic and 793maintain stability at work and home without challenging feminine 794expectations. Our findings suggest that regardless of the impact 795intentional invisibility may have on career advancement the long run, 796the strategy appeals to diverse women who find themselves caught 797within biased organizations.

798 To resolve the puzzle wherein professional women limit their own 799visibility, we show first that the women in our study encountered bias, 800backlash, and constraints in their workplace environments. Participants 801described a range of non-confrontational and vulnerability-minimizing 802"invisible" responses that they had developed to counter inequality 803and interactional discomfort in the workplace. But unlike other forms of 804executive workplace norms that felt inauthentic, navigating the

805labyrinth in this way allowed these women to accomplish 806organizational goals while also avoiding the backlash that individual 807self-promotion or assertiveness might have engendered.

808 We additionally demonstrate that despite being ambitious and 809career driven, the women in our study approached their work with an 810eye to fortifying their families for possible contingencies. Indeed, our 811data show how the responsibility many women bear for ensuring the 812wellbeing of their families serves as a multi-level barrier that 813encourages them to stay out of the spotlight. For example, women like 814Sandra and Carly took for granted that they would have careers 815through marriage and childrearing with access to paid help to maintain 816a full-time work schedule. However, both women also bore the burden 817of maintaining family stability and being available to deal with 818contingencies in ways that their husbands simply did not. Women saw 819their career stability as a way of freeing their husbands or partners to 820pursue riskier, but potentially more lucrative or fulfilling, opportunities. 821Together, the personal and organizational pressures that these women 822faced made invisibility an optimal strategy.

823 Still, while we suggest that intentional invisibility may have 824consequences for individual women's advancement and gender parity 825in the workplace more broadly, our conclusions are tempered by our 826awareness of selection challenges and methodological limitations.

827First, our study precludes us from examining all the dimensions along 828which workplace navigation strategies might differ for women from 829different backgrounds and intersectional identities. The women who 830participated in the professional development program were 831predominantly white and middle or upper class, and had opted to work 832within the same large organization. Likewise, because women self-833selected into the organizationally-sanctioned program, our research 834design could have led us to observe women less inclined than others to 835challenge the gender norms in their workplace. Given selection bias, 836we acknowledge that invisibility might not be a dominant strategy for 837all women, but rather, a strategy preferred by status-conforming 838women less interested in "rocking the boat." We hope that future 839research on organizational interventions and inequality will be 840attentive to the interpretive and behavioral strategies that diverse 841women employ across unequal settings.

842 In addition, we did not track long-term career outcomes and thus 843cannot speak to the causal impacts of invisibility. To the extent that 844this workplace strategy contradicts conventional professional norms, 845invisibility could stymie the career advancement of those who practice 846it; indeed, many participants who embraced invisibility were concerned 847about this consequence. However, it could be that this invisible, 848communal approach to work creates effective teams and successful

849organizations, and will therefore benefit women professionals in the
850long-term. Our findings suggest that regardless of the causal effects
851this strategy may have in the long run, intentional invisibility offers
852women an effective, adaptable set of strategies to maintain both
853professional and personal stability as well as feelings of authenticity
854and femininity.

855 While our data are not representative and do not speak to
856invisibility’s long-term effectiveness, our findings suggest that women
857within biased organizations construct and employ novel strategies for
858reconciling professional and personal demands. By shifting attention
859away from barriers themselves and towards the women who negotiate
860them, we point to how the daily choices women make in the workplace
861bear on their sense of self and sense of stability. While women may
862seek to stay out of the spotlight in the workplace, here we highlight
863how their preferences and decisions contribute to gender dynamics in
864the office and at home.

865

866CONCLUSION

867 Although scholars of gender and leadership have a strong
868theoretical grasp on the ways in which organizations fail women, they
869have a weaker understanding of how women internalize and respond
870to these organizational constraints in ways that influence their career

871outcomes. Our analysis of women’s aspirations and decision-making 872highlights both the nature of the challenges women encounter as well 873as the tools they can leverage to navigate these challenges. 874Particularly, in tracking women’s professional aspirations alongside the 875strategies they employ daily to navigate workplace responsibilities and 876relationships, we find that women’s use of “intentional invisibility” 877helps them as they continually confront and navigate maze-like 878barriers to professional advancement. Together, our findings 879demonstrate the importance of workplace policies that not only level 880the playing field, but also recognize the gendered baggage and toolkits 881that employees bring to the workplace.

882

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ENDNOTES

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.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of program participants by cohort.

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Age (mean)	46	40
Parent[†]	70%	53%
Relationship Status[†]		
Single/Non-cohabiting	17%	29%
Cohabiting	12%	9%
Married	71%	62%
Race[††]		
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 (mean)[†]	10	7
Manages others	73%	63%
Income[†††]		
0-49,999	-	3%
50-99,999	-	52%
100-149,999	-	32%
150,000 or greater	-	12%
N	138	177

[†]Among Cohort 1, parental status, relationship status, and organizational tenure were only asked on the post-program survey, which 86 participants completed.

[††]Cohort 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," etc. as their race.

[†††]Cohort 1 participants were not asked to report their income.

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Table 2. Interview respondent characteristics.

Age (mean)	45
Parent	71%
Relationship Status	
Single/Non-cohabiting/Divorced	24%
Cohabiting	7%
Married	69%
Race†	
White	47%
Black	4%
Asian	9%
Hispanic	13%
Other - All other responses	4%
Multiple responses	2%
Education††	
High School/Some college	4%
Bachelor's	36%
Master's	36%
PhD or Professional	22%
Years in organization (mean)	11
N†††	45

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

††Educational attainment is missing for one interview respondent.

†††Interviews were conducted with 45 unique program participants. Of these, 4 respondents completed a single interview and 41 respondents completed interviews at the start and end of the program, for a total of 86 interviews.

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