What women say they need to succeed

In its 13th year, the Women’s Forum for the Economy and Society convenes in Paris this week to explore some of the most vexing issues confronting the world today. As part of the event, a new group of women are chosen each year to join the ranks of the Rising Talents Initiative, which acknowledges accomplished women under 40. The group, created 10 years ago, has 216 members from 50 countries. Before the forum, The New York Times, an editorial partner in the event, asked some of them what advances they would like to see for women. Their responses have been edited and condensed.

Alix Strauss

Christina M. Alfonso-Ercan
35, New York
Chief executive, Madeira Global

The year 2023 will mark the 100th anniversary of the Equal Rights Amendment introduced to Congress, and yet we still have not secured our right to hold a seat at the executive leadership table. In the United States, women hold only 25 percent of executive or senior-level management roles, 20 percent of board roles and 6 percent of C.E.O. roles. The women’s movement needs to strengthen its efforts toward legislative support for equal pay and equal opportunity.

I left corporate America for the simple reason that I was conscious of being paid less than my male counterparts for the same role and had fewer opportunities for advancement. I am very confident that I am not the only woman who has faced a similar decision. Now as I look at the still long career ahead of me, I recognize that what I am missing is advocacy and mentorship. I, like many women, have been resourceful and determined, but no individual can reach the summit on her own.
Lauren Bohn
30, Istanbul
The GroundTruth Project’s Middle East correspondent

As a white woman from a middle-class background who was able to pursue her dreams from an early age, I’m constantly reminded of my relative privilege. Two of my start-ups aim to level the playing field and create access on both sides of the privilege spectrum.

We need enhanced literacy on different “feminisms” and intersectionality. I became a journalist because I believe in the power of storytelling to expand our realities. Through my stories, I want to make it possible for a woman in the West Village to better understand the experiences of a woman in Nigeria; for a woman in Brazil to better understand the realities of a woman in the Middle East; for a woman in Denmark to be able to speak to the other’s concerns in a more informed, enlightened way. A global and diverse feminist community isn't necessarily a fractured one; “their” stories are so often “our” stories.

Karoli Hindriks
34, Tallinn, Estonia
Chief executive of Jobbatical.com

One of the main drivers of entrepreneurial success is confidence. Not a day goes by when I don’t ask myself, “Am I good enough for this? Can I do this?” Being connected to like-minded women across the world and seeing their impact helps me build my own confidence as a leader.

Being in the tech sector, I’ve seen the conscious and unconscious biases that stop women and girls from living up to their full potential. I want sentences along the lines of “Well, actually, there are biological differences between men and women”—weak “justifications” for problems ranging from the wage gap to downright harassment—to stay out of discussions that otherwise have nothing to do with biology. I want to help build a world where a woman’s perceived capacity to lead isn’t connected to her desire or ability to raise children. These are only a few examples that are near to my heart based on personal experience.
Nang Lang Kham
29, Yangon, Myanmar
Deputy chief executive, KBZ Bank
As a woman with a voice in the public space, I would like to speak out for more official recognition and support for victims of rape, abuse and human trafficking. These are very relevant, pressing issues in the global arena and Myanmar. These issues are not going away. Our women and children should not have to fear for their safety and security.

Over the next year, and in the future, I would like to see increased awareness and public acceptance of gender equality, and the cultural norms that are hindering our women from reaching their true potential. I would also like to see equal opportunity and access to education, health care and job opportunities for women; with these tools, our women can empower themselves, rise above their circumstances and contribute to our people alongside our men.

Khululiwe Mabaso
39, Johannesburg
Communications associate director for P&G Sub Saharan Africa
I would like to meet more like-minded women to create programs that work universally on minimum resources delivering value for business while growing with the communities. I would like to share and learn from other women and men who are supporting and will be at the conference. Continuing to be part of the Rising Talents will help me to realize the passion I have toward rewriting the African women's narrative — the courage, skills and vigor she has to make Africa a better inclusive place for girls and women now and for generations.

Nelson Mandela once said: “Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom.”

Adriana Marais
34, Johannesburg
Head of innovation at SAP Africa
I believe in a future where we view each individual in our society independently of what gender, race or class they may have been born into. I try to live according to this mindset. The global challenges are of an unprecedented scale, and we have a long way to go in terms of raising the living standards of all of our people to a satisfactory level. We will need a contribution from each and every human toward achieving a tomorrow we can be proud of, and I believe collectively we do have the diversity of talent to achieve this.
Demet Mutlu
36, Istanbul
Chief executive, Trendyol

There is a lack of “successful scale” and leadership examples of women, particularly in the tech industry. In the next 10 to 15 years, I will work on this and make sure that I am not the exception, but that I am the norm, and that women can have impact. I do believe that the number of women in the tech start-up ecosystem should increase, and the way should be cleared for women who face career obstacles that men don’t.

I will continue my work of building the entrepreneurial environment, particularly female tech entrepreneurship, by sharing my experiences, serving as a role model, mentoring individuals and investing in companies.

The women’s movement should raise awareness about women’s effectiveness in e-commerce and tech sectors, and share the results of its activities with the community. It should provide support to increase the number of women executives and entrepreneurs in tech.

Zimbini Peffer
35, Cape Town, South Africa
Marketing director, Jewelry, TFG (The Foschini Group)

Successful leaders have an ability to create context and help teams orientate and collaborate effectively. Exposure creates capacity to lead. The women's movement should prepare even more women to become leaders across industries.
Gisela Pinheiro
38, São Paulo, Brazil
Vice president for BASF in South America
I began in finance where I was constantly the only woman in the room. On top of that, I was “in the closet.” I was fortunate enough to be exposed to several gender discussions that triggered my true interest—a more broad and serious inclusion dialogue. This gave me the strength to get out of the closet, continue to outperform myself as a professional and become a mother. I want to continue to drive the conversation and the real acts on accelerating diversity, lead by example and use every opportunity I have to advocate toward an open and inclusive world.
I wish that women around the world could have the same opportunities that others like me are having.

Samar Samir Mezghanni
29, Toronto and Cambridge, England
Writer and Ph.D. student
I want the movement to lead the way in promoting an inclusive society, not one where some women are more equal to men than others, but a society where every woman, no matter where she is from, what her skin color is, or what her background is, have equal rights and opportunities. Being a young woman, I face oppressive economic, social and political realities daily. An inclusive women’s movement can support me in reclaiming my rights as an equal valuable human.

Katharina Schmitt
32, San Francisco
General manager, Ampush Media
I’d love to see the women’s movement make progress on creating the right environment for women to flourish in. For me that is supportive, open-minded, welcomes diversity in every form and rewards ideas and performance over gender. I’d also love for the women’s movement to fuel greater access to high-quality child care, enable back-to-work support systems and improve parental leave policies, so that family and a successful and meaningful career are not an “either or,” but rather a question of balance and timing.
The women’s movement provides a supportive voice and diverse community to surface ideas, organize thoughts and prioritize topics on a global level. One of my favorite proverbs says: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Role models and female peers inspire, support and challenge me. Having diversity in my life—diversity of any kind—makes me smarter, kinder and a better person.
Tara Shirvani
30, Washington
Climate change and infrastructure specialist at the World Bank

Having the right mentors or sponsors has proved to make a dramatic impact in my career advancement. In fact, I would even refer to it as my Get Out of Jail Free card. Just as this card can provide you with a lifeline when you are in tough job situations, it can also propel you forward and help you with your next strategic move. Mentors and sponsors can act as important advisers, allies and fast-track partners to getting ahead.

The women's movement has already demonstrated their exemplary track record in becoming the go-to international women's movement for career advancement and development. For the coming year it would be great to see it grow further in membership numbers and become a household name on the international level.

Lea von Bidder
27, San Francisco
Chief executive, Ava Science

We've all become accustomed to slow but steady progress when it comes to women's issues. But today, for the first time, that continuous progress is at risk because of unforeseen political changes, especially here in the United States. It is important that the women's movement speak with one voice and isn't weakened by inconsistencies from within. We need to stop questioning and policing the women's movement and its members. Everyone who supports equality between women and men should be part of it. What I want the women's movement to accomplish next year is to find unity and a strong, common voice.
Successful Career Women Finish the Phrase ‘If Only …’

By ALINA TUGEND  OCT. 10, 2017

The New York Times asked some of the participants at last week’s global meeting of the Women’s Forum for the Economy and Society in Paris to look both backward and forward — backward at what they would have changed as they climbed up the career ladder and forward to what needs to change to create greater gender equity. The Times was a media partner in the event. Some of the answers have been condensed and edited.

**Inga Beale**

54, chief executive, Lloyd’s of London

In my 30s, I went through a period of being a complete workaholic. Other women didn’t want to work for me because they didn’t want that lifestyle. I eventually realized that being a workaholic was a choice, not a necessity, and the best way to manage is to surround yourself with the best people you can find and empower them. Don’t make the mistake of viewing good people as a threat.

**Beth Brooke**

58, global vice chairwoman of public policy, EY professional services company
I would have focused on building relationships and expanding my networks, both within the organization and outside of it, much earlier in my career. I would have put as much effort into cultivating these relationships as I did trying to do my job really well. Women can often find themselves excluded from so many natural networks, so it’s important to make a conscious effort to build these relationships early, in addition to doing your job well. Catching up on these two things later in your career is very challenging.

**Melissa Cefkin**

*Principal scientist, design anthropologist, Nissan Research Center*

Not to be apologetic for, dismissive of, or frightened by my own power. It’s a lesson I’m still learning.

**Ertharin Cousin**

*60, former executive director of the United Nations World Food Program*

I would have taken more time off for vacations. I was always afraid “there was too much to do” for a two-or-three-week vacation, so I carried over time every year, throughout my entire career. When I recently left my position and cashed out the unused vacation time, the money seemed minuscule in comparison to the adventures I missed.

**Marie-Jeanne Eby**

*45, head of unit in charge of donor relations and governmental affairs, International Committee of the Red Cross*

I wish I had spent a longer time in the field, sharing the lives of other women and girls affected by conflicts and violence to learn more about their incredible resilience capabilities and the innovative skills that they deploy to survive in these fragile environments. At times, I also wish I could have been bolder in fighting for more flexibility at the workplace, so women with children could continue to hold leadership positions.
Karien van Gennip

48, chief executive of ING Bank France

When I was younger, I believed if I worked hard, if I performed, I would get as far as I deserved. Or at least as far as the young men around me. Now I know better: It does matter whether you’re female or black or gay. If I had known all this, I might have been more myself, instead of trying to be one of the boys. I would have asked for more help and searched for more allies or mentors.

Alexandra Palt

45, chief sustainability officer, L’Oréal

The biggest mistake I made in my career was that I stayed too long in a job that made me really unhappy. If I could change one thing, looking back on my career, I would question myself less and accept that one cannot succeed when the conditions for success are not there.

Meena Harris

32, founder of the nonprofit Phenomenal Women Action Campaign

We need to shore up our laws, whether strengthening existing laws like those governing sexual harassment and other types of workplace discrimination, or adopting new legislation, such as the Paycheck Fairness Act. We also need to see corporate leadership step up. Finally, we need to engage individuals, and this includes men. I personally have been lucky where some of my best, most invested bosses and mentors have been male allies who “get it.” We need to be proactive in cultivating that sort of sensibility within men.

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim

33, coordinator of Afpat, a community-based organization to protect the rights of Chad’s indigenous people

Many national and international laws and legislations are not fully open to the inclusion and full and effective participation of women in decision-making. I have
been following the international negotiations on climate change, biodiversity and desertification for more than 10 years. But still, in each session of the negotiations, the gender aspects of climate change or the inclusion of women in decision-making needs to be debated and defended.

Isabelle Kocher

51, chief executive, Engie, a French multinational electric utility company

Regarding the gender issue, my conviction is that we are not addressing it in the right way. Parity laws, quotas on board of directors are obviously necessary, but we must go far beyond by treating the root cause. The real fight is parity in access to education all over the world to have a true impact on women’s empowerment.

Laura Quatela

60, senior vice president and chief legal officer, Lenovo

Actively enrich your career by embracing the lateral move. I’ve leaned a lot of lessons in my career, but I think – in the context of leadership – one of the most valuable is the importance of diversity of experience. Working women need to know that a career is not necessarily a stepladder. On occasion, we’re given an opportunity to go broad: to make a move not up, but across. When you are offered the chance to dive into a different area of focus or responsibility, please don’t put your hand out. Put it up.

Ranya Shamoon

45, vice president, Feminine Care Europe, Procter & Gamble

I’ve seen many young women throughout my career falsely assume that they need to settle for less because they want to have children or because they are not geographically mobile. This is where I think the change must begin — believing in oneself and not being influenced by biases of the past.

Siri Uotila

29, research fellow, Women and Public Policy Program, Harvard Kennedy
The next frontier of gender equality is tackling unconscious bias in organizational structures, processes and environments. Research shows that individual-level stereotypes and prejudices are incredibly difficult to eradicate. Biases building into organizations, however, can be mitigated or erased through behavioral-design interventions that are usually simple, low-cost and quick to implement. These include blind evaluations of resumes, data-driven and equitable distribution of resources, and inclusive social norms.

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