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## Luck or Hard Work?

**Men think hard work determines success. Women think it's luck. Maybe that's why women aren't getting to the top.**

WOMEN OF MY GENERATION—I WAS born in 1956—poured into the workforce with excitement about the possibilities. From 1970 to 2004 our numbers increased from 30 million to 65 million. We expected that our gender would soon be reflected in the ranks of America's corporate executives. It hasn't happened. In 2002 only 5% of the top-earning corporate officer positions were held by women. And today only 2% of chief executive officers in the country's 1,000 largest public companies are female.

The mainstream media have been telling us for years that women are opting out of the corporate race because they'd rather stay home and have children. Certainly those of us who have kids care deeply about them. But I knew there were other factors at play. I started interviewing women who got within spitting distance of the chief's job in the most famous corporations in America

and then left. After 35 interviews with women who stayed, women who left and men who left, I understood that the opt-out explanation was rarely the real reason. And never the only reason.

The more nuanced explanation is that many women think getting to the top job pivots more on luck and connections than on hard work. In short, the old boy network trumps 60-hour workweeks. And when women believe this, their inability to land the top job becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If hard work in a corporate setting doesn't pay off as well as a winning roll of the dice, maybe it makes more sense to stop aspiring to deliver the best results for the company at any personal cost. Or maybe the best decision is to stop working altogether.

Together with Raymond Fisman of the Columbia Business School, I parsed the work of the World Values Survey, administered every three to five years to 140,000 respondents across 80 countries by a global network of social science researchers. The



**Most women still believe the old boy network trumps the 60-hour work week.**

survey asks questions on a range of social and political themes while also collecting demographic information on respondents.

The 1995–97 survey asked people whether they attributed success in life to luck and connections or to hard work. We found a significant gender perceptions gap that gets wider the higher you look in the professional hierarchy. Twelve percent more working men than women think it is hard work, rather than luck, that determines success. When you look at men and women who hold supervisory roles, 30% more men than women believe it's hard work that determines success. Remarkably, the gap between men's and women's opinions remains consistent across countries: It is as strong in Sweden as in Argentina. Our work also finds that women are more likely to believe that too much competi-

tion is harmful and, in the post-Enron era, I have a feeling that I'm not alone in believing that a more

balanced view of competition might not be so bad.

Maybe women work their tails off and see the less diligent men beside them rewarded with promotions and the best opportunities. We don't know for sure. But we do know that the gender gap in perceptions about hard work versus luck is significant. And it gets more dramatic as women climb the ladder. Perhaps this perception helps explain the increasing number of women leaving corporate jobs to start their own businesses. I realized that on some level this may have contributed to my decision to found four small businesses in the energy, environmental and high-technology industries. I'm not alone. According to the most recent Census Bureau data, the number of women who own private nonfarm businesses in the U.S. increased by 20% in just five years.

I worry that if women don't think that the workplace is a level playing field where effort generates promotions, they will not feel compelled to invest their best efforts. As a result, corporate America will lose out on a vast reservoir of talent. **F**