EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS

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PRUDENTIA INSTITUTE

YOUTH KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

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ABOUT PRUDENTIA INSTITUTE

Prudentia Institute is a purpose driven, charitable research and development organization with a mission to empower and develop youth in Atlantic Canada. The institute supports the inclusive development and empowerment of youth. The Institute's charitable objective is advancing education through research and knowledge mobilization and developing educational programs for youth and youth-serving organizations. The Institute believes in nurturing self-belief, autonomy, personal power and independence in youth so that they can achieve their infinite potential.

Founded in 2020, the Institute became a registered charity in 2024. By conducting primary research and developing educational programs and resources, the Institute strives to increase youth confidence, foster stronger community bonds, and advocate for inclusivity. The Institute is home to the award-winning Student Research Lab where students act as peer researchers using participatory action research. The charity is focusing its research and development work on addressing the most pressing issues faced by young people today, including equity, security, health, connection, and protection. For more information see www.prudentiainstitute.ca.

ABOUT THE STUDY

We were inspired to talk to women leaders about the gender barriers and gender-based discrimination they encounter or have experienced in formal environments. Our intention is share that knowledge with other women and girls who are similarly navigating gender barriers and gender-based discrimination in school and work.

We took an action research approach, which means that were were as concerned with learning about lived experience through data collection, as we were with helping to solve an enduring challenge in our society with the assistance of our participants. As part of our approach to action research, we also reflected on the processes that reinforce gender barriers and gender-based discrimination in Canada and their effects on women and female-identifying persons. Harmful effects extend beyond health and well-being to include financial security and full economic participation.

Discrimination based on gender is the leading form of discrimination reported in Canada. After decades of progress on gender equity, the barriers that continue to exist are systemic, deeply rooted in cultural norms, and often hard to identify and even harder to address.

Our findings point to durable and self-perpetuating nature of systemic gender barriers and gender-based discrimination. Our findings also identify coping mechanisms and empowering strategies to enact real change.

This research contributes to pathways for women and girls to cope, challenge and transcend discrimination with the goal of full participation in the economy and society.

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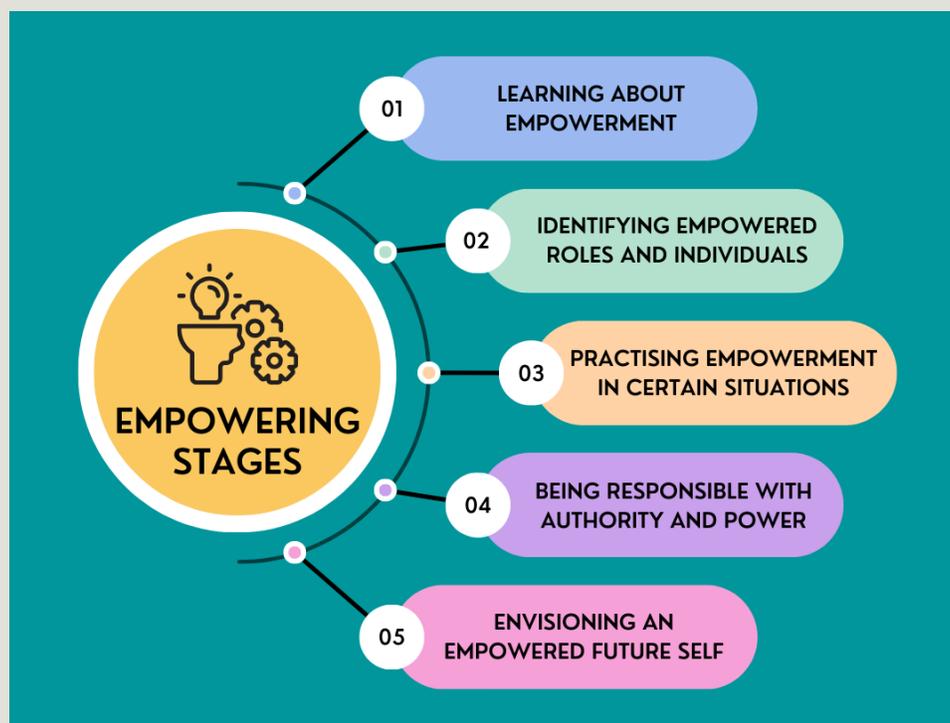*Youth Knowledge Exchange*

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS

Goal #5 of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals is to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls.

The study of empowerment is complex, conceptually underdeveloped, and operates across many subfields including sociology, psychology, social work, neurosciences, and organizational studies. It has strong ties to social justice and achieving personal agency, and power. Empowerment is considered central to the improvement of the human condition, often revealing environmental, social, economic, or political inequities. It can be defined as a process of increasing personal and interpersonal power and influence, achieving both personal and collective efficacy. Understood as a processional concept, it involves progress against a stated goal in which personal power is increased and thus involves self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence.

Investing in the empowerment of women and girls is key to stimulating economic growth but also global equality. Women are not afforded the same standards of physical and mental health, access to education, competitive or equal compensation, nor do they participate equally in a variety of sectors, or governance or leadership roles. Despite hard-fought movements for equality, voice and agency, the prevalence of sexual and gender-based discrimination and systemic barriers remain. In 2020, the United Nations reported that women only occupied 28% of management roles worldwide in 2019 (1)(2).

EMPOWERING STAGES

EMPOWERING STAGES

01 LEARNING ABOUT EMPOWERMENT

02 IDENTIFYING EMPOWERED ROLES AND INDIVIDUALS

03 PRACTISING EMPOWERMENT IN CERTAIN SITUATIONS

04 BEING RESPONSIBLE WITH AUTHORITY AND POWER

05 ENVISIONING AN EMPOWERED FUTURE SELF

STUDY OVERVIEW

This study explored the following overarching research question: **"how can we empower women and girls in formal environments such as school and work?"**

We spoke to women leaders and entrepreneurs across Canada about gender barriers in the workplace, how these barriers show up and continue to persist, and what supports and conditions empower them to challenge gender discrimination.

Our participants included 21 women, working in a variety of sectors, including finance, health care, technology, fisheries and natural resources, pharmaceuticals, biotech, applied research, international business, academia, media, supply chain management, ecosystem development, retail, social services, innovation and more. Seven of the 21 participants identified as Black, Indigenous or as Persons of Colour. Participants ranged in age from late 20s to early 60s. All participants identified as female.

Each of our participants were interviewed twice. The first interview was a one-on-one in-depth interview, lasting between 60-90 minutes. The second interview took the form of a focus group, where participants were randomly grouped together. These discussions were less formal but still included specific questions with a view to identifying strategies and solutions. The focus group sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for themes. Interviews were conducted in July and August of 2022. The focus groups were held in May 2023. Transcriptions were completed in June 2023. Initial analysis was completed by April 2024. Initial insights were published by Prudentia Institute in Fall 2024 with a series of fact sheets.

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GENDER BARRIERS AND GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

The barriers that our participants reported experiencing were cited as frequent, often taken for granted as the nature of work, the culture of the industry or profession, or just acceptable practice within work spaces and formal environments.

Our participants referenced the following common barriers and forms gender-based discrimination in their work environments:

- Gender bias
- Unconscious bias
- Gendered roles
- Stereotyping
- Microaggressions
- Harassment
- Gaslighting
- Imposter syndrome
- Lack of leadership accountability
- Lack of formal supports
- Lack of transparency
- Unclear processes of advancement
- Invalidation
- Unequal or unfair work pressures
- Lack of female leadership
- Glass ceiling
- Glass cliff
- Gendered toolbox
- Gender labyrinth

We recognize that this is not an exhaustive list of potential barriers that either women or female-identifying persons might experience or encounter in formal settings such as work or school, but it is a substantial list of gender barriers and forms of gender-based discrimination that were deemed common place by our participants. We also recognize the intersectional experience of individuals which can result in combined or interlocking barriers and forms of discrimination.

WE HAVE INCLUDED A GLOSSARY OF TERMS AT THE END OF THIS REPORT

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FIRST VOICE ACCOUNTS

BEING A GENDER ALLY

- *"If someone says something sexist and it's not just me who says something [about it], that's very empowering. Realizing that you're not alone in it. Because it does get exhausting."*
- *"My boss is an example. If there's a panel, he'll say, 'I'm not going to speak on it unless it's balanced in terms of gender.'"*
- *"Now, the big thing for me is how I bring others along with me – if somebody's lifting you, you lift others too."*

SELF EMPOWERMENT

- *"the "imposter syndrome" is very real. So I combat that by saying, "You have all the tools and things that you need to do this. And if you don't speak up, somebody else will.""*
- *"Hold leadership accountable. If you're in a company that doesn't really seem to acknowledge or value you [...], don't automatically jump to the assumption that it's you that needs to change."*
- *"Instead of just doing the job that you're doing, look outside to see what other things you can get involved in to build that skill set, or just engage yourself in other things."*

MENTORSHIP

- *"Having mentors who are empathetic and can help you alleviate some of the work pressure. [...] You're more happy at work if you have people around that you feel actually care about your well-being."*
- *"Having another female validate your concerns and thoughts as a female in this space, it goes a long way for me personally. [...] To have someone else come back and say, "No, this is not acceptable; here's what I would do, or here's why I think so."*
- *"I met this person who was really wonderful – kind and encouraging and willing to take me under her wing. She helped shift my perspective."*

FEMALE LEADERSHIP & SOLIDARITY

- *"When I first started in my professional career, women were very underrepresented. [...] So even in underrepresented professions, even just having one woman leader that you can look up to can make a really big difference."*
- *"I think that's an important part of my success story – having a super intelligent, encouraging woman at the helm who said, "You know what? You're good at this. If you want to make a career out of this, we can do it.""*
- *Being able to help other people achieve their goals is probably one of the most empowering things I can think of."*

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EMPOWERING STRATEGIES

Our data analysis points to several strategies that women and their allies can use to both cope and foster change.

1

BECOMING A GENDER ALLY: A gender ally notices when gender barriers loom, and they help to clear them from the path. They may give advice, offer support, help make connections or share information. Gender allies care about improving gender equality and ensuring equal opportunity. Gender allies work to improve social, learning and work environments and they stand up against behaviour and discrimination. Being a gender ally can make a significant difference in helping women and girls succeed in social and formal settings.

HOW TO BE AN ALLY

- Ensure equal representation and equal voice in social and formal settings.
- Share information that empowers and helps to equalize the playing field.
- Insist on inclusive activities where everyone can feel comfortable.
- Activities should not be gendered, nor should specific duties or tasks.
- Share the praise and ensure that those deserving of credit receive it.
- Challenge stereotypes when they happen.
- Speak up when things are not equitable or fair.

2

SELF EMPOWERMENT: Some of the gender barriers women face are self-imposed. Systemic discrimination shapes our ideas about "appropriate" female behaviour, competence and confidence. Learning to speak up, share ideas, take on challenges and claim a full share of opportunity and recognition can be a learning curve for many women.

HOW TO EMPOWER YOURSELF

- Make connections and build a network of support. Find your champions and mentors!
- Take advantage of new opportunities to learn and grow and gain new experiences.
- Believe in yourself and your right to participate. Don't be afraid to dream big.
- Hold others accountable for power imbalances and exclusionary practices.

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MENTORSHIP: Guidance from someone who has overcome challenges and found a pathway to success is enormously helpful. Some mentors come through organized programs. Others simply agree to offer time when asked. Some may only meet once or twice, while others provide ongoing contact for years. Mentors can be a great source of personal or professional empowerment.

3

WHAT MENTORS CAN DO
- Advise about career next steps, including training, assignments and opportunities.
- Help navigate difficulty and avoid pitfalls.
- Help evaluate opportunities and open doors.
- Make introductions and help build networks.
- Give developmental feedback and advice.
- Help build confidence, assertiveness and ability to speak up and be heard.

SOLIDARITY: Unity between women (and female identifying persons) can go a long way to supporting the eradication of gender inequality. When women stand together they can better challenge the status quo. Both social and formal environments often perpetuate barriers to female solidarity. Therefore, it is important to confront barriers, and create safe spaces that foster trust.

4

HOW TO FOSTER SOLIDARITY
- Create or nurture spaces for women to develop a sense of community, such as affinity or networking groups.
- Develop and or share communal resources.
- Collectively cmbat division, stigma, stereotypes and barriers in social and formal environments.
- Foster inter-generational dialogue.
- Promote female representation.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Barriers/Discrimination	Definition	Effects
Gender Bias	Intentional association of gender linked to compromised assessments and decisions.	A pro-male bias overestimates male performance compared to female performance.
Unconscious Bias	Unintentional and automatic mental associations with gender and stereotypes.	Differential treatment, unfair decision making or assessments, not based on ability.
Gendered Roles	Socially accepted behaviours or tasks tied to gender or sex.	Expectations about how to act, speak, dress or behave or specific tasks expected to perform.
Stereotyping	Generalized views and preconceptions about attributes and characteristics about women.	Unrealistic or unfair expectations often leading to penalties for violating gender stereotypes.
Microaggressions	Common behaviours, interactions and slights which communicate bias to marginalized groups.	Can have significant harmful effects including impacts to physical and mental health.
Harassment	Any unwanted behaviour, physical verbal or suggested. Aggressive pressure, intimidation or conduct.	Can lead to humiliation, mental distress. Harassing behaviour is unlawful. May escalate.
Gaslighting	A form of psychological abuse in which a person repeatedly attempts to distort reality to gain power.	Leads to feelings of confusion, questioning one's own judgement and can erode self-esteem and confidence.
Imposter Syndrome	Persistent doubt about one's own skills, expertise or experiences. A form of cognitive distortion.	Erodes energy, creates frustration, stress, low self confidence. Can lead to isolation or avoidance of new challenges or opportunities.
Lack of Leadership Accountability	A leadership bias that enables gender inequality, barriers and discrimination or fails to protect.	Results in discrimination and harassment and other abuses and lack opportunity or advancement.
Lack of Formal Supports	Economic security including formal policies that inhibit job loss and promote job security.	Comprised health as well as economic barriers and financial insecurity.
Lack of Transparency	Sharing relevant information, feedback and expectations honestly and openly.	Erodes trust and loyalty and compromises communication. Erodes ethical conduct.
Unclear Processes of Advancement	Unseen barriers or failing to invest in the potential of female leaders.	Negative perception of leadership potential or leadership identity.
Invalidation	Feelings, thoughts, behaviours are either rejected, ignored or judged.	Causes confusion, leads to self doubt and talents waste.
Unequal or Unfair Work Pressures	Bias in terms of perceived work-life conflicts. Promoting occupational segregation, or discrimination with task assignments.	Fewer opportunities for advancement, lack of recognition, failure to meet unfair expectations.
Lack of Female Leadership	Limited access to opportunities resulting in lack of female representation in leadership roles.	Fewer female mentors, and fewer opportunities to challenge barriers at the leadership level.
Glass Ceiling	A metaphor for the invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing in their careers.	Lack of advancement opportunities, leading to talent waste, fewer economic advantages or comprised financial security.
Glass Cliff	A term describing the tendency to appointment women to leadership roles during a crisis or when failure is likely.	Women leaders are set up for failure, often reinforcing several of the other harmful stereotypes and perpetuating harm.
Gendered Toolbox	The term refers to different tools, policies or practices that are acceptable for men but not for women.	Leads to segregated ways of working, and penalties. Limits innovation and creativity.
Gender Labyrinth	A metaphor used to describe challenges women face navigating work. Barriers are more complex, varied and full of obstacles.	Lack of access or no clear path to success.

TO CITE THIS REPORT

AUTHOR BIOS

Kristin S. Williams, Ph.D. (she/her) is the Director of the FC Manning School of Business at Acadia University, one of the oldest and most respected liberal arts universities in Canada. She is an Associate Professor (Management) at Acadia University and holds a Visiting Researcher appointment at the University of Eastern Finland (Innovation Management). Dr. Williams is also the Founder, Managing Director, and Principal Researcher at Prudentia Institute: Youth Knowledge Exchange, home to the award-winning Student Research Lab. She is co-editor in chief at the journal of Culture and Organization and a member of the editorial advisory board at the Journal of Management History. Dr. Williams has received several academic awards, and she is a recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal. Dr. Williams is the corresponding author. Please contact at **kwilliams@prudentiainstitute.ca** or **kristin.williams@acadiau.ca.**

Nina Winham, Ph.D. (she/her) is a faculty member at Langara College School of Management in Vancouver, B.C. Her background encompasses public broadcasting, journalism, marketing communications, and management, with an overarching focus on sustainability engagement. Her teaching interests include sustainable community development, business and the community, and courses that introduce business concepts through a lens of system change; her research focuses on care ethics and questions how human relationships are altered by managerialist structures. Dr. Winham has served as a board member on labour, environmental, faith-based and business organizational boards including Forest Stewardship Council of Canada, Canadian Business for Social Responsibility, Canadian Media Guild, and Whistler Centre for Sustainability.

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CITATIONS & ADDITIONAL READING

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

United Nations - Gender Equity

UN Women

Women and Gender Equality in Canada

Federal Gender Equality Laws in Canada

Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality

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