



CARE BAROMETER

Discovering What Women **Care** About

**riverbed**



## I. INTRODUCTION

# What women care about

At Riverbed we believe that everyone is guided by their radius of care; the things, people, ideas and causes they care most about. This radius of care is important, because it shapes our aspirations and inspires our actions, which leave traces that ripple out into the world. The more we care, the bigger the ripple.

**Our research seeks to discover what women care about, because if they care enough, they can move mountains...**





## I. INTRODUCTION

# Why this research matters

### **Ever heard of the Matthew Effect (Merton 1973)?**

It posits that those who begin with advantage, accumulate more advantage over time.

Sadly, the opposite is true for women. Whilst women lead with advantage from a young age with more women completing their matric and more women graduating from university; female representation in the workplace starts to decline rapidly once they enter the labour market with only **13%** of women serving as executive directors for JSE-listed companies.

**What shifts once women enter the job market, and raise families? Our empathy-led research asks women what they care about and more importantly, what is getting in their way.**





## II. METHODOLOGY

# Empathy-led approach

Our empathy-led approach sought to probe beyond the data and find **unique insights** that help us understand women's aspirations and the tension between their daily reality and the things that impede their ability to succeed.





## II. METHODOLOGY

### Quantitative Surveys

Women in South African major metros, aged **18** to **60**, earning **R20 000+** personal income per month. Nationally representative.

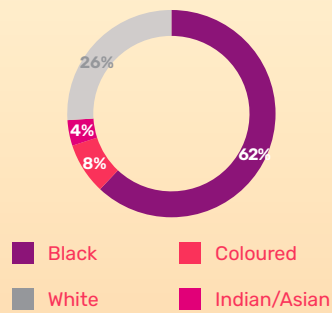
**n=200**

### Qualitative In-depth Interviews

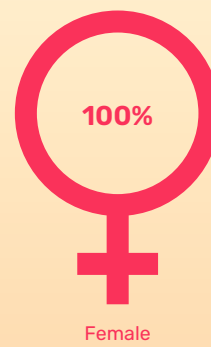
Women in Johannesburg and Pretoria, aged **37 – 50**, senior and executive management and business owners.

**n=8**

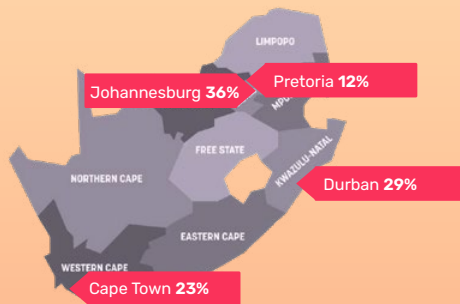
#### RACE



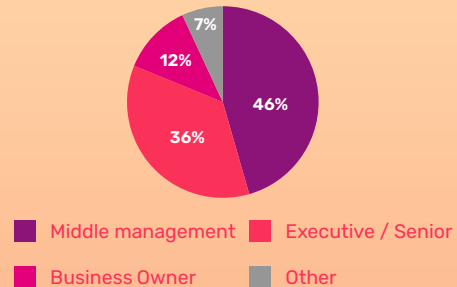
#### GENDER



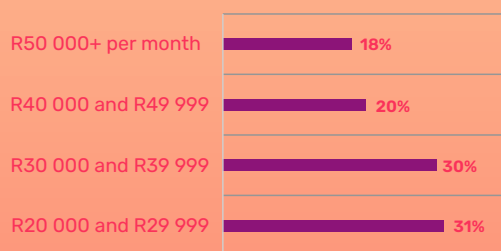
#### LOCATION



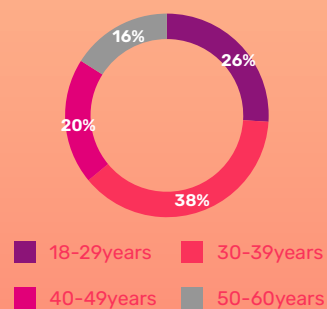
#### EMPLOYMENT POSITION



#### PERSONAL MONTHLY INCOME



#### AGE





III. FINDINGS

# Women's Aspirations



# Women aren't looking for a seat

**at the table.** *They just need the food that's on it.*

## What women care about

Our research revealed that women's ambitions are often curtailed by their circumstances and their lives are a constant juggle of prioritisation. This leaves little time for them to focus on future aspirations or to discover what they care about beyond what is in front of them.

So, while there is so much attention on more women occupying leadership roles, the truth is that most women are focused on their financial independence whilst juggling work and family priorities. Many are held back from advancing in their careers because of their socio-cultural context and by the systemic and structural systems in the workplace that aren't in service of women's aspirations.

In addition to that, women often get in their own way. Low self esteem, imposter syndrome and a heightened fear of failure are internal barriers that women need to overcome.

Women that have succeeded however, understand that they must challenge convention and redefine their role in both the workplace and at home in a way that gives them agency over the duality and multiplicity of their daily lives.



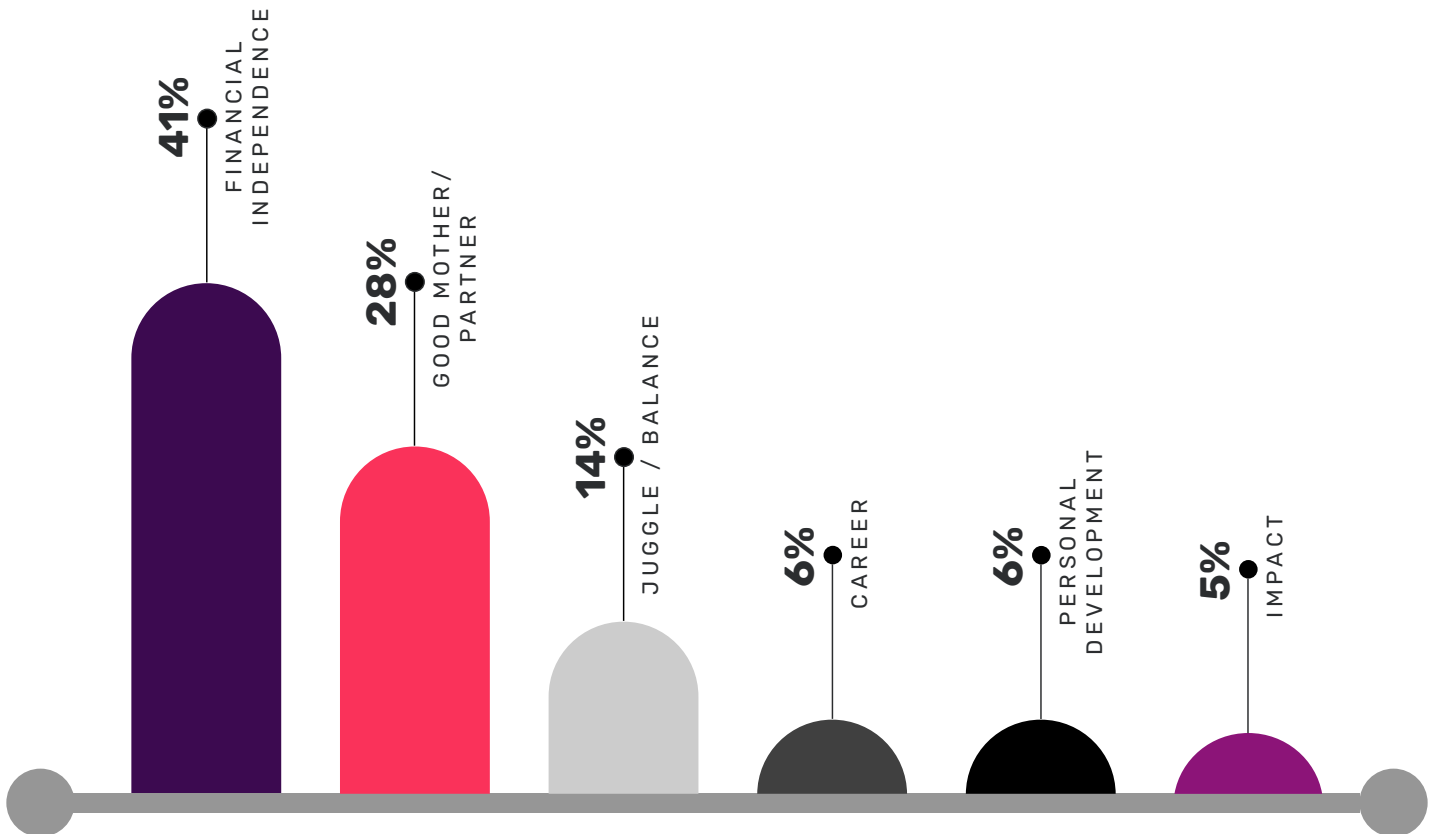
# Care barometer

**Overwhelmingly, women want to be financially independent and want to be good mothers and look after their families.**

**41%** of our respondents said their financial independence is what they care about the most. Being a good mother and partner were equally important, with women clear about the need to be financially secure in order to care for and raise their children.

These aspirations are mutually inclusive and result in a constant juggle of prioritization. The resultant tension between work and family is often far removed from personal ambitions as women focus more on their immediate needs and family expectations. Being with a financially responsible partner is less prevalent as well as investment in career and education.

At **6%** personal and career advancement had one of the lowest rankings, highlighting the barriers standing in the way of women's aspirations. This is in complete contradiction of the Matthew Effect, and any advantage women might have had is eroded. The data shows that women have to build the foundation of a good home, good motherhood and finances first before prioritising career advancement and personal development.





**41%**

of respondents ranked financial independence as the most important thing they care about.

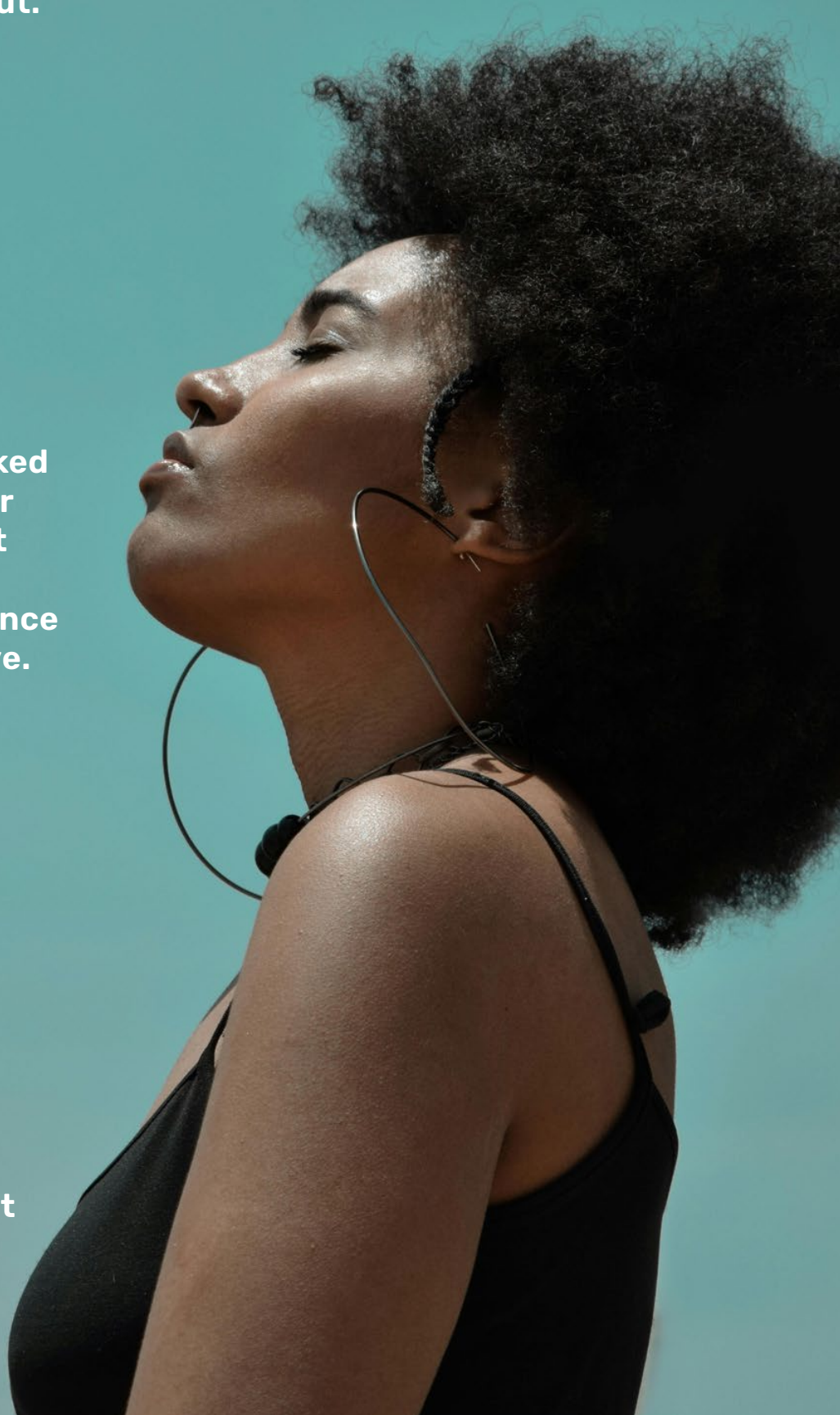
**28%**

of respondents ranked being a good mother and partner as most important, citing financial independence as mutually inclusive.

With so much in the way, only

**6%**

of respondents saw career advancement as a priority.



## Career Aspirations

Women's career journeys are never linear. They evolve over time and are often interrupted by family and socio-cultural responsibilities and influenced and shaped by self-belief and allies in leadership positions.

It's low ranking is symbolic of the many roles women play and the time deficit experienced in trying to do it all. Although many want to advance their careers or build their businesses, the challenges faced in doing so limits the number of women that are able to succeed.

Once women have succeeded, many of them care about mentoring other women mainly due to the struggles they faced.

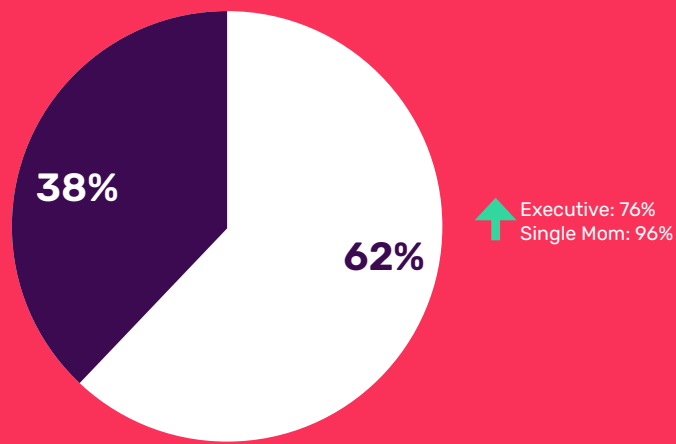
Women's career journeys are never linear.



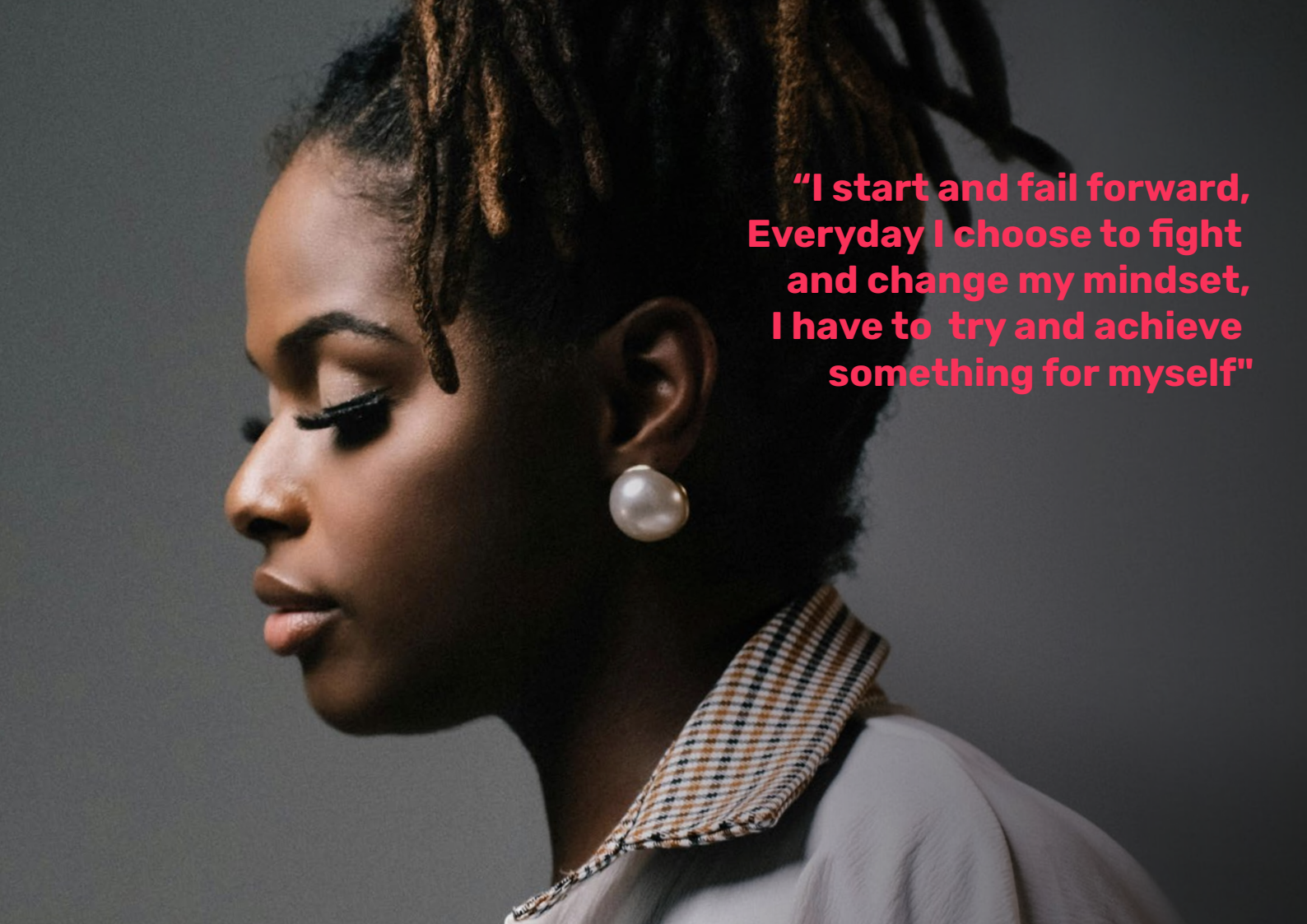
# Financial decision-making

**62%** of women make financial decisions alone and **38%** make financial decisions with someone else. This number should be seen in the context of **46%** of our sample being single. It is encouraging to see that women are not entirely financially disempowered and reliant on a partner for financial support.


## DECISIONS ABOUT FINANCIAL SPENDING



- I make my financial decision alone most of the time
- I make my financial decision with someone else most of the time

A close-up, profile shot of a woman with dark hair styled in braids. She is wearing a pearl earring and a light-colored blazer with a patterned collar. Her eyes are closed, and she has a contemplative expression.

**"I start and fail forward,  
Everyday I choose to fight  
and change my mindset,  
I have to try and achieve  
something for myself"**

A close-up shot of a woman holding a baby. The woman is looking down at the baby with a gentle smile. The baby is wearing a white top with large polka dots and is looking towards the camera.

**"I was only able to focus  
on my career after my  
children were older.  
I could never find time  
to do both."**



III. FINDINGS

# What's standing in the way?



"We look like we're running the same race,  
but we have to get over several  
**obstacles** that men **don't** regularly  
have to think about."





## **The many obstacles**

Barriers to success are multi-layered and are exacerbated by the multiple tasks women need to manage and the multiple roles that they play as mothers, caregivers, partners and so much more. There is a lot getting in women's way. Balancing work, family, and personal aspirations remains a challenge, with increased family time often at the expense of career growth.

Due to generational gender priming and socio-cultural pressures, some women often don't see beyond their roles as partners, mothers and daughters, which impacts their career choices and limits their ability to even think of any broader aspirations. Traditional gender roles force women to juggle unrealistic expectations.

The workplace presents a different set of challenges, with rigid workplace policies that don't accommodate non-linear growth.

**Barriers to success are multi-faceted.**

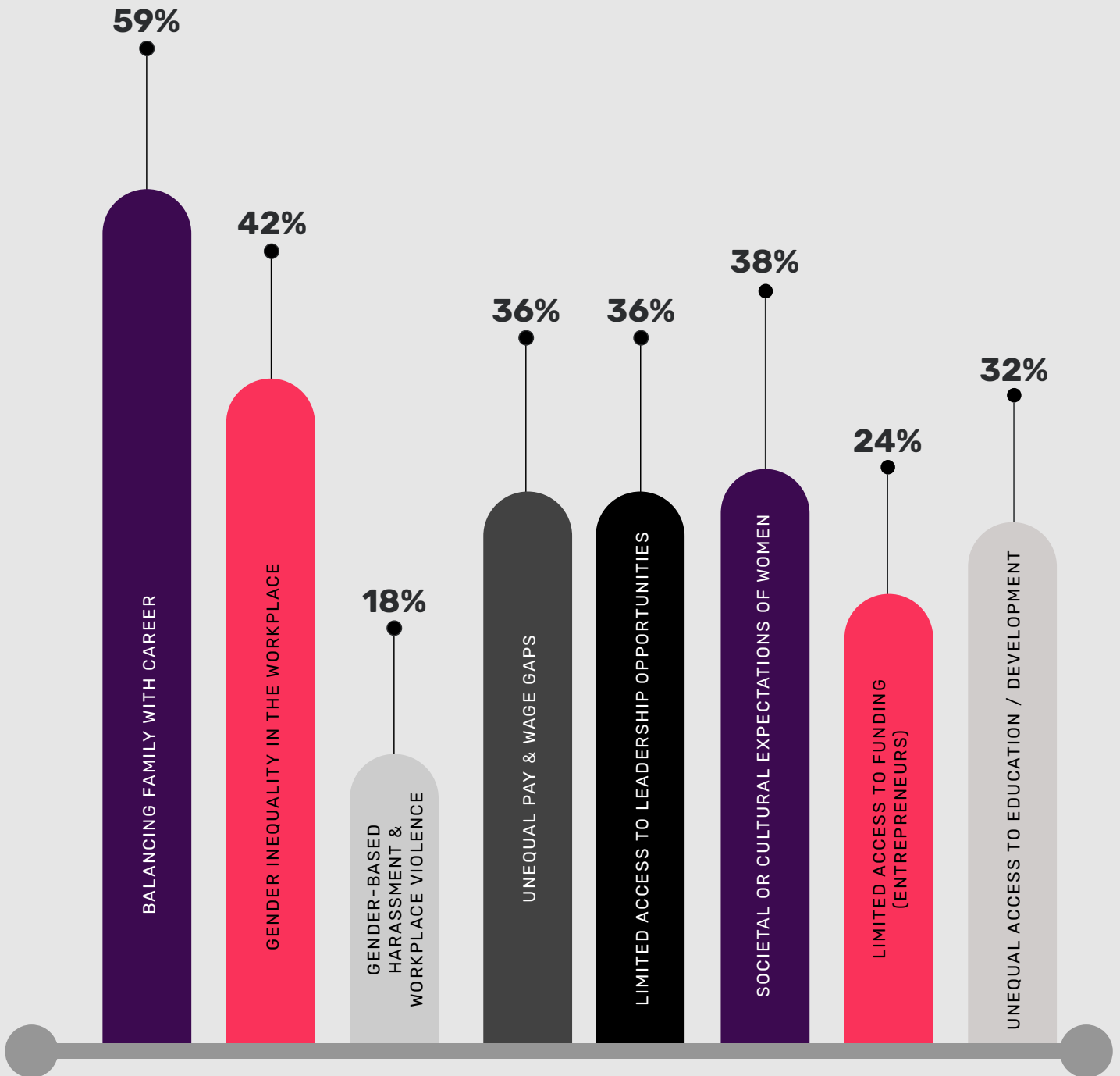
**Barriers to success are multi-faceted.**

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**Barriers to success are multi-faceted.**

# Challenges women face

The biggest challenge to women's success is balancing their family and career. The strain of "doing it all" has an impact on women thinking beyond their immediate pressures whilst the socio-cultural context of many women remains an inhibitor to growth.



↑ ↓ Significantly higher/lower vs total at 95% Confidence Interval





**59%**

Balancing family and work is their biggest barrier to success

**42%**

Gender inequality in the workplace limits my opportunities

**38%**

Societal and cultural expectations hold me back from doing what is important to me

# The Confidence *gap*

**1 in 3**

women believe that their low self-esteem and their confidence hold them back.



# The confidence gap

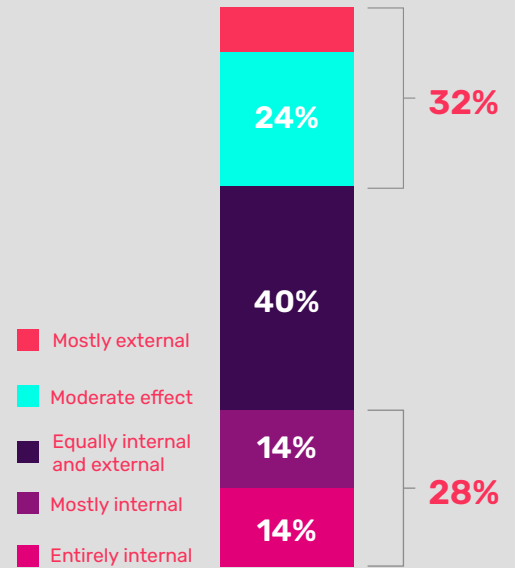
For women, barriers are seen to culminate both from internal choices and external circumstances, highlighting how **women are sometimes their own detractors**. The load of expectations across family and work seems to exacerbate this.



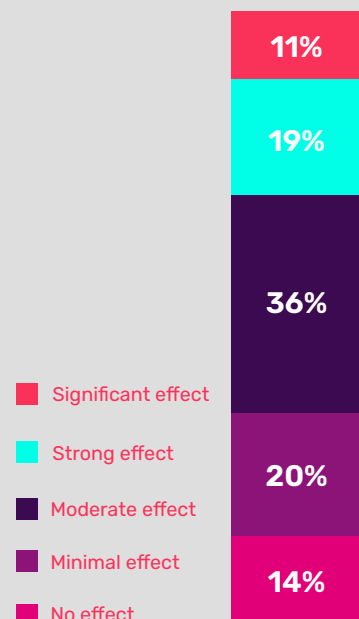
**"I held myself back and I didn't have the confidence to make the leap. I couldn't answer the question "why not me" "**

Many women expressed that they have high levels of confidence in themselves, however their confidence declines when in a workplace environment. Women in executive roles found that they had to overcome this in order to get ahead. Many women experience Imposter Syndrome and constantly question their right to be in leadership roles.

## EXTERNAL VS INTERNAL BARRIERS

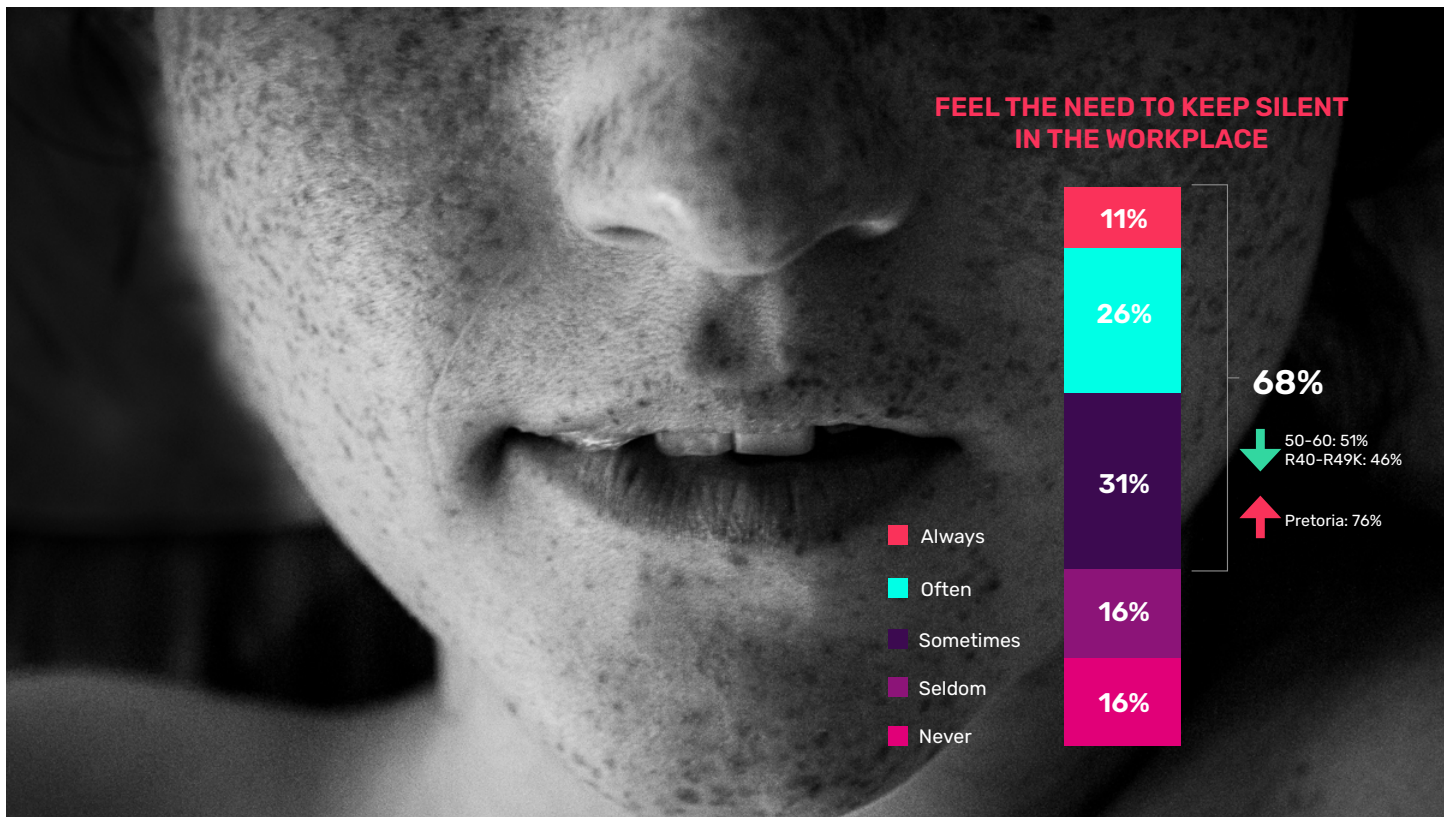


## EFFECT OF MALE WORKPLACE ON CONFIDENCE



# Keeping silent to avoid conflict

68% of women don't always feel safe or confident in work environments dominated by men. The lack of psychological safety diminishes their right to be heard. This is less prominent for higher income earners.



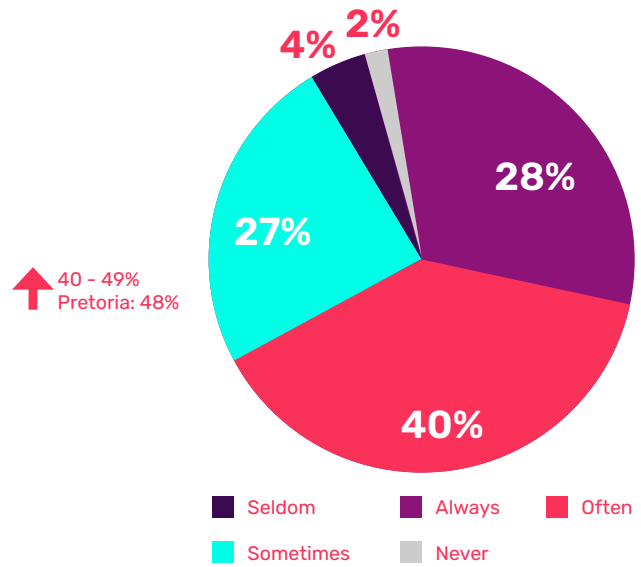
## THE CONFIDENCE GAP

Base: n=200

33% of women do not feel safe all the time. This percentage echoes the number of women that have experienced **some form of abuse** in South Africa.

The impact of abuse and sexual harassment impact on women's self confidence and their agency. They significantly influence women's self-belief and their capacity to dream bigger than their current circumstances.

## FEEL SAFE AND SECURE



**33%**

**1 in 3 women DO NOT feel safe and secure on a regular basis.**



# A socio-cultural construct that doesn't favour progress



THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

**“Stop raising females to be wives.**

If I had been raised as an  
independent individual first,  
I would not have been in this situation.”

# Social and Cultural Constructs

<b>Traditional Gender Roles</b>	Women are expected to prioritise caregiving over career ambitions.
<b>Marriage Expectations and Family Pressures</b>	Women often face discouragement from pursuing high-powered careers.
<b>Judgment for Career Choices</b>	Women are criticised for being either too ambitious or not family-oriented enough.
<b>“Pull Her Down” Syndrome</b>	Internalised gender biases sometimes cause women to compete against rather than uplift one another.
<b>Cultural Expectations Around Leadership</b>	Women are not always encouraged to pursue leadership positions due to deep-rooted norms.

**THE IMPACT**

**Feel discouraged. Unrealistic expectations and biases = burnout.**

**QUAL**





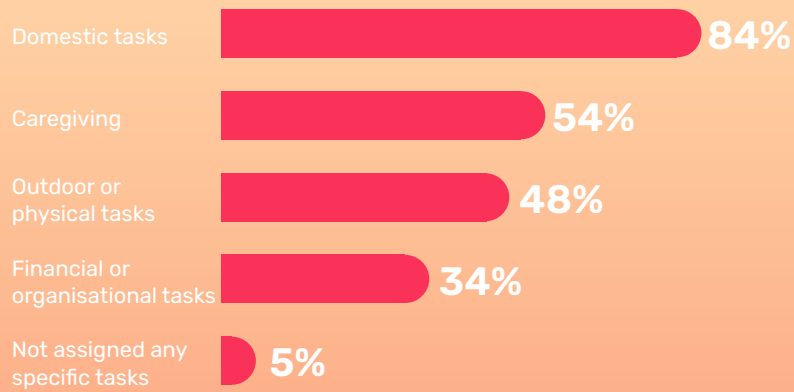
**95%**

**of women are primed  
for housework and  
care giving from an  
early age**

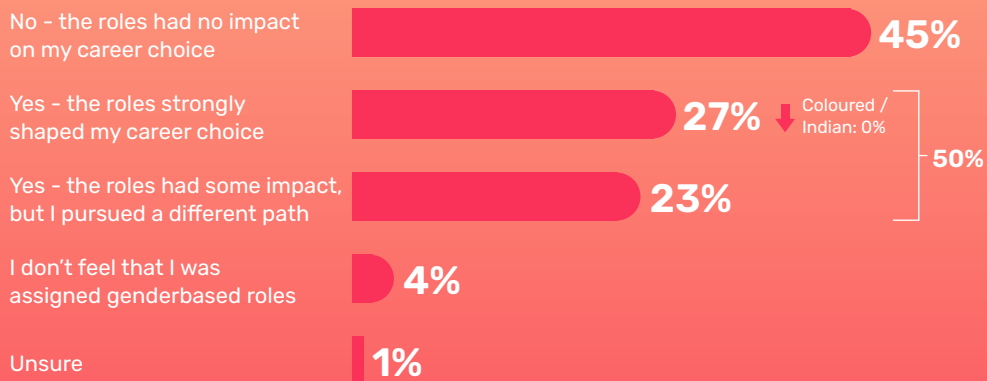
# Gender Roles and Career Choice

95% of women are primed for care giving and expected to do chores in the home. This upbringing creates the foundation of how women define their roles and place in society. Being overprotected in the home environment makes women more risk averse in the workplace.

## ROLES ASSIGNED GROWING UP



## DISCRIMINATION BASED ON:





THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

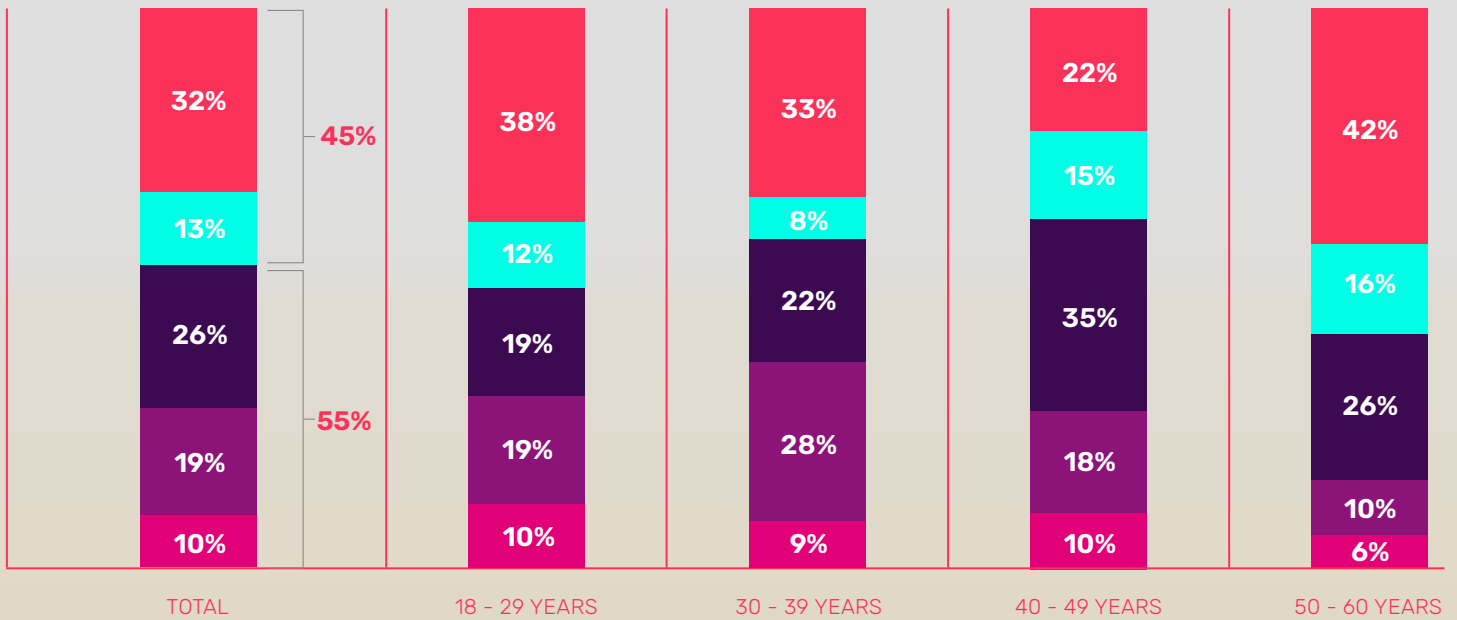
**56%**

see patriarchy and  
cultural expectations  
as a barrier to  
their success.

# Influence of culture on women's ability to succeed

**30-49-year-olds** feel this pressure more than other ages with **50-60-year-olds** feeling it the least.

## EFFECT OF FAMILY & CULTURE



- No effect
- Minimal effect
- Moderate effect
- Strong effect
- Significant effect

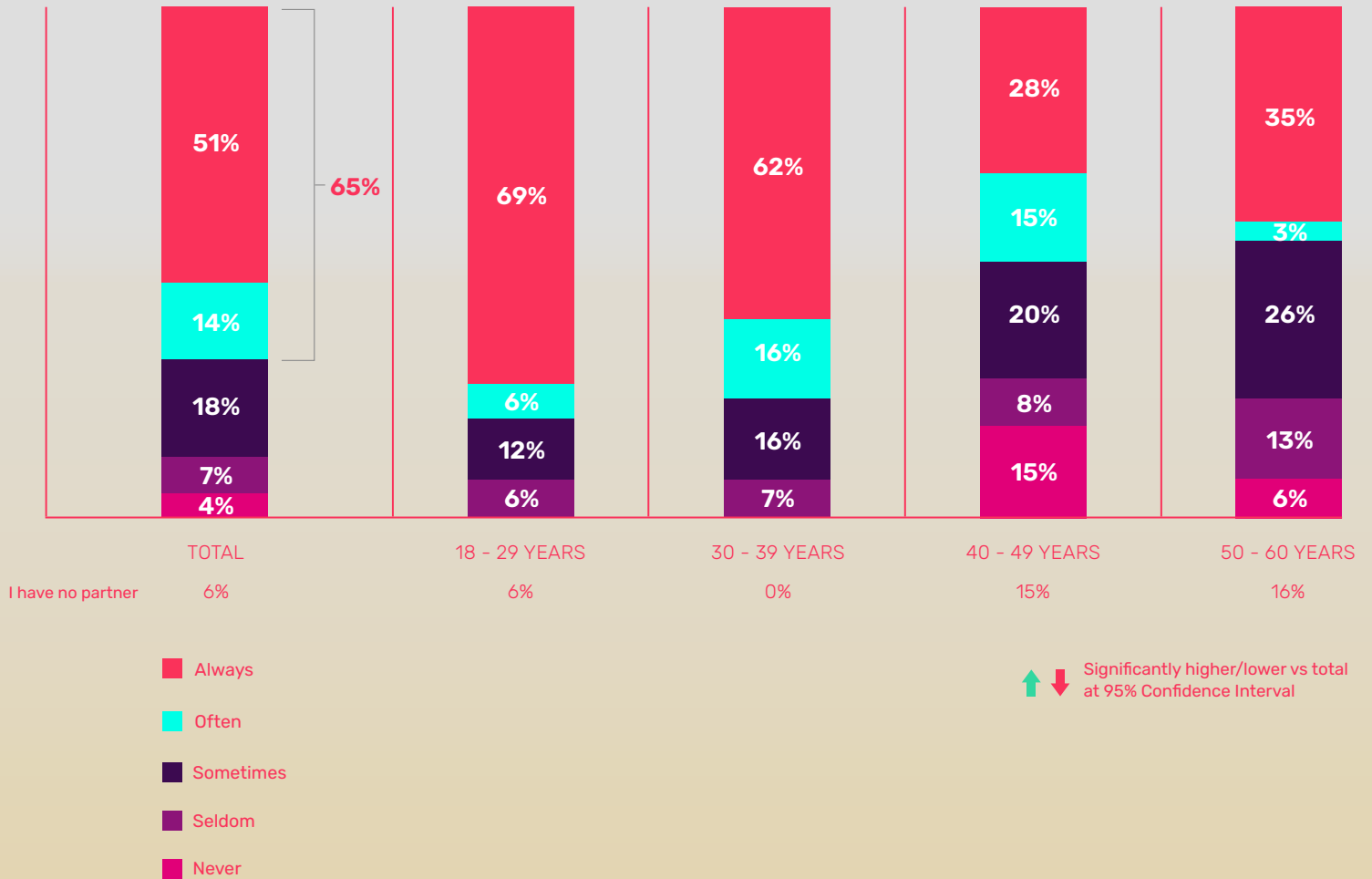
↑ ↓ Significantly higher/lower vs total at 95% Confidence Interval



# Career aspirations supported by partner

**65%** do feel supported by their partner, driven by younger females.  
**40-49 year-olds are under the most pressure**, feeling significantly less supported by their partners.  
**23%** in this age bracket have received very little partner support if any.

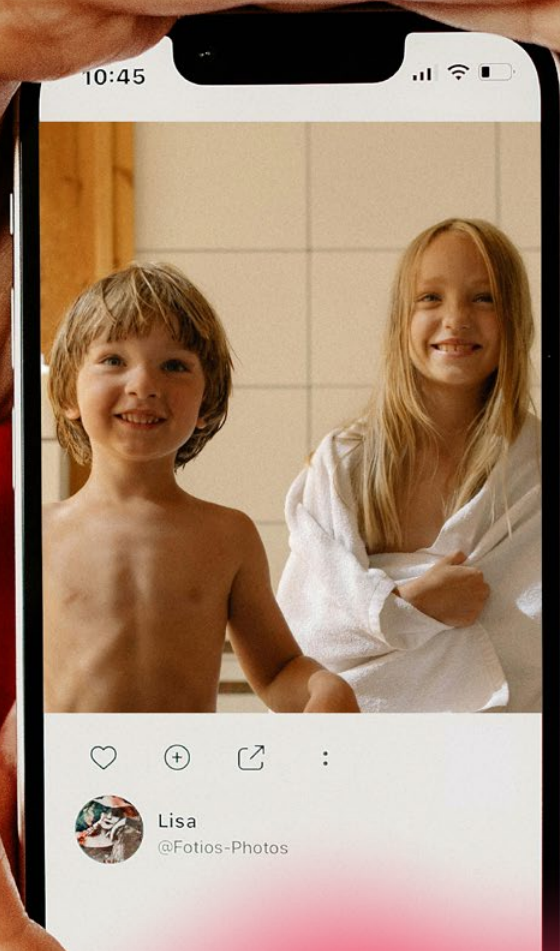
## PARTNER SUPPORT



# Work and life tension with a constant juggle to do it all



**"I always try to believe I can be a good mother and chase my career. Sometimes I find it draining to do both."**





# Time allocation vs. priorities

Many women encounter challenges in aligning their daily time use with their core priorities. This misalignment often results in a disconnect between their personal aspirations and lived experiences, which can hinder career advancement, disrupt work-life integration, and limit opportunities for personal growth.

## WHAT WOMEN EXPRESS THEY PRIORITISE

- Being a good mother and/or partner.
- Balancing career and family.
- Financial independence.
- Advancing career and business.
- Investing in education and personal growth.
- Making an impact and mentorship.
- Work-life boundaries and well-being.
- Recognition and respect in Leadership.
- Redefining success beyond career titles.



## ACTUAL TIME SPENT

- Household and caregiving duties dominate.
- Work-related demands.
- Securing stability and overcoming barriers.
- Navigating discrimination and bias.
- Proving themselves and gaining authority.
- Much more time is spent overcoming structural barriers, proving their worth, managing family responsibilities, and fighting for financial stability.



## CONSEQUENCES AND ADJUSTMENTS

- Some women sacrifice career growth to focus on family responsibilities.
- Others reduce personal well-being to meet career and family expectations.
- Women who push for career advancement often struggle with societal pressure and judgment.



## GAPS AND BARRIERS

- Career stagnation.
- Less time for networking, leadership roles, and business growth.
- Increased burnout Struggling to maintain all roles leads to exhaustion.
- Struggling to maintain all roles leads to exhaustion.
- Emotional toll. Women experience guilt, dissatisfaction, and stress.

# Women always have to make trade-offs

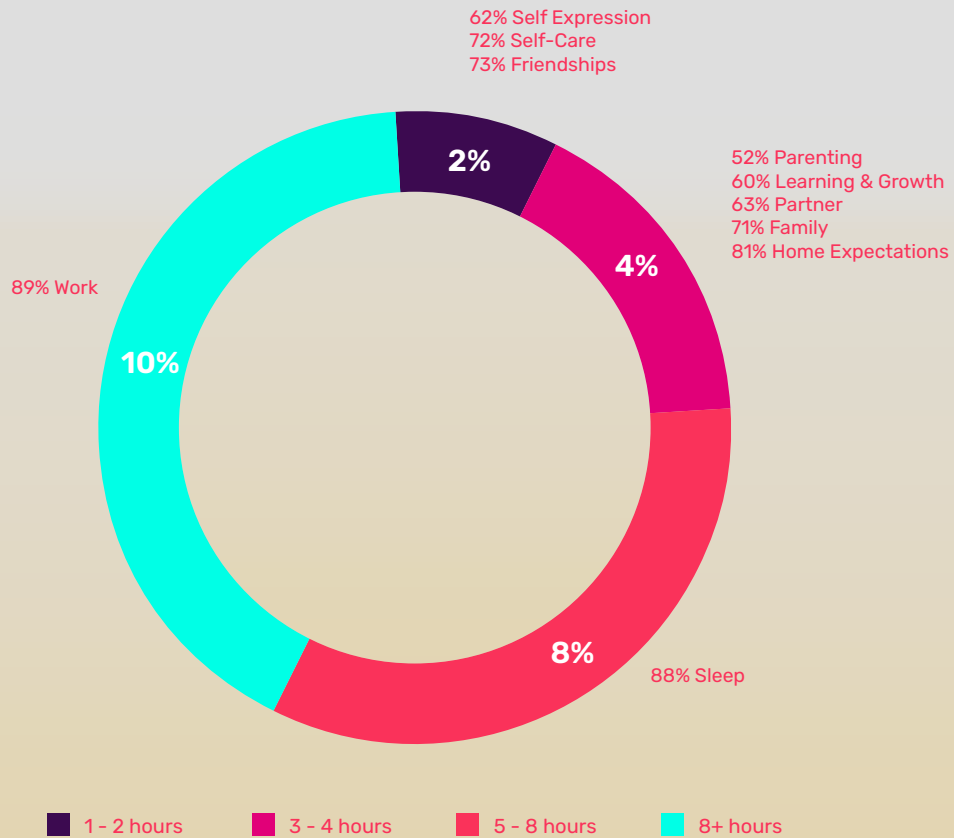
## 89%

of women spend more than 8 hours a day on work dispelling the myth that women don't spend enough time at work because they are raising children. It also highlights that women struggle to have enough time to focus on personal aspirations due to the need to work harder and longer to prove themselves relative to their male counterparts.

## 1-2 hrs

Very little time is spent on self care and personal development.

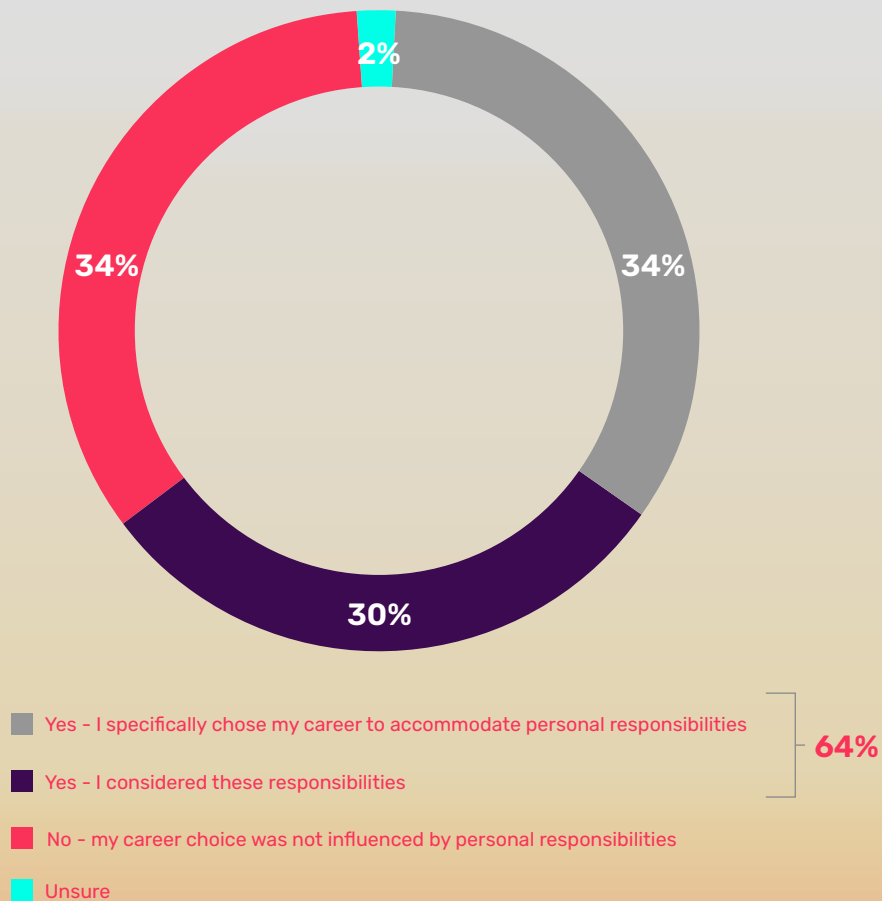
TIME SPENT ON PRIORITIES



# Work-life balance & career consideration

The **pressure** to carve out time as a Mother and Wife to meet personal responsibilities/expectations has a direct impact for **64%** of women's consideration of career choice.

## BALANCING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES & CAREER CHOICE





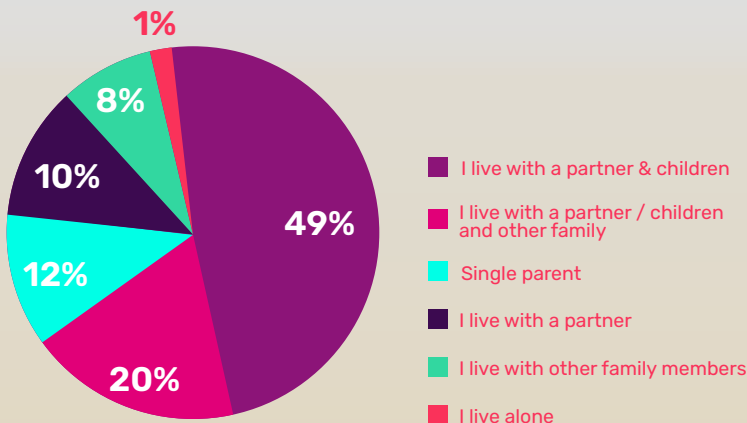
**59%**

of women believe  
that balancing work  
and family is the  
biggest barrier to  
career advancement.

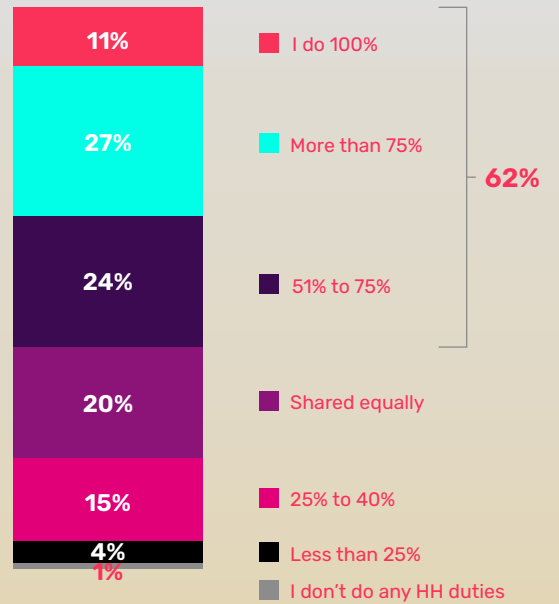
# Living situation and household responsibilities

Half the sample lives with a partner and children. **11% do 100% of household chores**, whilst **62%** do more than half the chores in the home. This is indicative of our findings on the constant juggle for women to do it all.

LIVING SITUATION



NON-PAID-FOR HOUSEHOLD DUTIES





WORK AND LIFE TENSION

"I refuse to see **barriers**;  
they are just opportunities  
to learn, to grow, and to  
challenge the status quo."



III. FINDINGS

# Gender and workplace incongruence



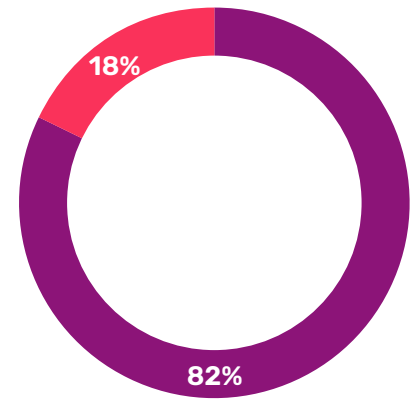
**"I had to fight harder,  
push longer, and work smarter,  
just to get a seat  
at the table."**



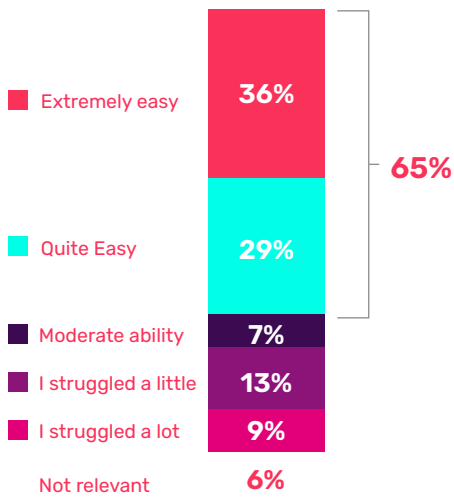
# Falling pregnant

**29%** of expectant mothers struggled to communicate their pregnancy at work for fear of negative repercussions. **25%** felt their pregnancy impacted their work and almost half (**48%**) felt it limited their career growth aspirations, less so for White females.

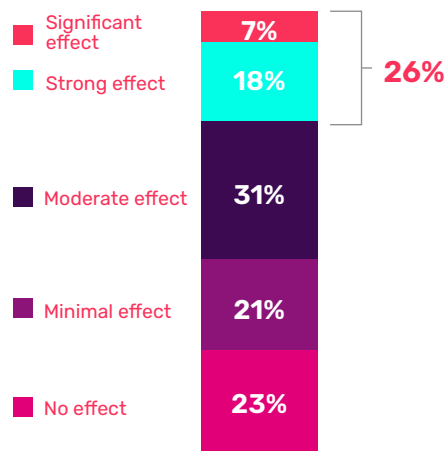
Yes  
No



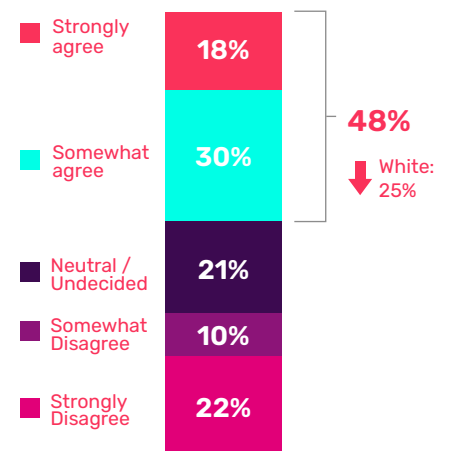
## EASE OF COMMUNICATING PREGNANCY WITH BOSS



## IMPACT OF PREGNANCY ON MY WORK



## PREGNANCY HINDERS CAREER GROWTH



↑ ↓ Significantly higher/lower vs total at 95% Confidence Interval

Base: n=200  
Mothers: n=164





# Sexual Harassment

<b>Male Intimidation Tactics</b>	Women face subtle and overt discouragement in asserting authority.
<b>Sexual Harassment and Inappropriate Behaviour</b>	Many women experience sexual coercion, inappropriate advances, or exclusion when rejecting advances.
<b>Being Undermined and Second-Guessed</b>	Women's ideas and expertise are questioned more often than men's.
<b>Labelled as 'Difficult' or 'Emotional'</b>	Women in leadership who assert themselves are often criticised for their tone or demeanour.
<b>Lack of Inclusive Policies</b>	Workplace policies still cater more to traditional male career trajectories.



## THE IMPACT

Women don't always feel safe at work, sometimes avoid spaces with males who behave inappropriately. Reinforces male-dominated leadership and hinders success.

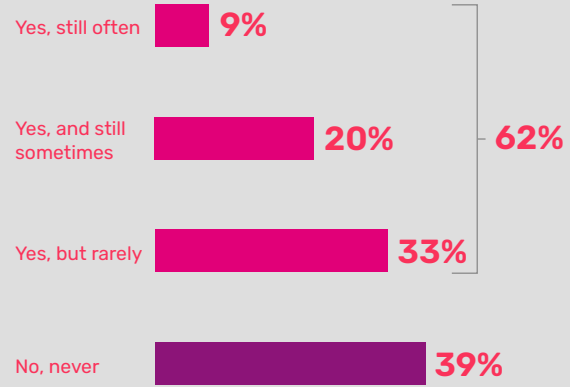
QUAL

# Male intimidation in the workplace

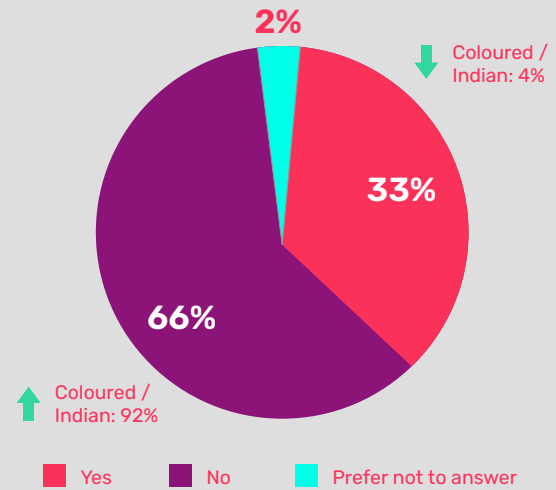
6 out of 10 women experience intimidation by male colleagues that impacts their career progression. A third have experienced inappropriate sexual advances in the workplace with 45% of these women saying it has very to extremely high impact on their ability to succeed, driven by higher income earners.



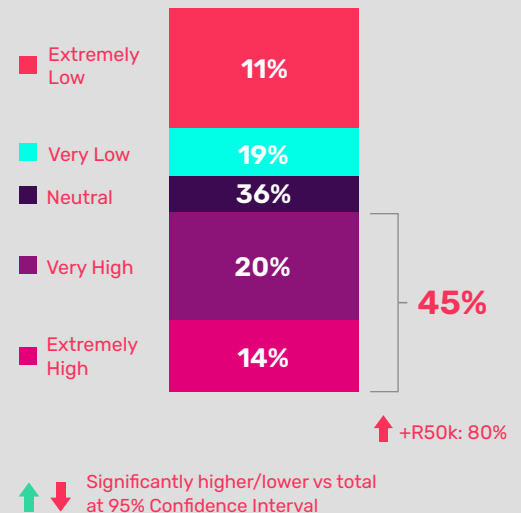
## INTIMIDATION BY MALE COLLEAGUES INFLUENCING CAREER TRAJECTORY



## INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR FROM MALE COLLEAGUES



## MALE SEXUAL ATTENTION: IMPACT ON MY CAREER





# Corporate challenges

<b>Gender Bias and Stereotypes</b>	Women must work harder to be recognised, while men's potential is often assumed.
<b>Leadership Scrutiny</b>	Women in leadership roles face increased scepticism and are held to higher standards.
<b>Gender Pay Gap</b>	Despite equal qualifications and experience, women still earn less than men.
<b>Exclusion from Networking Opportunities</b>	Many leadership discussions happen in male-dominated spaces.
<b>Lack of Mentorship and Sponsorship</b>	Fewer senior women leaders mean fewer mentorship opportunities for aspiring female professionals.



## THE IMPACT

**Women work harder and longer to prove themselves. Exclusion creates slower career progression, fewer promotions, and gender pay gaps.**

**30%**

**of women report that working in a male-dominated environment significantly impacts their confidence and sense of belonging.**

# Structural and Systemic Barriers

<b>Rigid Career Progression Models</b>	Career paths are often interrupted by family responsibilities, yet workplaces don't accommodate non-linear growth.
<b>Lack of Female Representation in Leadership</b>	Fewer women in executive roles mean fewer role models and less advocacy for gender equity.
<b>Expectation to "Dial Up" Masculinity</b>	Women feel pressure to behave in traditionally male ways to fit into leadership roles.
<b>Assumption That Women Need Extra Help</b>	Women of colour face additional biases regarding their competence.
<b>Limited Access to Decision-Making Spaces</b>	Women are often excluded from highlevel discussions, reducing their influence in key business decisions.

**THE IMPACT**

**Systemic biases and exclusion make it harder for women to be heard, respected, and included in leadership decisions.**



IV. CONCLUSION

# Harnessing Success

## What do women want to see

Women want to succeed and make meaningful contributions to the communities in which they serve. They want to own their womanness and see it as a superpower not a barrier. They also realise that they can't do it alone, and need the support of other women and people in power to help drive the change that they seek. Outside of the workplace

women believe that success must be redefined to support the unique differences between men and women. Most importantly what women care about has to be enabled first by self, and be supported and transformed by family, business and society.

- 1 Address our own self-limiting beliefs
- 2 Empowering women to be financially independent
- 3 Balanced, complimentary equality, not sameness
- 4 Changing the definition of success
- 5 Promoting equal parenting & domestic responsibility
- 6 Reducing workplace gender bias & sexualisation
- 7 Eliminating female sabotaging & internalised bias
- 8 Supporting women in leadership

"**Success** isn't just about the money or the title—it's about impact, about what you leave behind for those who follow."

"We need to do better to believe that we are as **more than capable**"

"**I refuse to be strong.**  
I am not 'Mbokodo'.  
I am a marshmallow,  
and I walk away  
from what does not  
serve me."



**“As a woman, I’ve learned this truth: never let your gender define or limit your ambitions. Your aspirations are valid, powerful, and worth pursuing.”**

**Monalisa Sibongile Zwambila  
Riverbed  
CEO & Founder**





# Earned Advantage Through the Power of Care

In today's hyper-connected, socially driven world, attention is no longer something brands can simply buy—it must be earned. At Riverbed, we believe the most powerful way to earn that attention is through care—care that is intentional, empathetic, and deeply human.

Our research is a call to action: for brands to lead with empathy, to act in the best interests of their people and their communities, and to build connections that are not only seen but felt. Because influence today doesn't come from volume—it comes from values.

In a world shaped by belief and emotion, brands that understand what people care about—what they value, feel, and stand for—are the ones that rise above the noise. This is where empathy-based marketing becomes a strategic advantage. It's not surface-level sentiment. It's insight-driven, personalized, and rooted in authenticity.

By caring enough to ask better questions, to listen more deeply, and to respond with relevance, brands can unlock the kind of emotional resonance that drives real change. This is how we create an earned advantage—a competitive edge that can't be bought, only built through trust, relevance, and care. This is the power of care. This is how brands earn their place in people's lives—and stay there.

Why brands should care. Why brands should care. Why brands should care. Why brands should care.

## **Monalisa Sibongile Zwambila** Founder and CEO Riverbed

Women thrive when empowered to pursue what matters most to them, free from the limitations imposed by gender. I hope this research enables organisations to recognise both the immense potential women hold and the barriers that obscure it. Through a shared belief in the power of care to inspire action we can all do our bit to help more women rise.



## **Jenni Ruth-Coggin** CEO I Can Do Life

Our approach was grounded in empathy. We asked deeper and more thoughtful questions to uncover the core beliefs that shape women's experiences. By connecting with these beliefs, this research creates the foundation for meaningful and lasting change.



### **Care to connect with us**

[hello@theriverbed.co.za](mailto:hello@theriverbed.co.za)

[www.theriverbed.co.za](http://www.theriverbed.co.za)



# riverbed

create positive impact