

#powerwomenspeak

22 PowerWomen/6 Top Insights

By Jackie Hatton in collaboration with twenty-two members of the PowerWomen Network UK: Guita Blake, Tamara Box, Kimberley Cole, Sarah Galloway, Kate Grussing, Merle Hall, Lisa Harrington, Fiona Hathorn, Alison Horrocks, Shiva McMahon, Ursula Morgernstern, Olga Muscat, Maria Grazia Pecorari, Tanuja Randery, Antoinette Raymond, Madhavi Reddy, Claudia Ruiz-Graham, Rebecca Thomas, Fabienne Viala, Tracy Watkinson, Isabelle de Vernon, and Deborah Zurkow.

Earlier this year I spoke with twenty-two members—approximately a third—of PowerWomen UK—a culturally diverse cross-industry network of very senior (and rising) business women currently living and working in London. They are a diverse group of powerful women and their observations represent over five hundred combined years of work experience. Here in brief are six of their strongest insights.*

1. PowerWomen are independent. Strong leaders. Outspoken. They hold their own in the world of men. That is not, however, the full criteria for independence. Real female independence is financial independence. Contemporary western norms continue to stereotype women as either financial dependents or secondary earners. Powerful women do not see themselves that way. They are comfortable being the breadwinners. We don't talk about this enough and we should. Financial necessity is an important driver for successful women. If more young women were made aware of the importance of financial self-sufficiency, then more of them might seek career success.

“Financial independence, financial independence, financial independence.
As a woman you do not want to be dependent on a man.”

“A man is not a plan.”

“You need to know that you are making a financial choice if you opt out.”

* All quotations were provided by members of the PowerWomen Network

“Women need to get comfortable with the idea of being the breadwinner.”

2. Don't be naïve about gender inequality. At the start of their careers many PowerWomen didn't really experience or think about gender inequality. They became increasingly aware of the issues as they began to approach the top. Women currently hold more than 50% of entry-level positions but less than 7% of CEO roles. As they move past the middle ranks, the so-called permafrost, their opportunities shrink, new challenges arise, and gender inequality becomes a lived reality. Unless history is to keep repeating itself, younger women need to be better prepared to handle gender road blocks. Or they need to get involved earlier, be part of the process to remove the blocks.

“A lot of girls come into these companies thinking that everyone is equal and we all stand the same chances but as they progress in the hierarchy they see that... it's not all the same and they're not all treated the same way.”

“When I was younger I didn't really think there was a problem and thought that I'd had the same opportunities as everyone else. But obviously the more senior you get the more you realize, hang on, there's only me here, or me and one other, not that many women.”

“I used to think... if you're good enough you'll get there. I didn't understand that I'm a survey of one. When I became an angel investor... and learned that only 4% of angel investment cash goes to women even though they run 55% of businesses... it was my light-bulb moment.”

3. Women need to check their own gender bias. PowerWomen note that many of the women who drop out of senior career trajectories are responding to internalized gender bias. The job will be too hard. The family needs them. They are stymied by the incredibly strong pull of gender norms and expectations. They are not alone. Both women and men remain boxed into stereotypes created by societal expectations and norms. Female executives like PowerWomen are starting to normalize women in leadership role, but we also need to free the men to take on different roles.

“This is not a women issue; this is a society issue, and it goes extremely, extremely deep, and business is only a small part of it. And it is about how society perceives the split of work, and... overall sustainability versus competition in a workplace for men and women.”

“I was at a workshop on the origination of good behaviour and there was a group exercise,
men and women on different sides of the room...
The women got up and said 50% of you are going to marry ditzes...
One of the guys got up and said, yeah, but 100% of you want us to be a half-step ahead...
and that’s really fatiguing.”

“We need to change structurally, societally to make change happen”

4. Women in business need to stop competing against each other. It is not the way to succeed. Your competition is not that one other woman in the room. Stop believing that most of the top slots are reserved for men. Those slots are reserved for talent. The more women rise to the top, the easier it becomes to imagine the top filled with senior women. So support each other: do it for the metrics and do it for yourself.

“Part of the problem is that when women don’t support each other they are still fighting for that one spot and we shouldn’t be fighting for that one spot...
we should be fighting for fifty spots.”

“There is starting to be a conversation about helping women feel that the pie can only get bigger, that it’s not a zero-sum game. Until things change, women think that there are only one or two spots for them—and they don’t think they need to get ahead of all the guys...
That’s sad—but I’ve seen it often—and bad behaviours associated with that.”

“If we don’t help lift each other into positions we will still be here having this same conversation in ten years time.”

5. Work your Difference. PowerWomen all advocate retaining your individuality as you build your career. Don’t try to emulate male leaders. Don’t emulate anyone. Lead with authenticity. Be nurturing if you’re a nurturer. Be alpha if that’s what works for you. Be an enabler. Be dispassionate. Be passionate. Whatever you like. Wear what you like. Speak your own truth. PowerWomen are as different as they are alike. Just by virtue of being themselves and walking their own walk they send the message that there are many different kinds of successful women and just as many different ways to succeed.

“I made my personality a key weapon in winning over people.”

“Strong opinions, speaking up a lot, those are all positive characteristics.
My behavior isn’t masculine. It’s alpha and that’s just who I am.”

“It’s about leading with purpose, leading with meaning... that kind of leadership is a disruptive model to the stereotypical male model of leadership—non empathetic, hierarchical, stuff.”

“Everyone is passionate about different things.. I believe in leading from the heart.”

6. Women’s Networks Need to Become More Purposeful, More Powerful. PowerWomen believe in women’s networks—particularly when they are places to share quality information, build connections, do business, lead change. Unfortunately too many women’s networks don’t deliver enough benefits or wield enough power. There is little to gain from wine, nibbles and complaining. Women need their networks to be purposeful and successful. Run them like you’d run a business. Track members. Monitor results. Provide excellent content. Make sure that the members of the network are a good fit, that they can advise and assist each other. A great network provides an edge.

“Men have been back-channelling forever...
it’s time women learned how to use all those tools.”

“We need a power base... so joining together is important.”

“It is important that we talk about our collective career experiences... We are kept naïve if we don’t get our heads out there and recognise what the bigger world is like.”

“It is important for women to have opportunities to propel them in business because there are aspects of networking of my male colleagues I find very hard to replicate...”

“If we really want to help each other... we need to make sure we do business with each other.”

“If we talk to some of the right institutes to see how we can create better policies then women’s networks can help. But so far we haven’t taken that action. If it is our purpose to be very impactful we have to look at the policy angle... there is no other way.”