Hey Blue Eyes: Sexism Still at Work in the Modern Sales Workplace

By Lindsay R.L. Larson and Linda Mullen

Business-to-business sales has been a traditionally male-dominated field, though across a variety of industries there has been a modern shift in the gender landscape, with an increase in female sales agents entering the profession. However, the work environment may remain unwelcoming to this new generation of saleswomen. A set of two exploratory qualitative studies considers the issue of sexism in the sales environment from the perspective of 67 young saleswomen early in their careers (Study 1) and interviews with 6 sales recruiters (Study 2). Through thematic content analysis, it can be seen that a majority (76.12%) of this new generation of female sales professionals are facing sexism in the workplace (e.g.; gender discrimination or sexual harassment) both internally with colleagues and managers, as well as externally in dealing with clients. While young saleswomen and recruiters each recognize continued issues with sexism in the modern sales workplace, they also speak on the various initiatives being set in place to help attract, recruit, and support females in sales positions.

INTRODUCTION

While business-to-business (B2B) sales remains a male-dominated profession, a notable increase in women pursuing sales careers has been seen over the past several decades (Moncrief et al., 2000; Ladik et al., 2002). Women now make up over one-third of sales professionals (Linkedin, 2018), though promotion beyond entry level is less common (Lane and Crane, 2002). Although the current business and cultural environments are pushing women to pursue careers in what have been traditionally male-dominated fields, and while gains are being made in this respect, women still remain fairly underrepresented in sales at all levels.

Along with the rising number of women entering sales positions over the decades has come a modest amount of research on the topic of 'women in sales.' However, much of this existing research has focused on gender and performance / human resource outcomes (for example, comparisons of male and female attrition rates, Ladik et al., 2002; buyer evaluations of female representatives; Dion and Banting, 2000, Cook and Corey, 1991; gender and confidence in sales ability, Swan, Futrell and Todd, 1978), which may overlook the

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fact that gender variables are oftentimes "confounded by situational and structural effects" dictated by cultural traditions and socialization (Kanter, 2019). For this reason, early research on the topic led to a variety of counterproductive conclusions, for example, that saleswomen should actually be managed differently from salesmen based on presumably insurmountable gender differences (Fugate, Decker and Brewer, 1988; Gable and Reed, 1987). Modern discussions on the science of gender differences at work must recognize that the solution "is not to fix women… but to fix the conditions that undermine women and reinforce stereotypes" (Tinsley and Ely, 2018).

Thus, the current work environment that young saleswomen are now entering must be better understood, to assist in the pursuit of this research agenda. Younger women with less career experience are known to be especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and discrimination at work, due to both the power inequity they encounter as well as their relative lack of preparation to challenge inappropriate conduct (EEOC, 'Chart of Risk Factors'). Therefore, a perspective on the experiences of this particular set of young women early in their career could be especially telling. While discussions of sexism at work seem a part of the current cultural zeitgeist, in a 2017 survey of American men (Horowitz and Stepler, 2017), 44% opined that the country has done enough to promote gender equality, and an additional 13% of men felt that the country has actually gone too far in these efforts.

Meanwhile, among millennial women, 52% report having personally experienced gender discrimination in areas such as hiring, pay and promotion (Horowitz and Stepler, 2017).

Early research on women in sales also made the bold claim that gender bias in hiring, promoting, and purchasing was nearly eradicated as of the late 1980's (Russ and McNeilly, 1988). Equally optimistic for its time, early studies on buyer impressions of saleswomen (Cook and Corey, 1991) claimed no evidence of gender stereotyping on the part of purchasing agents, based on self-report from buyers without consideration for the confounds of social desirability bias in self-report data. Studies of women in sales has slowed significantly since the early 2000's, and surprisingly little to no modern recent research has endeavored to examine the perspective and personal experiences of sexism faced by women in the sales force. Would today's saleswomen agree with this egalitarian vision of the current sales environment and her place within it? The position of this manuscript commences with the following primary research question:

What kinds of experiences with sexism are young female sales representatives facing early in their careers, internally within their organization and/or externally in interactions with clients?

SEXISM AND SALES: THE EXISTING LITERATURE

Though much of it is over a decade old, a look at existing research on sexism and sales may elucidate the conditions that young women beginning their careers might expect to face. B2B sales is a truly unique occupation (Morgan and Martin, 2006), as sales representatives are typically working alone one-on-one with clients and prospects out in the field, and the revenue of their company relies on these interactions. B2B sales also involves informal socializing with both clients and the sales team outside of the office. This is not only a standard part of the job, but also instrumental for the success of a sales representative (Morgan and Martin, 2006) and can create situations in which saleswomen are expected to somehow operate differently than their male colleagues. For example, saleswomen in the past (Catalyst, 1995) reported avoiding social situations that

they recognized as advantageous to their careers, in order to deflect impressions of sexual impropriety. Likewise, some married male clients would refuse to meet these saleswomen alone, for fear of being seen in public with another woman other than their wife. The women in this 1995 study noted the exhausting mental work of constantly monitoring and de-escalating sexually charged interactions with clients and colleagues, as they regularly encountered a sexualized work environment that was identified as merely "part of the job." Unfortunately these experiences come as no surprise, as sexism in the form of sexual harassment and gender discrimination against women has historically been a more common problem within work environments not traditionally seen as 'female' (Collinson and Collinson, 1996). Are these unique interpersonal aspects of sales still creating difficulties and disadvantages for young saleswomen early in their careers today?

When considering stereotypes that may impact modern saleswomen, two classic gender role stereotypes can be re-examined: the belief that women are less committed to paid work than their male colleagues, and that women are less capable of performing certain types of work (Lane, 2000). For example, early studies revealed an assumption that women are somehow less motivated by the pay structure of a typical commission-based sales position because they may already be supported by a husband's income, or, if they are single that they are somehow less reliable employees than single men (Morgan & Knights, 1991). It has also been documented that saleswomen are believed to be overly sympathetic towards customers at the expense of their own company's bottom line due to their (supposed) inherently sensitive natures (Comer and Jolson, 1991). Furthermore, there exists a belief among men that female sales representatives may strategically utilize sex appeal to buttress the sales pitch of a weak product (Glick, Chrislock, Petersik, Vijay & Turek, 2008). Are these same stereotypes still at play today, in the eyes of young saleswomen?

Saleswomen have also been known to face performance-support bias. In a study of a financial product sales force, it was found that saleswomen receive inferior support and inferior account assignments to work on, which inevitably causes a commission gap between

saleswomen and salesmen (Madden, 2012). Do young saleswomen still sense these differences, and what actions are companies taking to support the performance of their new female recruits?

Recent studies suggest that women working within male-dominated industries such as sales may experience "heightened performance pressures," which can lead dominant groups to "heighten their group boundaries" (Kanter, 2019). In other words, women report feeling significant pressure in such environments to prove their competence among male colleagues by over-performing, mixed with a counterintuitive pressure to avoid outstanding performance so as not to upset the dominant masculine culture (Kanter, 2019). When this work culture is threatened, male colleagues may increase displays of masculinity, or the number of subtle conversational reminders about the 'difference' between the sexes to reinforce that psychological boundary between genders at work (Kanter, 2019). Are young women in sales careers experiencing a similar balancing-act of performance pressures?

What do we know about the current work environment that young women beginning their sales careers face? The topic of the female experience deserves renewed attention. Therefore, the current research provides an update on the perspective of young saleswomen, at a time during which gender issues are at the forefront of the cultural conversation. To better understand the experience of and capture the voice of young women working in business-to-business sales, and to identify gaps in management, two exploratory studies were conducted.

STUDY 1

Methods

Study 1 involved an active on-line recruitment method (following Harvard Catalyst guidance on utilizing social media for research recruitment) in which selected individuals were directly contacted "on the basis of knowledge of characteristics that would make them suitable candidates" (Gelinas et al., 2017). Social media is considered an ideal context for this type of research recruitment, as it "may enable investigators to target individuals on the basis of personal information

that, in many cases, allows researchers to infer their eligibility for particular studies" (Gelinas et al., 2017). Invitations to complete a survey on the topic of women in sales were sent to 160 women linked to a university's sales center through social media, and whose profile within this platform identified them as currently working in a professional selling position. Therefore, participants typically had some personal affiliation with the University, as either alumni or through corporate sponsorship / recruitment. University Sales Centers were initially conceived for the purpose of establishing an interactive relationship between academic institutions and businesses, and to be a resource for information about professional selling that may lend to valuable research projects (Caballero, 1989).

The goal of maximizing participation shaped the sampling method. The survey was disseminated through a weblink that did not record personal identifying data, affording advantages for collecting data on a sensitive topic from a dispersed sample (Creswell and Poth, 2019; Schiek and Ulrich, 2017). Personalizing survey invitations is known to increase response rates for web-based surveys (Fan and Yan, 2010). Therefore the recruitment message described this survey as being 'on the topic of women with careers in professional sales,' and identified the reason for their selection; as females in sales positions connected professionally to the sales center. As the center is fairly new (established in the early 2000's), the sampling method also allowed for a focus on young women in the early stages of their career. Of the 160 women who received the recruitment message, 76 completed the survey. Consistent with the intended focus of this study, data from 6 women over age 40 was removed (coinciding with the 2020 age cut-off of the millennial cohort as defined by Gallup Polling), and 3 women reporting over 10 years of experience in sales were removed, leaving 67 participants for analysis.

The survey itself asked participants: "Do you feel that gender stereotypes, gender bias, or gender-based obstacles have weighed upon your personal experience as a woman in sales? Please provide information on specific experiences that informs your response to this question." Responses were collected in the form of open-ended written paragraphs. An additional question requested

participant reflection on whether they had "noted any new programs or initiatives in place within your organization meant to attract, recruit or support women to sales positions." Additional demographic information was collected, to include age, ethnicity, number of years working in sales, and current sales industry.

Participants averaged 26.6 years of age, ranging from 21 to 40 years, and were predominantly Caucasian (89.55%). Most reported under 5 years of experience in sales (n = 54), with 13 reporting between 5-10 years of sales experience. Industries in which these women currently sell products or services varied (based on the North American Industry Classification System), though most numerous were manufacturing (n = 13; e.g. pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, electronics, plastics), wholesale trade (n=11; e.g. industrial supplies, commercial equipment, beverage, and construction material merchant wholesalers), professional, scientific and technical services (n = 11; e.g. bookkeeping and payroll services, physical distribution and logistics, advertising and marketing services), and information (n = 10; software publishers, telecommunications, information security solutions, data processing).

Analysis and Results

Thematic content analysis, as adapted from the 'grounded theory' approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to draw recurring themes from the textual data. Transcripts of participant responses were put through a categorization process completed by two independent researchers, to enhance the validity of the categorizing method (Burnard, 1991). Five prevailing themes were revealed, each offering a different angle of insight into experiences of sexism in the workplace, as shown in Table 1-3. Data was coded around these themes, and agreement between two raters' judgments on the presence or absence of these themes was strong (Cohen's kappa at 83.6%). In all instances where the two raters were not in agreement, the response was re-read and discussed until there was consensus on categorization.

Based on distinctions within the sexism literature, analysis focused on instances of 1) overt sexism, and 2) covert or subtle sexism. Overt sexism refers to "unequal and harmful treatment… that is readily apparent, visible, and observable" (Benokraitis and Feagin, 1986, p. 30). Covert sexism refers to instances of unequal or harmful treatment that is indirect or plausibly deniable, while subtle sexism reflects a nonconscious bias, as the offending behavior is unhidden but likely outside of the perpetrator's awareness (for example, accidentally mistaking a female salesperson for the secretary; Swim and Cohen, 1997). While covert and subtle sexism concepts can be discussed separately, they are similar from the perspective of the victim, in that it can be impossible to discern the underlying motivations or intentions of others, and because both are difficult to document.

Most participants (76.12%, n = 51) reported feeling that they had been the object of some form of sexism at work, and went on to described these particular instances. In scoring the textual data, overt sexism involved any instance in which the participant reported being spoken to or treated in an objectively inappropriate or potentially illegal manner at work, based upon the Benokratis and Feagin (1986) definition noted above. Common reflections of this issue within the internal work environment included: being passed up for opportunities and directly told that gender was a factor, explicit sexualization at work by bosses or coworkers, and having work performance itself sexualized (e.g., alternatively being encouraged to 'use' or being accused of 'using' one's sexuality to influence clients). In work with clients, this theme was typically exemplified in statements about inappropriate sexualization directed at the saleswoman. These experiences ranged from the generally unprofessional and cringe-worthy (e.g. a saleswoman receiving an after-hours text from a flirtatious client that said only "hey blue eyes") to the completely inappropriate (e.g., a saleswoman being asked by a client if she had ever had an orgasm). From this textual evidence it seems clear that many women beginning their careers in professional selling today are experiencing instances of actionable, documentable workplace harassment or discrimination. Approximately one quarter of the young women surveyed (25.37%; n = 17) report overt sexism involving a boss or colleague, while 14.92% (n = 10) report overt sexism involving clients.

Table 1. Prevailing Textual Themes with Examples: Overt Sexism

Theme	Overt sexism within the company (n = 17; 25%)

"I was passed over for a business trip. I was told it was because my male counterparts were uncomfortable telling their wives that another female was on the team trip."

"They initially told me they didn't want to move me to a sales position because I am a single mother."

"My colleague sent me an email telling me to 'put down my lipstick,' and shuffle my 'skirted little self' to the closet to get him a promotional product. I sent this to HR and they told me 'that is just his personality' and to disregard it."

"My boss used to make comments about my body and would tell me if I looked attractive to him that day."

"There have been assumptions voiced to me that I have slept with my clients or my boss in order to be successful."

"I was told that if I dressed in tighter clothes I would sell more."

Theme	Overt sexism from clients (n = 10; 15%)

"The customer asked me if I ever get hit on by clients. Later after the sales meeting, he texted me 'Hey blue eyes.'"

"The customer asked me if I'd ever had an orgasm."

"The client told me he believed that the company only hired me because of my looks, and that I was just a 'trophy.'"

"Several times on job sites (construction) I have been cat called by the client's employees, and the client has done nothing to address it."

"Some carriers I worked with would approach me with rude sexual comments or flirtation. When I responded sternly, some would call me a bitch."

In scoring the textual data, covert or subtle sexism internal to the company involved any instance in which the participant personally felt that they were passed up for opportunities at work that were afforded to male colleagues, held to a different standard or managed differently than male colleagues, spoken to or treated differently than male colleagues, assigned lesser tasks or responsibilities than male colleagues, or felt that they were presumed incompetent or less valuable than their male counterparts by someone in the organization. Instances of covert or subtle sexism in interactions with clients included any instance in which participants felt that they had been spoken to or treated differently by the client, presumed by the client to be incompetent or unknowledgeable of their own product, and instances in which clients were either surprised to see a female salesperson or actually requested to speak to a man when confronted with a saleswoman. A majority of participants, 64.18% (n = 43), report covert or subtle sexism from within their company and the same exact percentage report covert or subtle sexism involving clients.

Finally, 23.88% (n = 16) of participants also wrote about how being a woman in sales benefits them, or that it is a 'double-edged sword' with clear benefits despite potential drawbacks. Four of the participants who referenced the double-edged sword of being a woman in B2B sales specified that female clients in particular appreciate dealing with female salespeople, which provides them that edge. For example, one woman noted that "there are some guys who don't give me the time of day, but the reverse is also true. I have several female clients that love working with women and men wouldn't have as good a chance to sell to them."

Table 2. Prevailing Textual Themes with Examples: Covert or Subtle Sexism

Theme	Covert or subtle sexism within the company (n = 43; 64%)

"I was there to run the meeting but they (executive board) admitted that they thought I was there to take notes."

"I was put into a public speaking course in order to learn to be 'more aggressive' even though I am the highest performing sales rep on the team."

"I've been told I need more time in my role before I'm ready for a promotion. Then, I see several men who have been in-role as long or even shorter than me have gotten those roles that I wanted."

"I was a top performer every month that year, and always seemed to receive a lower bonus than several male colleagues. I'd love to know how that worked."

"I believe we are managed differently, that we are seen as sensitive, fragile, and sometimes aren't taken seriously until we earn it over time whereas a lot of men can gain respect immediately because they're 'supposed' to be in sales."

Theme	Covert or subtle sexism from clients (n = 43; 64%)

"Most of the time they (clients) think I am the receptionist when they meet me, even though I hold a management position for an inside sales team."

"They assume I have a lack of knowledge and sometimes they immediately request to speak to one of the men."

"Men seem to unintentionally try to test my knowledge."

"You hear a lot of 'hon' 'sweetie' 'babe' nicknames thrown around casually in conversation."

"Buyers are surprised to see a woman by herself offering products, they always look to see if anyone else is coming as well."

Table 3. Prevailing Textual Themes with Examples: Benefits

Theme	Benefits or a 'double-edged sword' for saleswomen (n = 16; 24%)

"Sometimes I feel that I am looked down upon as if I am not intelligent enough to be selling the solutions that I do, while other times clients and colleagues are impressed that I'm a woman able and able to discuss / sell our products. Both situations come off as backhanded."

"Being a young female in a male dominated industry, I feel has gotten me in the door a little easier. I think people are intrigued by an intelligent sales woman."

"Some clients talk down to women because they may feel we don't know as much or can't get them the best deal. On the other hand, some prefer to work with women because they feel we are more patient and offer more positive treatment in an otherwise harsh field."

"Being a woman could definitely get me in the door quicker in some situations, but it was harder to keep myself there."

"In some instances I've found that maybe because I am female, there is more of a trust factor in a positive way, versus the stereotype of the 'slick salesman' that just wants to sell you something and run."

Although results suggest that many young women are experiencing either overt or covert sexism on the job at an early point in their career, approximately half of respondents (47.76%, n = 32) report that their company has initiated creative programs to hire, support or encourage women in sales. The most common descriptions of these programs can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Organizational Initiatives to Support Women

Initiative	Sample descriptions	n (%)
Women's discussion and/or networking groups	"We have a group for women to discuss topics we face day-to-day in the workplace and in our industry"	22 (33%)
Women's hiring initiatives	"Our women's group visits colleges for recruiting events"	9 (13%)
Women's leadership development	"We have a women's leadership alliance that men and women can actually be a part of. In fact, a lot of men attend and really support that group"	10 (14%)
Women's mentorship programs	"We have a mentoring program for high-level female employees to mentor newly hired females throughout the company"	3 (4%)
Pay and benefits initiatives to support women	"We have pay parity initiatives in place" "We have extended our maternity leave options (and have added paternity leave)"	4 (6%)

Although these initiatives mostly received praise, two participants discussed the unintended negative side effects they perceived. For example, regarding a female referral bonus, one woman said "it's mocked by male employees – and sadly, some female employees." Another respondent took the position that "we have a 'Women in Technology' group which I am actually against. Here we are fighting for equality, and then we create an organization that separates women from men." While these responses were rare, they speak to the difficult balancing-act of supporting women in sales without unintentionally creating the impression of further separation.

STUDY 2

The voice of the sales recruiter was sought as a follow-up to Study 1. While there is little demographic information available specific to B2B sales recruiting, recruitment in general is a highly female field. Women comprise approximately 60% of professional recruiters, and they represent a majority of HR leadership (Petrone, 2015). Meanwhile, approximately 25% of recruiters report that they have observed sexist attitudes expressed by others in their organization towards a female candidate they've

brought in, and over half report that their companies seem reluctant to set any specific organizational goals for hiring more women (Jobvite, 2017).

Methods

Study 2 utilized an active off-line recruitment method in order to obtain a sample of interviews. In-person interviews with six sales recruiters (2 male, 4 female) from large national and international companies were conducted. Participants averaged 9 years of experience in sales recruitment (ranging from 5 to 13 years). Two of the recruiters simultaneously work in sales management roles with heavy recruitment duties, two hold HR leadership roles focused in recruitment and training of talent, and two were recently moved to recruitment positions after spending several years in sales roles. This sample again was accessed through the contacts built by the University Sales Center; a call for participation in recruitment research was made to all sales recruiters visiting the center for an annual career fair. After contacting the center in response to this call, individual meetings were set up to ensure the privacy and anonymity of each participant.

Each interview lasted approximately 10-15 minutes, and began with a synopsis of the results of Study 1, with an overview of all numerical findings (e.g.; percentages of respondents who had experienced either overt or covert/subtle sexism in B2B sales positions, percentages reporting issues internal to the company, or externally in interactions with clients). The recruiters were then asked to offer their thoughts and opinions about these findings. The interview was thereon out semi-structured, creating space for discussion of their experiences in recruiting young women for sales positions.

Analysis and Results

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and thematic content analysis was conducted (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Two independent raters examined the interview transcripts, conceptualized key themes repeated across the interviews, and brought their assessments together for comparison and reworking until a consistent vision of the interviews emerged. Through discussion among the raters, quotes of interest were selected to reflect recurring themes across the six interviews.

The reaction of all six sales recruiters to the results of Study 1 seemed to be an overwhelming lack of surprise. For example:

> *"I wish that I was more surprised by this. I have witnessed these things happen to young women in the company."* -Recruiter 1 (male)

> *"I am surprised at your findings, only because I'd expect the numbers to be even higher based on what I've heard, what I've seen and what I've witnessed."* - Recruiter 3 (male)

In considering the results of Study 1, one of the female sales recruiters reflected back on her own past experience in a sales role:

> *"I'm not surprised, from my own experience when I worked in sales. Looking in hindsight… I thought I was one of the only ones experiencing it, or that it's changed since then, but obviously not."* -Recruiter 2 (female)

Among those sales recruiters interviewed who did not also hold a sales management role (n = 4), there was

much discussion of the difficulties they have faced in bringing female recruits in front of male managers:

> *"Managers have definitely not had as much positive feedback on a woman who I felt was a great candidate, who is saying the same things a male candidate has said, but maybe they believe it more coming from a male."* - Recruiter 4 (female)

> *"If it's a male manager I'm working with, sometimes it is harder to sell him the idea of having a female onto the team. The question had been raised of - why haven't we hired any female salespeople? - and the answer from one of the sales managers was 'because I don't know emotionally how to handle women.' It's one thing to admit that and ask for help, and it's another to admit it and then say- well, we just won't hire any women."* - Recruiter 4 (female)

Beyond issues with breaking through to male management, four sales recruiters (2 female, 2 male) spoke on the relevance of the results of Study 1 regarding sexist behavior from clients. These recruiters all discussed feeling particularly concerned for the lack of control their company has in these instances, for example:

> *"We can control what happens in our office obviously, but we can't always control what is said over the phone in sales, and what is said - especially to women, is not always ideal. We've had female (inside) salespeople being asked for pictures of themselves, we've had people ask for personal numbers or attempt to reach out to them outside of work in other ways… We've had women leave because they don't want to possibly have those conversations, or they've had too many of them. It's hard."* -Recruiter 4 (female)

Recruiters seemed to recognize how business goals also play a role in this problem, and the importance of their own company's response to it:

> *"I think it puts the female sales professional in a very compromising scenario… they don't believe that they can push back because this person, the client, is a source of their income and livelihood."* -Recruiter 1 (male)

> *"We make it very transparent that we have no problem ending business partnerships (over client misbehavior) because our employees come first." -Recruiter 5 (female)*

After recruiters discussed their views on the results of Study 1, they were asked whether they typically speak about sexism in sales with female recruits during the hiring process. Only three of the six sales recruiters confirmed that topics of sexism are explicitly made a part of the interview discussion with female applicants, and addressed their reasoning.

> *"...I don't want to fail to provide them an opportunity, but I also don't want to blindside them with something that they're not aware of." -Recruiter 4 (female)*

> *"If you don't tell them – Not to scare them, but if you don't give them a realistic view of that world that they're going to be in... now you've got a bigger problem not only from an HR and a legal standpoint, but turnover." -Recruiter 3 (male)*

Next, recruiters were asked about initiatives that have been implemented to support saleswomen. All felt that their companies were taking action; many mentioned either women's groups or mentorship programs.

> *"In an industry and a position that it's really 80% men and 20% women... I feel like we're taking actionable steps to close that gap." -Recruiter 6 (female)*

Interestingly, two recruiters report that young women at their company are mentored exclusively by other females, while two recruiters report mixed-gender mentorship. Their reasoning for these distinctions was notable. For example, from recruiters whose companies do female-to-female mentorship:

> *"The women are not mentored by males because if they... can't relate to their male manager...they have someone else to touch base." -Recruiter 4 (female)*

> *"We do this for two reasons: first that they see someone that looks like them that may have gone through the same challenges. Second, that they*

> *know and see that this could be them in a leadership position 4, 5, 6 years down the line." -Recruiter 2 (female)*

Those who do not implement exclusively female-to-female mentorships also offered their reasons. In the case of one sales recruiter, the company's decision seemed to be based on an egalitarian vision of success, while the other recruiter's company simply lacked females at the upper level to serve as mentors.

> *"Just as much as we want to obviously protect the advancement of women, we would also want to make sure that our male candidates have an opportunity to work with really high caliber female salespeople, regardless of their gender." -Recruiter 1 (male)*

> *"We don't have a lot of mentors that are female, simply because our female salesforce is still growing and most are not at the stage where they can even act as mentors yet." -Recruiter 6 (female)*

Notably, both of the male recruiters mentioned in discussions on future initiatives that might benefit saleswomen, the possibility of training women on how to dress and behave.

> *"It's very important that a female is putting off the right signals. Maybe they don't even realize they're doing it. I believe that having some very intentional training on what signals from a female say to a male that would cause them to say some inappropriate things; the way they're dressing or sitting..." -Recruiter 1 (male)*

> *"Not that it's the responsibility of the female, but can it be prevented? Are there proactive measures that can be taken as far as training—you know, having the appropriate attire and knowing from a communication standpoint the verbal and nonverbal cues that could sometimes lead to this?" -Recruiter 3 (male)*

While one could fault these men for espousing victim-blaming stereotypes about sexual harassment (Wolfendale, 2016), beliefs in the link between attire and likelihood of sexual harassment are extremely

common among both men and women (Johnson and Workman, 1992). Furthermore, what these recruiters say does bear some careful consideration given the existing research on gender and perceptions of sexual intent, as men are significantly more likely than women to interpret sexual intentions from ambiguous non-verbal cues such as eye-contact, interpersonal distance and friendly touch (Abbey and Melbey, 1986). The issue of power dynamics is also relevant, given the power differential likely in play between a young saleswoman and the clients who impact their livelihood. For example, psychological research (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, and Strack, 1995) has shown that some men may perceive a woman as significantly more attractive when they are placed in positions of relative power over her, leading to misattributions of otherwise innocuous cues (e.g., smiling, friendliness) as sexual advances. In other words, "the male power holder will… perceive his attraction and sexual thoughts towards the female subordinate as caused by her behavior; as flirtation instead of friendliness" (Bargh et al., 1995, p. 771). In this respect, while it would be problematic to suggest that it is a woman's 'fault' due to her attire or displays of positive interpersonal cues, it may in fact be useful to consider discussions with newly hired sales representatives - both male and female - framed around these troubling findings within social science on gender, power, and perception; and how to best address them.

Finally, many of the sales recruiters recognize a recent shift; a recognition of the importance of understanding and discussing women's experiences within their company.

> *"I think if you asked me this five years ago it would've been different but we're at a stage now where we're hiring more females than ever, so we need to think about retention, putting these things in place and helping women grow and develop."* -Recruiter 6 (female)

CONCLUSIONS

Through two qualitative studies, a picture of the early career experiences of young saleswomen and those involved in recruiting them emerges. The key takeaway from this investigation is that young saleswomen are indeed experiencing sexism at high rates as a part of their early professional life, and that recruiters are keenly interested in ways to best address these issues.

Study 1 suggests that saleswomen today still face some of the same overtly sexist disadvantages as described in the literature from previous decades (Catalyst, 1995; Lane, 2000). For example, the woman who (quoted within Table 1) was not invited on a work trip due to the potential discomfort of her male colleague's wives, and the woman who was told she was a poor fit for sales as a single mother; each of these instances reflects a continuation on the same established discriminatory hold-overs and double binds that have long faced women in sales.

However, covert and subtle experiences of sexism were much more common in the data, for example, the young woman who was put into training to become 'more aggressive' despite her already outstanding sales performance (quoted in Table 2) suggests that underlying and implicit bias also remain at play. Even the language used in recruiting for sales positions has served to reassert the stereotypically masculine nature of the field, for example, descriptors such as an "aggressive" "hunter" personality (Voria, 2018) with the need to "control and dominate" (Lane and Lane, 2002) prevail in the conception of what makes a successful salesperson.

Of those participants who reference a benefit in being female within a male-dominated industry, many of their explanations focused on being perceived by clients as more patient or amiable than their male counterparts. While this may seem like a silver lining to some, it does require further consideration. Academics have noted that the 'pro-female' argument for women being well-fit for sales due to their relationship-nurturing skills only further entrenches women in gendered stereotypes about how they 'should' function at work (Lane and Lane, 2002). In other words, trading one stereotype (e.g., 'women are not aggressive enough for sales') for another (e.g., 'women can excel at sales due to their nurturing approach and soft temperaments') may still hold women back "whether framed as a barrier or benefit" (Tinsley and Ely, 2018).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

It is clear that women in sales need management motivated to both support and heighten awareness of these issues. As much as the recruitment of women matters in male-dominated industries, retention efforts are equally important (Tapia and Kvasny, 2004). From a 'human resources' perspective, companies should understand that supporting high-value initiatives at the organizational level for saleswomen is not only an egalitarian kindness, but also a strategic opportunity. Turnover, absenteeism, diminished work productivity and organizational commitment are all at stake when it comes to the impact of sexism in the workplace (Böckerman and Ilmakunnas, 2009, Dalton, Cohen, Harp, and McMillan, 2013; Willness et al., 2007). The results of Study 2 suggest that sales recruiters are well aware of the situation. Their companies are looking for ways to impact women positively through mentorship and HR training initiatives. Recruiters remain hopeful, while recognizing that there remains a gap in strategy when it comes to preparing new female recruits for this reality. In considering future research, it is evident that HR professionals would benefit from research-based recommendations geared towards defining these strategies.

Recruiters in Study 2 expressed their company's desire to prepare and protect saleswomen from overt forms of sexism. However, Study 1 results suggest that covert and subtle sexism are a more common issue for saleswomen (both internally within the company and externally with clients). Although many firms spend a significant amount of time focused on addressing overt sexism through training and programs, management must find ways to better tackle covert and subtle forms of sexism, both within their corporate culture and in dealing with clients. Based on the discussion with sales recruiters, future research should help companies understand what kinds and types of training will help to make their corporate culture more equitable, and what proactive steps they might take to better address the uncontrollable external element of interactions with clients. Companies may also benefit from research-based guidance on the impact of same-gender versus mixed-gender mentorship, best practices recommendations on how to bring workplace sexism into the conversation during interviews, and whether sales training should or should not involve thoughtful, honest discussions of the social scientific research on gender dynamics, power and perception.

Another area in which these findings may be valuable is business education. It's important to consider that while female business students tend to be aware and knowledgeable of gender inequities that will face them in the workforce, they report low levels of concern that they will personally confront issues of sexism within their own career (Sipe, Larson, McKay, and Moss, 2015; 2018). Therefore this set of studies may inform business schools preparing their female graduates for reality outside of the academy. It seems a fair question to ask: "what are business schools for" if not to prepare young people for the realities and systemic challenges within the business world (Grey, 2002)?

Limitations and Future Research

The method utilized to acquire the Study 1 sample was imperfect but did yield a set of data that is nevertheless compelling. As about half (84 of the 160) of those contacted declined to complete the survey, there is likely some self-selection due to the sensitive nature of the topic. On the other hand, web-based surveys historically struggle with much lower response rates than the rate seen in Study 1 (Fan and Yan, 2010). The higher the response rate, the greater opportunity there is to minimize self-selection error (Greenlaw and Brown-Welty, 2009). Future research must find a way to increase participation on this sensitive topic, as self-selection bias is likely diminishing representation of those women who are unwilling to speak on their experiences. While the interview method utilized in Study 2 yields a depth of response that is ideal for thematic content analysis, the sample size was limited. Again, self-selection bias impacts data collection, as those who sit for interviews on a delicate topic must be willing volunteers. Future studies focused on the recruiter perspective might consider methods allowing for greater feelings of anonymity and larger sample size than the interview method allows for.

Through a better understanding of the work environment young women face as they enter the sales force, future

research on this important topic may assist companies, sales recruiters, and female recruits in establishing new norms for the new decade.

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It's Time to Move Past Lean-In: Breaking Institutional Barriers to Empower Female Sales Leaders

By Mary Shea, Matthew Flug, Jennifer Zhang, Waverly Deutsch, Kara Hartig,
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There is a dramatic underrepresentation of women at the highest levels of leadership in *Fortune*-class and other types of companies. With a focus on growth, the top sales position is an ideal steppingstone to the CEO role. As more women pursue careers in business-to-business (B2B) sales, more will land senior sales leadership positions and have a viable path to the C-suite. This study looks at why women are underrepresented in B2B sales, which obstacles they face at distinct phases of their career, and how those challenges compare with those of their male counterparts. Through qualitative and quantitative research, we uncover strategies female senior sales leaders have employed to reach the highest levels of success and directions they see their careers heading in the future. Finally, we provide advice for policymakers, academics, business leaders, and female sales professionals to increase female representation in the B2B sales world and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Women make up half of the US and global population but hold only 7.4% of CEO positions at Fortune 500 companies. Eighty-five percent of venture investment goes to all-male led companies even though female entrepreneurs are more likely than their male counterparts to build companies that become cashflow positive (*Fortune*, 2020; Clark, 2019). The Miami Marlins appointed a woman to the position of general manager — the first ever for Major League Baseball.

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It is unsurprising she is widely acknowledged as "the most qualified general manager in baseball" (Sanchez, 2020). B2B sales is no different. Only a third of B2B sellers are women, and there is even less representation in senior sales leadership (Zoltners, Sinha, Lorimer, Lennon, and Alexander, 2020).

Research shows that organizations with more diversity benefit from having more innovative cultures, higher profits, and better overall business results (Tynan, 2020). This is particularly relevant to B2B sales because companies with more gender diversity in their sales forces deliver better commercial results than those with more homogenous ones (Lorenzo et al., 2018).

Female sales professionals bring unique perspectives, competencies, and value to their companies, colleagues, and clients (McKinsey, 2020). But they typically express facing more challenges than their male counterparts. Our research shows, struggles in having their voices heard, acquiring the confidence to put forth their ideas, adopting authentic leadership styles, and gaining compensation equity are issues that disproportionately affect women. This study describes the type and timing of predictable obstacles female sales professionals can expect to encounter and highlights successful strategies the top female sales leaders have used to reach the highest levels of the profession.

The purpose of this research is to increase awareness of the underrepresentation of females in B2B sales and

top sales leadership positions and to surface typical extrinsic and intrinsic gender biases they encounter at different stages of their careers relative to male counterparts. Finally, we will recommend strategies and methods various constituents — from policymakers to female sales pros themselves — can adopt to overcome these obstacles and reach the highest levels of the B2B sales hierarchy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While some inquiries on women's advancement in the workplace has focused on the confidence gap between women and men — most notably highlighted in Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* — this line of thinking places blame on women for the conditions of gender inequality and ignores the "societal, cultural, and organizational norms that elevate men as natural leaders and regard women as 'less than'" (Kottke and Agars, 2005; O'Neil and Hopkins, 2015). This all presents a picture of women as lacking in confidence, opting out, and believing themselves to be, unfit to demand leadership. The reality is women often hold themselves hyper-accountable for their successes and failures and report having to work harder than male colleagues to keep up and contend with "men's documented tendencies toward overconfidence" (O'Neil and Hopkins, 2015). Women "blaming themselves for years for not fitting in further obfuscates the real root of the problem — that our organizational systems do not work for half of the working population" (O'Neil and Hopkins, 2015). The underrepresentation of high-ranking women in the workplace is not an individual issue but part of a larger societal affliction.

New research now largely focuses on the biases that place invisible barriers for women in the workplace. These biases — dubbed "second-generation gender biases" — arise from "cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men" (Ibarra et al., 2013). This includes the lack of female leaders, gendered career paths and work structures, lack of sponsors and mentors, and double-blind dilemma that women face when the actions they are criticized for are perceived as "strong" or "decisive" when done by a male colleague (Ibarra et al., 2013; Costigan, 2018).

Once these biases are recognized, company leaders can eliminate the tired explanations about the lack of women in leadership — women "don't ask," "opt out," or are "too nice" — and focus on actionable ways all constituents can help close the leadership gap (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Now more than ever, companies are recognizing the importance of fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace. Research shows it is a winning strategy that translates into obtaining more customers, acquiring better talent, maintaining lower employee attrition, deriving greater brand equity, and delivering better financial results (Tynan, 2020). Customers in 2020 are increasingly making purchase decisions based on their supplier's corporate values, looking for brands they can connect with as a method to heighten meaning in a world now separated by a pandemic (Collins et al., 2020; Lai, 2020a). A diverse employee population means a better ability to connect with customers in their product and service design offerings (Bhawalkar, 2019). Employees themselves are also key drivers of change. As more employees focus on values, they will hold their employers accountable (Tynan, 2020; Lai, 2020b). Pressures from both customers and employees have created a climate where organizations must reevaluate the ways they conduct business.

The pandemic has added new complexities to an imperfect situation. A recent McKinsey study of women in the workplace found that one in four women are contemplating downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce because of the myriad challenges brought forth by COVID-19 (McKinsey, 2020). As workplace pressures collide with pandemic-exacerbated burdens at home, women are leaving the workforce in droves (Graves, 2020).

As we collectively face one of the most challenging societal and business environments of our time, this research details the effects of bias on women in B2B sales. Supported by primary interviews, survey data, and our lead author's personal professional experiences, we identify actionable steps stakeholders — policy leaders, academics, business leaders, and female sales pros — can take to decisively break the glass ceiling that exists for women in B2B sales.

METHODOLOGY

We obtained data for this research in several ways. We gathered data from surveys, the first of which we fielded to our extended social networks. We also shared the survey with the Women In Revenue, Women Sales Pros, and National Association of Women Sales Professionals (NAWSP) networks. As such, Forrester's Q4 2020 Global Women in Sales Survey received responses from 73 female and 35 male B2B sales contacts with knowledge of the B2B sales industry. For quality assurance, we screened respondents to ensure they met minimum standards in terms of sales experience and career progression in sales. This data may not be representative of the population, and, unless otherwise noted, quantitative data is intended to be used for descriptive and not inferential purposes. While nonrandom, the survey is still illustrative of where B2B sales trends are today and where they are headed.

Forrester fielded the survey from August 13 to November 19, 2020. We incentivized respondents by sharing a complimentary copy of Forrester's "The Democratization of B2B Sales" by Mary Shea, PhD, which respondents could download upon completion of the survey. Exact sample sizes are provided in this report on a question-by-question basis.

We also used Forrester's Q2 2020 Global B2B Channel and Sales Survey, which we fielded to direct and indirect sales professionals from June 15 to July 20, 2020. For quality assurance, panelists needed to supply contact information and answer questions about their ability to supply information on their company's sales routes and go-to-market strategies. Respondent incentives included a courtesy copy of a published Forrester report. Exact sample sizes are provided in this report on a question-by-question basis. Panels are not necessarily representative of the population. Unless otherwise noted, quantitative data is intended to be used for descriptive and not inferential purposes.

Next, we conducted qualitative interviews with 11 female sales leaders between August and September 2020. All interviewees were senior sales leaders at organizations that sell to other businesses or are focused on development at not-for-profit organizations.

Third, we conducted qualitative interviews with Phil Harrell, the head of Forrester's sales leadership practice, and Jody Michael, the founder and CEO of Jody Michael Associates, a leading executive- and career-coaching firm, in November 2020.

Fourth, Tracy Eiler, cofounder of the Women In Revenue organization, graciously shared data obtained through her organization's State of Women In Revenue Annual Survey 2020. Women In Revenue surveyed 215 quota-carrying women professionals from February 9, 2020, to March 18, 2020.

Exact sample sizes are provided in this report on a question-by-question basis. Panels may not be representative of the population. Unless otherwise noted, quantitative data is intended to be used for descriptive and not inferential purposes.

Lastly, we used relevant secondary research to supplement the primary research methods used for this study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this section, we have organized the findings from our survey research into four sections: 1) gender diversity in hiring B2B salespeople; 2) management of work-life balance; 3) challenges faced early in one's sales career and as a sales leader; and 4) career next steps.

Recruitment and Hiring

In Forrester's recent channel and sales survey, 74% of B2B sales leaders said they factor in their company's diversity and inclusion (D&I) values when making hiring decisions, while 54% expect their company's commitment to D&I will be considered by buyers and buying committees evaluating their company (Shea et al., 2020a). Although modern sales leaders recognize the importance of having a sales organization that reflects their client base and society at large, where gender diversity is concerned, there is much work to do because only one-third of B2B sales reps identify as women (Zoltners et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, many sales organizations lack modern and creative talent acquisition strategies. Our research reveals the top two avenues for sourcing sales talent are internal referrals and competitors (Shea et al., 2020a). How job descriptions are created and tuned

is another friction point. According to Cynthia Barnes (2020), founder and CEO of the NAWSP, "There are many technology organizations that say they want more women in sales, but they create stringent and unwelcoming job descriptions." Some descriptions say the candidate must have five years of selling software as a service (SaaS) to C-level executives, and Barnes believes, "Women who have had success in other areas will not apply." A lack of confidence and the ability to take feedback literally stood out as themes in our research. A female who may have been successful in other areas of sales may believe she isn't qualified based on a restrictive job description.

Understanding a future employer's commitment to D&I, the visibility of women leaders, and the ability to imagine oneself in the role are crucial factors that affect employment decisions for female candidates. In the Women In Revenue survey, 64% of respondents said a culture with explicit programs for D&I was a crucial factor when considering a career opportunity, but 34% of our survey respondents stated their company had no D&I initiatives (Women In Revenue, 2020). Eighty-two percent of Women In Revenue respondents said a high percentage of women leaders and/or board members in the company was a critical factor when considering a career opportunity (Women In Revenue, 2020). Maria Black (2020), president of worldwide sales and marketing at ADP, believes, "Women must have the ability to see themselves in the role."

The Universal Work-Life Balance Struggle

One area where both men and women in the sales profession face serious challenges is in maintaining a balance between the demands of their work and their home lives. Whether it is the need for travel or new responsibilities as a parent, two-thirds of men and 40% of women cited balance as a key challenge in the early years of having a sales career. Interestingly, this number converged to 54% of men and 51% of women who cited balance as their number-one challenge once they attained sales leadership roles (Shea et al., 2020b).

Our interviews revealed that the most successful senior sales leaders are adept at setting clear boundaries between their work and personal lives and often have an understood division of labor with their spouses. One

sales leader stated she was committed to picking up her kids from school every afternoon. She left the office every day at 4:15 p.m. despite getting some inquisitive looks from colleagues for her departure time (Patel, 2020). Once her kids were in bed, she would sign back on and return to work. According to Alyssa Merwin (2020), setting clear boundaries is crucial. "I told my boss a couple years ago, this is my year of no, which means I'm going to say no to every special project you ask me to take on because I have a big meaty business challenge and I'm not going to get distracted."

Both men and women rely on support at home to address the work-life balance challenge. Eighty-three percent of women and 81% of men who were married or partnered described their spouse as extremely or very supportive of their career ambitions (Shea et al., 2020b). Qualitative interviews revealed having a spouse who is willing to bend, flex, and take on more responsibilities at home is key, particularly as the sales executive progresses into leadership roles. One senior sales leader described her marriage as nontraditional with her husband doing all the laundry for the family and taking on the lion's share of childrearing responsibilities when she was on the road. Another commented that there were times her husband picked up the primary caregiver role and times she did (Patel, 2020; Bhargava, 2020). According to Anna Baird (2020), chief revenue officer (CRO) at Outreach: "Some days it's your family and some days it's your work. You just have to take a step back and say, Do I feel good about those choices?"

Companies can help here too. Ninety-one percent of our survey respondents said their companies have family-friendly policies in place from work-at-home options and flexible hours to parental leave and a mother's room. Cynthia Sener (2020), CRO at Chatmeter, noted that the challenges she faced as a working mother early in her career have lessened because companies are now more sensitive to the issue. "In the beginning, because I was an executive, I felt pressured to return to work just two weeks after giving birth to my first child [and start] traveling. I recall FedEx-ing frozen breast milk back home because I was still trying to pump and do everything that I could to be a good parent but also do my job in the field. I look at roles now, and with people working from home, it's so different. At the time, I was

the only woman on the executive team. It was made clear that my pregnancy was an inconvenience and that they were concerned I might not be able to continue in the role."

Unique Career Challenges for Women

As with balance, men and women experience difficulties in similar numbers in managing their company culture. While more men find it difficult to deal with politicking among their peers early in their careers, once women reach sales leadership levels, they begin to experience this challenge at the same rate as their male colleagues. But women face three additional obstacles at a much higher rate than their male colleagues — implicit and explicit gender bias, issues with self-confidence, and a feeling that they are being left out when critical decisions are being made. And a key resource that supports career

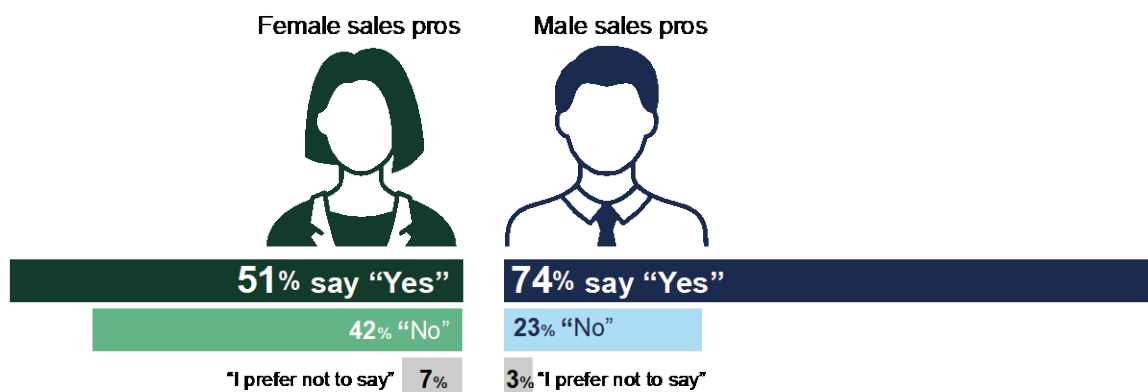growth for both men and women, mentorship, appears to be harder for women in sales to obtain.

Gender Bias

Our research reveals that more than one-third of female respondents felt they were treated differently because of their gender, and for 14% of them, this treatment included sexual harassment (Shea et al., 2020b).

Gender bias in pay and around promotions is a key concern for female sales pros. Perpetuating this problem are the vastly different lenses through which female and male sales pros see this issue. As noted in Figure 1, 42% of our female survey respondents said they did not think women receive equal treatment during promotion and raise conversations at their company, compared with only 23% of male respondents who indicated this concern (Shea et al., 2020b).

Figure 1

"Do you believe women receive equal treatment during promotion and raise conversations at your company?"

Female sales pros — Male sales pros

51% say "Yes" | 74% say "Yes"
42% "No" | 23% "No"
"I prefer not to say" 7% | 3% "I prefer not to say"

Base: 73 business professionals who identified as women and 35 who identified as men
Source: Forrester's Q4 2020 Global Women In Sales Survey

In our qualitative interviews, nearly every female sales leader indicated that she had experienced a situation where she suspected, or confirmed, she received less compensation than a male counterpart despite having a similar or a higher-level role. Women have good reason to be concerned about pay inequity. The "2019 State of Gender Equality in Sales" report from Xactly, a leading sales performance management software provider, found that women in direct sales roles earn 22% less, compared with their male counterparts. Specifically, with women in sales leadership roles, the gap increases to 25% (Xactly, 2019). If the original compensation package provided to a female sales pro is in a lower band, it can be difficult to recover. This was the case with one senior sales leader, who discovered during promotion discussions that her base salary was $40,000 less than her male counterpart in the same role. According to her: "There

was a companywide rule that you could only get so much of a raise in a promotion. I had to speak up and fight for the maximum raise" (anonymous, 2020).

Some situations were even more egregious. Another interviewee told us one year after a new HR executive joined her company, she received a $90,000 increase in her annual compensation. When she asked why she received such a significant increase, she was never able to get a complete or satisfying answer. Left to connect the dots herself, she realized she had been underpaid relative to her male counterparts for years. Instead of being motivated by the pay raise, she was angry and disappointed in her company (anonymous, 2020).

Gender pay inequity is a long-term and pernicious problem. Tanya Jansen (2020), cofounder and CMO of beqom, a compensation software company, told us when pitching prospects in the early days, if she mentioned the gender pay gap as something the company or HR executive should look at, it would have been considered "a completely taboo topic."[1] Twelve years later, our research reveals that only 51% of B2B companies have formal processes and policies around gender pay equity (Shea et al., 2020b). Until there is transparency, visibility, and tools to shine the light on gender pay inequities, this will be a difficult problem to solve. The good news is we are starting to see the emergence of visual tools that can quickly surface compensation disparities and provide recommendations to stakeholders.[2]

Other less overt biases such as, "She's not strategic," hold back results-oriented and operationally savvy female sales pros. The "she's not strategic" bias roadblock usually surfaces when women rise from director or senior director to VP, and while the circumstances are unique, the context is usually similar. Jessica Iandioro (2020), chief marketing officer at Starburst, says: "This woman gets stuff done, and in many cases, she gets more stuff done than anyone else. But when the decision comes down on whether she is a fit for the VP role, the 'she's not strategic' objection often surfaces." This bias resonated with one of our interviewees who was looking to advance from a director to a VP role. "I interviewed for the role of VP, and presented well, but was told that I was not strategic enough. They said there was no doubt

I could hit my numbers, but they were worried about my strategic capabilities" (anonymous, 2020). It can be difficult to overcome the "she's not strategic" bias, and the label frequently follows a woman to her next opportunity when hiring execs notice a pass-over and offer a lateral move (Iandioro, 2020).

Lack of Self-Confidence

In addition to external biases, internal ones also hold female sales pros back. While more prominent earlier in the career trajectory, a lack of self-confidence holds women back throughout their career journey. For female sales professionals looking to advance earlier in their careers, more than half ranked a lack of confidence in herself and her ideas or in career conversations with her boss as a key obstacle. Even after women advance to sales leadership roles, this lack of self-confidence still plagues 38% of our survey participants (Shea et al., 2020b).

According to executive coach Jody Michael (2020), "A lack of confidence is deeply embedded in women's psyches from an early age, and the messages they get early in their careers reinforce that feeling of insecurity." They tend to see men being "in the club" and getting promoted, whereas they are not and that impacts their confidence. According to Michael (2020), "All of these things reinforce women's belief that they aren't good enough to make it in the career they want."

Confidence issues are less of a barrier for male sales pros: Only 34% of men cited confidence issues as challenges early in their career, dropping to 26% once they attained leadership roles (Shea et al., 2020b). Kelley Hippler (2020) leads Forrester's global sales organization that has roughly the same number of males and females. Hippler has observed, "Men are more proactive than women about wanting to talk about their careers and what might come next." Anna Baird (2020), CRO at Outreach, has observed the same. When a leadership position opened at the company, "Only men put time on my calendar asking to speak about the opening." Baird approached her female direct reports and asked them why none of them did the same. With Baird's encouragement, her female leaders are now more proactive in discussing their career goals with her.

Being out of the Decision-Making Loop

To be recognized and promoted, sales professionals need to be present when important strategies and tactics are discussed, and decisions are made. Female sales professionals feel particularly concerned that they are excluded from the places, both inside and outside the office, where these decisions are being made, and unlike their male counterparts, this concern does not abate when they reach management levels. While 29% of men reported they felt left out when decisions were happening early in their career, this dropped to 17% once they had attained a leadership role. Not so for female sales professionals. Forty-two percent had this challenge early in their career, and 45% reported still feeling that way as sales leaders (Shea et al., 2020b).

Nearly half of the women surveyed specifically felt they were missing opportunities outside the office — at a bar or restaurant, on a golf course, or just after hours (see Figure 2). Fifty-eight percent said that they consciously worked on improving their self-confidence to increase the chances they would be included in such impromptu meetings. They also indicated expanding their topics of interest, changing their work hours to match their bosses', and changing their professional attire among things they did to increase their ability to be present when important decisions were being made (see Figure 3). Some female leaders have simply moved on from this obstacle. Sangita Patel (2020) told us, "I can't always drink or golf, and it bothered me for a while. I got over it and decided to let my results speak for themselves, and they did."

Figure 2

"Do you consistently have the opportunity to be a part of important business decisions that happen outside the normal office setting?"
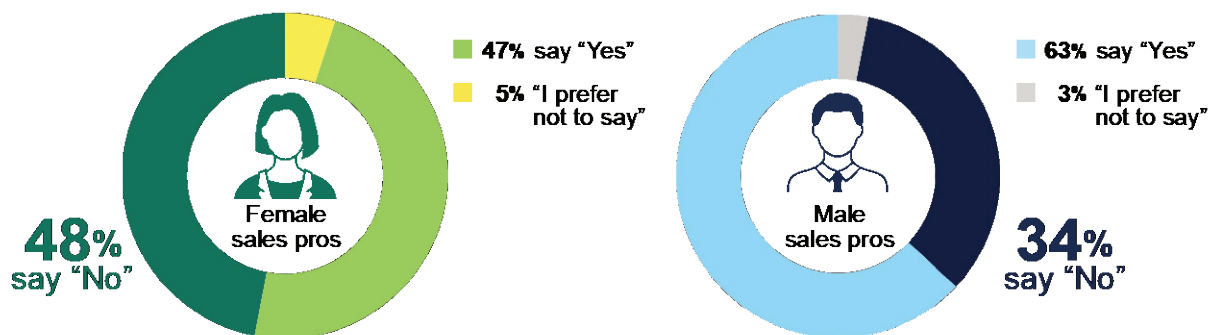
Base: 73 business professionals who identified as women and 35 who identified as men
Source: Forrester's Q4 2020 Global Women in Sales Survey
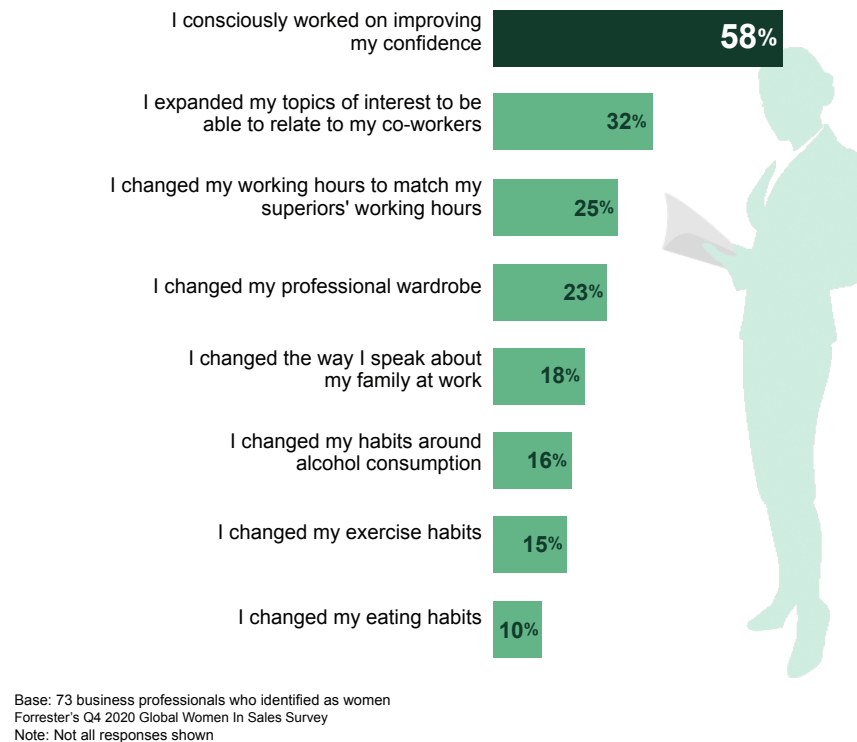
Mentorship

In our qualitative interviews virtually, every sales leader told us mentors were important in both their career development and organizational advancement. Kelley Hippler (2020) believes, "Having mentors who can help you work on your blind spots is very important," and many interviewees cited the importance of a personal board — typically comprised of advisers outside of their current companies — to provide candid feedback and help them navigate some of the more turbulent periods in their careers.

A lack of mentors seems to plague women in sales more than their male colleagues. More than a third of our female survey participants felt the lack of mentors was a challenge early in their careers versus a quarter of men. Later, 22%

Figure 3

"What conscious efforts, if any, have you made to ensure you are there when the important decisions are made?"

Base: 73 business professionals who identified as women
Forrester's Q4 2020 Global Women In Sales Survey
Note: Not all responses shown

of female sales leaders still felt they had insufficient access to mentors, compared with 14% of their male counterparts (Shea et al., 2020b). In a post-#MeToo environment, it's unsurprising to see mentorship surface as a key challenge for women. In a 2019 survey, 60% of US managers who identified as men stated they felt uncomfortable mentoring, working alone, or socializing with a woman in the workplace — more than double the respondents in the 2018 study (Leanin.Org and Survey Monkey, 2019).

Career Next Steps

While the trajectory from individual contributor to sales manager can be relatively quick, the female sales leaders we interviewed stated it took 10 or more years to land their first senior sales leadership position. Three themes that positively impacted career progression at the senior-most levels were a willingness to embrace risk, a fearlessness of nonlinear routes to gain experience, and the ability to set sights on several roles
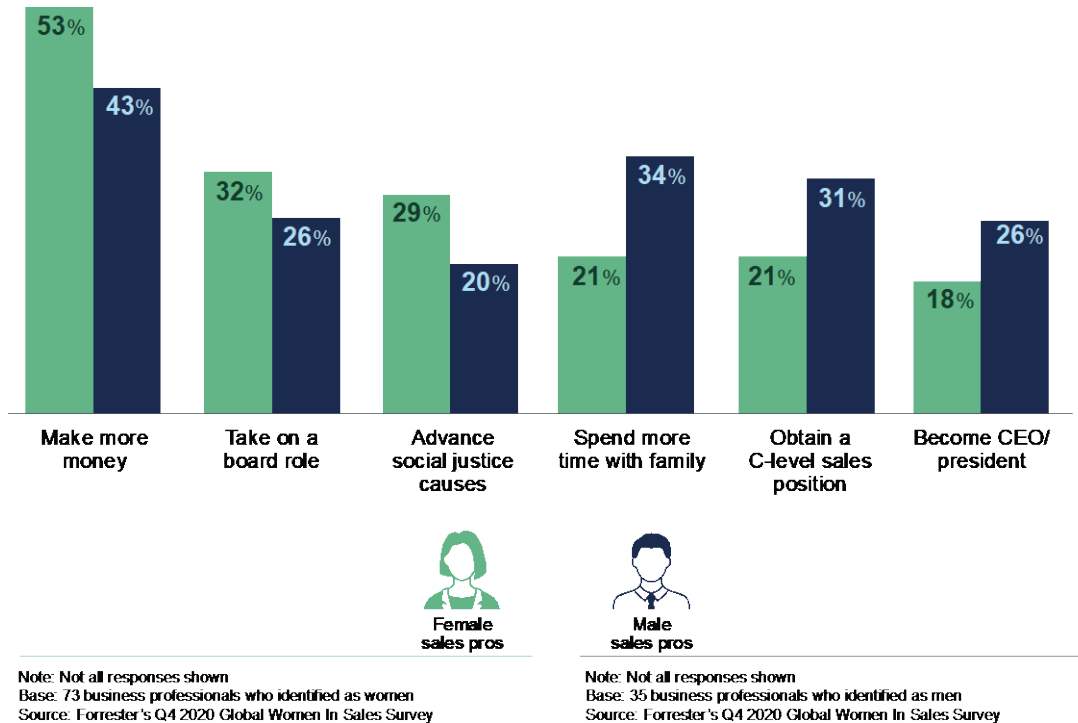
ahead of the next position. Early in her career, Andrea Austin (2020), Nokia's VP of North American sales, was selected for an overseas assignment in a non-sales role. Rather than getting caught up in the immediate rewards of the position, Austin took the job because it was what the company needed. According to Austin, the reward was "the learning," and the assignment was "a defining moment" for her career. When evaluating two potential positions at a critical juncture in her career, Alyssa Merwin (2020), LinkedIn's VP of sales solutions for North America, took the less obvious position. Although the role had significantly fewer people to manage, less revenue responsibility, and less overt ego gratification, it lifted her out of her comfort zone and forced her to acquire the skills she would need as a future CRO or CEO.

As both female and male sales leaders consider their next career steps, our research revealed similar and divergent paths. While both female and male sales

leaders ranked making more money as their top goal, that's where the similarities ended. Thirty-two percent of female sales leaders ranked assuming a board position as their second most likely step, while 34% of males ranked spending more time with family second (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

"What do you see as the next step in your personal career progression?"

Note: Not all responses shown
Base: 73 business professionals who identified as women
Source: Forrester's Q4 2020 Global Women In Sales Survey

Note: Not all responses shown
Base: 35 business professionals who identified as men
Source: Forrester's Q4 2020 Global Women In Sales Survey

Alyssa Merwin (2020) has always aspired to be a CEO and consciously cultivated the skills she believes she needs for the future, and Kelley Hippler (2020) sees the COO or CEO role as a natural next step in her career progression. Anna Baird (2020) told us that she wants to continue to help Outreach grow into a multibillion-dollar business. The obstacles women face at multiple phases of their sales careers illustrate just how difficult it is to reach the highest levels of the B2B sales hierarchy — a CSO or CRO position. In addition to being important roles on their own merit, because of the revenue responsibility and the focus on continuous growth, the top sales job can be an ideal steppingstone to the CEO position. Phil Harrell (2020), group director and VP of Forrester's sales leadership

practice, describes the path forward. "It is a very natural progression because the CSO and CRO roles are focused on growth, and as a CEO, investors demand growth. Growth-oriented customer-facing executives are exactly what boards look for in CEOs, and CSOs and CROs do that."

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Women get mixed messages and face bias throughout their career. According to Jody Michael (2020), women deal with men's implicit bias, mansplaining, and general discounting of their positions throughout their careers. Women are told they must learn to position their conversations less aggressively or more collaboratively and are routinely perceived as being less powerful than

men. If a woman speaks more assertively — more powerfully — then she is told she is too aggressive. According to Michael (2020), "The contradictory mixed messages women receive throughout their careers such as, 'You're too soft,' 'You're too aggressive,' 'You're too weak,' 'You're too powerful,' 'You're too vocal,' or, 'You're not vocal enough' shape women's behavior and make them second-guess themselves.

All senior sales leaders we interviewed described challenges in their journey to find their authentic leadership style. Maria Black (2020) described a period very early in her career when she read baseball and other sports statistics to connect with her colleagues more, even though she had no particular interest in those details. One day a male colleague pulled her aside and said, "You can read all the sports pages you want, but you are never going to be one of the guys." That conversation was a turning point for Black who realized the inherent value in embracing one's authentic self. She told us, "Owning your own strengths, recognizing those things, and showing up authentically is really important for women". In addition to developing one's own leadership style, female sales leaders must draw from a range of styles and apply them situationally. Alyssa Merwin (2020) made a classic mistake when she joined LinkedIn. "I brought in the culture from my previous company. I just wanted to win, and I wanted to perform. And LinkedIn has a culture where it's all about relationships and collaboration. It was so foreign to me, and I didn't realize I had alienated my team until I got a ton of really harsh, difficult feedback."

MENTORS, SPONSORS, AND BOARDS

For most women who reach the upper echelons of sales leadership, it is lonely at the top. In addition to having mentors and sponsors in the earlier phases of their careers, the sales leaders we interviewed have a collection of advisers, usually women and typically outside of their existing company structure, whom they turn to for support and guidance. Maria Black (2020) who has cultivated a personal board of women in a similar capacity across different companies says, "They're the people who hold me accountable and inspire me to dig deep and find that grit again." Cynthia Sener (2020) established her personal board while in

graduate school, and Manisha Bhargava (2020) believes, "Investing in networks is the biggest investment that you can make in your own career."

Cynthia Barnes (2020) encourages members of the NWASP to seek out both mentors and sponsors. According to Barnes, sponsors choose you; when you perform well, they tap you on the shoulder and say, "I'd like to now vouch for you in those C-suite meetings." Mentors are someone who's not in your direct reporting structure so they cannot impact personnel decisions relating to their mentee. Women at the highest levels of sales leadership provide mentorship to others and rely on their personal boards and other networks for advice concerning their own careers.

Leading companies have formal groups that offer mentoring opportunities. ADP has 10 business resource groups such as Women in Sales Leadership, which has more than 1,500 members, including allies, globally. ADP also boasts an International Women's Inclusion Network, which has thousands of members, and a Women in Leadership group, which includes female executives across the company. According to Maria Black, "There is a lot of content sharing, best practice sharing, and mentoring that happens in these groups." The importance of mentorship cannot be overstated because 50% of respondents from the Women In Revenue annual survey reported a top reason for joining the organization was to gain mentorship and/ or sponsorship to advance their career (Women In Revenue, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND STAKEHOLDER IMPLICATIONS

This research reveals the systemic, extrinsic, and intrinsic biases women in B2B sales face throughout their careers — from applying and interviewing for a sales role to advancing from sales manager to director or VP and landing the top sales leadership job. It is time for B2B companies to create cultures where all employees can thrive and build sales forces that map to population and customer demographics. In addition to being the right thing to do, it's good for business. Seventy-seven percent of B2B sales professionals who identified as women told us they met or exceeded their

sales targets in the past fiscal year (Shea et al., 2020b). B2B organizations that are slow to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion within their sales forces will be unable to recruit top-tier sales talent and lose customers to sales organizations that do.

Policymakers

The bulk of work conducted to close the gap in women in leadership relies on organizations and the cultures and structures they build — things government legislation often struggles to affect.[3] According to a 2020 survey conducted by Hired, 74% of male and female respondents believe that company leadership — not the government or applicant — is responsible for closing the gender gap (Hired, 2020). There are, however, two areas where legislation is key to preventing the practices that breed gender discrimination in the workplace — salary-history-inquiry bans and pay-transparency protections.

Employees being open about and willing to discuss their compensation with colleagues is important in preventing the information asymmetry that restricts women from gaining the knowledge to determine when they're being discriminated against despite equal work responsibility or outcomes relative to their peers. Pay secrecy is federally illegal throughout the US under the National Labor Relations Act, even if the employee signs a nondisclosure agreement. However, in practice, limits to the law's coverage, combined with a lack of employee awareness of the laws and employers who continue to enforce secrecy despite the laws, have led to 41% of the working population discouraged and 25% explicitly prohibited from discussing wage and salary information, according to a survey conducted by the Institute For Women's Policy Research (IWPR) (Rosenfeld, 2017; IWPR, 2017).

For salary history, "A ban on salary-history inquiries breaks the link in the chain between past systemic gender pay issues and allows employers to base decisions on bona fide occupational qualifications" (Abbott Watkins, 2018). While there are several state laws prohibiting the practice, on a federal level, there is still no legislation, and proposals like the Paycheck Fairness Act have stalled in Congress. The challenge of political gridlock, coupled with the coercive pressures of organizational cultures, has slowed progress. In practice,

legislation alone will not solve the gender bias issue in the workplace but combined with organizational change and education on the issue, it can have a positive impact.

The Academic Community

The Journal of Selling's special edition on women in sales brings greater awareness to the unique challenges, women in B2B sales face. While this study surfaced topics such as pay inequity, confidence gaps in female sales pros, authentic leadership, mentorship, and more, deeper research must be conducted in these and other areas. When creating syllabi, college and university professors must arm the next generation of sales professionals with knowledge, skills, and frameworks to overcome these biases. Make students aware of managerial tools that highlight pay inequities. Include simulations that help sellers learn how to negotiate difficult internal conversations about promotions or raises. Use role-plays and pitch competitions to help sellers, both male and female, gain confidence. Finally, make students aware of the importance of networks and personal advisory boards, and encourage them to start building those support structures while they are in school.

Business Leaders

Business leaders must create welcoming and inclusive cultures, develop policies and processes to support pay equity and career advancement, and foster an environment where formal and informal mentorship can flourish. Formal diversity and inclusion programs shine the light on gender biases and sharpen the focus for companies looking to accelerate progress. Unfortunately, much more work needs to be done in this realm: 30% of respondents told us their company does not have any D&I initiatives, and only 20% of respondents indicated their company had a chief diversity officer (Shea et al., 2020b). In the 2020 Women In Revenue survey, 64% of respondents said a culture with explicit programs for diversity and inclusion were critical or helpful factors when considering a career opportunity (Women In Revenue, 2020).

Job descriptions are a barrier at the beginning of any aspiring female sales leader's career. Many females are put off by unwelcoming language, highly specialized requirements, or lack of visible female executives at the

hiring company. While the candidate may be a perfect fit for the role, she may not even apply for it if the job description does not position the role in a way that feels relevant to the candidate. ADP's Maria Black (2020) told us, "We have begun to use job descriptions that are gender-neutral in their language. We also require diverse candidate slates on our interview panels." Using gender-neutral language in job descriptions invites all the best candidates to apply and allows the hiring firm to cast a wider net and find the best applicant.

The most persistent and insidious challenge women in B2B sales face is gender pay inequity. Every female sales leader we interviewed said they were paid less than a similarly situated male counterpart at some point during their careers. Our experts believe the solution lies in organizational transparency. Beqom's Tanya Jansen (2020) told us, "The more transparent we are, the more equal we will be." Unfortunately, there is no panacea to solve the gender-pay-gap issue. According to Jansen: "The first step is getting the right stakeholders to take the concept seriously. Once you do that, you must assess where you are, and from there, you must have a target you want to reach every year."

Creating a culture where mentorship is expected, accepted, and rewarded is important. If your company does not have formal mentorship programs, informal ones work too. Encourage women in leadership positions to take on mentees because it will benefit both groups. Cynthia Barnes (2020) says it best, "You can't reach up without reaching back."

Female Sales Professionals

In the second half of 2020, women such as Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Emmanuelle Charpentier, Jennifer A. Doudna, Kamala Harris, and Kim Ng broke glass ceilings in their respective professions (Sanez, 2020; Nobel, 2020). It is time for women in B2B sales to take a page from these and other trailblazers' playbooks. Women in B2B sales face systemic gender biases throughout various phases of their careers, but there is plenty they can do to help themselves including researching a company before taking a position, seeking mentorship through internal or external structures, and taking calculated risks where the experience benefits may be high.

Most sales professionals conduct extensive research before joining a new company. But female sales professionals need to quickly uncover clues that indicate an environment may be inhospitable for women. Look for inclusive and welcoming job descriptions, females in leadership such as on the executive committee and board, an inclusive interview process, and the presence of a D&I council or diversity officer. Women sales pros must have a walkaway point and the discipline to move on if signals do not add up. Use external sources like Glassdoor to research compensation and ask what processes, policies, and systems are in place to ensure pay equity.

Mentorship, sponsorship, and personal boards, important to all professionals, are essential for female sales professionals who must have the support and skills to successfully navigate predictable obstacles. Early in the career journey, build a personal board of advisers, and if formal mentorship programs are unavailable, join an external networking group like Women In Revenue or the NAWSP. Issues around self-confidence surfaced for female sales pros at various stages of the career trajectory. Enlist an executive coach to help gain the tools and frameworks to increase confidence. In a way that is authentic to who you are, find some swagger and position yourself for a raise or promotion even if you think you are not fully ready.

When asked what advice she would give to female sales pros earlier in their careers, one senior sales leader stated, "If you don't like the channel, change it." She believes that you control your attitude and approach (Austin, 2020). The elegant simplicity of this advice is powerful. If your company, department, or reporting structure is not inclusive, supportive, and encouraging to female sales pros, leave it and find one that is. As the spotlight shines brightly on B2B organizations that value diversity, equity, and inclusion, opportunities for B2B women in sales and beyond will abound.

Companies Interviewed for This Report

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Cynthia Barnes, NAWSP

Jody Michael, Jody Michael Associates

Manisha Bhargava, Innoveo

Maria Black, ADP

Phil Harrell, Forrester Research

Kelley Hippler, Forrester Research

Tanya Jansen, beqom

Alyssa Merwin, LinkedIn

Sangita Patel, Comlinkdata

Lisa Rowan-Gillis, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

Cynthia Sener, Chatmeter

NOTES

[1] Beqom is a global provider of compensation management software founded in 2008. Beqom was included in Forrester's most recent sales performance management Now Tech report.

[2] Varicent Software is a software company that provides Symon.ai. Varicent has added applications to Symon.ai that provide in-depth data and visualizations on gender pay and diversity.

[3] While there has been an increase in state legislation mandating the increase or disclosure of the diversity on corporate boards, these laws and proposals face numerous challenges with enforcement and pending lawsuits (Hatcher et al., 2020; Castillo, 2020).

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