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**Gender**

## It's Time to Break the Cycle of Female Rivalry

by Mikaela Kiner

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Illustration by Ana Galvañ

**Summary.** Female rivalry happens when a woman uses her power to keep another woman down, whether it's by mistreating her or unfairly competing with her. But women are not at fault. Sexism has been long normalized in many spaces, and many women have been taught... [more](#)

Female rivalry happens when a woman uses her power to keep another woman down, mistreats her, or competes unfairly. Here are a few of my own experiences:

- I was told by my manager not to speak up or ask questions in meetings.
- A colleague plagiarized my work in a white paper and took credit for my comments.
- When I confided in a peer about a difficult client, she told my boss I was “having trouble building relationships.”

As women, it’s common that we internalize what’s happening and blame ourselves. Early in my career, I had never heard of female rivalry. Over time, I learned to distance myself from women who mistreated me, and did not trust or confide in them. Eventually I realized that their behavior was about them and not about me.

My experience is not unique. When I began writing my book *Female Firebrands*, I interviewed 13 mid-career professional women and 10 younger women aged 17 to early 30s. I read extensively about women at work including what they value, how they’re perceived, and the role social norms and everyday sexism play in holding women back. For instance, I found that both women and men judge women more harshly when they speak. Or, that even when both women and men are mentored, men are still promoted at a higher rate.

One thing I learned through my research was that women invite and value *healthy* competition – fighting fairly for a job, project, or promotion. But a big driver of female rivalry is the concept of “one seat at the table.” A young woman I met recently had applied for a transfer and wasn’t selected. She heard that the team already had one woman on it and “didn’t want another.” She was so frustrated she left that company for one that was more inclusive. Not everyone has the luxury to do this, but voting with her feet increased her own confidence and improved her situation.

The precept of “one seat at the table” comes from a belief that diversity is mandated, but not useful. In fact, there’s extensive evidence that more diverse teams perform better, are more innovative, produce more revenue, and higher profits. When women adopt this scarcity mindset and fight amongst themselves, it holds all women back. If a woman wants to get ahead, the better course is to champion the women around her, resulting in more opportunities and increased success for all.

Women can and do internalize patriarchal messages that women are not as strong, competent, and capable as men. This is known as *internalized sexism*. Women unconsciously absorb beliefs about their rightful place, and those messages show up in how women judge each other. That can lead women to mistreat, underestimate, and distance themselves from other women in order to increase their power and standing among men. In addition, successful leadership has long been defined by men. With few women role models, professional women have emulated men in order to find acceptance and get ahead.

Uncover your own hidden biases by asking yourself these questions:

- Do you judge other women for choices that you wouldn’t personally make?

- Do you criticize women for minor transgressions and forgive men for major ones?
- Do you make excuses for men's behavior as "just the way it is"?
- Do you compete more than you collaborate with your female colleagues?

### **Actions You Can Take to Break the Cycle of Female Rivalry**

- Help women through mentorship, advocacy, and creating opportunities. You can redefine how women interact at work by proving there's room for many. If you see a woman struggling, don't judge her. Ask how you can help. Share information about how you've succeeded on projects, and how you've effectively built relationships.
- Amplify other women: That is, reinforce their ideas and suggestions in meetings to increase their chance of being heard. If a woman is interrupted in a meeting, ask her to finish her thought. That way, she gets the floor and you didn't have to call anyone out.
- Give women credit for their ideas, contributions, and accomplishments. Publicly praise women who do well — in meetings, over email, and even in casual settings.
- If you have skills or knowledge that's in high demand, host a brown bag lunch and invite other women to join you. If that feels like too much work, start a book group where women can get to know each other and build relationships. The informal friendships women build serve them well back in the more formal work setting.

- Join forces with other women to ask for what you collectively need at work. Working together is a proven way to influence leaders and effect change. Join your company's employee resource group (ERG). Use your ERG to discuss issues that affect women, and brainstorm solutions to share with your sponsor. If your company doesn't have a forum for women, start one yourself.
- Do not talk badly about other women, gossip, or throw them under the bus. If you have constructive feedback for another woman, share it with her directly and respectfully. Talk to her, not about her.
- If you overhear a sexist joke or comment, don't let it go. Even a phrase like "I didn't find that funny" or "What did you mean by that?" disrupts inappropriate behavior. It's so much easier for you to do this when the comment isn't directed at you.
- Use company suggestion boxes and leader Q&A sessions to raise issues that affect women, and encourage others to do the same. I worked at one company where an anonymous question about insufficient maternity leave led to a complete overhaul and much more generous time off for mothers.
- Stop expecting more from female versus male bosses, peers, and direct reports. Stop judging women, including yourself, using a double standard. Assume best intentions, and if their behavior doesn't make sense to you, get curious.
- Learn from those who have been working longer than you. Reach out to your more experienced female peers, talk to

them about the battles they've faced, and what they've had to overcome. They will appreciate your asking.

If you've already "made it," don't unintentionally haze other women by putting them through the same challenges you faced over the course of your career. Send the elevator back down!

- Offer to mentor women around you by signing up with your company's mentoring program. If your company doesn't have a program, start one or set up informal mentor meetings over coffee or lunch.
- Consider a mentoring circle where you can mentor one-to-many.
- Post office hours where women can come to you for advice. So many women just need a sounding board or someone to confide in.
- Make it a point to know the high-potential women around you so that you can advocate for them when it's time for promotions and pay increases.

As painful as female rivalry is, it represents only a fraction of my professional relationships. The key is learning to recognize unhealthy relationships. If you can't change your situation, you can still spot the signs. Seek out confident women who value you; women who want to be your mentor or sponsor. Find women who are not threatened by you, who appreciate you, and want you to succeed. I can guarantee you they're out there.

## MK

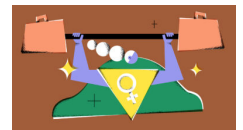
**Mikaela Kiner** is a CEO, author, and executive coach. In 2015, she founded Reverb, helping

companies create healthy, inclusive culture. Prior to Reverb, Mikaela held HR leadership roles at Northwest companies including Microsoft, Starbucks, Amazon, PopCap Games, and Redfin. Mikaela enjoys coaching leaders at all levels and working with mission-driven organizations. She's the author of *Female Firebrands: Stories and Techniques to Ignite Change, Take Control, and Succeed in the Workplace*. A native Seattleite who grew up on Capitol Hill, Mikaela is married to Henry, a musician, artist, and teacher. Their two teens are good at challenging the status quo and are a constant source of learning and laughter.

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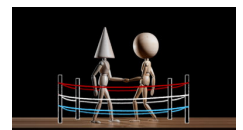


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