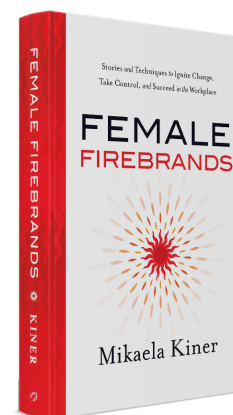


# Female Firebrands

Stories and Techniques to Ignite Change, Take Control, and Succeed in the Workplace

by **Mikaela Kiner**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Today, with Time's Up, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and LGBTQIA+ empowerment, there's pressure to change the way we relate at work and to build healthy, inclusive cultures that are better for everyone. There's much that women, as managers and leaders, are still trying to decipher. How do we create modern workplaces where everyone can thrive? How can people with demands and interests outside of work grow their careers?

*Female Firebrands* discusses these issues and suggests ways to address them. It is based on nearly 30 hours of interviews with thirteen successful, mission-driven women and ten dynamic younger women.

Mikaela Kiner, an HR expert, wrote the book because she knows countless women who want and deserve to choose family and take care of their team, their clients, and themselves but are unsure if it's truly possible. She subscribes to Ruth Bader Ginsburg's philosophy: "Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you."

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The role that privilege plays in the workplace.
- How men worried about #MeToo can gauge how they treat women.
- The negative effects of women's own internalized sexism.
- Pregnancy discrimination's toll on women and companies.

### Introduction

Mikaela Kiner worked in HR in big companies, including as VP Human Resources. She found herself questioning companies whose work hours and reward structures were designed, long ago, by and for men. She wasn't invited to executive dinners or drinks with the guys and was told to refrain from asking questions in meetings. She saw male peers and executives repeatedly let off the hook for missing meetings, yelling, and name calling, yet she was shut down when she tried to participate and do her job. Over the years, she received feedback from managers, including women, that was unclear and often unconstructive and contradictory.

Women in the workplace are often in a double bind. Leadership wants women to command the room without being commanding and to be more assertive—but the moment they are, they fire them.

#### As you read the book, you will:

- Develop tools and techniques to stand up and speak up on behalf of yourself and others when it's both difficult and necessary;
- Get better at recognizing “little indignities” you don't have to tolerate;
- Learn what it means to be an informed, empowered advocate for women;
- Increase awareness of your own blind spots and biases so you can learn from them; and
- Recognize the role of privilege at work and how it can be used for positive change.

### Privilege in the Workplace

Talking authentically about diversity requires us to ask hard questions and have uncomfortable conversations. Conversations about privilege are situational and highly complex because no one fits into just one box when it comes to race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and so on.

What matters is being aware of your privilege and recognizing how unmitigated privilege contributes to holding others back. Those with privilege have a responsibility to recognize the advantages it provides and use it not only for their own good but also to boost and join force with others who don't share the same privileges.

Women are dramatically underrepresented at S&P 500

companies and in executive boardrooms. Most Americans define leadership using stereotypically white, male attributes because sports, government, and workplaces in our countries were built by and for white men. This imbalance means women and others in marginalized groups do not have equal power.

#### Male Privilege

Men can be true advocates and allies of women. But unrecognized male privilege continues to hinder the progress, confidence, and wellness of many capable, talented, and hardworking women. Savvy companies are learning to make their spaces more welcoming and productive for all kinds of people, while simultaneously educating their workforce about how to break unconscious bias and increase belonging.

#### Wage Equity

Women are still paid less than men for performing the same job, and the gap is even wider for Black and Hispanic women than for white women. When employers rely less on relationship factors like who you know in power and more on hard data, workers are measured in terms of their value to the organization, which helps address the pay gap. A company that proactively encourages the advancement of women of all races can make a measurable difference in the number of women who are promoted.

#### Office Housework and Other Little Indignities

All too often it is assumed that female employees should make the coffee, order snacks, do the dishes, and plan social events, all of which take up time they could use working on more critical, high-impact, high-visibility projects.

People comment on a woman's looks and clothes before her quality of work. And there's a double standard—women are called “aggressive” when they're being assertive. They're accused of talking too much when they're not talking as much as men. It's typically harder for women to get the floor, and when they do, they're often interrupted.

#### How Does Male Privilege Impact Women?

It is generally assumed in high-pressure corporate settings that a woman will likely underperform. Because of the scrutiny women are under, they internalize messages that they're not good enough and those beliefs subconsciously become part of their nature.

When women do break the glass ceiling, it's often because no man wants to face the immensity of the job that's being

vacated. And women of color don't have the privilege of smashing a glass ceiling—they face a concrete ceiling. And it's not due to lack of ambition.

### White Privilege

Many women of color don't feel heard or represented by modern-day feminism. We will never be able to build safe, equitable, and productive workspaces and communities without bridging this racial divide.

Those in the majority need to educate themselves about what's offensive, invite people of color to be blunt with them, and build a thicker skin in order to receive feedback without being defensive.

Privilege means there are people you are not likely to see—either you don't physically see them, or you can't imagine them in leadership roles. It's crucial to ask yourself if there are stereotypes and implicit biases you've internalized that have caused you to miss the possibility, creativity, and ingenuity of those around you.

We all have opportunities to take concrete steps, big and small, to take personal responsibility for creating workplaces that are safe, welcoming, and inclusive for everyone. Identify your unconscious biases. Seek out diversity training for yourself and introduce it at your organization if you can. Reject stereotypes.

There are many ways to open doors for women at work. A couple of them: Pay them equally, even if they ask for less or made less in the past. Give them the floor and reinforce their points.

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## #MeToo

People all over the world are demanding awareness and action against predatory behavior. The #MeToo movement is changing the way we conduct ourselves at work. Companies are adopting and reinforcing zero tolerance, anti-harassment, and anti-discrimination policies.

Some men have decided to just avoid working with women as much as possible because of fear of getting in trouble. But the line that defines appropriate behavior is clear. Men, ask yourself, "Would I say this in front of my spouse, daughter, mother, or a customer? Would I want this show up in the press or on Twitter?"

Those who have power are often held to different standards. They get to define what's morally correct, fair, and

acceptable, and they can use control tactics. Recognizing and preventing these abuses of power are being integrated as essential topics in diversity, equity, inclusion, and workplace safety initiatives.

Women have always been vulnerable when they speak out, since they risk not only ostracism, but the likelihood that they won't be believed. Today women are learning to join forces. When they unify their response to #MeToo behaviors, they won't be as easily dismissed or ignored.

### Who's the Victim Here?

Men who are accused of assault and discrimination are often given more sympathy than their victims. The survivors, not the perpetrators, are the ones who are threatened, blacklisted, and driven away from their jobs.

A possible unintended consequence of the #MeToo movement is that men will avoid one-on-one meetings with women and exclude women from key events such as dinner meetings and travel opportunities. This kind of thinking can lead to huge setbacks for women. And unless men also choose not to meet privately with other men, this separate and unequal treatment for women may well constitute discrimination.

### The Role of HR in the Wake of #MeToo

One person alone—the HR leader—is not enough to change company culture and decision-making. HR needs to take allegations seriously and create a safe place for complainants to come forward, with support from the executive team. All senior leaders must be held equally accountable and be part of the solution. If the leadership team is a sexist boys' club, HR hardly has the power to change the culture. Boards, advisors, and venture firms can play more active roles by ensuring that everyone, including HR, has a safe, confidential way to report concerns.

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## Send the Elevator Back Down!

Women can be unnecessarily competitive with one another, for no reason, when it serves no purpose. But women need to work together if we want to dispel the myth that there's room for only one woman at the table. We should compete, of course, but without personal judgment, shaming, and stereotyping, and while putting at least as much if not more energy into helping all women rise.

We cannot ignore our own internalized sexism and allow it to hold other women back. Women unconsciously integrate

society's beliefs—that women are not as strong, competent, and capable as men—and those messages show up in how women judge other women.

### Women Are Still Being Stereotyped

Social conditioning is a problem. It defines how women are supposed to look, feel, and contribute to the world. We have to keep examining what we've been taught, what beliefs we've internalized, and how we can change outdated norms. These messages set up a competitive environment that girls can't help but internalize from day one. That environment was rooted in the reality of an earlier time—when women were dependent on men for their livelihood and had few or no rights to education, voting, or high-paying jobs.

### Women at Work: Competition or Sisterhood?

It's hard to develop strong bonds and collaborate if we are not clear on our biases. Many white women are still in the dark about their advantages and biases. White women have a privilege (race) and also experience oppression as women versus white men, who are dominant. White women should ask for and welcome feedback from women of color. Do not defend or try to explain your intentions, which burdens women of color.

### #MomToo

Parental discrimination is another battle we have to face in the workplace. Most of the women interviewed avoided or left corporate environments because the companies where they worked didn't offer the fairness and flexibility they needed.

The facts about working moms are eye-opening. They are much less likely to be offered a job and, when they are, are offered much less money. And consider: the United States is the only country in the developed world that does not mandate employer-paid leave for new parents.

Pregnancy discrimination is real, and it's illegal. Because of discrimination, many pregnant women leave companies or drop out of the workforce. Once back on the job, moms face a mental and physical toll. Parental discrimination has detrimental effects both on organizations and on working moms. The impact even spreads to women who don't have children and aren't planning to, simply because one day they too might become mothers.

While it's true for most women that becoming a working mom is hard work and requires a new kind of balance and flexibility, that is no reason to exclude moms from the workforce or limit their opportunities.

### Conclusion

With a rich combination of women's stories explained by societal context and backed by data, *Female Firebrands* invites you to take a realistic look at what it means to be a woman in the workplace so you can do what you need to do to thrive.



Mikaela Kiner is an executive coach and the CEO of Reverb, helping companies create healthy, inclusive cultures that engage and inspire employees. She's been quoted in *Fast Company*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Harvard Business Review*. Her firm works with companies like Microsoft, HBO, and *Wizards of the Coast*. She and her family live in Seattle, Washington.

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