
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Women in the workplace

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Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Neil

Sam, does this situation sound familiar? It's a colleague's birthday next week. A male boss says to a female employee – “You're great at organising things – would you buy a card and get everyone in the office to sign it? Oh, and we'll need to order a cake too – thanks, you're amazing!”

Sam

Yes, I have seen that. A male boss asks a woman to do all the jobs that keep the office running but do nothing to advance her career or improve her chances of **promotion** – that's when someone moves up into a higher, better paid position in a company.

Neil

Sadly, this happens a lot. In many workplaces around the world, it's the men who are considered 'born leaders' and promoted up the corporate career ladder, while the women are given less important roles. Even today, many working women find themselves at a point in their career beyond which they cannot progress, an invisible barrier to succeed referred to as the **glass ceiling**.

Sam

But in this programme, we'll be meeting the members of The No Club, a group of women saying 'no' to the glass ceiling by publicly questioning the kinds of jobs men and women are asked to do in the workplace. And, of course, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary as well.

Neil

But first, I have a question for you, Sam. Despite the glass ceiling, women do make it to the top jobs in many areas of work and business, even in the male-dominated world of politics. So, who was the first woman to become British Prime Minister? Was it:

- a) Theresa May?
- b) Nicola Sturgeon? or
- c) Margaret Thatcher?

Sam

I know the answer to this one, Neil. It's c) Margaret Thatcher.

Neil

OK. Well, we'll find out later if you're right. Professor Lise Vesterlund is one of the four academics who co-wrote *The No Club*, a book discussing how females disproportionately take on the unimportant, less visible tasks at work.

Sam

Professor Vesterlund calls these **non-promotable tasks**, jobs like taking notes, organising social events or chairing meetings – jobs that take time and effort but do little to increase company profits or to boost your career. Research shows that most of these tasks are done by women. Here's Lise Vesterlund explaining more to BBC World Service programme, Business Daily.

Prof Lise Vesterlund

We've been noticing gender differences in wages, in advancement, in negotiation. **Burn-out** for women is much greater than it is for men. Their dissatisfaction with their work is much greater. And we've been trying to sort of address all these objectives with lots of different methods and techniques, and what is interesting about the **non-promotable work** is that it, in a very structural sense, contributes to all of those differences.

Neil

Professor Vesterlund lists some workplace gender imbalances, including job dissatisfaction and **burn-out** – that's tiredness and exhaustion caused by working too hard. Many of these issues are made worse by non-promotable tasks.

Sam

Natalie Quail agrees. Natalie started her successful dental cosmetics company, SmileTime, after winning a business competition on the TV show, *Dragon's Den*. Here she tells BBC World Service's Business Daily about her experience of being asked to take on non-promotable tasks in her work as a trainee solicitor.

Natalie Quail

As a trainee solicitor pretty much every task that you take on is a non-promotable task. Note-taking is one of them, in meetings, when you, kind of, are told that you can't really speak or say anything. I was tasked with being the team party organiser, so that was my role. It does definitely occur that the women in the team, the level of **multitasking** they're doing just ... far outstrips the men in a lot of cases, for example, you know, a lot of women in the team would also be **juggling** having kids at home, being a working mum.

Neil

Natalie found herself doing non-promotable tasks. She thinks many women in the workplace are expected to be good at **multitasking** - doing more than one thing at the same time.

Sam

For working mums, who are raising a family as well as developing careers at work, this involves some **juggling** - trying to manage your life when you are involved in many different activities which all demand your time.

Neil

In the forty years since the term 'glass ceiling' was invented, it seems not much has changed for working women. But there is some good news. The number of female managers and women working in jobs traditionally seen as male has increased dramatically, and those companies where getting promotion is based on ability not gender, have benefitted from talented, hard-working female leaders.

Sam

And speaking of female leaders, Neil, what was the answer to your question? You asked me who was the first female British Prime Minister, and I said Margaret Thatcher. Was I right?

Neil

You were right! Mrs Thatcher, nicknamed The Iron Lady, became Prime Minister in May 1979, the first woman to break the political **glass ceiling** in the UK - an invisible barrier to advancing in your career.

Sam

OK, let's recap the other vocabulary we've learnt, starting with **promotion** - moving up into a higher, more important position in your company.

Neil

The term **non-promotable tasks** describes those unimportant jobs which help your organisation but do nothing to advance your career. They are often given to women.

Sam

If you have **burn-out**, you're exhausted from working too hard.

Neil

Multitasking is the ability to do several things at the same time.

Sam

And finally, **juggling** involves managing many different activities which all demand your time. We've managed our time pretty well so far but now our six minutes are up! Bye for now!

Neil

Bye!

VOCABULARY

promotion

moving someone up into a higher, more important or better paid position in a company or organisation

glass ceiling

an invisible barrier to advancing in your career

non-promotable tasks

unimportant and time-consuming jobs which helps a worker's organisation but do nothing to advance their career

burn-out

exhaustion caused by working too hard

multitasking

doing more than one thing at the same time

juggling

trying to manage your job or life when you are involved in several different activities which all demand your time