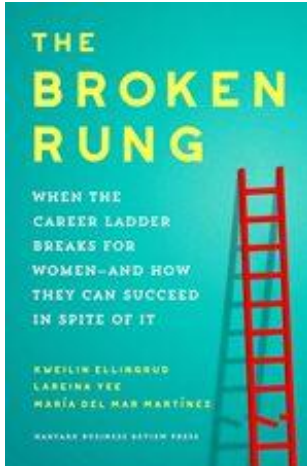


PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW ¹



Book Title: ***The Broken Rung: When the Career Ladder Breaks for Women - and How They Can Succeed in Spite of It***

Author: Kweilin Ellingrud, Lareina Yee, and María del Mar Martínez

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Introduction

There are books that inform, and then there are books that feel like they were written about your own life. *The Broken Rung: When the Career Ladder Breaks for Women and How They Can Succeed in Spite of It*, by McKinsey senior partners Kweilin Ellingrud, Lareina Yee, and María del Mar Martínez, is the latter. Published in March 2025 by Harvard Business Review Press, this 267-page hardcover draws on more than a decade of rigorous McKinsey research, interviews with over 50 remarkable leaders, and the authors' own experiences at the highest levels of global consulting. The result is a timely, data-rich, and deeply humane examination of why women, who excel in education and early career performance, consistently fall behind once they enter the workforce.

As a woman who has navigated professional challenges since before entering college in 1996, I found this book both validating and energizing. The central phenomenon the authors identify, the “broken rung,” the critical first step from individual contributor to manager where women lose ground they never fully recover, is something I and countless women around me have lived. This book finally names it, quantifies it, and most importantly, offers a clear-eyed roadmap for what women and organizations can do about it.

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Overview of Book's Structure

The Broken Rung is organized around a single, powerful concept: experience capital. The authors argue that while roughly half of a person's lifetime earnings come from education and half from work experience, men and women do not accumulate this experience capital at the same rate. The book systematically explores why that gap exists and how women can close it, weaving together McKinsey data, economic research, and the candid stories of leaders who have navigated the broken rung themselves.

The book opens by defining the broken rung phenomenon: for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 81 women receive the same promotion. This is not a glass-ceiling problem occurring at the top, it is a ground-floor crisis. The authors then build their case through thematic chapters covering key topics: how to choose the right boss and organization when starting out; why frequent, intentional job moves (both internal and external) are essential to building experience capital; how to close the gender technology gap; the ways in which bias operates and can be turned to a woman's advantage; and the complex relationship between motherhood and career trajectory.

Throughout, the authors balance systemic analysis with individual agency. They are unflinching in their diagnosis of structural inequality, the gender wage gap, the gender wealth gap, and the gender health gap are all examined through fresh data, but they do not leave readers helpless. Each chapter ends with actionable strategies women can apply immediately, without waiting for their organizations to change. The final sections pivot to a message for leaders and companies: the broken rung is not only a moral problem but a business one, and organizations that repair it will outperform those that do not.

Highlights

One of the book's most compelling insights is the distinction between the glass ceiling and the broken rung. While the glass ceiling has been a defining metaphor of workplace gender inequality for decades, Ellingrud, Yee, and Martínez show that the more urgent problem happens much earlier, at the very first promotion. Women who miss that step fall behind in experience capital and often never catch up, regardless of how talented or hardworking they are. This reframing alone is worth the price of the book: it shifts attention from the senior leadership pipeline to the entry and early-career stages where interventions can have the greatest impact.

The concept of experience capital is another major contribution. The authors argue persuasively that the value a worker gains from on-the-job experience varies enormously depending on the role, the organization, the boss, and the types of assignments undertaken. Women, on average, tend to end up in roles that accumulate less experience capital, often because of seemingly benign choices, cultural expectations, or lack of awareness about what high-value career moves look like. The

book provides concrete frameworks for evaluating opportunities through an experience-capital lens, which is immediately practical for anyone at any career stage.

The chapter on motherhood is particularly nuanced. Rather than treating it as simply a career derailment, the authors explore how motherhood can be an experience capital escalator if approached strategically, a perspective that challenges both the pessimistic narrative of the “motherhood penalty” and the oversimplified “you can have it all” message. They also address the gender technology gap with urgency, noting that as AI and automation reshape every profession, women’s underrepresentation in technology roles puts them at a compounding disadvantage that must be addressed now.

Highlights: What I liked!

What I appreciate most about this book is its refusal to choose between structural critique and individual empowerment. Too many books on gender in the workplace either place the entire burden of change on women or wait passively for systemic reform. *The Broken Rung* does neither. It acknowledges that the system is broken and that women cannot wait for it to be fixed, and it gives them the tools to act now. This dual focus makes it far more useful than most books in this genre.

I also deeply valued the authors’ tone: unflinching but never despairing, rigorous but never dry, and generous in its inclusion of men as allies rather than adversaries. The personal stories woven throughout, of women who overcame early setbacks, of leaders who learned to recognize bias in their own organizations, make the data come alive in memorable and motivating ways. Reading this book, I felt not just seen but genuinely armed.

Who might benefit from the Book

The Broken Rung will resonate with women at every stage of their careers. Young women entering the workforce for the first time will find invaluable guidance on choosing their first role, their first boss, and their first organization with an eye toward building experience capital from day one. Mid-career professionals who sense they have fallen behind will find both an explanation and a recovery plan. Senior leaders will find frameworks for examining their own organizations and repairing structural barriers that they may not even realize exist.

The book is explicitly addressed to men as well. Its authors argue compellingly that gender equity in the workplace is not a women’s issue to be solved by women alone, it is a leadership issue and an economic issue. Project managers and organizational leaders in particular will benefit from the book’s discussion of how role assignments, promotion processes, and organizational culture either accelerate or impede women’s advancement. For anyone who manages teams, leads organizations, or influences career decisions, this book is essential reading.

Conclusion

The Broken Rung is one of the most important books on gender and work published in recent years. It combines the analytical rigor of McKinsey's best research with the storytelling warmth of a mentor speaking directly to you. Unlike books that chronicle the problem of gender inequity without offering solutions, or that offer strategies without the data to back them up, this one does both with equal skill.

On a personal level, reading this book was a moment of recognition that I did not know I needed. I have believed for nearly three decades that women face real, structural obstacles in professional life, obstacles that persist regardless of talent, preparation, or determination. The Broken Rung validated that belief with evidence, named its mechanisms with precision, and offered paths forward with genuine optimism. It did not make me angry; it made me feel informed, empowered, and ready to act.

I give this book my highest recommendation. Whether you are a woman navigating your career, a leader responsible for others' advancement, or simply someone who wants to understand one of the defining challenges of our time, The Broken Rung belongs on your shelf, and, more importantly, in your hands.

For more about this book, go to: <https://store.hbr.org/product/the-broken-rung-when-the-career-ladder-breaks-for-women-and-how-they-can-succeed-in-spite-of-it/10722>

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Carla Costa is a PMI Dallas Chapter member and volunteer as Director of Content. She is a Multilingual Product & Business Development Leader with 15+ years of experience driving enterprise revenue, digital transformation, and product adoption across North America and LATAM. Specialized in SaaS, SDLC, ITSM, and Agile methodologies, with a strong track record of delivering CX/UX products. Carla has proven success in go-to-market strategy, cross-functional alignment, and executive stakeholder management. She holds PMP, CSPO, PMC, and ICP-ACC certifications

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