One is the loneliest number

Put an end to the costly isolation experienced by many women by clustering them on teams and improving the promotion process.

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Chances are, most people have experienced an "only" moment. Ours included being the only Jewish kid in the class as *The Merchant of Venice* was being discussed and plans for Christmas reviewed, and being the only woman and person of color in a room full of older men and about to tell the group that they needed to shift their strategy.

All of these experiences brought with them anxiety, pressure, and a sense of being on the spot: if we said or did the wrong thing, stereotypes would get reinforced or prejudices confirmed. Other people, we recognize, experience far worse.

For women, being an "only" in the workplace is endemic. Twenty percent of the women in our latest *Women in the Workplace* report said they were commonly the only person of their gender in the room or one of very few. The figure is far higher in some sectors such as technology and engineering. For women of color, that number rose to 45 percent. For men, it was just 7 percent.

These statistics, from a study of 64,000 employees and 279 companies in North America, are a sobering gauge of how frustratingly slow progress is toward gender equality in most companies. In the past five years, the proportion of white-collar women joining companies has risen steadily to reach near parity with men. But female representation still diminishes along the corporate pipeline, and in the C-suite it is stuck at one in five.

The more encouraging news is that those same statistics point to a potentially forceful way to break through: say no to "onliness."

We know women are more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace than men. But the study shows the odds are higher still when women find themselves alone in a group of men (exhibit). They are far more likely than others to have their judgment questioned than women working in a more balanced environment (49 percent versus 32 percent), to be mistaken for someone more junior (35 percent versus 15 percent), and to be subjected to unprofessional and demeaning remarks (24 percent versus 14 percent). If they are treated like this, no wonder they get overlooked for promotion.
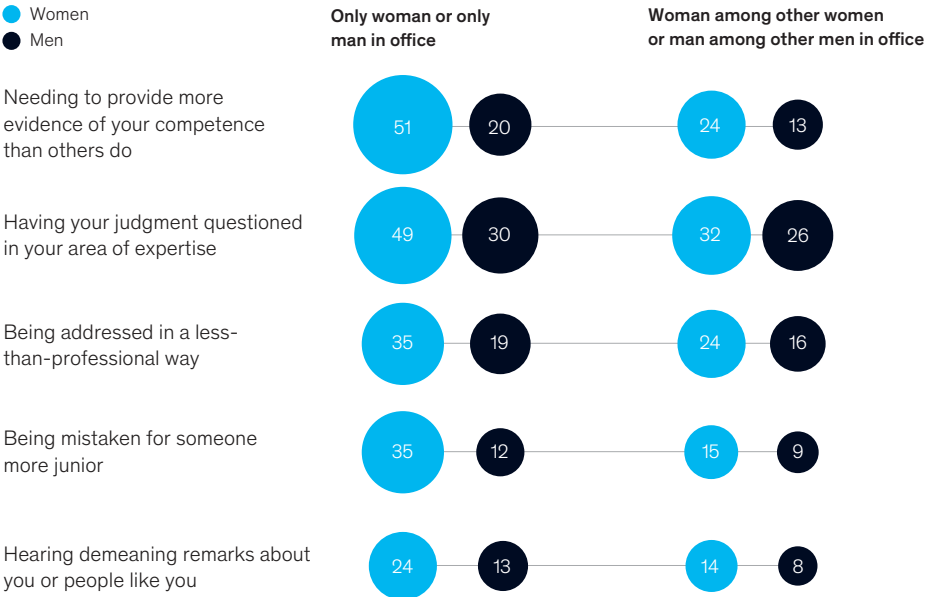
Banishing onliness does not replace the goal of gender parity in the C-suite nor the need for a more complex strategy to achieve it. But our research suggests it will diminish some of the barriers that hold women back. Importantly, it is also a relatively simple goal toward which visible progress can start today with a few practical measures, such as the following:

- *Recognize that one is not enough.* Forty-five percent of all men and 28 percent of women in the survey reported that if one in ten leaders is a woman, that means women are relatively well represented. These beliefs clash with the experiences of the onlys—suggesting how important it is to shift those perceptions. Two women is the bare minimum; better yet, many more.

- *Build critical mass instead of spreading women leaders too thinly.* Leadership teams, project teams, agile squads, and many other groupings of people are being formed all the time. Our research strongly suggests that it is preferable to assemble teams comprising several women rather than try to place one woman on every team. A higher concentration of women in some groups could, in the beginning, strip others of any women at all. This is far from ideal, but it does at least signal the aspiration and underscore the continued need to boost the number of women across the organization.

Exhibit

Women are more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace than men, but being the only woman is an even worse experience.

Employees who have experienced microaggressions during the normal course of business, %

● Women
● Men

	Only woman or only man in office		Woman among other women or man among other men in office	
Needing to provide more evidence of your competence than others do	51	20	24	13
Having your judgment questioned in your area of expertise	49	30	32	26
Being addressed in a less-than-professional way	35	19	24	16
Being mistaken for someone more junior	35	12	15	9
Hearing demeaning remarks about you or people like you	24	13	14	8

Source: 2018 LeanIn.Org and McKinsey *Women in the Workplace* study

- *Review processes for making promotions and filling vacancies.* If the proportion of women at entry level has risen and if, as our research consistently indicates, women leave their companies at the same rate as men, then there must be a growing proportion of experienced women building up in the pipeline. Find them, help them advance, and enlist them in the effort to overcome onliness.

- *Use the CEO transition period.* In separate research, our McKinsey colleagues found that more than two-thirds of chief executives replace at least half of the members of their top teams within two years of taking office. These moments of change represent a great opportunity to address the "only" problem, but too often it becomes an opportunity forgone: the proportion of women in management in the senior teams that new CEOs reshuffled increased by only two percentage points to 14 percent.

A word of caution: We do not want to suggest women onlys never succeed. On the contrary, plenty do. And plenty feel supported in their work and ambition. That said, the research shows they are more likely to contemplate leaving their jobs (26 percent) than other women (17 percent) and employees overall (19 percent).

And our research reveals how to bring the "only" population into line with others in terms of job satisfaction and intent to leave. Sponsors who give them stretch assignments, highlight their good work to others, and advocate on their behalf for new opportunities move the needle most. Middle managers are naturally positioned to be the first line of change.

This speaks to the importance of making a compelling case for gender diversity that all managers hear and investing in more employee training to overcome the biased views—sometimes held by women as well as men—that keep women back. Both have emerged as constant themes in our research over the years.

We recognize that achieving gender parity in the workplace depends on a targeted set of actions that will differ by industry and company and that companies worldwide are making considerable efforts to change the status quo. But to inject some adrenaline into all those efforts, why not build strength in numbers?