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What's Holding Women Back?

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Last week, I attended the annual [Aspen Ideas Festival](#), which features discussions with leading experts and thinkers across industries. This year's program covered five tracks, including one called "Women + Girls: The Solution." The agenda refers to a point made by festival presenters: only by helping women and girls achieve their full potential and using all of the brainpower available to us, can we hope to solve the world's problems.

From the representation of [women in elected office](#) in the United States to the rarity of [female chief executives running Fortune 500 companies](#), evidence that women are not yet full participants in society was presented. And the women who spoke, including Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Supreme Court justice, and [Sylvia Earle](#), an oceanographer who is also chief executive of [Doer Marine Corporation](#), offered no quick fixes. I've gathered some highlights of their discussions here.

During panels that considered leadership and women in science and technology, presenters shared their backgrounds and discussed attitudes from the not-so-distant past that contributed to the current situation. [Judith Rodin](#), president of the Rockefeller Foundation, recalled a conversation she had with an adviser while working toward her Ph.D. in psychology in the 1960s. He asked if she was taking birth control pills and said he wouldn't waste his time on her if she wasn't.

The Wellesley College president and immunobiologist [Kim Bottomly](#) spoke of the luck that enabled her career: While pursuing her Ph.D. in the 1970s, she happened to choose the only adviser who allowed women in his lab. "My mantra became, 'women shouldn't have to depend on luck,'" she said.

With experiences like these presumably behind us, the question arose: What's holding women back? [Laura Liswood](#), secretary general of the [Council of Women World Leaders](#) and a senior adviser to Goldman Sachs, said that "unconscious behaviors" contributed to the problem. Several panelists noted that from the political to corporate realms, women still consider it risky to pursue power. It can seem less appealing, said the panelists, given that [women are often judged harshly](#) for being as aggressive or ambitious as their male counterparts.

"It's not about work-family balance," Dr. Rodin said. Rather, she continued, that's an excuse used by women who find it too difficult to acknowledge larger fears. Dr. Rodin, who has one child and two stepchildren, acknowledged that the pressures of managing a career and personal life were nonetheless real for everyone who works.

When it comes to gender parity in careers in science, Ms. Bottomly said, "We've made it clear there are problems." But, she said, it's important that we do more to motivate women to pursue these careers and not simply scare them off. "We have to make women understand that science is a field for them," she said. This will involve debunking inaccurate stereotypes about women's aptitude for science, the panelists agreed.

Dr. Earle noted that, as a grandmother, she had become especially aware of the forces that undermine girls' potential. She talked about walking the "pink" and "blue" aisles in toy stores. "The blue aisles have really cool stuff — you can be anything," she said; the pink aisles are full of "frilly things, mirrors, and kitchen appliances." In cartoons, the girls are still the ones being "saved," said Dr. Earle, who set a world record for solo diving to a depth of 3,300 feet in 1970.

The panelists agreed that girls often lose interest in science during middle school when they face societal pressure to dumb themselves down. [Sophie Vandebroek](#), chief technology officer with Xerox, read part of an essay, written by her daughter at age 16, that eloquently described the peer pressure she fought as a girl taking honors classes.

So, what can be done? The panelists agreed on the importance of parents and mentors. [Edith Widder](#), president and senior scientist with the [Ocean Research & Conservation Association](#), said that her mother, who held a Ph.D. in mathematics — rare for her generation of women — was a "fabulous role model." Dr. Earle said it was formative that her parents let her do whatever her brothers did and encouraged her interest in science.

Across panels, women also spoke of the necessity of equal relationships at home. "This is about partners figuring out how to raise children together," said [Isobel Coleman](#), senior fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy, Council on Foreign Relations and author of "[Paradise Beneath Her Feet, How Women Are Transforming the Middle East](#)." Said Ms. Coleman, a mother of five: "I wouldn't be here today if my husband weren't home with the kids."

Speakers consistently rejected the notion — fostered, for example, by the recent Atlantic magazine cover story, "[The End of Men](#)" — that women succeed at the expense of men. "Men and women, shoulder-to-shoulder, will work together to make this a better world," said Justice Ginsburg. "We will get there."

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