

The Tallest Poppy

How the workforce is cutting ambitious women down.



Source: The Tallest Poppy, an international research project led by Women of Influence+. More than 4710 respondents completed the survey between January and February 2023.

**WOMEN OF
INFLUENCE+**

About The Author

Dr. Rumeet Billan is an award-winning, internationally recognized entrepreneur, learning architect, speaker, author, and humanitarian. Her mission is to transform workplace cultures through research, training, and experiences that enable trust, foster belonging, and build resilience. Dr. Billan is the CEO and owner of Women of Influence+ and CEO of Viewpoint Leadership Inc., a learning and development firm. She completed her PhD at the University of Toronto and has designed and facilitated programs, courses, and training sessions across industries and sectors. She has twice led groundbreaking research studies on Tall Poppy Syndrome, which reveals the impact of the silent systemic syndrome on women in the workplace. In 2020, she co-led the Canadian Happiness at Work study, in partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association. Her award-winning, bestselling book, *Who Do I Want To Become?* helps children and adults rethink the often asked question: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Dr. Billan was named Canada’s Top 10 Power Women in 2020, and she serves on the Board of Directors of First Book Canada. Visit www.rumeet.com to learn more.

About Women of Influence+

For almost 30 years, [Women of Influence+ \(WOI+\)](#) has been the community where ambitious women with wide-ranging expertise and innovative ideas go to create a new future for themselves, and for the world of work at large. A future where women-led leadership thrives. At WOI+, our ethos is rooted in making meaningful and impactful change. We do this by placing ourselves and our community in positions of influence and power — places where we can drive transformation.

We measure influence by impact — the ripples that are made, the doors that are opened, the number of seats that are added to the proverbial decision-making table. Influence is about how decisions, innovations, and systems create a more inclusive and equitable world for everyone. At WOI+, we are unafraid to shake the status quo to transform society’s expectations of our capabilities.

We are dedicated to sharing and elevating the unfiltered success stories of a diverse group of role models. We know that when done right — from the podium or the page — these stories not only inspire, educate, and connect — they start to redefine our perceptions of gender roles and abilities. We are changing the narrative. The result? Our community is equipped with the connections, support, training, and tools to carve new pathways and excel within their careers, on their own terms.

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Executive Summary

We know that many women have a significantly different experience in the workplace than their male counterparts. From hiring processes that are riddled with biases, to pay disparities, to barriers in advancement — the inequities women face are far-reaching.

We also know that over the past few years, women have been leaving the workforce in droves — a period that has come to be known as the Great Resignation. While many are returning to work, there remains a significant gap and a need for structural and operational changes to the workplace in order to remedy it.

For those women who are committed to forging ahead, navigating the obstacles in an attempt to shatter the glass ceiling, there's another notable barrier to advancement and engagement that's proving to have a significant impact. Women who are successful are being bullied and belittled, challenged on their successes, and made to feel as though it's not their place to take up so much space. This is called **Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS)**, a term referring to flowers that grow higher than others and are cut down to size so that they are the same height as the flowers around them.

The Tallest Poppy 2023, is the first international study of its kind. The study looked to thousands of working women from all demographics and professions to determine how their mental health, well-being, engagement, and performance are affected by interactions with their clients, colleagues, and leaders surrounding their success and accomplishments.

The results are significant and should be heeded. Women's success is under attack in workplaces around the world. The more accomplished an individual is, the more likely she is to face aggressions, not only from those in positions of seniority, but also from her peers.

The Tallest Poppy study reveals that TPS remains a significant issue in workplaces around the world, and the results are detrimental to women and the organizations within which they work.

Survey Methodology

The study was planned and carried out between January and February 2023. An online survey, using a mixed-methods approach, was sent out on January 9, 2023, and closed on February 10, 2023. The survey was sent to contacts in Women of Influence+'s database and was also shared via social media. The majority of those who received the survey identify as women. In the end, 4,710 respondents across 103 countries took part in the survey. This paper discusses the data revealed by the survey including the prevalence of TPS for women in the workplace, an examination of who is doing the cutting, the effect it has on women both in terms of their psychological health and workplace performance, the resulting impact on company productivity and retention, and the solutions suggested by women on the front lines to manage, mitigate, and eliminate this silent systemic syndrome.

Are women in the workforce experiencing Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS)?

"My boss told me that I need to play it small because I'm making others uncomfortable."

Of the 4,710 respondents, an astounding 86.8% indicated that at some point in their career, either past or present, they have experienced hostility or have been penalized and/or ostracized because of their success or achievements. These attacks have occurred at all stages of a woman's career, across a wide variety of industries, and have been experienced by individuals at varying levels within an organization.

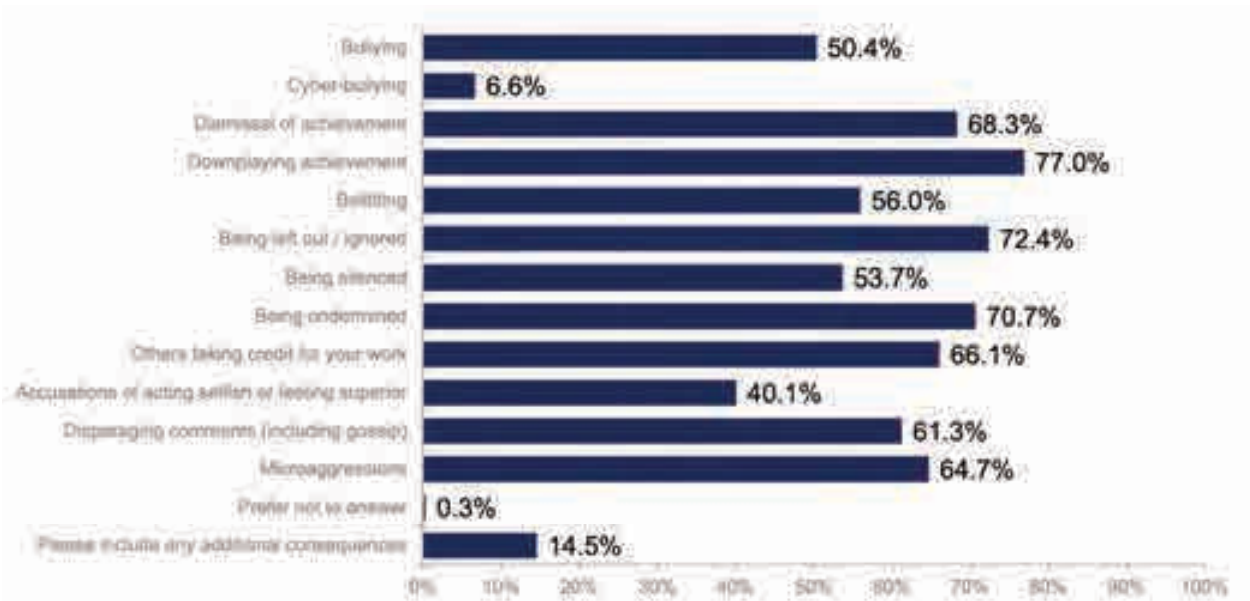
How are women being cut down and by whom?

"My boss told me that my ambition annoys him, so he chooses to ignore it."

The form of attacks experienced by women are broad and far-reaching — from being undermined or excluded, to experiencing microaggressions and belittling, to having their achievements downplayed. Some also felt they had experienced gaslighting.

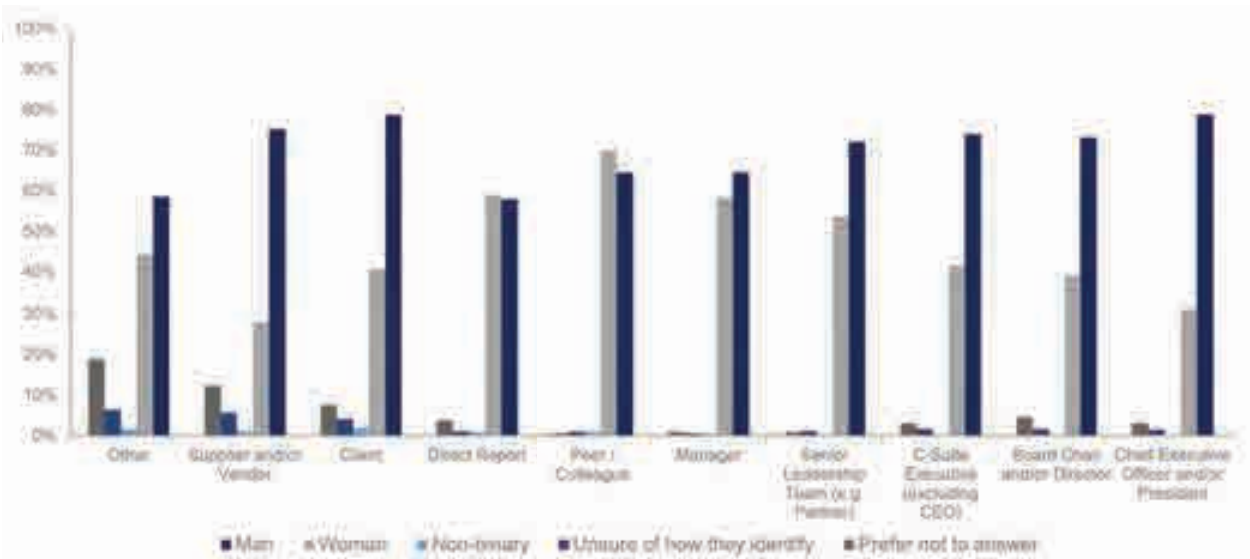
"I did the work; she took the credit," recalled one respondent. "When I inquired as to why no announcement was made, I was told that nobody cares about what I do so no one would be interested," shared another. "I was told in a previous job by a former Chair of my department that my achievements and hard work made everyone else look bad."

Figure 1: In what way(s) have you been penalized at work due to your successes and/or achievements?



The aggressors, the survey reveals, are identified across all levels of seniority, from co-workers and clients to managers and executives. The majority were identified as being men, especially in the position of leaders/executives and clients/suppliers. But, there were women in every category also cutting other women down.

Figure 2: Think about the person(s) who have penalized or undermined you in the workplace. How do they identify, and what was/is their relationship to you?



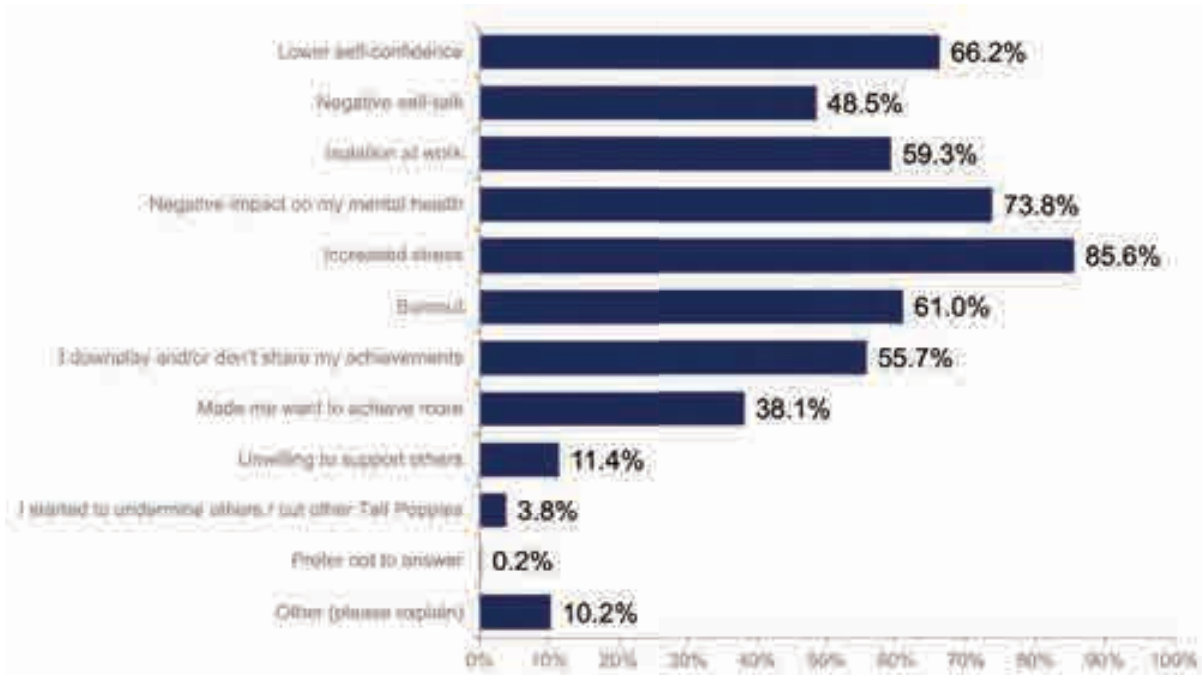
Respondents also added professors, funders/donors, recruiters, and volunteers to the list. One might wonder whether the numbers skew in favour of men doing the “cutting down” because more men hold these positions, especially in the senior leadership team category and above. It’s worth noting, however, that even in categories such as supplier/vendor and client, the number of men identified as doing the penalizing or undermining far outweighs the number of women.

What are the effects of Tall Poppy Syndrome?

“I was openly promised a promotion to the C-Suite and then later told I was too outwardly ambitious/excited for the opportunity, and not promoted. I’m completely checked out, embarrassed, and looking for new jobs now.”

There is no question that this type of treatment in the workplace is detrimental to a woman’s self-confidence and well-being. Of the respondents surveyed, 85.6% indicated that their stress had increased as a result of TPS, while 73.8% indicated it had a negative impact on their mental health, and 66.2% cited lower self-confidence. Other effects include feelings of isolation and burnout, engaging in negative self-talk, and the lack of desire to share or celebrate success and accomplishments.

Figure 3: How has this impacted you?



One respondent told us, “The impact was career altering. I started to lose confidence in my abilities. I felt set up to fail at every turn and began to believe that my voice was not worth hearing.” Another added, “I’m completely burnt out, my mental health has drastically suffered, and I don’t understand why I’m being punished for doing exceptional work and asking for what I deserve.” And finally, “...the CFO told me ‘I wasn’t worth it,’ and that sums up that experience.”

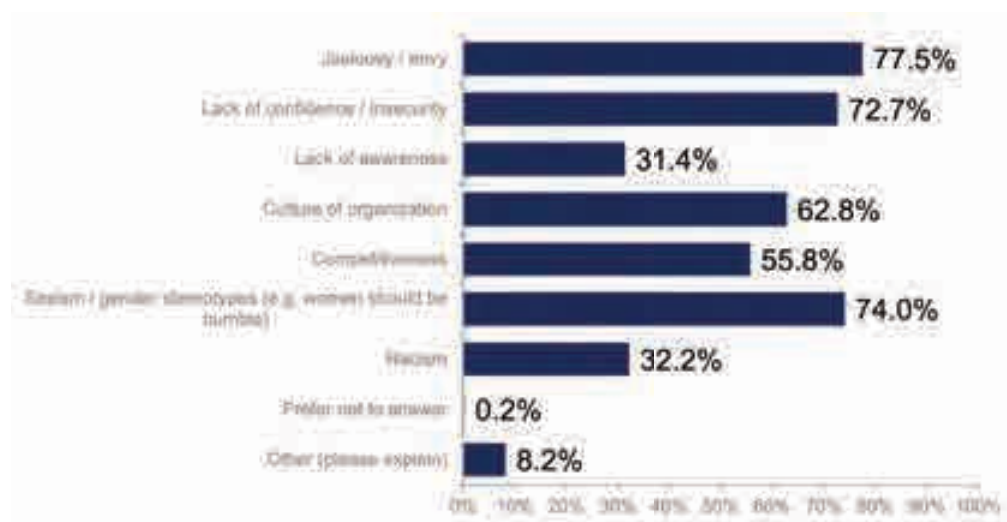
The Oxford Dictionary defines “worthless” as, “having no real value or use. Having no good qualities; deserving contempt.” Employees are being made to feel this way as a result of their success and achievements. The irony should not be lost on business leaders.

Why is Tall Poppy Syndrome still an issue in workplaces?

“I think it’s mostly out of fear and protection – fear that I want people’s jobs and could do them better if I tried; protection for themselves and their roles because I am viewed as a threat.”

When asked why they believe TPS occurs, respondents cited a number of factors including jealousy and envy (77.5%), sexism and gender stereotypes (74%), and lack of confidence and insecurity (72.7%). Other reasons include the organization’s culture (62.8%), competitiveness (55.8%), and racism (32.2%). Respondents also added ageism, a broken reward system, narcissism, and greed.

Figure 4: Why do you think Tall Poppy Syndrome occurs? (Select all that apply):



Respondents also said TPS exists when someone is perceived as a threat to the existing power dynamics or to someone else’s confidence or position. One respondent explained these phenomena as: “Every boss that hires me has made a joke about how I’ll be ‘coming for their job soon.’” Another said, “[it is] the perception that women will ruin the boys’ club.” One more added, “Leadership allows it to happen.”

Does Tall Poppy Syndrome negatively impact productivity?

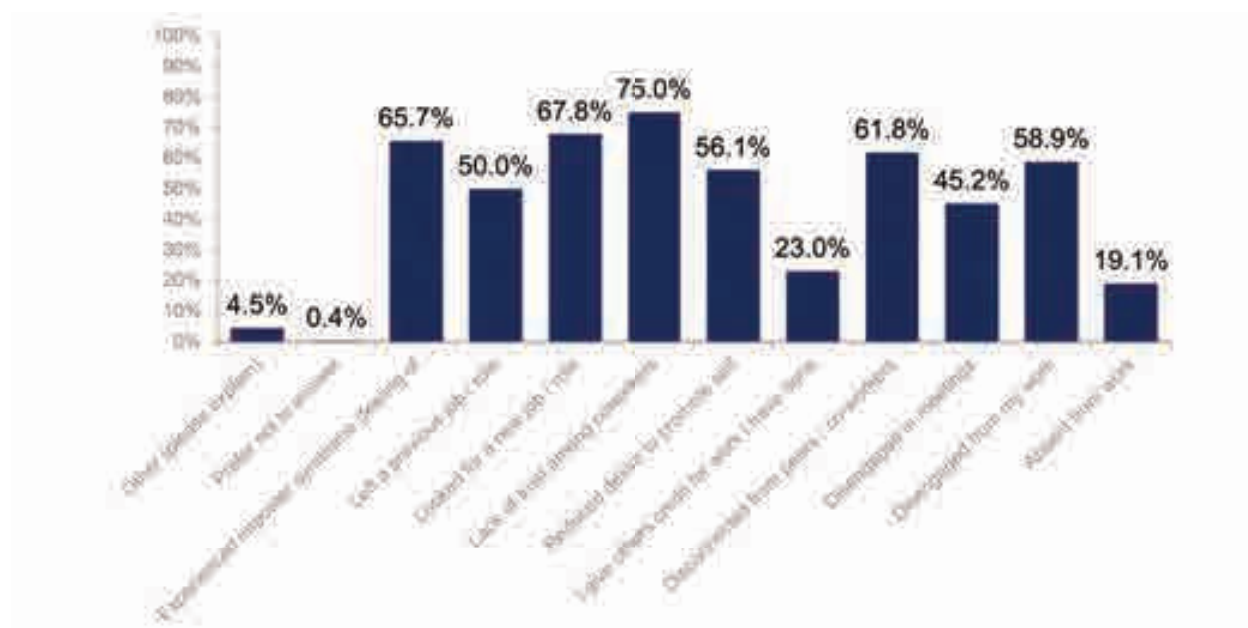
Resoundingly yes. And, this is something employers should be paying attention to. Of all the respondents surveyed, 75% said that being “cut down” by others impacted their productivity at work.

While 38.1% indicated that this negative treatment at work made them want to achieve more — in an effort to prove themselves — the majority admitted that their desire to produce and achieve more was waning.

One respondent said, this treatment in the workplace “made me self-promote more, or overtly call out when others were taking undue credit for my work, having to spend inordinate time documenting and proving.”

But for the majority, a lack of productivity showed up as being disengaged in meetings and from work in general, a lack of trust and subsequent desire to look for a new job, and a heightened sense of imposter syndrome and reduced desire to promote oneself.

Figure 5: How has Tall Poppy Syndrome impacted your productivity at work?



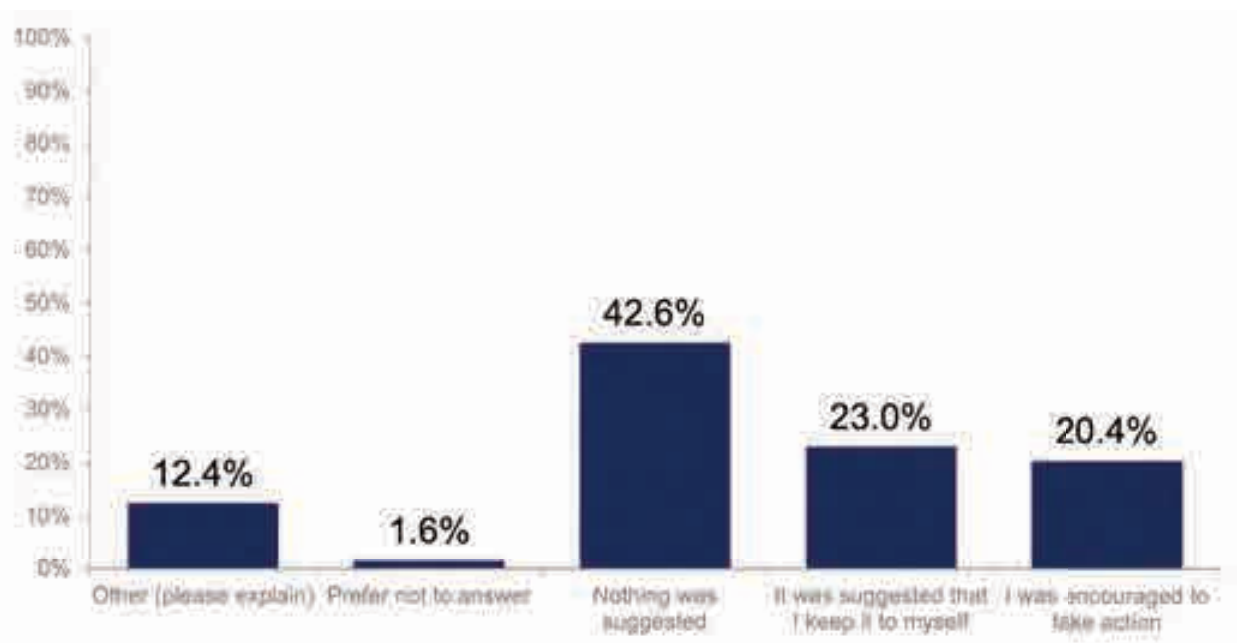
Respondents said they felt: “Frightened to celebrate my success.” “Feelings of being unworthy. Paranoia. Fear. Nightmares. Ruminating.” “Makes me want to hide to make others succeed.”

When the goal is productivity and the impact is the bottom line, it makes sense that no organization would want to allow TPS to continue in their place of work. Perhaps what's missing is the awareness that it's taking place, and at such a startling rate.

When women shared their experiences at work, what happened?

For those who were brave enough to speak up at work, we asked whether they were encouraged to take any form of action. Of those women surveyed, 42.6% indicated they were given no further suggestions or advice to take action, 23% said they were encouraged to keep these "complaints" to themselves, and only 20.4% were encouraged to take action.

Figure 6: When you shared your experience at work, were you encouraged to take action?



"I was blamed for it," said one respondent. "I was told I was being emotional. I was told I was the one with the problem," said another, and one respondent said, "I was given more work."

This culture of silence is problematic in a number of ways. When women realize something is wrong and make the effort to come forward, they should be met with concern and respect. As one respondent boldly suggested, "Recognize that it's happening and believe it when it is reported." In a time when women should feel more empowered to take a stand and speak up, this silencing and inaction speaks volumes.

Why should organizations care?

“Mass exodus of disengaged workers.”

For companies interested in getting the most out of their people, TPS should be recognized as a real problem — because it is. With a workforce of women already experiencing burnout at much higher rates than before the COVID-19 pandemic, attention needs to be paid to these unsettling trends. **Make no mistake, Tall Poppy Syndrome impacts the bottom line.**

Of the women surveyed, 50% shared that they left their previous job/role after experiencing TPS. Further, 50.4% said that their experience with TPS negatively impacted their desire to apply for a promotion, while 60.5% said they believed they’d be penalized if perceived as ambitious at work.

Instead of focusing on the war for top talent, organizations should shift their focus to retaining and nurturing the top talent they have. When the culture is not supportive or encouraging, the ambitious high achievers will be the ones to leave. And, they are more difficult and expensive to replace. In the end, the cutters are the ones that remain and as one respondent said, “low performers stay — they win.”

But is anyone actually winning when ambitious high achievers leave because of TPS?

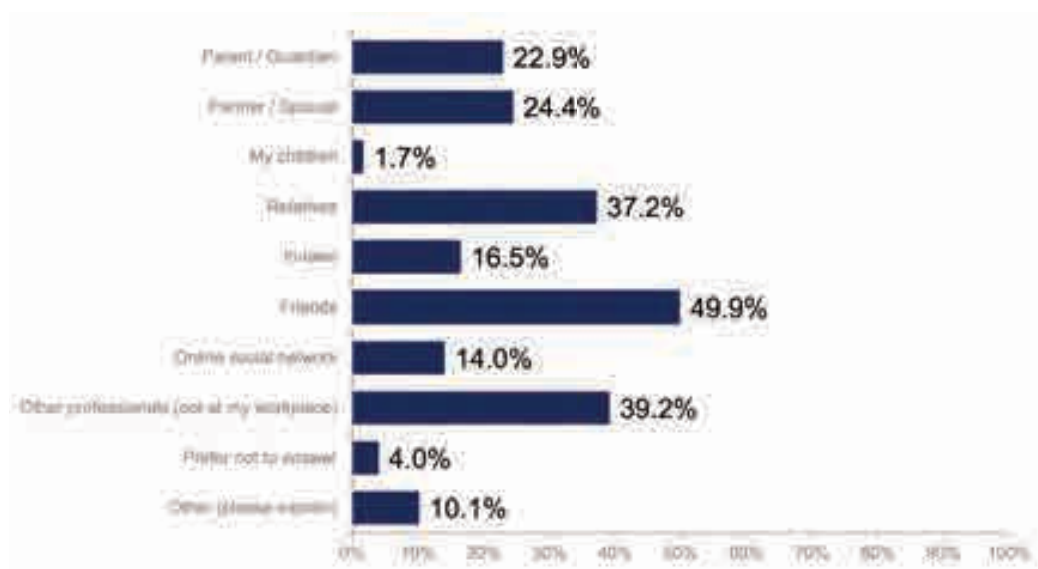
Where else is Tall Poppy Syndrome having an impact on women’s lives?

“A group of moms told me I was too ambitious and that I came off as a snob because I am too engaged in my job, rather than my kids.”

Unfortunately for women, TPS isn’t limited to the workplace. It often trickles into individuals’ personal lives and shows up in unexpected places. When asked, 49.7% of respondents said that outside of their place of work, they experienced hostility, were penalized, and/or ostracized by others as a result of their success and/or achievements. This hostility came from friends, relatives, siblings, other professionals, and even parents and spouses.



Figure 7: What was their relationship to you? (Select all that apply):

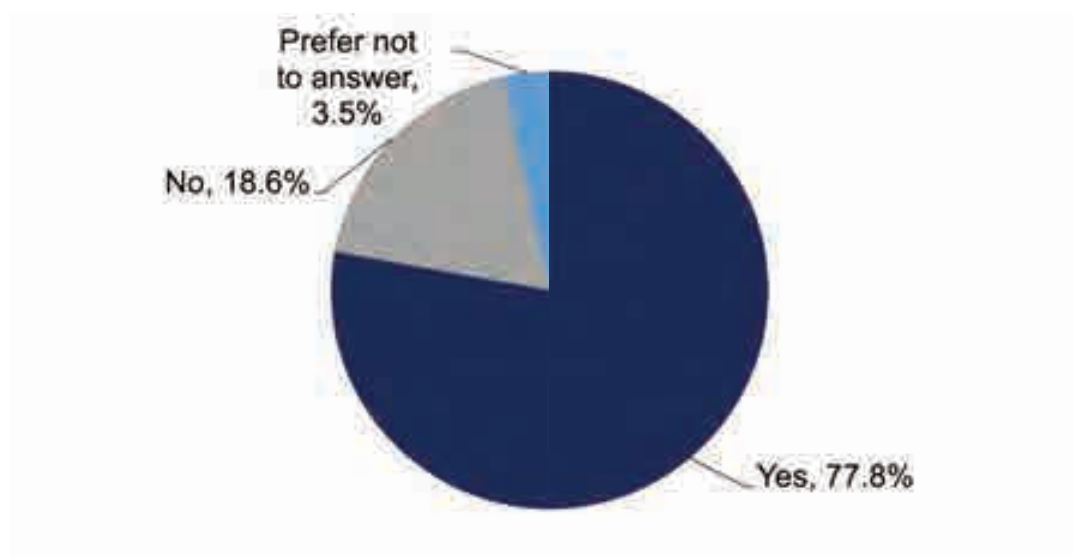


Some respondents shared that they received backlash from fellow parents as well, and one respondent mentioned experiencing TPS from “mothers of my children’s friends who did not work outside their homes.” Other respondents added that it came from acquaintances, fellow students, people they were dating, and even family friends.

What does Tall Poppy Syndrome look like from the outside?

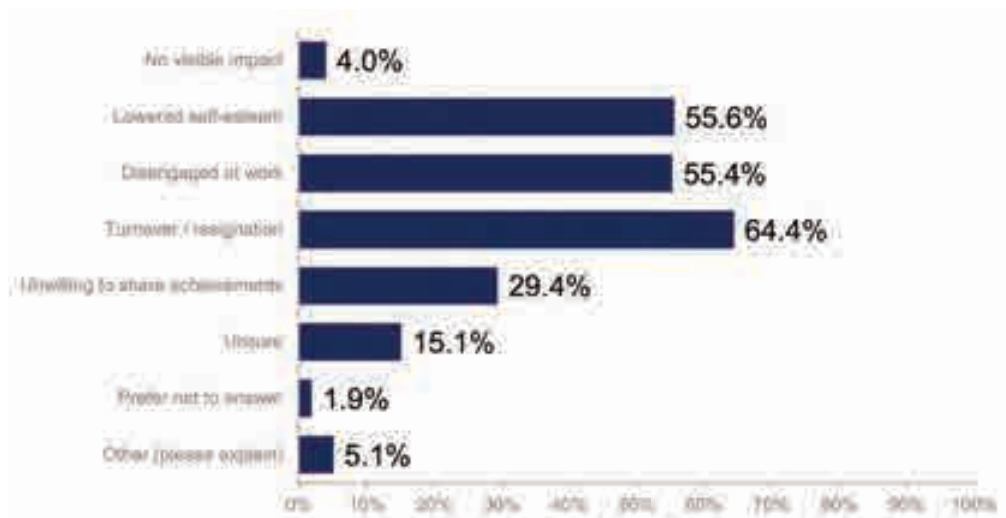
Even if a woman hasn’t experienced TPS herself, she has likely witnessed it in action. To see an individual express joy or satisfaction at the misfortune of a successful woman can be unnerving. Of those surveyed, 77.8% said they have observed TPS in their workplace.

Figure 8: At your past and/or current workplace, have you observed Tall Poppy Syndrome or others experiencing satisfaction and/or joy due to the misfortune of a successful woman?



When asked how they think TPS is impacting those on the receiving end, respondents cited “burnout,” “buried emotions,” and “anxiety.” Some did note, however, that those being cut down were, in fact, “motivated to achieve more.”

Figure 9: In your opinion, how did this impact the individual who experienced it? Select all that apply:



While it seems overwhelmingly common to be a bystander to TPS, it’s not always easy to step in or take action as a result. When a corporation doesn’t support the disclosing of this type of behaviour, much of it continues to wreak havoc without any accountability.

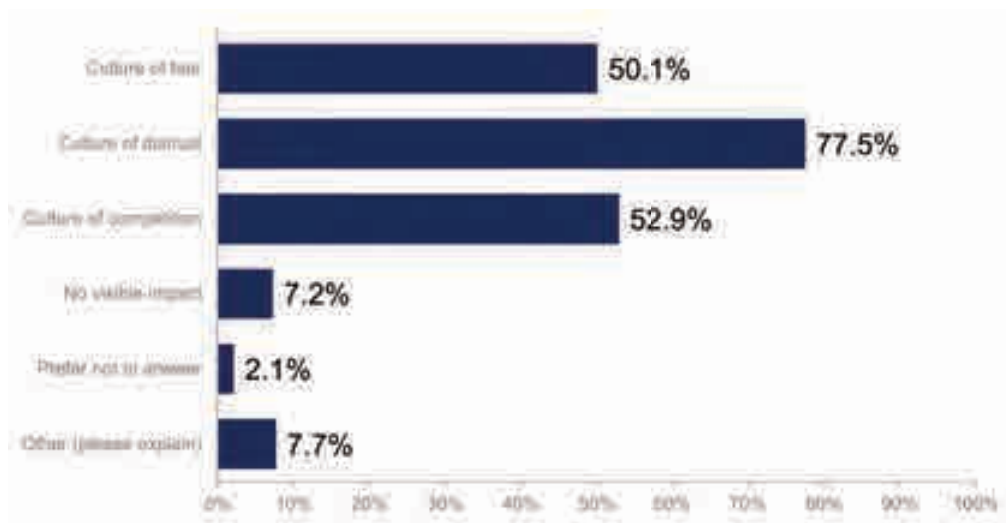
How is Tall Poppy Syndrome impacting organizational culture?

“Makes it an unpleasant environment where everyone is scared to be vulnerable. It’s a real shame.”

As you can imagine, it’s nearly impossible to have a healthy culture when a significant portion of the workforce is being bullied or knocked down – silently or otherwise. Eventually, it seeps into the climate of the workplace. Of those asked, 77.8% said they’ve witnessed a culture of distrust as a result of TPS, 52.9% cited a culture of competition, and 50.1% noted a culture of fear.



Figure 10: How has Tall Poppy Syndrome impacted the culture of the organization? (Select all that apply):



Respondents added high turnover, a toxic work environment, a culture of silence, alienation, and working in silos as the noticeable impacts of TPS in their workplaces. One shared that she witnessed the “loss of great talent, loss of great ideas.” Another noticed, “low morale and a sense of not being seen or heard.” For others, “the culture was stagnant.”

No matter how it presents, when the success of women is downplayed rather than celebrated, there is bound to be an impact that permeates into corporate morale. Productivity can’t thrive in a place where some employees aren’t valued for their efforts or achievements, no matter how hard they work or how much they accomplish.

Paving the way for young tall poppies.

In creating a path for young tall poppies to follow, consider a more supportive culture where people are encouraged to help raise each other up, rather than cutting each other down. “Offer development opportunities and sponsorship,” said one respondent. “Support and acknowledge their achievements, stop punishing women in the workplace for showing ambition,” said another.

Respondents shared that young tall poppies need support (including mental health supports), mentorship, encouragement, role models, and to hear stories of success. One respondent said that we can pave the way “by being their sponsors. Not just mentors, but sponsors.” Another said, “Surround them with taller poppies. Help them to get to where they need to be.” We should also be challenging traditional ideas around career progression and success. A respondent said, “please don’t limit them by the typical years of service benchmarks or ‘pay your dues’ type of comments...let them be awesome!”

TPS doesn't have to be a given when it comes to young women's experiences in the workplace. If organizations heed the advice provided by our respondents below, perhaps this toxic and counterproductive syndrome can be cut out of workplaces once and for all, allowing the next generation to thrive and flourish.

What can organizations do to counter Tall Poppy Syndrome?

Who better to look to for the solution than those experiencing the impacts of TPS first-hand? When given the opportunity to weigh in about how organizations should be handling TPS, a few respondents threw their hands up in frustration and resignation.

"I really don't know," one said. "I wish I knew." Others added: "I honestly have no idea," and "I wish I had an answer for you."

But, many others – and there were many – offered up well-thought-out solutions. The responses came in loud and clear. Women are demanding change and accountability.

We compiled their suggestions into five steps for making change:

1. **Begin by raising awareness.** This means listening when someone comes forward with a report of being cut down or diminished in the workplace. "Listen to your employees," said one respondent. "Name it. Talk about it. Share how it's unacceptable and why. What it does to people, teams, and the organization's success and culture," said another. "Awareness – many people saw what was happening, but they didn't really understand."
2. **Hold people accountable.** Don't just pay lip service to reports of TPS. Action should be real and impactful. "Stop talking and take action," said a respondent. "Hold people accountable for their actions," said another. "Recognize it. Recognize that women are treated differently when successful."
3. **Set a standard of transparency.** Whether that means being transparent when it comes to salaries, opportunities for promotions and advancement, or ensuring all employees are held to equal and equitable standards, transparency will do much to remedy TPS in the workplace. "[There should be] transparency around succession and promotion processes," said one respondent. "Transparency around how decisions are made and expectations for success," said another.



4. **Adopt zero tolerance.** No employee should be made to feel less than because they are working hard. In some cases, respondents shared that they were told their accomplishments were making others “look bad.” Success is not something to be blamed and shamed. It is not something that should be downplayed, ignored, or attacked. “Don’t look the other way,” said one respondent. “Acknowledge it happens, create a clear understanding of what it is and how to identify it, and create a culture of zero tolerance.” This can aid in creating and fostering a culture of trust and belonging.
5. **Invest in training for all employees and celebrate wins.** “Spend more time and money investing in women training programs, retention programs, and sponsorship (not just mentorship),” said one respondent. Respondents suggested emotional intelligence, communication, bias awareness, and psychological safety as topics that training should focus on. Make a practice of celebrating all wins, recognizing and acknowledging people the way they want to be acknowledged, and creating a culture where it’s safe and encouraged to succeed. “Normalize promoting qualified women into positions of power.” And, above all else, as one respondent said, “SUPPORT WOMEN.”

While there is no one solution that fits all circumstances, listening to the women in your workplace is a good place to start. It’s not only an opportunity to gain important feedback, but also a chance to show women that their experiences are being heard, and they are valued.

Conclusion

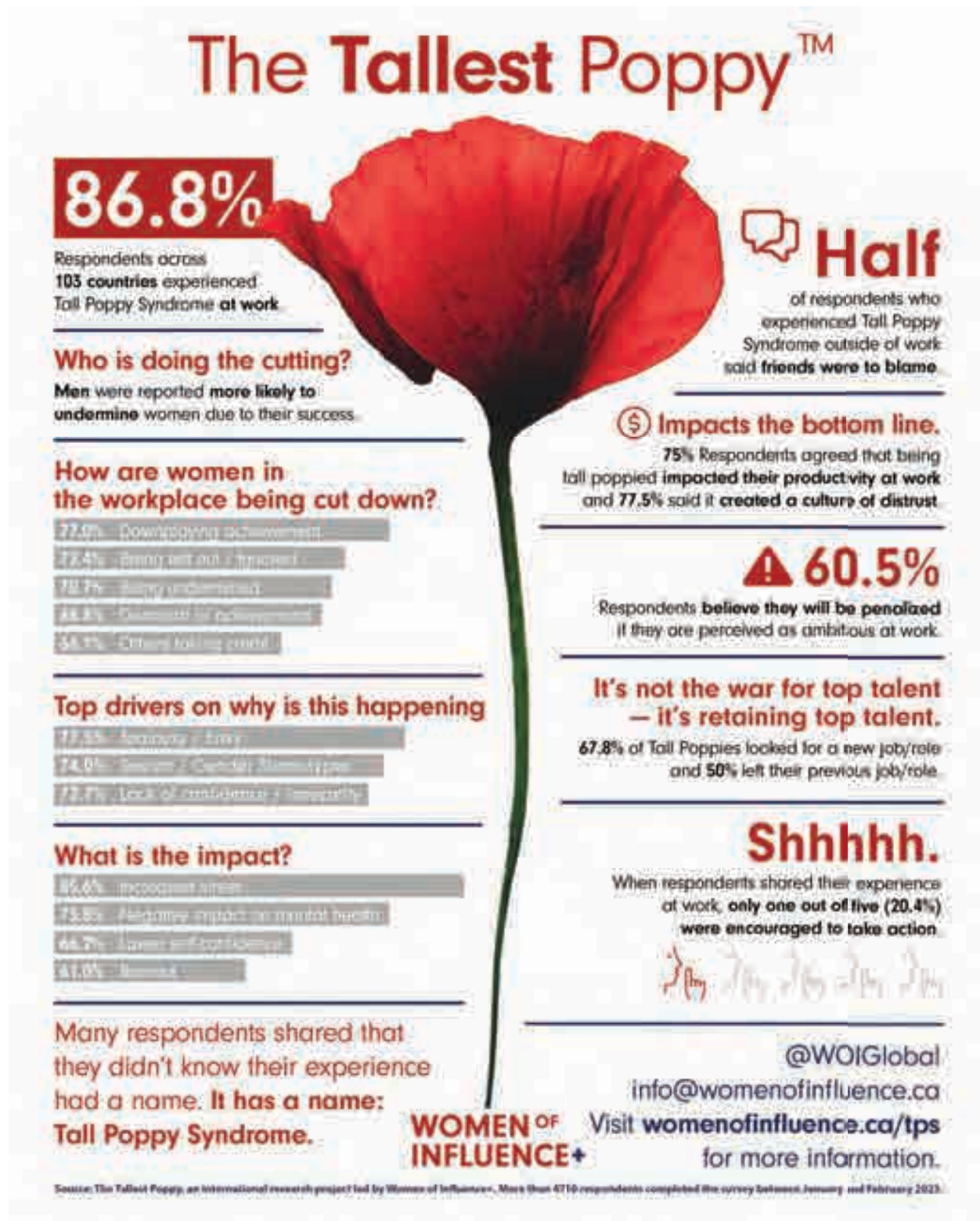
This international study conclusively demonstrates that Tall Poppy Syndrome is an issue impacting women in the workplace across countries, organizations, industries, and sectors. No company or individual is completely immune to it. This often silent, systemic syndrome impacts productivity, engagement, recruitment, and retention. It can have a devastating effect on people’s lives — both personally and professionally. The responses to the survey provide merely a snapshot of how women have experienced TPS and how it has impacted their experiences in the workplace.

The true effects are even greater than what we’ve presented here.

The next step is change, and it must come quickly. In a time when women are burnt out, stressed out, and fed up, organizations can no longer afford to drag their feet or look the other way.

“When you know better, you do better,” said one respondent. And, for the sake of all of these women and thousands more, the time to start doing better is now.

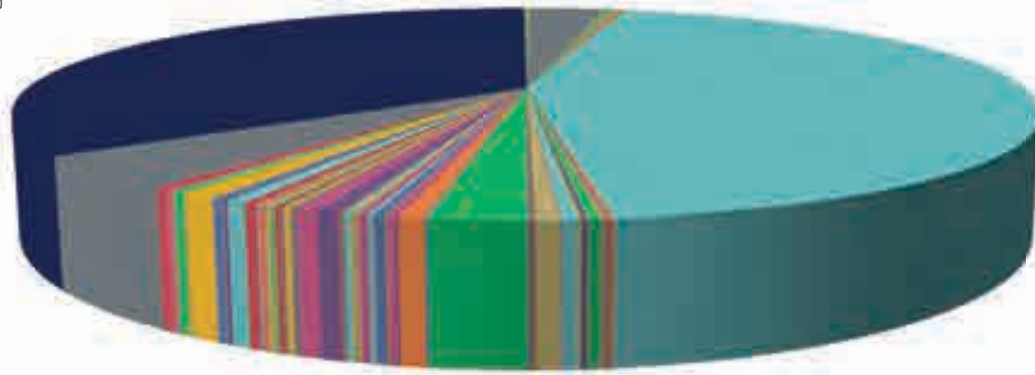
Appendix A: The Tallest Poppy 2023 Infographic



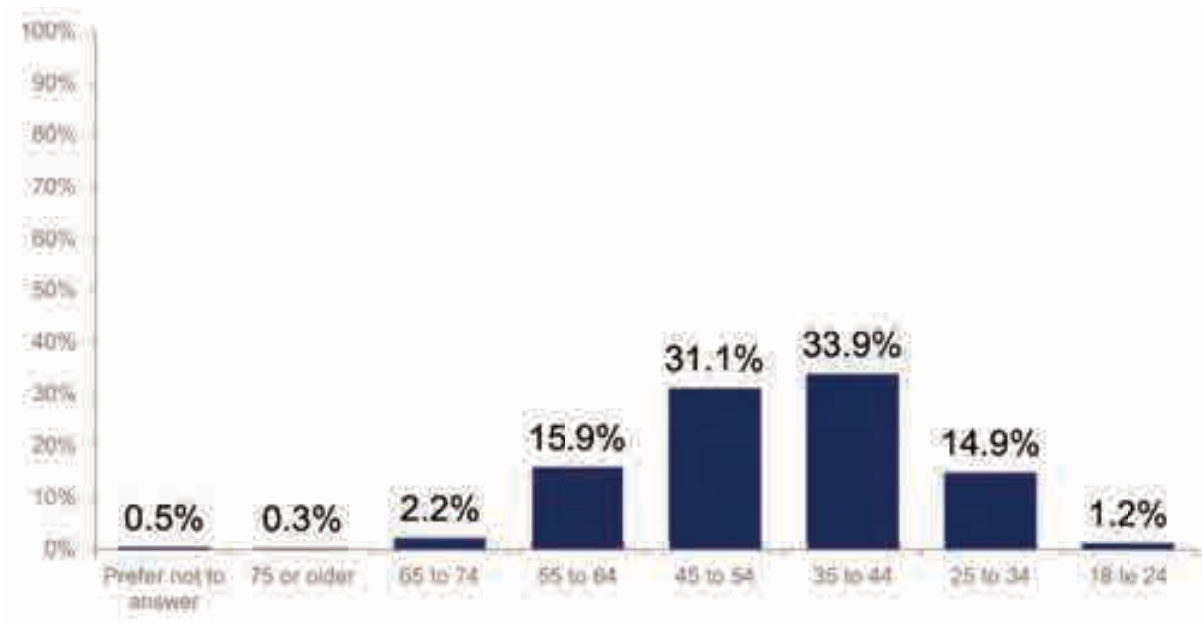
Appendix B: Demographic Data

Question: What country do you live in?

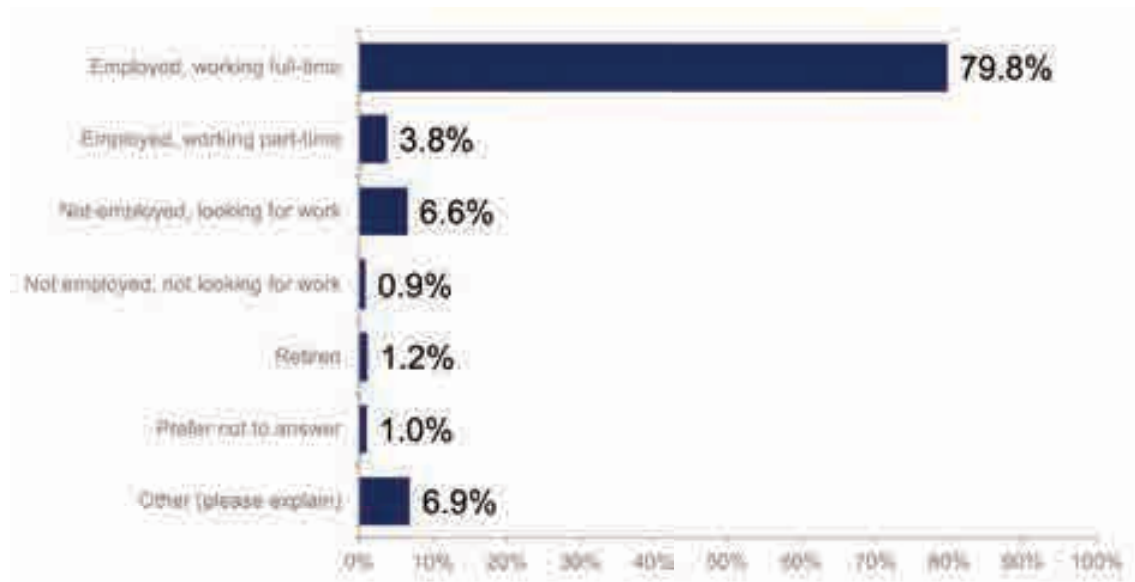
Canada 43.8%
United States 34.8%
United Kingdom 4.9%
Australia 3.0%
India 2.5%



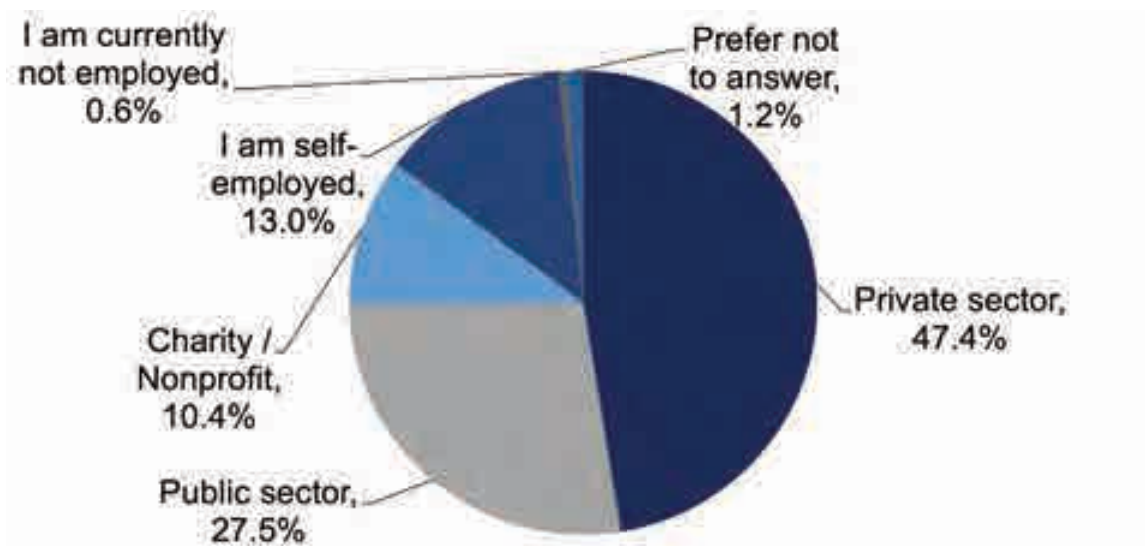
Question: What is your age?



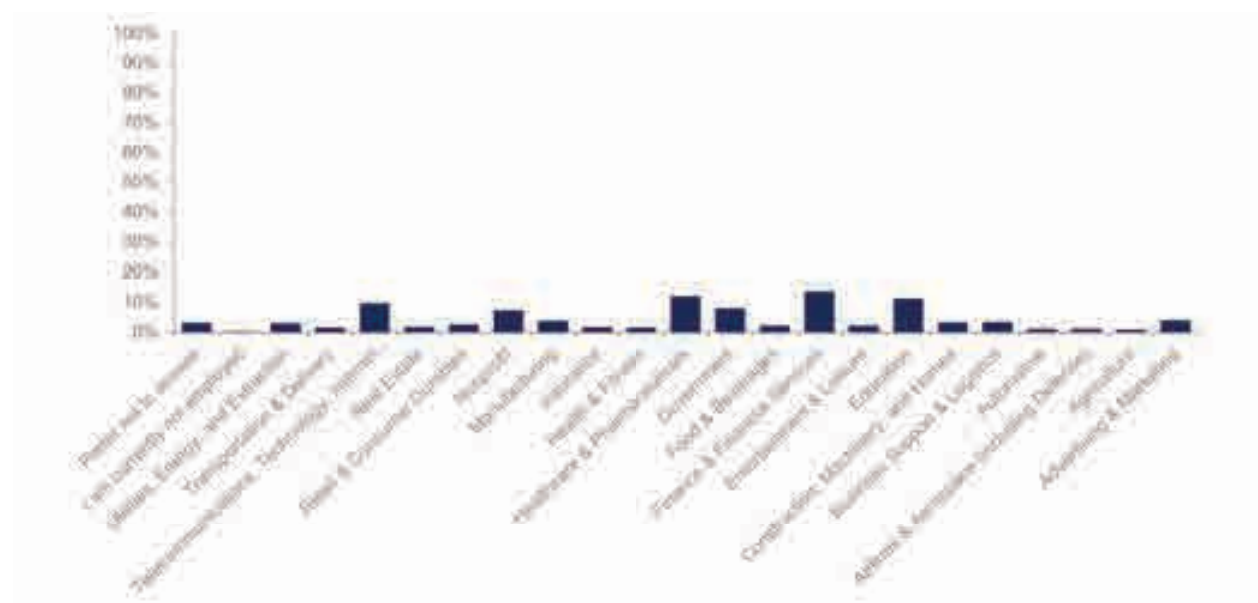
Question: Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?



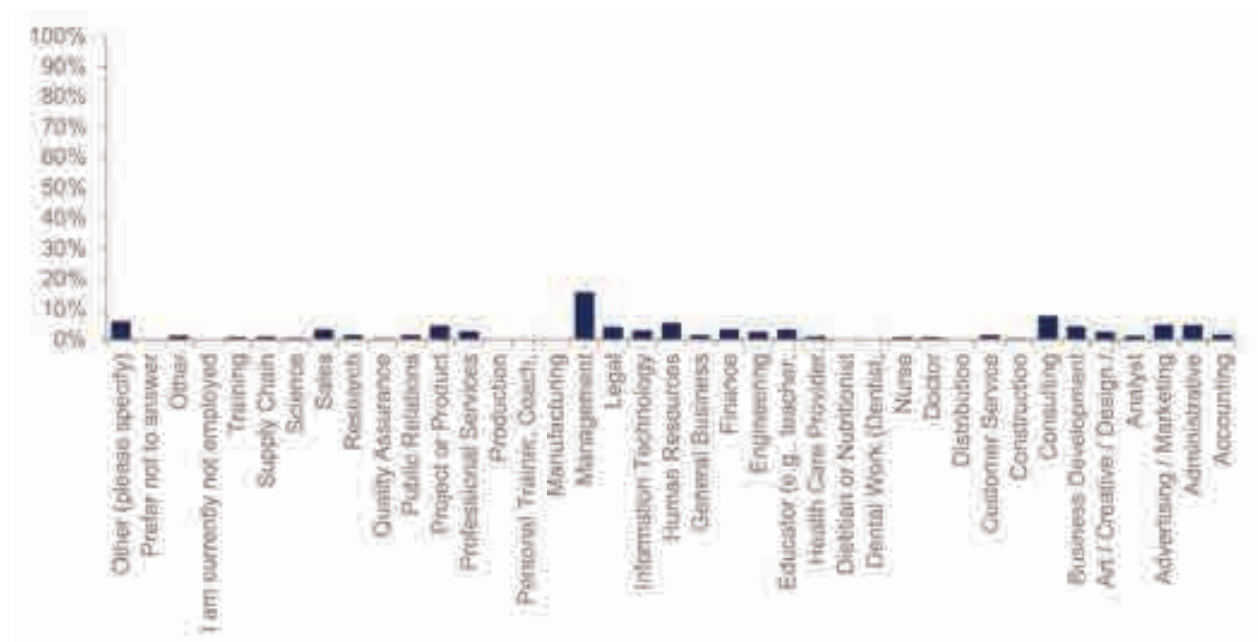
Question: Is your employer:



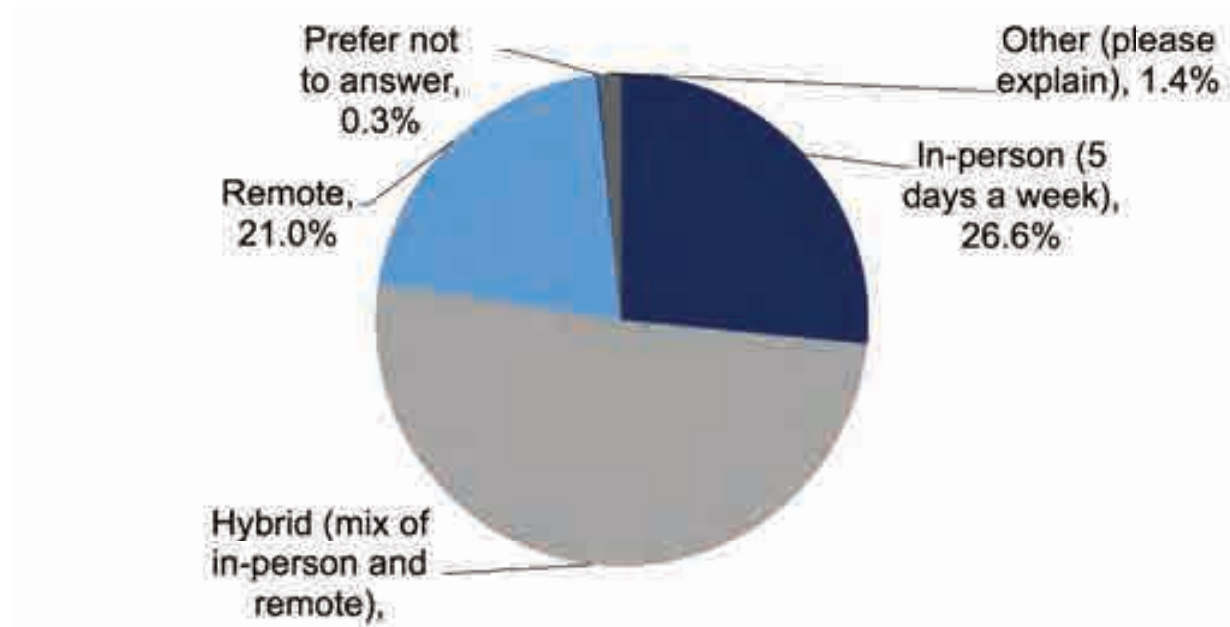
Question: Which of the following best describes the principal industry of your organization?



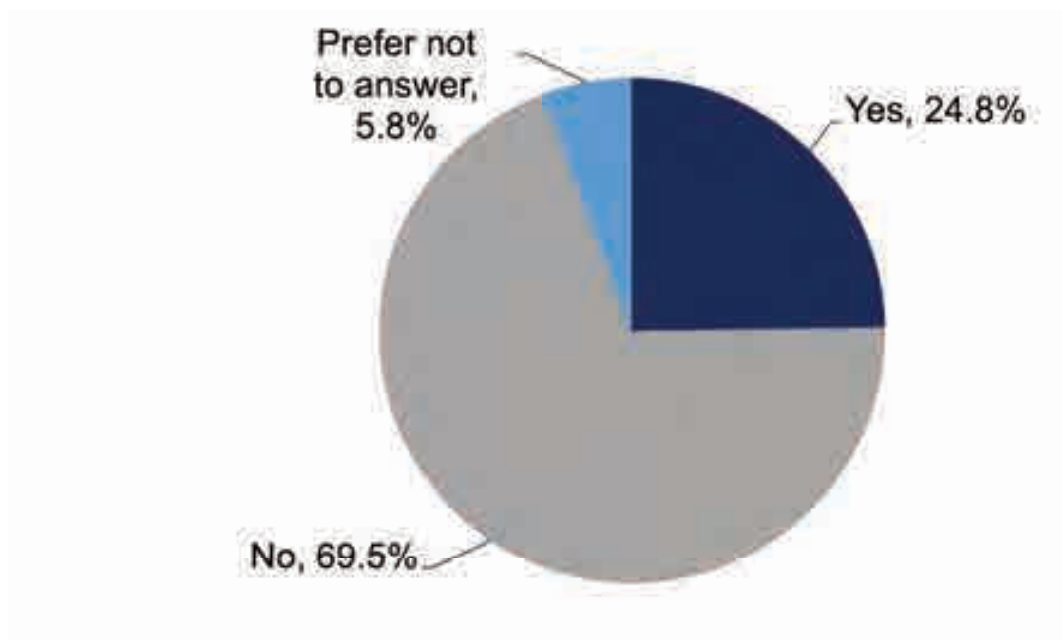
Question: Which of the following best describes your job function?



Question: Which of the following best describes your work environment?

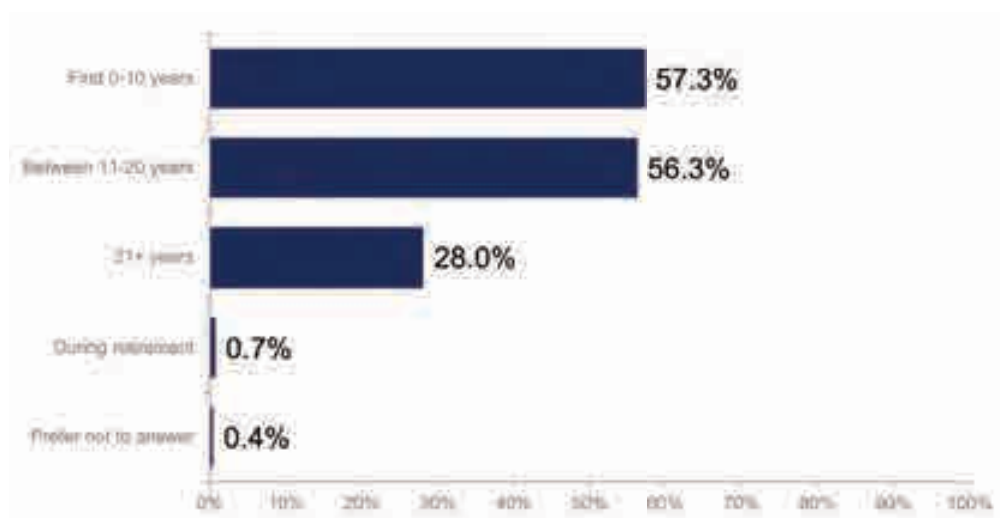


Question: Do you identify as a racialized person?

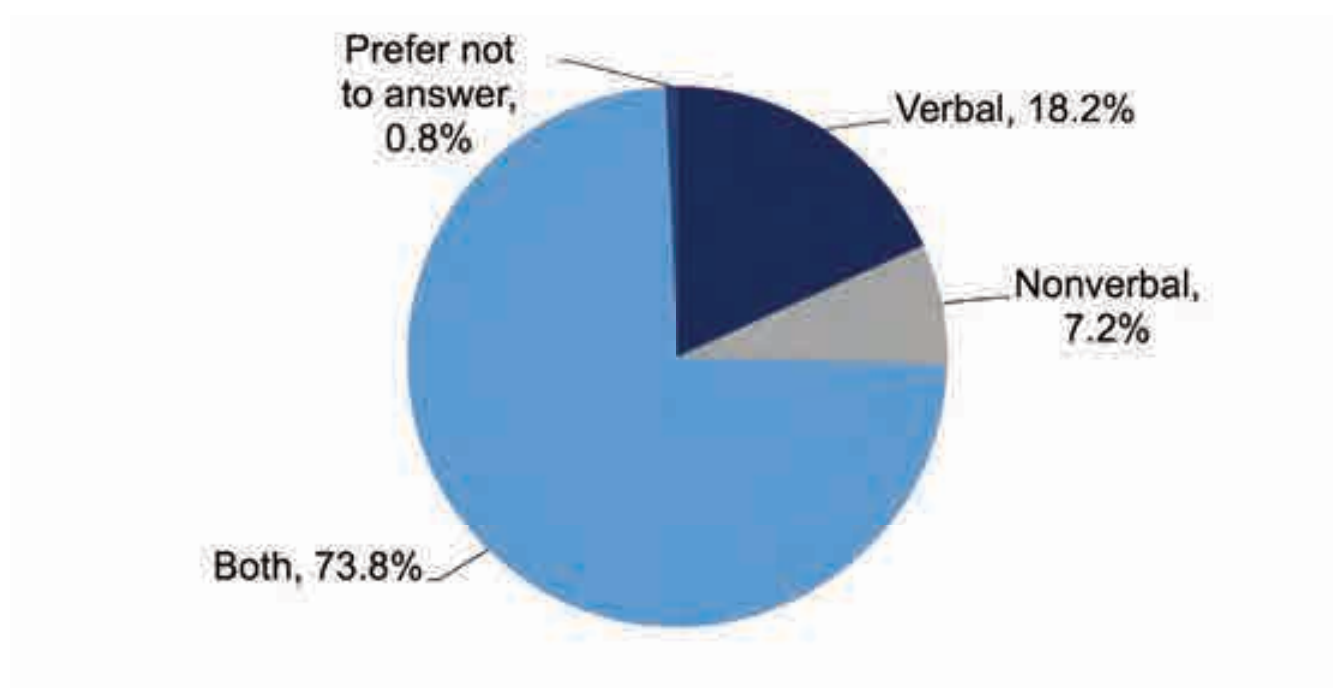


Appendix C: Additional Survey Findings

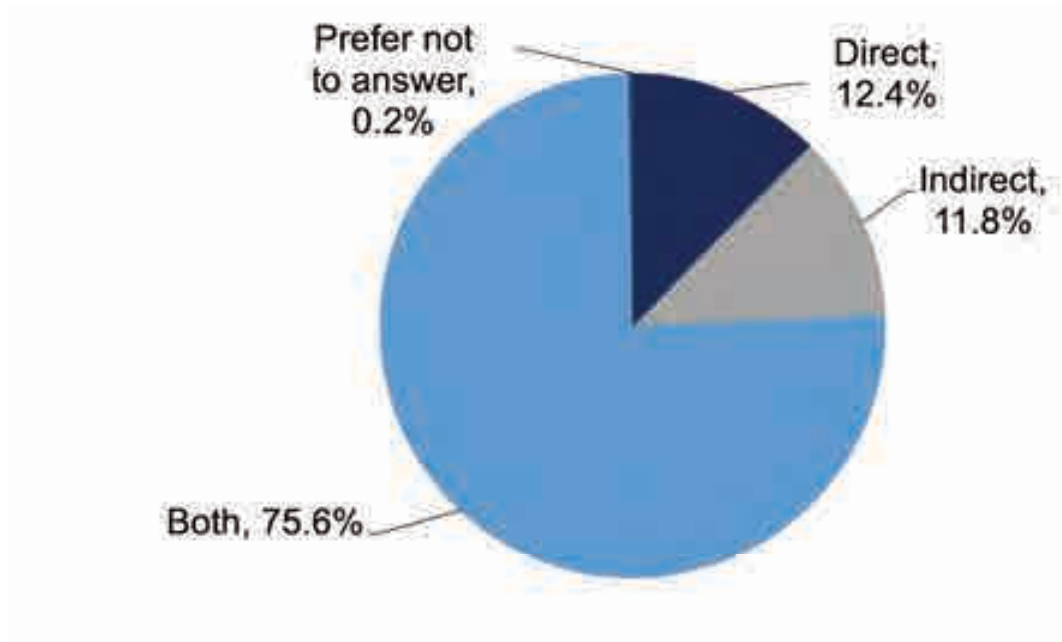
Question: At what stage(s) of your career have you experienced Tall Poppy Syndrome?



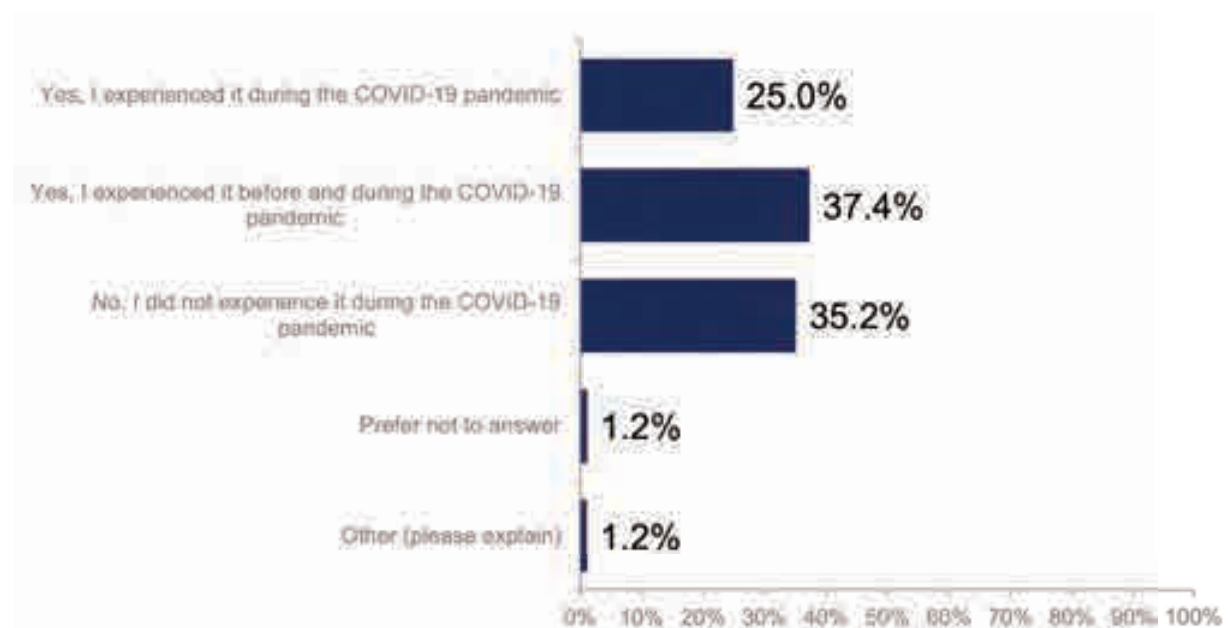
Question: Have the consequences been verbal or nonverbal?



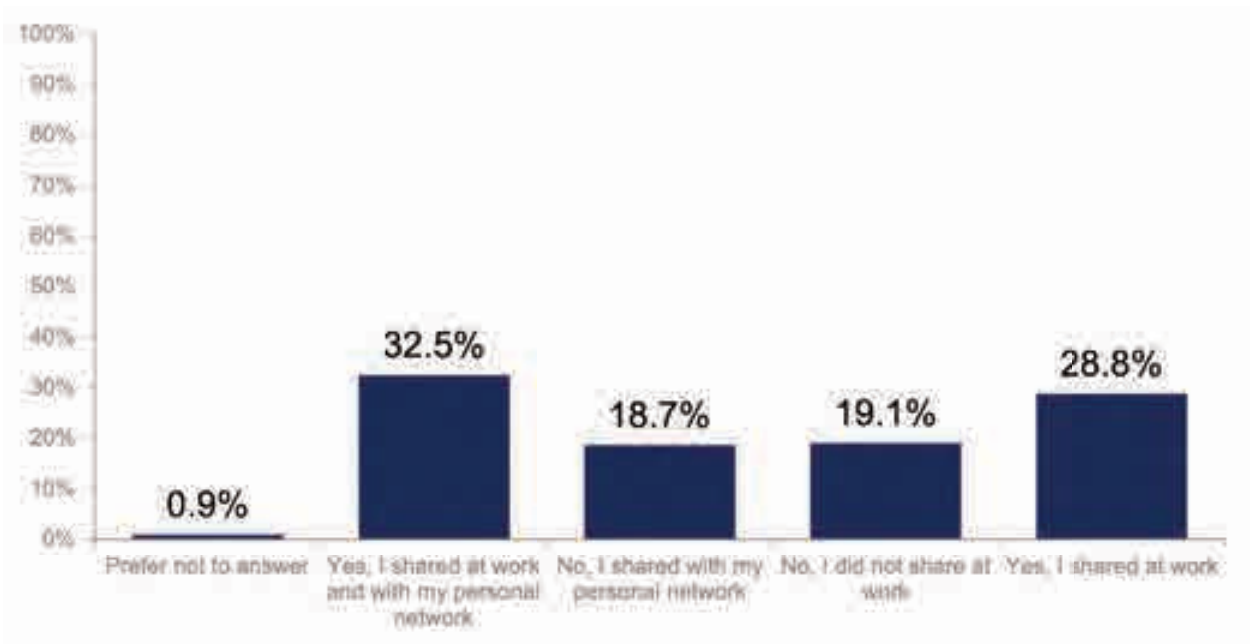
Question: Were the consequences directed towards you or were they indirect (e.g. behind your back and reported to you by someone else)?



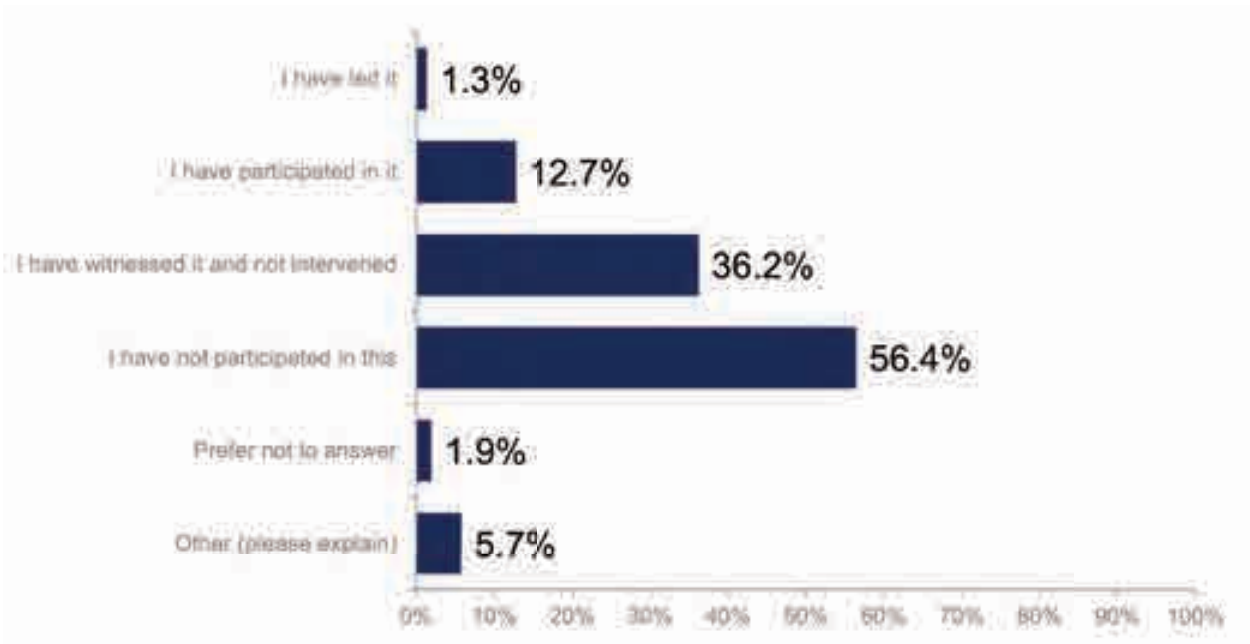
Question: Did you experience Tall Poppy Syndrome during the COVID-19 pandemic?



Question: Did you share your experience with Tall Poppy Syndrome with anyone at work (e.g. a colleague or manager) or did you keep it to yourself?



Question: Upon reflection, have you participated in negative reactions to others’ achievements at your past and/or current workplace? (Select all that apply):



The Tallest Poppy™

For more information, please visit:

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Reach us via email: info@womenofinfluence.ca

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