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TEMPO Research Finds Workplace Barriers Threaten Milwaukee's Female Talent Pipeline

March 24, 2026 | Milwaukee, WI —New research from TEMPO underscores a growing and urgent challenge for the region's business community: **workplace barriers are limiting women's advancement—and for 41% of respondents – prompting them to consider leaving Milwaukee for other opportunities.**

The study, *Voices of Women at Work: The Milwaukee Experience*, surveyed TEMPO's executive, senior-level, and emerging women leaders across industries, in February 2026. The findings reveal a troubling pattern: while ambition remains strong, especially among younger women leaders, workplaces are not keeping pace with what women need to grow—and stay.

Burnout, lack of sponsorship, reduced flexibility identified as obstacles

Managing caregiving demands, which disproportionately affects women, was cited as a top issue by **43%** of respondents. Burnout issues followed at **39%** with promotional bias and sponsorship gaps each cited by more than a fourth of respondents. Additional barriers include lack of a clear path to promotion, waning flexibility and lack of pay equity.

Some respondents identified obstacles more specific to Milwaukee:

"Milwaukee has a strong base of women leaders, but the pathways into senior roles are still shaped by long-standing networks that women, especially women of color, are often excluded from."

"In Milwaukee, larger employers have stricter in-person office policies, which are impacting women's ability to accomplish what they need to in their personal life and take on additional responsibilities at the office."

"Local, white men who all know each other are still doing business among themselves and not including women as equals."

"Milwaukee features a large number of companies that are traditionally male dominated, which leads to biases and barriers to women hoping to advance in those organizations."

In terms of organizational support, one respondent commented, "I can rely on self-motivation, but getting encouragement and support would further motivate me."

TEMPO President and CEO **Jen Dirks** emphasized the broader economic stakes for the region: "Milwaukee's economic growth will be fueled by talented innovative leaders—and women are

critical to filling those roles. We must find meaningful ways to support women leaders and remove the obstacles that stand in the way of their advancement so organizations can thrive."

Dirks emphasized the importance of grounding these findings in national context. "We know from **McKinsey's Women in the Workplace research** that many of these challenges are not unique to Milwaukee—but benchmarking ourselves against national data is critical," said Dirks. "What's different here is the clear signal that women are considering leaving their organizations or the region entirely."

Additional findings:

- Nearly half of respondents have considered leaving their organization due to lack of advancement opportunities
- Nearly half cite unclear advancement paths as a reason for disengagement
- Around 42% have considered opting out of pursuing a promotion due to lack of support
- Only about one-third of respondents report having access to sponsors. As one respondent put it: "Advice doesn't move people into power. Advocacy does."

When asked what practices would most influence their decision to pursue advancement, compensation equity (91% agree/strongly agree); targeted leadership development (90%); and flexible work arrangements (84%) ranked at the top. Formal sponsorship wasn't far behind at 68%.

The findings point to practical, actionable steps organizations can take:

- Invest in formal sponsorship—not just mentorship
- Ensure pay equity through transparent audits
- Define and communicate clear advancement criteria
- Expand leadership development opportunities
- Normalize flexible work environments that support caregiving responsibilities

"These are not radical changes," said Dirks, "but the outcomes of these actions could be transformative for women and their employers."

What's Next

TEMPO will convene business and community leaders on June 18, 2026, to discuss these findings and highlight meaningful progress in advancing and retaining women leaders. These conversations will focus on practical solutions and shared accountability across the region.
The full survey analysis is available as an attachment to this release.

About TEMPO

TEMPO is a network of more than 560 executive women and nearly 300 emerging women leaders dedicated to advancing women in leadership. For 50 years, TEMPO has provided professional development, networking, and advocacy to empower women to achieve and sustain leadership roles across Milwaukee and beyond.

About the Research

Voices of Women at Work: The Milwaukee Experience was conducted in February 2026 and includes responses from 212 TEMPO members and Emerging Women Leaders across executive, C-suite, and senior management roles. The research is part of TEMPO's broader commitment to serving as a data-driven voice on the issues shaping women's professional experiences.