



# AMER EXP

## Ambitious Insights

Commissioned by American Express

In partnership with **The New York Women's Foundation**





## Overview

**Ambition is not a simple thing for women.** Their personal lives weigh heavily on the goals they have for themselves as part of their overall perspective on being ambitious. Success in a career without success in the rest of their lives is not achieving their ambitions. This raises large questions for what women bring to the workplace and how that is critical in reshaping how their careers need to be managed.

While having ambitions is generally important to accomplished women around the world, it is defined by multiple-dimensions.

Most women do not call themselves “ambitious” and they are divided about whether being described as “ambitious” in the workplace is positive. Instead, most women would rather be described as motivated or confident. Overall, women view their own confidence and determination as the most important factor for staying on track to achieve their career ambitions. But while half of women say they are confident in having the skills and qualifications to effectively perform their job, their actions at work may demonstrate otherwise as fewer feel comfortable in sharing their opinions or in seeking out leadership opportunities.

Women typically rely on other women to help and mentor them in their careers. However, less than one-third of women have had someone advocate for them or have acted as an advocate for others in their career, suggesting this role is not fulfilled as much as it should be.



## Research Method

Ambitious Insights commissioned by American Express is based on a sample of 3,026 women (not affiliated with American Express) ages 21-64 with a college degree or higher and employed full time in the following markets: U.S., Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, and U.K. Completed interviews were weighted by age to ensure reliable and accurate representation of the individual market populations. The anonymous survey was conducted using an online panel January 10-16, 2020.



# Perceptions of Ambition

Women believe it is important to have ambitions or a strong desire to achieve success in life.

The importance of ambition to women is generally quite high, with 59% overall who believe it is essential to life and work. However, differences can be seen from country-to-country with the highest levels in India (89%, very important), followed by Mexico (82%) and the U.S. (68%). The importance of having any ambitions in life is significantly lower in France (41%, very important) and Japan (28%).

Most women do not call themselves “ambitious” and they are divided about whether being described as “ambitious” in the workplace is positive.


**The majority of women consider themselves to be ambitious, however only three-in-ten (31%) women overall say they are proud to call themselves “ambitious.”**

More feel that they are ambitious but wouldn't describe themselves this way publicly (34%). One-quarter (26%) say they pursue opportunities but are unsure about calling themselves ambitious.

- Women in India (70%), Germany (35%) and the U.S. (33%) are most likely to say they are proud to call themselves ambitious. While women in France are least likely to consider themselves to be ambitious at all (21%).

While in the workplace, more women believe it is very positive to be described as motivated (56%) or confident (48%) than ambitious (40%). And, likeability (53%) is significantly more positive than assertiveness (36%) or competitiveness (30%).

- Women in India (69%), the U.S. (51%) and Germany (46%) were most likely to view being called ambitious as very positive, compared to other markets.
- In the U.S. (63%), Italy (60%), Australia (59%), and Germany (55%) being called “motivated” at work is viewed most positively.
- In the workplace in Mexico (75%), Canada (57%), France (56%), and Japan (20%), being described as “likeable” is viewed most positively.


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- Women in India view being called “motivated” and “confident” as equally very positive (73%).
  - Women in the U.K. view being called “motivated” and “likeable” as equally very positive (52%).

## Putting Personal Ambitions Above Professional

When considering different types of ambitions for career and personal lives, the survey results showed that external manifestations of ambition (career, wealth, skills), rank at the bottom of the list of importance. Almost universally personal goals (health, parenting and relationships) ranked much higher in defining ambition.

Being as healthy as possible tops the list, rated very important by two-thirds of the women surveyed overall (65%), while acquiring wealth, a traditional outcome of ambition, is at the bottom of the list with only 30% rating it as very important. Notable findings by market include:

- Having a successful career received the highest importance ratings in India (78%, very important), Mexico (69%) and the U.S. (44%) and was significantly lower in Japan (17%).
- Ambitions for acquiring wealth received the lowest importance ratings in France (17%) and was the least important ambition in all countries except for Italy (47%) and Japan (24%), where having a successful career was least important (Italy, 30%; Japan, 17%).
- The importance of being as healthy as possible (55%) significantly outweighs any other ambition for Japanese women surveyed (all other ambitions were rated very important by 34% or less).
- In Australia, women weigh ambitions for health (56%), parenting (55%) and relationships (56%) as equally important.
- Ambition for developing a skill or hobby was rated lowest in importance in France (23%), the UK (23%) and Japan (19%).

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- The U.S. is the only market where women placed significantly more importance on being a good parent (69%) and having a successful relationship (67%), than being as healthy as possible (57%) or any other external ambitions including career (44%), education (40%), skills (35%) or wealth (24%).

### Accordingly, commitment is highest for personal ambitions not professional.

Overall, the women surveyed were more likely to be committed to doing whatever it takes to achieve personal ambitions (68%) such as those related to parenting, relationships or personal health than external ambitions (53%) such as career, education and wealth.


- Commitment to achieving personal ambitions is highest in India (91%), Italy (77%) and Mexico (87%).
- Specifically, commitment to being healthy as possible is highest in India (65%, committed to doing whatever it takes) and Mexico (64%), followed by Italy (43%), Germany (42%) and the U.S. and Canada (each 41%).
- 38% of U.S. women said they are committed to doing whatever it takes to achieve their career ambitions. This is in-line with Canada (37%) and significantly higher than Australia (29%), the U.K. (28%), France (25%) and Japan (10%).
- U.S. women are most committed to achieving ambitions related to parenting (55%) and relationships (53%).

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## Receiving Recognition

### Women have relatively low expectations for being recognized for successes in their career or personal lives.

One-quarter strongly agree that it is important that others recognize their personal successes (25%) and only slightly more feel similarly about getting recognition for career success (27%). More women strongly agree that they receive recognition for success in their personal life (34%) than in their work life (29%). And, three-in-ten women strongly



agree that they feel like they have to work harder than their male peers in order to get that recognition at work (31%).

- Women in India (65%), Mexico (38%), Germany (34%) and Italy (33%) are most likely to feel that they have to work harder than their male counterparts in order to gain career recognition.

## The Confidence Gap

While women may be sure of the importance of having ambitions and are committed to seeing them through, by comparison their confidence in being able to achieve those ambitions is significantly lower - particularly when it comes to personal ambitions.

Overall, 65% of women said it is very important to have ambitions for being as healthy as possible, however only half as many (32%) are very confident that they will be able to achieve this ambition. Similar gaps between the importance of ambitions and confidence in achieving success are seen in parenting (61%, very important; 36%, very confident) and relationships (56%, very important; 36%, very confident).

It seems as if women perceive successful careers as being easier to achieve than personal ambitions: **overall, 40% said it is very important to have ambitions for a successful career and 32% are very confident that they will be able to achieve that success.** While the gap is smaller, that is still fewer than one-third of women overall who feel very confident in their ability to achieve their career ambitions.

- Women in India (68%, very confident) and Mexico (59%) are the most confident in being able to achieve their career ambitions, followed by Australia (32%), the U.S. (31%) and Germany (30%), while women in Japan (8%) are by far the least confident.
- When it comes to achieving personal ambitions, women in India, Mexico and Germany are more confident, especially when it comes to being as healthy as possible and fulfilling life experiences.



# Achieving Career Ambitions

Women accept personal responsibility for playing the biggest role in achieving their professional goals.

**Overall, women view their own confidence and determination (31%) as the most important factor for staying on track to achieve their career ambitions.** The second most important factor is family support (21%). Other factors such as professional recognition (10%) and supportive leaders (10%) are a distant third.

Differences can be seen from market-to-market in terms of importance of these factors:

- Women in Mexico place the most emphasis on their own confidence and determination (48%) to keep them on track, followed by the US (36%) and Australia (34%).
- U.S. women place the highest emphasis on confidence and determination (36%), followed by support from their family (21%) and leaders (11%).
- Women in Germany are least likely to place an emphasis on their own confidence and determination (15%), instead believing there are numerous factors that play more balanced roles including: family support (17%), supportive leaders (14%), professional recognition (13%), advocates (11%) and personal interests outside of work or family (11%).
- In Canada (9%) and Japan (10%), workplace benefits play a larger role than in other markets.
- Receiving professional recognition is of highest importance in India (16%), but still ranks behind self-confidence (31%) and family support (28%).





# Confidence in the Workplace

While having self-confidence is viewed as being most important for women to stay on track to achieve career ambitions, women may not act as confident as they feel when in the workplace.

Half of women surveyed (48%) consider being described as “confident” by someone at work as very positive. A similar number (47%) strongly agree that that they are confident they have the skills and qualifications to effectively perform their job.

- This confidence is highest among women in Mexico (75%), India (71%) and the U.S. (51%).

**However, only 30% of women overall believe that confidence comes naturally to them and more (36%) feel the need to put effort into building their self-confidence.**

Further, while half of women say they are confident in their ability to perform their job, their actions at work may prove otherwise: 38% are likely to stand their ground if they feel strongly about an issue and 36% feel comfortable sharing their opinions when others don't agree. Perhaps most telling is that less than one-third (32%) strongly agree that they seek out leadership opportunities in their job.

- Women in India (69%), Mexico (60%), Italy (48%) are most likely to stand their ground on an issue at work and most likely to seek leadership opportunities as well (India, 66%; Mexico, 62%; Italy, 34%).



# Personal Support

**Family support was identified as the second most important factor, behind self-confidence, in staying on track for achieving career goals, further reinforcing the connection between women's personal and professional lives.**

Three-in-ten (28%) women strongly agree that in order to make progress toward achieving their career ambitions, they have to make significant sacrifices in their personal life. The good news is that a similar proportion of women feel that they have a support system in their personal life that helps them achieve their career ambitions (32%).

- Notably, in Italy, women are significantly more likely to strongly agree that they have to make personal sacrifices to achieve their career ambitions (34%); yet, this is the only market where a lower proportion of women (31%) feel that they have a support system in their personal life that helps them.

**Overall, women are likely to have more elements necessary to achieve their ambitions in their personal life than in their work life.**

For instance, 45% strongly agree that they have a person whom they trust to go to for advice in their personal life but only 40% would say the same about their work life. They are also more likely to have a role model or someone who inspires them in their personal life (37%) than in their work life (33%).



# Women as Career Advocates

While women see value in having a career advocate, that role is not necessarily being fulfilled for many women.


**One-third of women strongly agree that it is important to act as an advocate for others to help them in their career (34%). Though fewer have acted as an advocate for others (30%) or have had someone advocate for them and help them in their career (27%).**

- Acting as an advocate for others in their career is most important to women in India (63%) and the U.S. (39%).
- Women in India (63%), Italy, Mexico and the U.S. (32%, each) are most likely to have advocated for someone else in order to help them in their career.
- Women in India (62%), Mexico (35%) and Germany (27%) are most likely to have had someone advocate for them and help them in their career.

## Women rely on women to help and mentor them in their careers.

For the most part, these advocates are in the same field. Among women who say they have had someone advocate for them in their career, other women outnumber men as being the most influential person by nearly two to one (65% said a woman was most influential, 35% said it was a man). They have typically been helped by someone who is older than themselves (69%).

- In Germany and Mexico influential advocates are much more evenly balanced between men and women (Germany, 47% man/53% woman; Mexico, 50% man/50% woman). While in Canada and Japan, there is a much more significant skew towards woman advocates (both 76% woman, 24% man).

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- Women in Australia (80%), Japan (77%), U.S. (77%), Mexico (76%) and U.K. (75%) are significantly more likely than those in other markets to say their most influential advocate was older than themselves; while women in India (32%) and Germany (20%) were significantly more likely to say they've been helped by someone younger.

Similarly, among women who have advocated for others' careers, they have typically been most influential in helping other women (71%) who work within the same company (66%). However, they are much more divided on whether they have been most influential in helping the career of someone who is younger (39%), a peer (30%) or older (31%).

- Compared to other markets, women in Germany (42%), Italy (39%) and Mexico (34%) were more likely to say that they have been most influential on a man's career, while women in Australia (80%), Japan (79%), Canada and the U.S. (78%, each) are significantly more likely to be helping other women in their careers.
- Women in Italy (42%) were most likely to say they have been influential in helping a peer in their career, while women in Japan (44%), Germany (42%) and India (39%) were most likely to say they were most influential in helping someone older than themselves (31%).