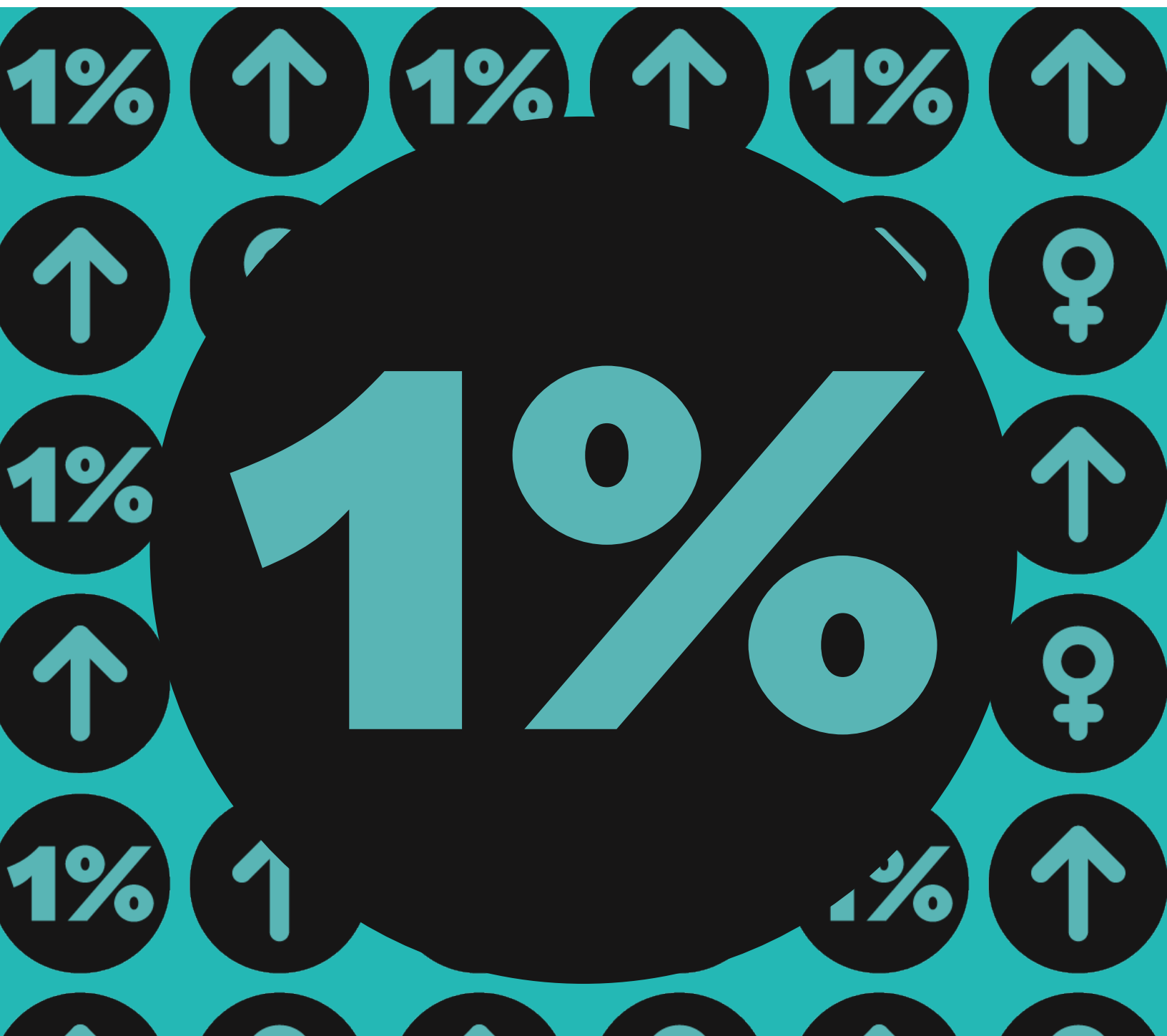


Creating a Path For More High-Income Women

Women In the 1%

The first survey of women earning enough to achieve 1% income status in the US



by Emily Riley

The Women in the 1%

When I started this research project, I had no idea what the data would reveal.

Would most women in the 1% come from privilege? Would they be entrepreneurs who took wild risks? Would they be ruthless?

I am thrilled to find that most women in the 1% are by no means extreme. Instead, they have many traits that other women can emulate. Traits that parents, teachers, employers and investors can seek out and encourage in women at every age.

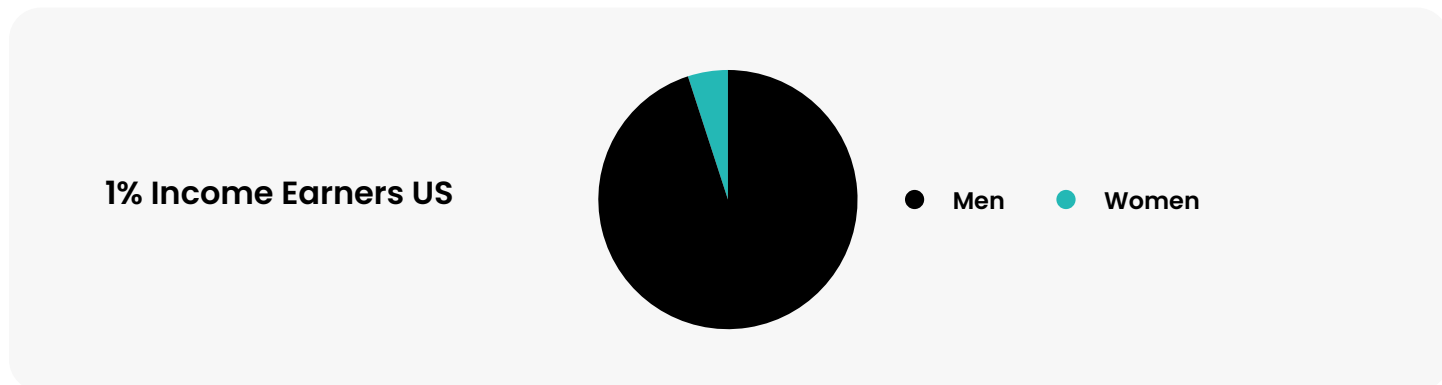
Rather than provide a peek into a rarified world, this report offers a real roadmap for what other working women can do to reach the 1% themselves.

With the right roadmap, many more women *can* achieve 1% income.

Background

Money is Power. Women are employed at historic levels, but they don't make as much money as men, and they have a lot less power as a result. This disparity between men and women is particularly obvious in the top 1% of income earners in the US.

Of individuals making \$775k or more annually, only 5% are women – that's only one in twenty.



That equates to 75,000 women in the top 1% income bracket compared to about 1.5 million men.

Men Dominate US Income 1%

Total US Households	150m
Total US Households In the 1% Income Bracket	1.5m
1% Income Threshold (Men and Women)	\$775k

The hurdles that make it hard for women to earn a high income – such as the broken rung and glass ceiling at work, and a heavy burden of labor at home – are well documented and very real. There has been much work and attention applied to solving these ongoing problems.

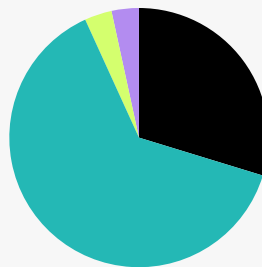
Rather than add to the research about the obstacles, this report focuses on the path forward. Although women’s paths are full of hurdles, it does us no good if we quit or accept the status quo. To help us keep going when the going gets tough, I wanted to look at the women who have made it to the highest income brackets despite the hurdles. We need a roadmap for defying the odds.

The report includes data from my survey across three income levels:

- **Women in the 1%** – Women in the top 1% of all earners in the United States, making \$775k or more per year
- **Women Making Up the Rest of the Women’s 1%** – Women who earn more than \$300k up to \$775k per year
- **Women Earning \$100k–\$300k** – Women who earn from \$100k up to \$300k per year

All of these women are successful and inspirational. By learning more about the high income women, we can add positive narratives to the story and help more women achieve high income.

Distribution of Income for Women in the 1%



- \$775,000 to less than \$1 million
- \$1 million to less than \$5 million
- \$5 million to less than \$10 million
- \$10 million or more

Key Personality Traits

“There was always this thing about me that I was the one who could handle things, which, frankly, I didn't always know that I could at the time, but then I did.”

Women in the 1% are mentally prepared for the steep climb to the top. They approach their careers with a sense of control and an explicit desire for growth. Their careers did not happen passively. If something at work is not satisfactory, these women do not give up or back down – they make change happen. They get past the hurdles.

These three traits stood out most for women in the 1%:

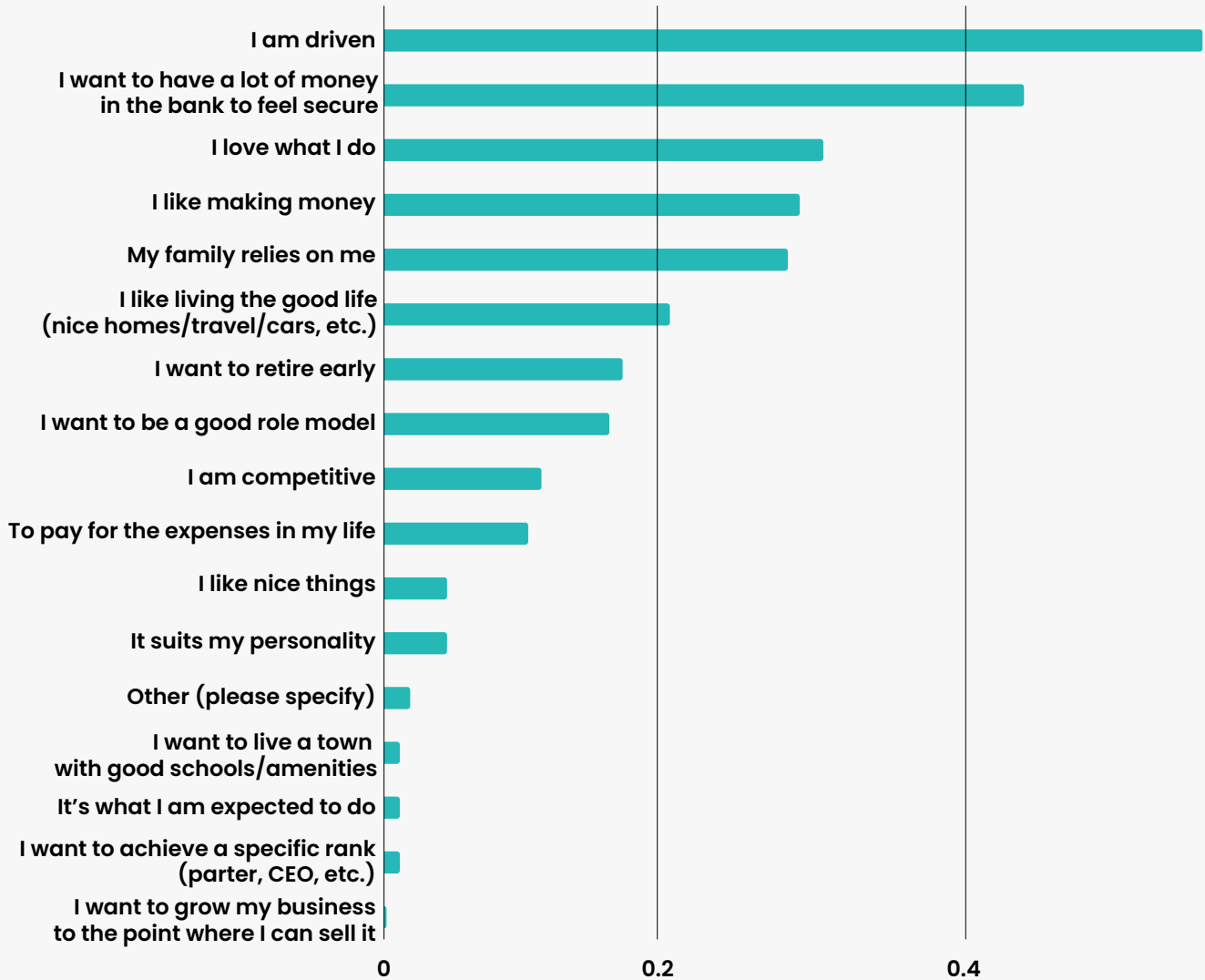
Drive:

When asked why they work, the most common reason was “I am driven” at 55.4% for women in the 1% and 52.6% of women in the \$300k-\$775k bracket – much higher than women who make less than \$300k (34.5%.) The top income earners are also much more likely to say they are efficient and don't take “no” for an answer. They are also more likely to strongly agree that they expect a lot from themselves and others and are more likely to strongly agree that they are competitive (although being competitive is not usually why they work.)

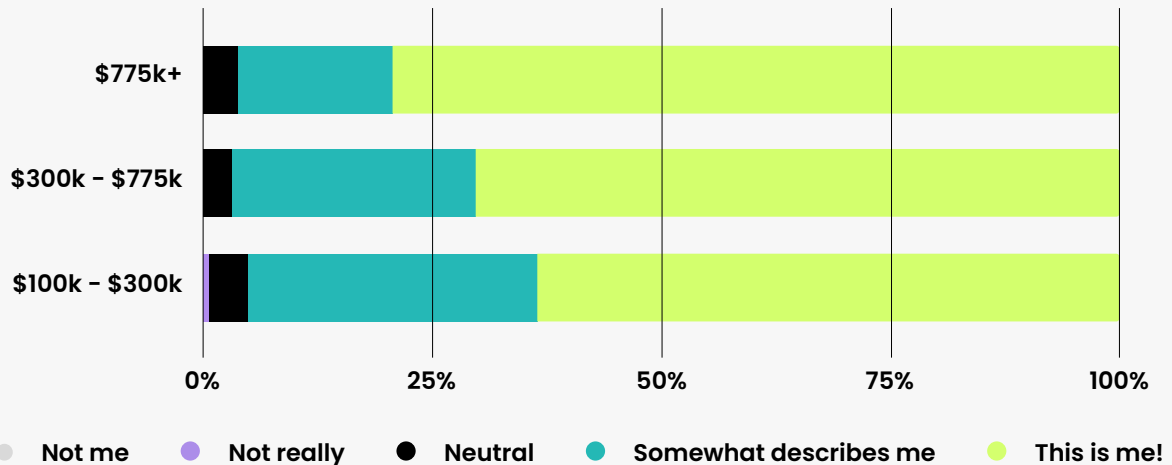
- 43.5% of women in the 1% strongly agree they are competitive compared to 27.5% of women who make between \$300k and \$775k and 25% of women who make \$100k to \$300k.
- 79.2% of women in the 1% strongly agree that they expect a lot of themselves and others compared to 70% of women who make between \$300k and \$775k and 63.4% of women who make \$100k to \$300k.

“I never thought about quitting my computer engineering program because I didn't want to let my dad down.”

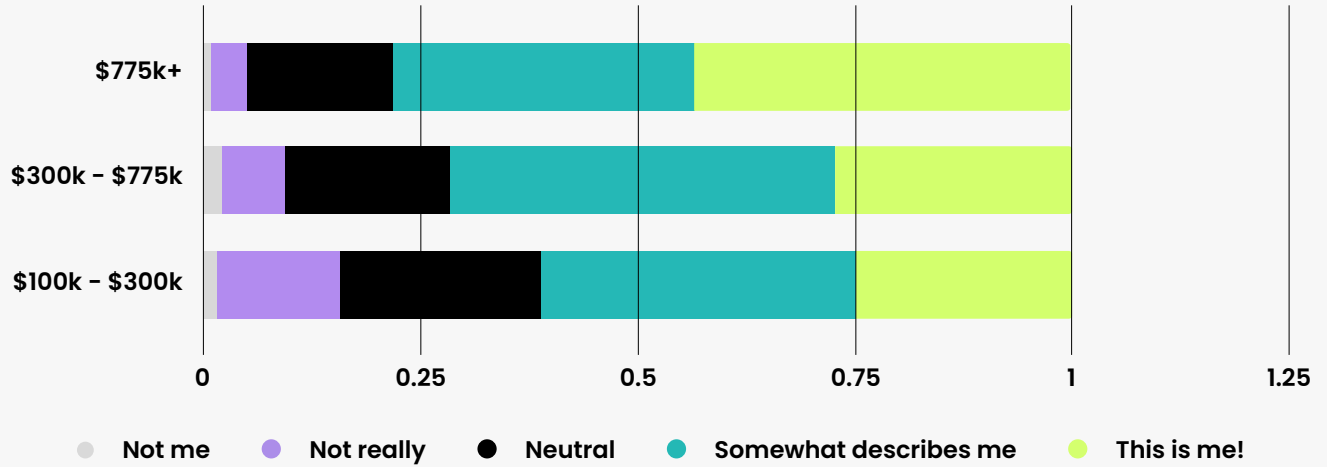
Why Do You Work?



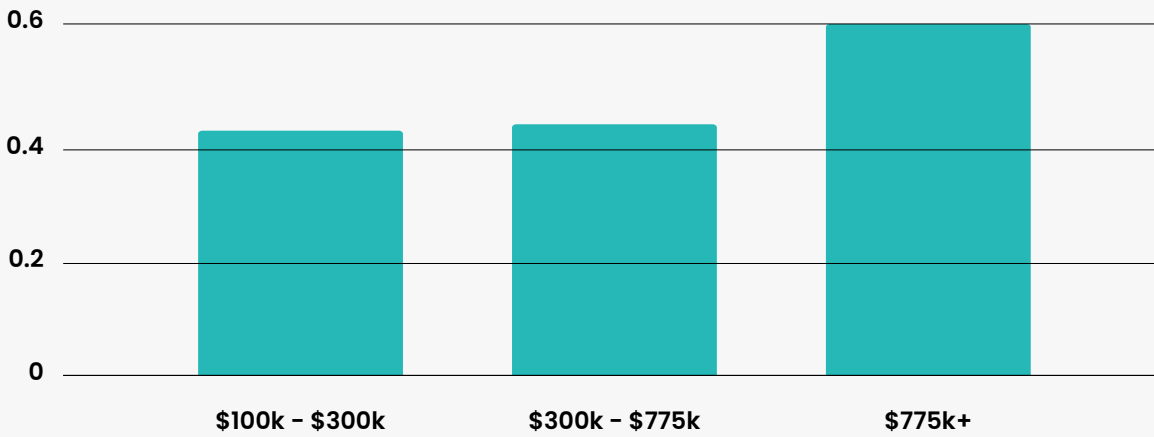
I expect a lot of myself and others



I am competitive



I am efficient

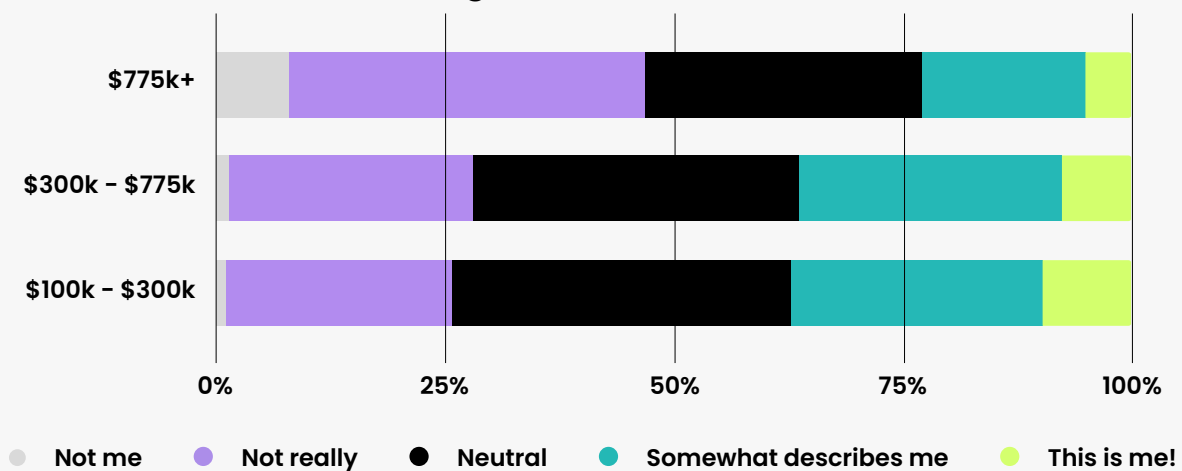


Active career management:

Women in the 1% are much more likely than other women to say that they advocate for themselves at 67.5%. This translates directly into the way they manage their careers, with 55.3% actively negotiating salary and promotions - more than other women in the survey. Women in the top income bracket are also more likely to strongly associate themselves with taking calculated risks. Interestingly, women in the 1% are much LESS likely to say they “go with the flow” (1 in 5 vs. 1 in 3 for other women in the survey.)

“One of my mentors said, “You have to be having this conversation every October with your manager: what you think you want to get paid. And I had never had a conversation like that in all my years on the Street. So I did what he said, and I prefaced it by telling the guy I worked for at the time, ‘I’m very uncomfortable with this conversation, but it’s occurred to me that everyone else is having this conversation and not me, so that’s where we are.’ And it became a little bit of a joke. He would say, “Oh, are we having that conversation that you hate?””

I go with the flow



Growth:

Continuous learning is a very common trait across the survey, but even more so for women in the 1%. A full 91% say they are lifelong learners and 81% of them embrace innovation and new concepts.

Growth is more important than income for many women in the 1%. While 82.2% are always thinking about how to improve and advance (slightly more than other women in the survey) only 45.5% are always thinking about how to make more money, (about the same as other women in the survey.) Women in the 1% are also more likely to say they are good at networking with other people at 71.2%.

“I was recruited on the banking side. I thought banking was interesting. At a high level, I knew they worked on deals for companies. I had no idea what that actually meant, but I said ‘let’s try it.’”

“When I got my new assignment, there was literally no roadmap. I slowly worked through issues and asked a ridiculous amount of questions, but there weren’t any rules. The job was ‘go fix performance.’ So I did that without following any of the rules.”

“I think that’s what I just continued to do, explore the opportunities and keep doors open.”

While women in the 1% are clearly playing the working game effectively, they don't consider themselves to be ruthless. Only 21.1% said they'll do whatever it takes to get ahead - slightly more than other groups but still not many. Compared to other women, top income women are much more likely to work because they want to have money in the bank to feel secure at 43.8%.

Despite their rare income status, women in the 1% are not more likely than other women in the survey to consider themselves brave, unique, tough and thick skinned.

- Almost two thirds of all women in the survey consider themselves brave.
- Fewer women in the 1% consider themselves tough and thick skinned compared to (50% compared to 57.5% of women who make \$300k to \$775k).
- Only 37.9% of women in the 1% consider themselves unique or unusual compared to 40.5% of women who make \$300k to \$775k.

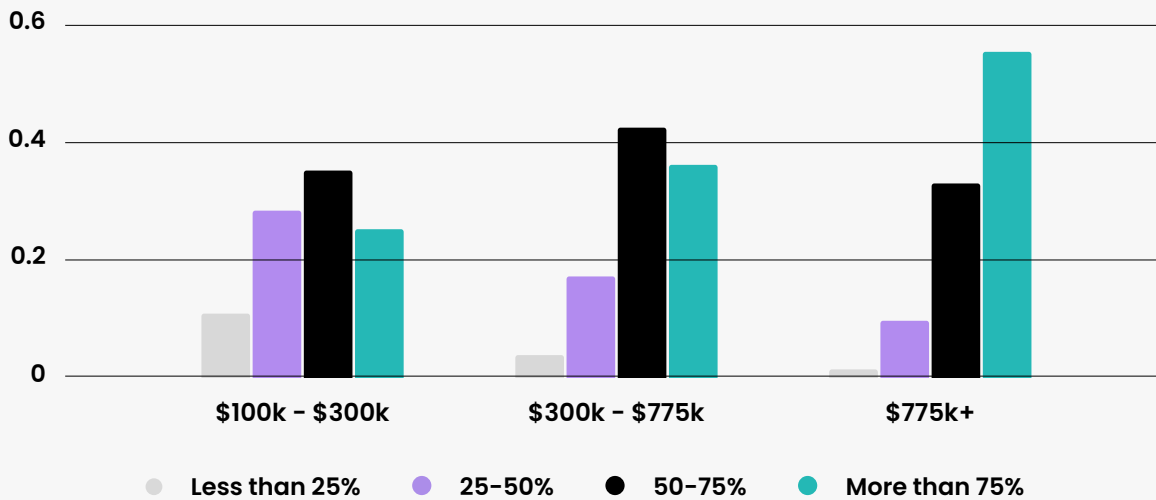
Takeaways: Grit matters. Foster a sense of drive, adopt a growth mindset and continuously work to improve. In the face of difficulty, find a way around. Even if you don't recognize it in yourself, you are brave and unique. Take more calculated risks.

Living a Full Life

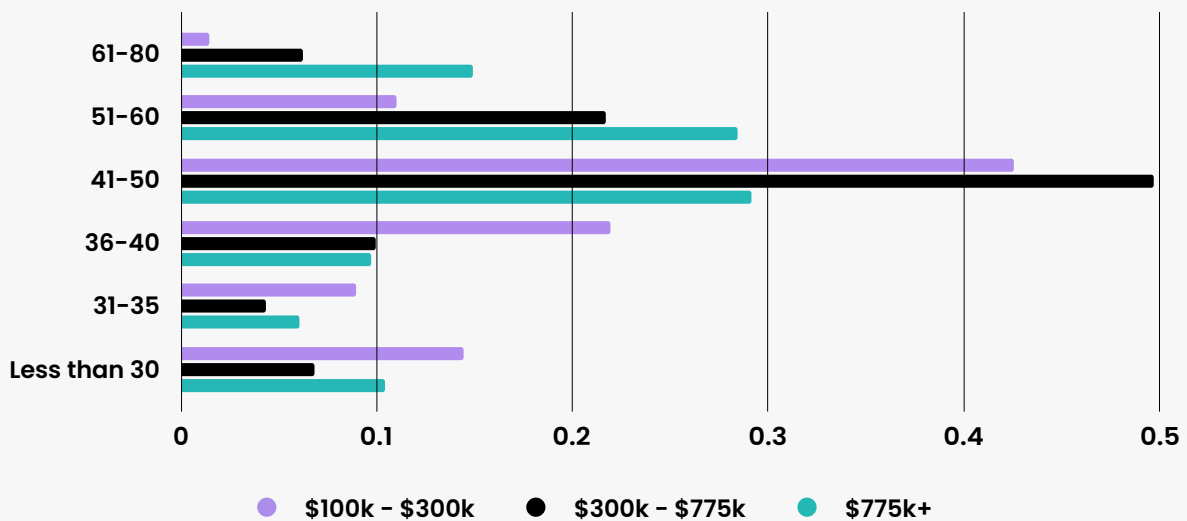
Women in the 1% live a full life. They work more than other income groups, contribute a higher percentage of their household income, have more kids, and are more likely to be married than other income groups. Most play the role of primary breadwinner.

- 89% are married.
- 88.7% contribute more than 50% of their household income.
- 73.9% work 40 or more hours per week.
- 70.9% have two or more children.

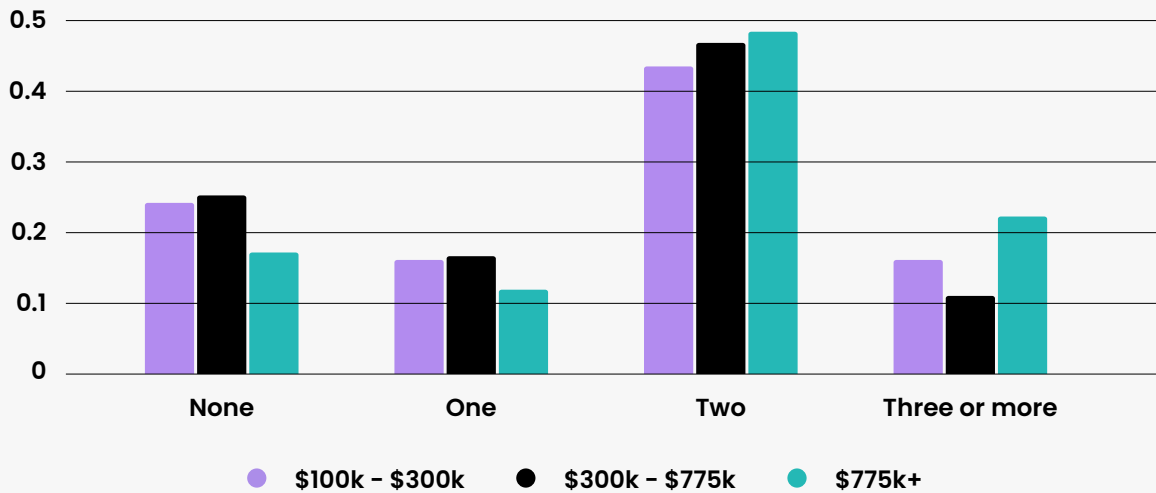
Contribution to Household Income



Hours Work Per Week



Children



Despite balancing a heavy load of work and family, the women in the 1% also report less stress than the other women in the survey. Only 27% of women in the 1% are very stressed compared to more than 40% of other women in the survey. They are also more likely to report that they are happy and they think they are happier than their peers.

“I enjoy having a lot on my plate. I have a lot of energy and like to see how much I can fit in. It makes me feel like I’m living a full life.”

In interviews, women in the 1% reported a sense of agency - they have made the decision to take on the role of primary earner - and they feel empowered by it.

Many of the women in interviews acknowledge that they have built a solid support network including a good team at work, paid help at home, and a supportive spouse. They are well aware of the tradeoffs they make, but (usually) feel like they make choices purposefully, rather than feel like they are the mercy of an overwhelming schedule.

NOTES: While older studies of happiness and money show a plateau after \$75k, [new studies show an increase in happiness](#) that continues as income rises. Wealthier women can afford to hire more help, and buy what they need and want.

“ My husband has always been incredibly supportive of everything that I do, which made it a lot easier. As it makes it a lot easier for the traditional provider that is male, to have a spouse at home. ”

Stress and happiness also tend to be related to age. Although we didn't control for age in this study, it is likely that the women in the 1% have a higher median age than other groups, although they are all still of working age. As women age, they gain income and their kids grow up, stress naturally decreases. However, the fact that they report low stress and high happiness (and especially that more of them think they are happier than their peers) shows that they feel their journey was worth it.

Takeaway: Women can be happy with a career and a family with the right balance. Women can thrive as primary breadwinner when they have support.

Career – Industries and Roles

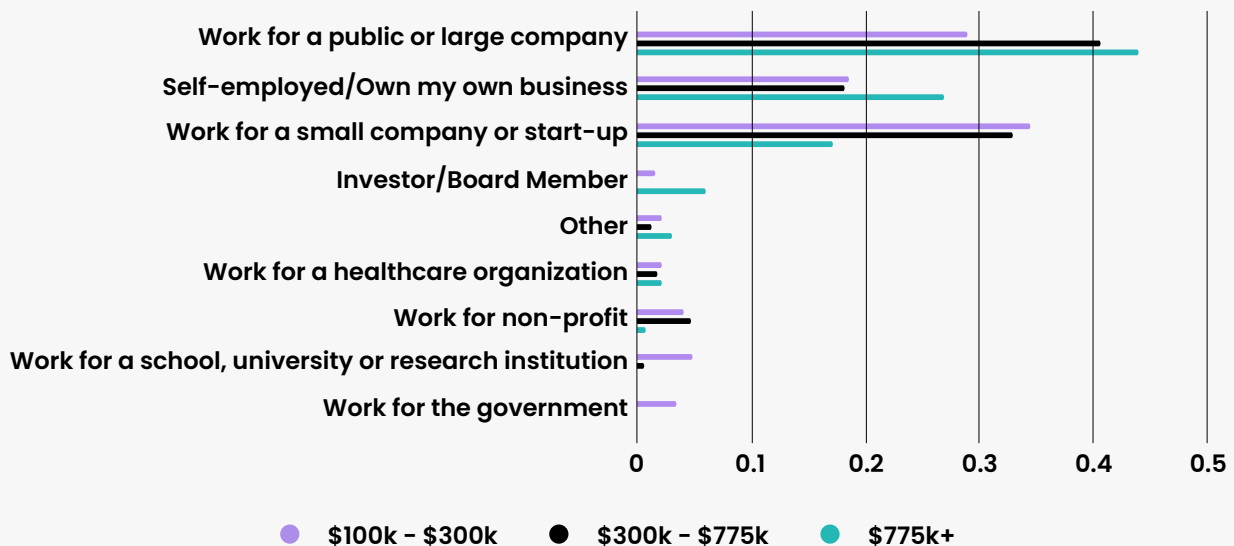
Women in the 1% are in industries dominated by men: 41.7% work in financial services and 21.2% are in technology. They are most likely to work in a large public company (44%) but there is also a sizable number (26.9%) who are self-employed or own their own business.

“I was the only woman in the room beginning my senior year in high school. In technology, the rooms were always that way. And if there was, in fact, another woman, most of the time, they were in HR or logistics, they weren't on the technology side.”

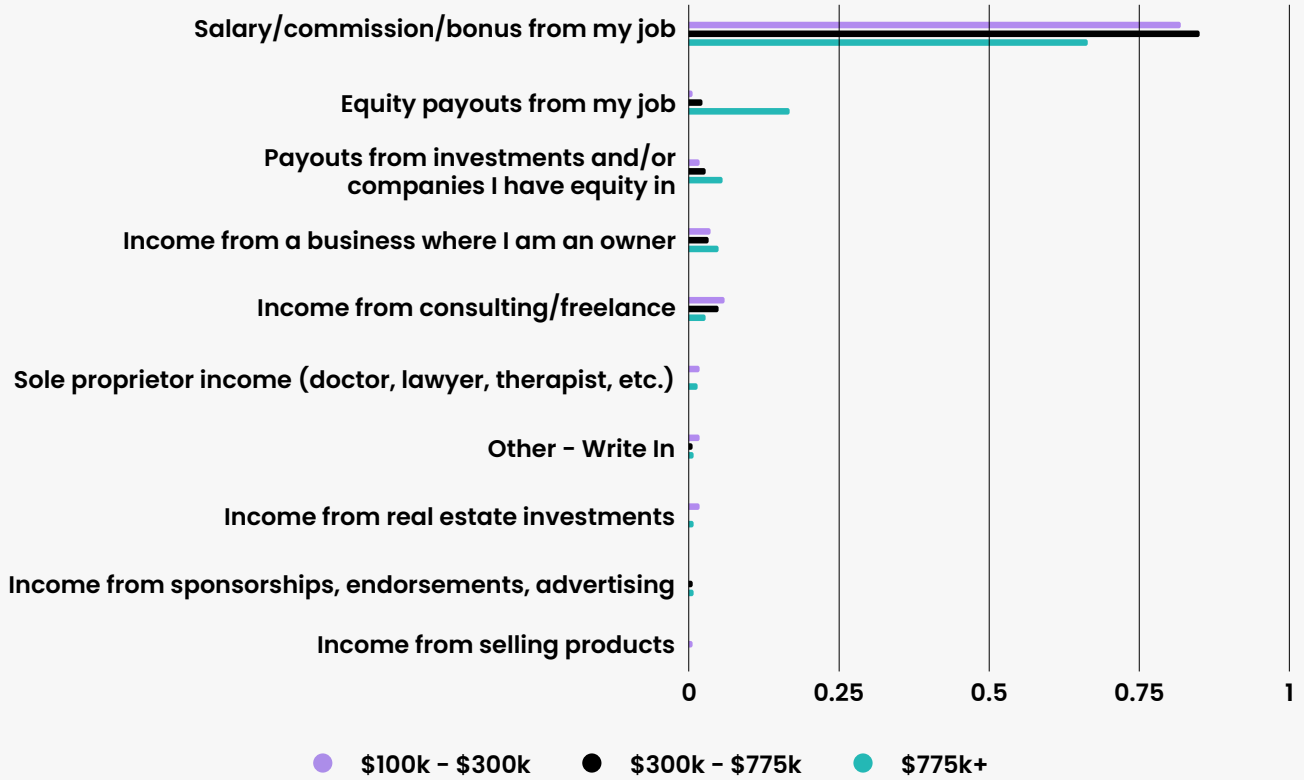
Most women in the 1% are in senior roles or in roles that control the money. More than half have an executive position and another 20.7% are in the finance department with far fewer in sales, marketing, or operations.

Most of the women in the 1% have income that comes from salary, commissions, and bonus from their job, but there is a bit more income diversity compared to the other women in the survey. Women in the 1% are more likely to have income from investments. Women in the 1% were also significantly more likely to have had an equity payout in the past five years compared to other women in the survey.

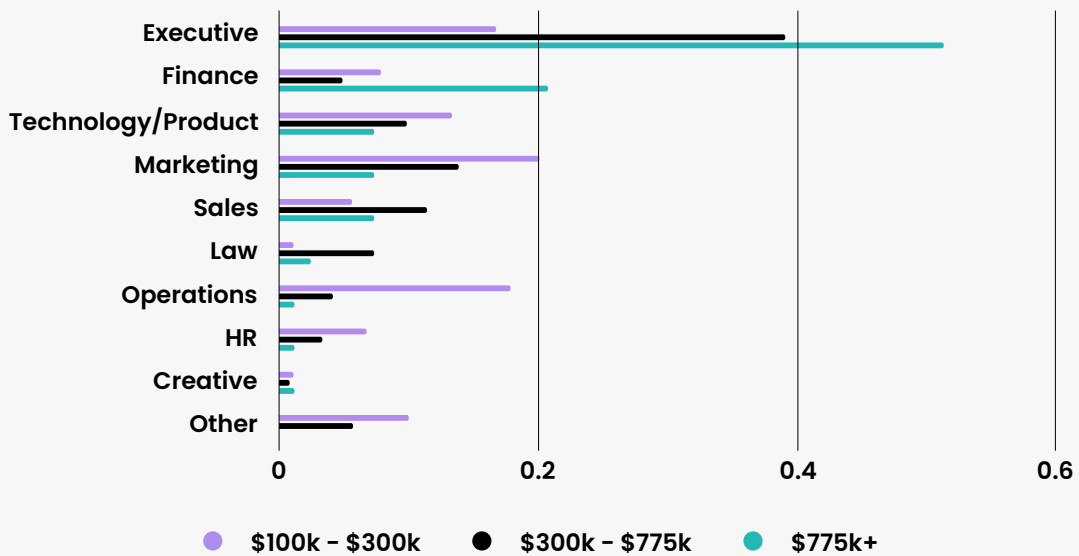
Where Do You Work



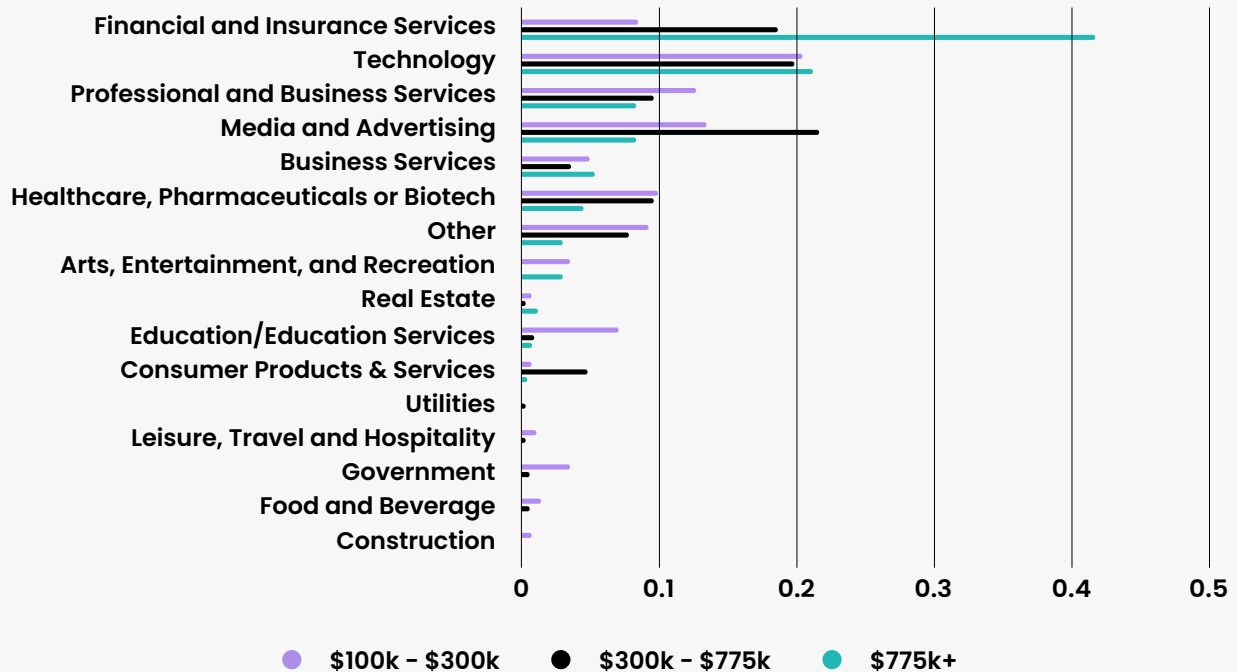
Primary Source of Income



What is your primary role at work?



What industry are you in?



To gain power, more women need these additional money-making levers. Having equity, diverse sources of income and ownership will give women the most power. Today, these power roles are almost exclusively held by men.

- [Fortune 1000 CEOs](#)
- [Board members](#)
- [Heads of banks](#)
- [Heads of top hedge funds and private equity firms](#)

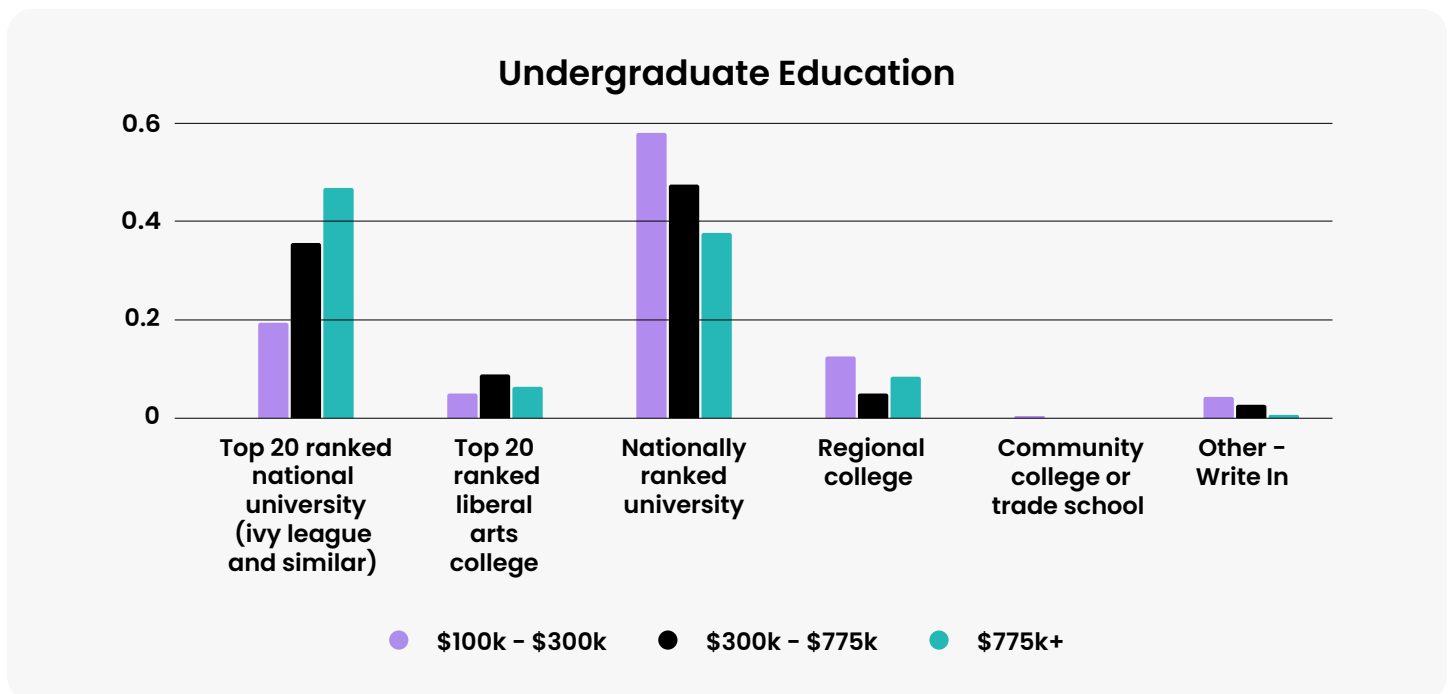
The more women push into power roles, the more money and control they have - and the more influence they have over our world.

Takeaway: Do it scared. Don't shy away from power. Enter industries and take on roles typically dominated by men, and focus on gaining leverage and power yourself. Find roles with direct P&L responsibility.

Formal Education

Nearly every woman surveyed across income levels said that they got good grades and went to college. However, the women at the top are more likely to have attended a highly competitive college and are more likely to have an MBA.

- 97.2% of women in the 1% have a four year degree or higher (about the same as all women with \$100k+ income.)
- 53.2% of women in the 1% attended a top college (top 20 nationally ranked university or liberal arts college.)
- 57.2% of women in the 1% have a graduate degree with half of all graduate degrees being MBAs (in other words, about one quarter of women in the 1% have an MBA.)



NOTE: School alone is not enough to propel women to equal income as men. Most [valedictorians in the US are women](#) and more [women graduate from college](#) every year.

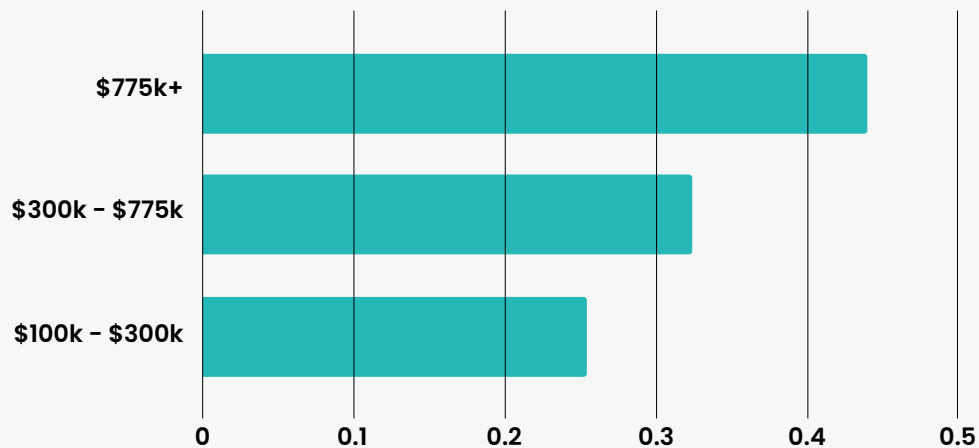
Takeaway: A top undergraduate education and a graduate degree can set you up for higher income, but it is not a sure thing.

Childhood Experiences

“At our high school, the motto was, ‘Find a way or make one’. And I love that. I have always run my life like that.”

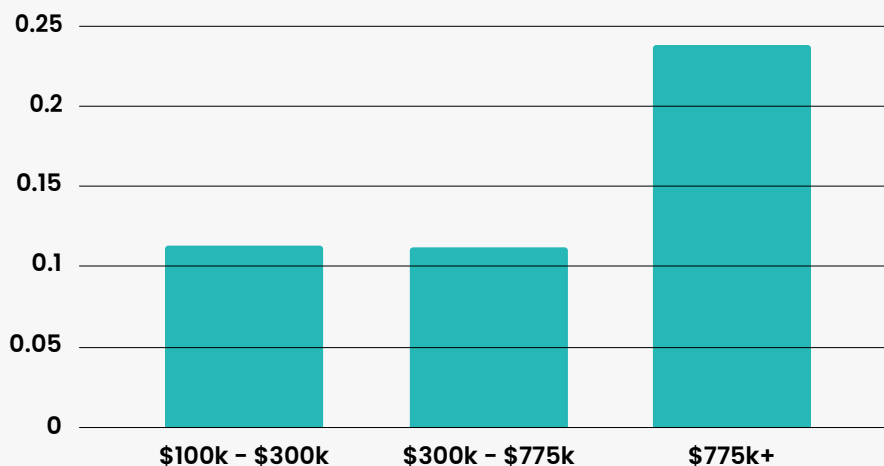
More women in the 1% compared to other income groups wanted to be successful at a young age and nearly three quarters were also ambitious at a young age (true for \$300k+ women as well.)

I wanted to be rich/successful at a young age



Women in the top 1% are significantly more likely to be first generation American - 23.9% compared to about 11% for other income groups. Significantly more women in the 1% also experienced a time in childhood when the main breadwinner in their home was unemployed - about one in five (perhaps one reason why more women in the 1% say they work to have money in the bank to feel secure.)

I am first generation American



Most women in the 1% - 83% - grew up with parents who were married, slightly higher than average. While 17.2% grew up in a wealthy family - also slightly higher than other groups.

While the survey shows a majority of women in the 1% did not have a very stressful event in their childhood, many interviewees revealed a defining experience.

“When my mom died, I was the executor of her will at age 18. Not my dad or my older siblings. It was me.”

“My parents were divorced and my mom got into a terrible car accident. After years in foster care, my mom took us back, but she and I didn't see eye to eye. When she moved, I stayed with a friend and made money to pay rent.”

“My dad died when I was 14. I was very, very scared that if I didn't have a career, that I wouldn't be successful and be able to take care of myself. So in high school and college and graduate school, I waitressed and bartended the whole time I was taking full course loads.”

*NOTE: There are some experiences from childhood that are remarkably consistent for all women in the survey across income brackets. These elements may encourage women to work, but **do not** seem to be directly correlated with women achieving 1% income status specifically.*

The following is true across working women in all income brackets:

- About 80% were told if they worked hard, they could achieve their goals in life.
- About three quarters had a job when they were in high school.
- About two thirds report having a happy childhood.
- Nearly half had mothers with a career.
- Just over half were expected to contribute around the house.
- Nearly half were surrounded by smart and successful people growing up.

LeanIn research shows that [women are just as ambitious as men](#), but are more likely to be derailed by the many structural challenges they face.

Takeaway: Teach ambitious girls an extra dose

of grit to prepare them for the long road ahead.

**Keep Going.
Keep Getting
Better.**

“I had never traded before, but it looked interesting and they needed someone, so I asked if I could try it. They let me and I just kept going at it.”

“They call me “The Wolf.” I was willing to do the hard things like the cleanup jobs and restructuring. And I was willing to collect the forgotten, misfit teams across the company so that eventually I was managing a ton of people.”

“I had quit to raise my kids. When they were teenagers, I was at lunch with my friends and was in my mid-forties. I looked across the restaurant at a table of women in their sixties and I realized I wasn't done working. I needed to go back. When I went back to work, I didn't make as much as what I was worth, but I was back. I don't regret it.”

Women in the 1% are running a marathon, not a sprint. The common thread across every woman in the 1% that I interviewed and surveyed was their unflagging commitment to doing a great job over and over again. They keep going when the going is tough.

It's not easy to forge a new path, especially one dominated for centuries by men.

Despite their marathon mentality, women in the 1% are not emotionless robots who climb to the top in a straight line. Many got fired, were told they'd never get the promotion, or had a toxic work situation that they left in frustration. However, they all took another step and found a way around. Many went around a roadblock by moving to a new company, getting a coach, or starting their own company. Some couldn't get funding for years until they found an investor or worked alone on a side hustle.

They ask questions and turn problems into opportunities. They have a sense of humor and a sense of self-worth. They bounce.

“I was a top sales executive and was blowing the lid off of my goals but nothing was changing. I looked around and realized that there wasn't anything else for me at that place. It wasn't my company. I knew I had to take things into my own hands and start my own thing. It took a lot of work to figure out how to get funding. I finally had to bring in my old mentor, and it ended up working out really well, with a very favorable structure.”

If we create more conversations about long term achievement, if we share our experiences getting around obstacles, if we pass on our wisdom, more women will see that reaching the 1% is possible.

The more we believe we can, the more we will.

Takeaway: Forging a new path is not easy.

Believe in yourself first and foremost. Keep going when the going gets tough. You'll be glad when you make it.

Background and Methodology

Within the US population, there are about 1.5 million households with enough income to be in the 1%. **Only 5% of those households** achieved this number based on the woman's income alone, which nets out to approximately 75,000 women total.

As far as I know, this is the first survey to focus on the women in the 1%.
(Please share other existing research if you know of it!)

This study includes survey responses from 492 women including 325 women who earn enough to be in the top 1% of all working women (more than \$300k), 145 of whom also earn enough to be in the overall top 1% (more than \$775k.) The remainder make between \$100k and \$300k.

The survey ran from July 2025 to mid-January 2026.

This report also includes insights from more than 30 one-on-one interviews with women in the 1% as well as my personal experience as a 1% income earner.

Note: I focus on 1% income rather than 1% net worth, to avoid spouse's wealth and inheritance.

Acknowledgements

I'm thrilled that this research project was a success. It took months of personal outreach across a variety of different channels including LinkedIn, a variety of women's professional networks, my personal connections and outreach to my community. Many women opened their own networks to me, connecting me to friends of friends and colleagues of colleagues. Thanks to everyone who took the survey, passed it on, posted about it or generally encouraged me and others to make it happen.

Many people not only took the survey, but also volunteered their time for interviews - which were extremely helpful, fun and fascinating. It was a highlight of my career.

It has also been a pleasure to work with a variety of women on the survey project itself including Corina Matiesanu, Mihoko Miyata, Joanne Hader and Cory Munchbach.

I know I was able to undertake this project specifically because of my good fortune - my schooling, career, and my resulting connections to so many generous and high-achieving women throughout my life experiences. I do not take this privilege for granted. Rather, I want to show that we can work together and support one another across the highest levels and the farthest reaches. Simply getting this survey to happen is proof of what we can do when we work together.

Takeaway: Ladies, we have what it takes. Let's

learn from each other!

For more information, visit www.womenintheonepercent.com or email Emily Riley at emily@rileystrategic.com.