

Gender Career Ambition and Identity in *Working Girl*

Posted on September 17, 2018

Introduction

Mike Nichols's 1988 film *Working Girl* presents corporate ambition through the story of Tess McGill, a working-class secretary from Staten Island who wants to become an executive in Manhattan's financial sector. The film is often celebrated as an empowering story about intelligence, persistence, and women's professional advancement. It is also more complicated than a simple message that women can succeed if they work hard. Tess faces sexism, class prejudice, credentialism, sexual harassment, and the theft of her ideas, yet her route upward depends on adopting the appearance, speech, and risk-taking style of the corporate elite. The film therefore explores gender, career ambition, and identity while revealing both the appeal and limitations of individual advancement inside an unequal workplace (Nichols, 1988; Tasker, 1998; Gill, 2007).

The Corporate World of the 1980s

Working Girl emerged during a period associated with deregulation, mergers, finance, consumer display, and the celebration of entrepreneurial ambition. Women had entered professional occupations in growing numbers, but executive leadership remained heavily male. Secretarial work was feminized, lower paid, and treated as support rather than as a source of ideas. The film's visual geography captures this hierarchy. Tess travels by ferry from Staten Island to lower Manhattan, moving daily between a working-class community and the towers of corporate power. The commute represents more than distance. It marks the social boundary between people whose labor keeps offices functioning and people authorized to make decisions. Tess's ambition begins with the conviction that she can contribute at a higher level, even though her job title and background encourage executives to overlook her ability (Nichols, 1988; Tasker, 1998).

Tess McGill's Ambition

Tess is ambitious, but the film distinguishes her ambition from greed. She takes evening courses, follows business news, studies industries, and develops ideas outside the narrow tasks assigned to her. She does not merely want wealth or status; she wants recognition as someone capable of thinking strategically. Her frustration comes from being repeatedly placed in roles where appearance and obedience matter more than knowledge. When male colleagues exploit or mock her, the film shows that the workplace rewards confidence differently depending on gender and class. Tess's

ambition is therefore both personal and political. She seeks a career, yet her struggle exposes how organizations waste talent when they assume that secretaries execute ideas while executives generate them. Her ascent challenges that division even though it does not dismantle the hierarchy itself (Nichols, 1988; Williams, n.d.).

Gendered Labor and Sexual Harassment

The early office scenes establish that Tess's professional environment is openly sexist. Male supervisors treat secretaries as potential sexual partners, use humiliation as entertainment, and interpret women's career aspirations as opportunities for manipulation. Tess is sent to a meeting under false pretenses and discovers that her boss has arranged an encounter in which her professional credibility is sacrificed. Her refusal leads not to institutional protection but to another reassignment. These scenes matter because they show that individual confidence cannot solve structural harassment. Tess's intelligence has always existed, but organizational power determines whether it is heard. The film's comedy softens some incidents, yet the pattern is serious: women in subordinate positions are expected to manage male desire while remaining professionally pleasant. Tess's career ambition therefore develops in a workplace that makes advancement conditional on navigating sexualized power (Nichols, 1988; Tasker, 1998).

Appearance, Voice, and Power Dressing

Clothing and speech function as forms of social identity throughout the film. Tess's hair, jewelry, accent, and fashion initially mark her as working-class and place her outside the visual code of executive authority. Katherine Parker advises that professional women must control how they are seen, and Tess later changes her appearance when occupying Katherine's role. Power dressing gives her access to meetings and creates the confidence others already possess through status. Yet the transformation raises a critical question: does Tess become recognized because the organization discovers her ability, or because she learns to appear like the people who already hold power? The film celebrates self-presentation while exposing its unfair necessity. Competence should not depend on suppressing regional speech, class identity, or femininity, but corporate institutions often treat elite cultural style as evidence of intelligence (Williams, n.d.; Wolf, 1991; Butler, 1990).

Katherine Parker and the Problem of Female Rivalry

Katherine is initially presented as a possible mentor who understands the difficulties women face. She speaks the language of partnership and encourages Tess to share ideas, creating an expectation of female solidarity. Her later decision to steal Tess's merger proposal is therefore a betrayal of both professional ethics and mentorship. The film uses Katherine as an example of a woman who has

gained power by mastering corporate rules but reproduces the exploitation she once may have faced. This portrayal is dramatically effective, although it risks turning structural sexism into a conflict between a good ambitious woman and a bad ambitious woman. Katherine's conduct is indefensible, but the organization that enables her deserves equal attention. It lacks transparent credit, reliable grievance procedures, and safeguards for lower-status employees whose intellectual work can be appropriated (Nichols, 1988; McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007).

Class and Educational Credentialism

Tess's lack of an elite business degree repeatedly becomes a reason to discount her, even though she understands the proposed acquisition and has researched it carefully. The film does not reject education; Tess herself pursues courses and values knowledge. It criticizes credentialism, the assumption that institutional pedigree proves ability while practical learning and independent thought do not count. Katherine can present Tess's idea credibly because her title, education, and accent already authorize her. Tess must perform competence under conditions where any error could confirm others' prejudice. Her working-class identity is therefore central to the film's gender politics. Professional women are not a uniform group. Some possess wealth, connections, and cultural capital, while others face barriers created by both gender and class. Tess's achievement challenges the idea that merit is reliably recognized through existing corporate pathways (Nichols, 1988; Tasker, 1998).

Identity Performance and Ethical Ambiguity

After Katherine is injured, Tess enters her employer's home, uses her clothing, and presents the merger idea as though she were an executive. Her deception creates ethical ambiguity. Tess is responding to theft and exclusion, but she also misrepresents her position to Jack Trainer and Trask Industries. The film invites viewers to support her because official channels have failed, yet it does not make her conduct entirely innocent. Her impersonation demonstrates that executive identity is partly theatrical: access depends on clothing, location, vocabulary, and confidence as much as on formal authority. Once Tess performs the role convincingly, powerful men take her analysis seriously. This revelation is liberating because it exposes arbitrary status signals, but it is also unsettling because success requires her to enter a system through concealment rather than through fair recognition (Nichols, 1988; Butler, 1990; Williams, n.d.).

Romance and Professional Recognition

The relationship between Tess and Jack combines romantic comedy with career narrative. Jack listens to Tess's idea, treats her as an intellectual partner, and helps arrange the meeting that brings the proposal forward. However, their romance complicates the film's feminist message because professional validation remains partly connected to the approval of an influential man. Tess's success

ultimately depends on Trask recognizing her authorship, not solely on Jack's support, but the romantic plot gives emotional legitimacy to her movement into the executive world. Jack is also deceived about her status, which creates a conflict between personal trust and professional aspiration. The film resolves the tension optimistically, suggesting that love and ambition can coexist. A critical reading should nevertheless ask why female career stories are so often required to reassure audiences through romance rather than allowing professional identity to stand independently (Nichols, 1988; Tasker, 1998).

How Tess Proves Authorship

The climax turns on evidence rather than appearance. When Katherine claims the merger idea, Tess reconstructs the intellectual path that led her to connect Trask's strategic needs with a radio acquisition. She explains the newspaper story, market logic, and business reasoning behind the proposal. Katherine cannot provide an equivalent account because she possesses the presentation but not the process. This scene offers the film's strongest defense of Tess's merit. Her authority comes from research, synthesis, and understanding rather than imitation. Trask's willingness to investigate also matters, because institutions must create moments in which lower-status employees can challenge powerful claims. The resolution is idealized, but it dramatizes an important principle: credit should follow documented intellectual contribution, and leadership should be capable of hearing evidence from people outside established ranks (Nichols, 1988).

The Meaning of Tess's Final Office

At the end of the film, Tess begins a new job and initially assumes that the woman at the desk is her supervisor. She then learns that the other woman is her secretary and that she has received an office of her own. The moment represents mobility, recognition, and the achievement of a professional identity she has worked to claim. The camera's wider view of Manhattan also places her success inside an enormous corporate system. Tess has moved upward, but thousands of workers remain in lower-level offices, and the hierarchy continues. Her treatment of her secretary provides a small ethical contrast with Katherine's behavior. Tess promises cooperation rather than domination, suggesting that advancement can be used to change everyday workplace relations. Whether she can transform the broader institution remains unanswered (Nichols, 1988; Gill, 2007).

Postfeminism and Individual Success

Critics often describe *Working Girl* as postfeminist because it assumes that earlier feminist struggles opened doors while shifting attention toward individual choice, self-fashioning, and career success. Tess rarely organizes with other women or challenges discriminatory policy collectively. Her solution is to prove that she personally deserves entry. This makes the film inspiring and limited at the same

time. Viewers can identify with her persistence, but her success does not address childcare, pay inequality, racial exclusion, disability, labor rights, or the conditions of secretarial workers as a group. The story reflects a common corporate-feminist idea: equality means allowing talented women to rise within existing institutions. A broader feminist analysis would ask whether the structure, values, and distribution of power inside those institutions should also change (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).

Female Solidarity and Its Absence

The film includes several women, but sustained solidarity is fragile. Tess's friend Cyn offers loyalty and connection to her Staten Island life, while Katherine offers mentorship only until self-interest intervenes. Secretaries share a workplace culture, yet they are not shown collectively confronting harassment or seeking recognition. This absence reflects the film's focus on individual mobility. It also creates a warning about advancement strategies that require separation from one's peers. Tess changes her appearance and social environment, but the film does not require her to reject her origins completely. Her continued warmth toward Cyn and her respectful approach to her new secretary suggest an alternative identity: she can enter management without treating lower-status women as inferior. The possibility is hopeful, though it remains less developed than the competition between Tess and Katherine (Nichols, 1988; McRobbie, 2009).

What Has and Has Not Aged Well

The film's hairstyles, clothing, technology, and office practices clearly belong to the 1980s, but its central issues remain recognizable. Workers still confront harassment, idea theft, unequal sponsorship, credential barriers, and judgments based on accent or appearance. At the same time, contemporary audiences may notice the story's limited racial diversity and its assumption that entry into corporate finance represents liberation. The film also treats some workplace misconduct through comic conventions that would now receive more explicit ethical scrutiny. These limitations do not make it irrelevant. They allow viewers to examine how gender representation changes over time. *Working Girl* captures a historical moment when the image of the ambitious professional woman became culturally prominent, while leaving unresolved whether individual success can produce collective equality (Tasker, 1998; Gill, 2007).

Conclusion

Working Girl presents Tess McGill's ambition as a justified demand to have intelligence recognized across barriers of gender, class, and status. Her transformation shows that corporate authority is partly performed through dress, speech, confidence, and access, but her final success depends on proving the originality and quality of her work. The film criticizes harassment, idea theft, and credentialism while celebrating persistence and self-invention. Its feminist achievement lies in making

a working-class woman's professional intelligence central to the story. Its limitation lies in resolving structural inequality through one exceptional individual's promotion. Tess wins an office, but the system that underestimated her remains largely intact. The film is therefore best read as both an empowering career narrative and a critique of the narrow conditions under which women are permitted to advance (Nichols, 1988; Tasker, 1998; Gill, 2007).

References

1. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990.
2. Gill, Rosalind. "Postfeminist Media Culture." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2007.
3. McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism*. SAGE, 2009.
4. Nichols, Mike, director. *Working Girl*. 20th Century Fox, 1988.
5. Tasker, Yvonne. *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*. Routledge, 1998.
6. Williams, Linda Ruth. "Deciphering *Working Girl*: Identity, Post-Feminism, and Power Dressing." *Invisible Culture*.
7. Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*. William Morrow, 1991.