

Women in Leadership: Where Are They?

Samantha Knight

School of Leadership and Professional Studies

Western Kentucky University

Abstract

This paper analyzes the barriers women face to obtaining leadership roles and proposed ways to create change. Such barriers are rooted in the social construction of gender and how it impacts individuals throughout the course of their lives. Barriers are further complicated when viewed from an intersectional perspective that accounts for other marginalized identities (e.g. race). The complexity of this issue is deeply interwoven into other social issues (e.g. class struggles). Broad societal and personal suggestions for change are outlined below. Finally, this paper notes potential avenues for further research.

Women in Leadership: Where Are They?

Research shows that gender leadership diversity can increase financial success for businesses as well as build important structures that ensure future success. For example, diverse leadership teams are more likely to champion initiatives that promote fairness, effective governance, product development, transparency, and social responsibility (Glass & Cook, 2018). However, out of the five hundred Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of leading firms on the *Fortune* 500 list, only 6.6% (or 33) are women (Zillman, 2019). This is the largest number ever recorded. Women directors are also underrepresented, composing just 25.5% of board members (Zillman, 2019). These statistics will not shock, but might infuriate, supporters of social and gender equity. Moreover, they highlight an important area of growth for businesses that seek to maintain a competitive edge in a hyper-competitive and globalized economy.

However, even with the benefits noted and the deficit recognized, the question remains: What changes can be made to promote gender diversity in business leadership? To answer this question, we must recognize how social inequities impact diverse individuals at key stages of development and reinforce patterns of oppression and marginalization for certain groups. As a result, influence and power are often awarded to those who were always positioned to succeed, while the rest must rely on perseverance and luck to reach the upper echelon.

The Barriers to Change

In an ideal, blank slate world, each child would be born with all the right tools to succeed in life. Their physical and emotional needs would be met and their minds would be stimulated in developmentally appropriate ways. During their formative years, they would attend schools that are well-suited to educate, inspire, and properly socialize them with diverse peers. After succeeding through this stage, they would continue their studies at a university, college, or trade

school where they can build on their knowledge base that will allow them to succeed in their future careers. Ideally, they would also develop professional networks that will connect them to future employers. Once employed, their superiors and managers will continue to hone their skills and competencies so they can climb up the organizational ladder, if they so choose. Then, after they acquire the right amount experience and express a strong desire to lead, a select few recruits will rise above the rest and assume leadership roles. Most importantly, a perfect world would never impose barriers on a child that they could not overcome with some hard work and the desire to grow.

However, the real world poses numerous challenges that deter and inhibit individuals from reaching those goals based on socially constructed differences (i.e. race, class, gender, etc.). From birth, gender is assigned based on biological sex, and this social label can positively or negatively affect individuals based on their culture's gendered roles. Gender socialization theory, as defined by Glass and Cook (2018), "posits that women and men are encouraged and rewarded for different types of behaviors throughout the life course" (p. 824). As a result, communal qualities and relationship-building behaviors are developed in women while agentic traits and competitive behaviors are instilled in men (Glass & Cook, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2012). Since most leadership qualities are synonymous with masculine traits, socialization differences are important. However, gender impacts people long before they apply for the corner office.

In school, curriculum is geared toward the education of males. Subjects in which males traditionally dominate (i.e. math, science, technologies) are emphasized and valued, while the less competitive, and thus more effeminate, subjects such as history, foreign languages, and the arts are not mandated after a certain grade level. Standardized tests further incline teachers to prepare students for specific subjects and skills that are inherently biased toward Western (i.e.

white) culture, which continues to marginalize minority students irrespective of gender. Combined with other life circumstances, such as poverty, the ability to receive a quality education, and the chance to attend a university become limited based simply on where we come from and what we look like.

As people age from children to adults, gender inequality continues to limit women. Women cannot be too loud or competitive because it is *unladylike*. Girls cannot outshine boys because we will make them feel insecure which is *not nice*. However, if a boy is picking on a girl, being rude, or acting out, girls are told that “boys will boys.” School dress codes often prioritize male comfort, therefore girls with bra-related infractions or those who wear *revealing* clothes are sent home for lacking modesty. It is never adequately explained why boys and male teachers are allowed to sexually regard and objectify female students instead of learning to respect them as people. Regardless, these rules demonstrate how the classroom is designed for male success and disciplinary action is taken against girls when their femininity interferes with the boys’ success. There are no good answers for why a girl’s education is less important than that of their male peers. Simply put, conventionalism and stereotypes favor male superiority.

Other harmful stereotypes are used to limit a woman’s educational pursuits. After all, women are told that they are meant to be the primary caretakers and homemakers in the family, while men are the primary breadwinners (Kellerman & Rhode, 2012). If a parent falls ill, the daughter should care for them. If a new child enters the family, a woman should be the first to reduce hours or quit her job to attend to the needs of the child. Anyone willing to step outside of this script risks scrutiny, judgment, or even social ostracization.

Furthermore, gender stereotypes do not operate in a vacuum, Ridgeway and Kircheli-Katz (2013) remind us that race and other contextual statuses impact the way we are judged

based solely on social categories. Therefore, because masculinity and whiteness are more commonly associated with leaders, it is easier to picture a thirty-year old, white man as young, hungry professional than it is to picture a pregnant black woman who shares the same ambitions.

Ridgeway and Kircheli-Katz (2013) write:

“These biased expectations tend to have self-fulfilling effects on behavior in the setting and to create inequalities in evaluations of performance, influence, and attributions of ability. In this way, among others, implicitly salient gender and race stereotypes shape interpersonal hierarchies of influence, status, and perceived leadership potential in ways that reproduce and maintain gender and race as systems of inequality” (p. 299).

Furthermore, the similarity attraction theory argues that people are attracted to those who share similar observable characteristics (i.e. race, gender). Therefore, they are also assumed to share similar core values, perspective, and priorities (Glass & Cook, 2018). As a result, not all hiring practices are created equal. Subjective interviews with applicants akin to hiring managers will go over more smoothly than interviews with those who are different in background and appearance.

Proposed Solutions to Change

The issue is multifaceted and requires change at various levels of society. Starting with schools, a proper education should emphasize the development of skills which are traditionally understood as more effeminate pursuits. Standardized testing and other curriculum-setting factors should consider the experiences of diverse individuals. Financially, school funding should not be based on property taxes, as that system perpetuates wealth inequality. Additionally, admission to elite schools should not favor the children of alumni, but instead should consider the challenge certain individuals face to receive an education. Poverty should not prevent a student from attending college, nor should it force them to divert their energy away from their

studies and toward one or more jobs in order to afford their education. Remedies for this, at the organizational level, include paid internships to help those who cannot afford to accept an unpaid position yet need to gain experience in their preferred career field. Unpaid internships, perhaps unintentionally, allow socioeconomic status to prevent many individuals from ever entering certain professions because they cannot afford to gain the requisite entry-level experience.

Other organizational remedies can focus on hiring practices and policies that promote diversity and inclusion. For example, to allow for continued participation from new mothers, an organization should offer paid parental leave that encourages new parents (regardless of gender) to share child rearing responsibilities. Moreover, organizations can offer meaningful part-time work, allow their employees to work remotely, and/or work on a flexible schedule (Kellerman & Rhode, 2012). Eagly and Carli (2012) also suggest changing the long work hours norm, using open-recruiting practices or a headhunter for hiring purposes, reducing subjectivity in performance evaluations, supporting mothers who return to the workforce, and teaching their employees about implicit bias and harmful “othering” tendencies.

Moreover, leadership change is needed at the societal level. Individuals can support diversity by electing diverse candidates and those with change agendas. Public policies must include federally mandated parental/family leave and enforce equal opportunity/affirmative action initiatives (Kellerman & Rhode, 2012). Although women are not categorically barred from employment opportunities, “second-generation sex discrimination” is alive and well (Kellerman & Rhode, 2012). Our legal system must combat subtler forms of discrimination.

Ultimately, cultural changes are much needed. Women should not be viewed predominantly as caretakers, but rather as people with diverse ambitions. *Mother* and *working professional* are not incompatible identities—they can be combined or changed throughout the

course of a woman's life. Additionally, business scholarship supports evidence that strong leaders master soft skills such as emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and relationship-building competencies (i.e. traditionally feminine traits; Eagly & Carli, 2012). Therefore, when socializing children, adults should encourage young males to develop emotional intelligence and young females to dream big and chase their ambitions.

Conclusion

These lofty goals are just some of ways to create meaningful change. However, we are often reminded how the issue is larger than Forbes's top five hundred firms and how it can impact us in subtle ways. The change process requires motivation and resources. However, some women do not want to be leaders and privileged women are afforded the option to simply not work. Therefore, the detractors prevent the development of a class consciousness of "all women wanting change" and reduce the number of voices and resources that can be used for that change (Kellerman & Rhode, 2012). Moreover, without an acute awareness of social inequities, they can easily be overlooked and perpetuated. For instance, every gender reveal party puts a future baby on a pink or blue path (and not necessarily one of their choosing). Still, this labeling activity will determine how the world views them and how they will be raised.

For instance, in the business world, a single female leader in a room full of men may unfortunately be labeled as *the token woman* presumed to understand and reflect a monolithic conception of women. Glass and Cook (2018) "warn that token women leaders will face challenges to their leadership effectiveness, including heightened scrutiny, exaggerated stereotypes, and negative evaluation bias" (p. 825). This issue is compounded for women with other marginalized identities (e.g. young women, women of color, queer women etc.). As such, it

is hardly surprising that, of the female CEOs on the Forbes 500 list, only one is Black and her formal title is “Interim” CEO at Bed, Bath, & Beyond (Zillman, 2019).

Still, a recent study by Glass and Cook (2018) suggest that strategies for diversifying business leadership are more nuanced than just hiring more women. Their findings suggest that female CEOs perform better when *influential* women are also on the board of directors to mentor and provide support. However, firms with male CEOs perform better when there is a critical mass of women on the board. Overall, their work details the intricacies needed to capitalize on leadership diversity because it is not a one-size-fits-all business plan (Glass & Cook, 2018). Furthermore, although their study specifically analyzed gender diverse boards and CEOs, their findings suggest further analyses of the impact on race (sexuality, etc.) are needed.

In general, change requires unrelenting effort and the willingness to take risks. Research is still needed to formulate policies and practices that will allow women to succeed in the business world. Navigating the labyrinth, as Eagly and Carli (2012) view it, is easier when the puzzle is seen in its entirety from above. Thus, this paper calls for additional resources to study this complicated dilemma from an intersectional perspective. The business case for more women leaders is clear, but that requires women to reach the point where they can apply for those roles. Standing in their way are barriers that can sometimes be removed by individual effort. For instance, fathers can assume more responsibility for child rearing and home maintenance. Business leaders can reach out to schools and community groups that are dedicated to empowering young women. Men in the office can make the choice to stand up to misogynistic or sexist behavior. All people can research (e.g. read a news article, listen to a podcast) how to change their own attitudes and behaviors to be inclusive and open-minded. Correcting this issue will require persistence in order to create lasting change.

References

- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2012). Women and the labyrinth of leadership. In W. E. Rosenbach, R. L. Taylor, & M. A. Youndt (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in leadership* (7 ed.). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Glass, C., & Cook, A. (2018, July). Do women leaders promote positive change? Analyzing the effect of gender on business practices and diversity initiatives. *Human Resource Management, 57*(4), 823-837. doi:10.1002/hrm.21838
- Kellerman, B., & Rhode, D. L. (2012). Viable options: Rethinking women in leadership. In W. E. Rosenbach, R. L. Taylor, & M. A. Youndt (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in leadership* (7 ed.). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Ridgeway, C. L., & Kircheli-Katz, T. (2013, June). Intersecting cultural beliefs in social relations: Gender, race, and class binds and freedoms. *Gender & Society, 27*(3), 294-314. doi:10.1177/0891243213479445
- Zillman, C. (2019, May 16). *The Fortune 500 Has More Female CEOs Than Ever Before*. Retrieved from Fortune: <https://fortune.com/2019/05/16/fortune-500-female-ceos/>