

Women in Power: Contributing Factors that Impact on Women in Organizations and Politics; Psychological Research and Best Practice

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Overview

In this paper we discuss the factors that influence women's likelihood to gain positions of power, and what impedes women's effectiveness once in these roles. We have reviewed the research from an international perspective and have highlighted the common trends that impact women across the globe. Although progress has been made, there is still much that needs to happen before equality of opportunity is realized. This paper highlights the macro and micro level factors that have an impact on women's rise to powerful positions and the progress and reactions thereafter. The psychological research indicates that it is not sufficient to address the individual challenges of being a woman in business or in politics. The current emphasis is on women as individuals and relies on them taking action. But this fails to address the wider societal impacts. It is not sufficient

for women to focus on building their networks, increasing their social capital and enhancing their motivation. This fails to take into account the institutional and societal biases that undermine opportunities for women. We recommend changes in the way that women approach opportunities in the workplace, and in the way that policy makers and employers act. We highlight the importance of embracing diversity more broadly, not simply from a gender perspective. Only in this way, can there be equality of opportunity and an enhancement of diversity in the workplace. We address the practical implications from the psychological research and provide advice for organizations, senior executives, women throughout their professional careers and for young women as they start their career journey.

Introduction: Women in Power – The Global Context

Women are underrepresented in both business and politics, and this is consistent around the globe. It is tempting to look at notable exceptions. In politics there are prominent female leaders such as Angela Merkel in Germany and Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar. In business, there are role models such as Ursula Burns, the Chair of Xerox and CEO of the Corporation from 2009 to 2016. An African American, Burns took over as CEO from Anne Mulcahy, who had been at the helm since 2011. This insight suggests that women are now well represented in senior

positions. However, this is not the case. The United Nations includes women's representation in the workplace as a key component for Gender Equity. Several nations for example Norway and Malaysia have responded by mandating quotas for women to ascend to leadership and governance positions. Yet this has not been adopted consistently or effectively by most countries. Consequently, women remain noticeably absent from senior leadership positions.

In Standard & Poors (S&P) 500 companies, in the US, women comprise approximately 45% of the labor force and a little over 36% of first and mid-level managers. Yet only 25% of executive/senior level officials and managers, less than 20% of board members, and only 5% of CEOs were women in 2016. The numbers are even more concerning for women of color: 1.7% of Asian women, 1.2% of Black women and 1.0 % of Latina women were executive, senior level officials and managers in S&P 500 companies in 2015. The National Science Foundation reported that in 2015 women were particularly sparse in leadership positions in traditionally masculine fields. Only 19% of managers in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) workforce are women, and the proportion drops to 15% for top-level managers in STEM business and industry.

The monitoring of figures globally over the past 15 years shows that the gender balance of boards is unlikely to change

dramatically through organic processes. Many countries' efforts stagnate at about 15% women on boards.

Most European countries require a delegation of executive tasks from a supervisory board to an executive body. In Germany, on the management board only 6% of the seats are held by women. In 2011 women held 10% of the supervisory board seats, the portion increased in 2016 to 26%. However, there are few women represented in board committees. For example, on the audit committee only 18% were women. Furthermore, in 2016 16% of Germany's largest companies were without a single woman on their board. 41% of the boards had less than three women. Research shows that a critical mass of three is needed to be able to exert influence.

In the UK, the government has brought in targets for two levels below the board. The Executive Committee and their direct reports must consist of 33% by 2020.

The Micro Issues

Women in Politics

With regard to political elites, there are high profile role models such as Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, and Theresa May, Britain's second woman Prime Minister. Women have occupied the roles of U.S. Attorney General and Head of the International Monetary Fund. The U.N. reported the number of

women parliamentarians doubled worldwide between 1995 and 2015. Yet despite promising signs of progress, it is arguably too early to celebrate. Hilary Clinton won the most votes but nevertheless lost the Presidency to Donald Trump. In the UK, for every woman elected as a Member of Parliament (MP), four men become MPs. Only 17% of the women elected become government ministers. They usually have responsibilities for education and the family rather than more powerful areas such as business or defense. Women's participation in workers' unions, a traditional route into politics in Europe, is at an all-time high. But, their representation at leadership levels remains low.

In the next section we explore the underlying reasons for this disparity.

How Similar or Different are Men and Women as Leaders?

The first question to address is the fundamental one; are women different from men as leaders? A quantitative analysis of over 160 studies of gender-linked differences in leadership style indicates that men and women exhibit similar styles overall. The one exception is that in male-dominated workplaces, women use more participative leadership styles, and less autocratic, or directive styles than men.

A follow-up study found no differences in leadership effectiveness unless there is a high percentage of male subordinates, or the role is perceived as inherently masculine. These findings were found to favor women more than men when the conditions were reversed. If leadership skill and style are similar between men and women, what might account for the persistent shortage of women in power?

Disrupting male dominance of corporate boards has become a social change movement in a number of countries. Thinking has progressed from 'fixing women' (e.g. thinking the reason women do not get board positions can be attributed to some failing on their part, such as lack of human capital, insufficient statement of ambition or poor networking skills) to a recognition of such structural issues as a lack of alternative childcare, or flexible work arrangements. Heuristics, or 'rules of thumb', that affect our judgements in organizational life are often based on stereotypes or unconscious biases. For example, executive search firms typically prefer female board candidates who hold a financial qualification. They do not consistently apply this to male candidates. There is a stereotype that girls are not as good at math as boys. Thus having that qualification gives women credibility as a potential leader.

Countries that are proactive on the political agenda in terms of encouraging diversity include Iceland, Finland and

Norway. These countries are also proactive in encouraging social and societal factors to support women to achieve top organizational positions.

Individual factors - What are the core issues for women to address?

Research clearly shows that greater diversity, if managed effectively, produces better quality decision-making, with less 'group think', enhanced innovation, and better adherence to governance rules. Moreover, there is increasing evidence that traditionally masculine occupational contexts erodes the motivation that makes it possible for women to persist in the face of barriers. In a range of traditionally masculine occupational contexts, from policing to politics, researchers have found that women's (but not men's) motivation to get ahead in their careers wanes over time.

The temptation is to focus on what women can do themselves to enhance their impact in terms of how they present themselves in the Board room, how they network, build their social capital and enhance their ambition and determination to succeed.

Undoubtedly, women can look inwardly and ensure that they are making the right moves. But this is not enough. The

research evidence indicates that this only makes a dent in the imbalance, but not equality.

The Importance of Role Models

In male-dominated occupations, it may be harder for women to find individuals to identify with as role models. Research shows that women are particularly likely to nominate other women as role models, especially if these women identify highly with their gender. There is further evidence that this presents difficulties in male-dominated occupations. Women are less likely than men to feel that they have good role models for future achievement; they are also more likely to say that their role models are negative (i.e., examples of who not to be) rather than positive (i.e., examples of who to emulate).

Women's motivation to persist in male-dominated roles and occupations is likely to be adversely impacted by social comparisons. In particular, women more than men are likely to feel that they are different to the leading members of these roles and occupations. There is evidence that this perception of difference undermines their identification with these occupational groups and makes it difficult to find inspiring role models.

Importantly though, there is evidence that interventions can have beneficial effects on women's motivation to get

ahead. Therefore, ensuring that the environment within which the interventions takes place contains gender-sensitive belonging cues should increase their effectiveness.

Furthermore, female university students who encounter female teachers in male-dominated fields are more likely to pursue further study in that field. There is also impressive evidence that when villages in India were randomly assigned a female leader, the gender gap in career aspirations shrunk markedly between girls and boys.

Motivation – How can women’s motivation be focused on the top jobs?

Overall, there are consistent differences between men and women regarding leadership motivation. Regarding *motivation to lead*, men and women differ in the affective component with women scoring lower. This component reflects the degree to which one likes to lead others. It has a strong impact on leadership emergence and leadership role occupancy. In addition, women are less likely to exhibit the *leadership motive pattern*, as they score lower in “power motivation” and higher in “affiliation motivation”. Thus, women on average tend to have a lower desire to influence others and a stronger wish to be liked and accepted. This results, on average, in a lower drive to aspire to and assume a leadership role as well as the persistence to be and act as a leader.

Alice Eagly's *Social Role Theory* explains these effects with the congruity of the two leadership motivation approaches with the traditional male gender role. Therefore, for a woman a role incongruity often arises between her gender role and the leader role. Consistently, women who hold traditional gender role beliefs exhibit less affective motivation to lead compared to women who do not hold those beliefs. For men those beliefs, such as women shall support the career of their husband and not their own, do not produce role incongruity, and thus do not result in lower affective motivation to lead. Similarly, the leadership motive pattern is more consistent with traditional male gender role compared to the female one. In sum, leadership motivation models are inclined towards the traditional male gender role. This makes it difficult for some women to aspire to leadership positions. Even more, research suggests that women are penalized and devalued when exhibiting agentic, and thus male stereotyped leadership styles. Accordingly, the initial lower leadership motivation may decline in a downward spiral. However, being provided with female role models may reduce stereotype threats and enhance leadership motivation of women.

Additionally, studies indicate the existence of multiple motivations beyond traditional, male-focused reasons to take over a leadership position, especially board of director positions. For example, Walther, Moltner and Morner reported

that one supervisory board member described his motivation to continue serving on a board in terms of “the fun of the job, to have another challenge, to meet very interesting people, and to give something back [to the firm]”. Thus, there are multiple motivations, beyond a traditional leadership motivation, to take into account when evaluating a board candidate.

Unconscious biases and Stereotypes

Multinational corporations around the globe have embraced unconscious bias training with this becoming regular training in large organizations. However, this generic training to elevate awareness does not necessarily result in significant behavioral change. Women are held back by the unconscious biases of their superiors and colleagues. While unconscious gender bias does not necessarily imply an underlying intention to cause harm, the context that it generates prevents women from reaching their full potential.

Bias against women leaders

The media fuels the public perception that women leaders should not be taken seriously. Media articles for women business leaders, such as Carly Fiorina or Sheryl Sandberg, that scrutinize clothing choices over substantive details

dilute the message that women leaders are on the same level as men.

Further, the *double-bind*, in which women are either perceived as too cold and aggressive, or too feminine and caring, make it difficult for a woman to be perceived objectively by her colleagues. One explanation for this mismatch in perceptions is that when the same behaviors exhibited by a male leader are adopted by a woman, the behavior is perceived differently due to stereotype sex roles. Thus, traits such as risk-taking are perceived positively when enacted by a male, they are typically evaluated negatively for women as they are seen to be inconsistent with stereotypical female traits. Early work on gender perceptions of leaders found that managers rated characteristics of males as more similar to those of leaders than females. This “Think Manager, Think Male” phenomenon indicates that men are more readily associated with the role of a leader than women. In short, there is evidence to suggest that biases that favor men as leaders occur early in the information processing stage.

Biases in the Selection Processes

Executive search firms often treat men and women differently in the selection procedures for board appointments. Women tend to have a different set of

experiences and career trajectories than most men. So, there is a sense that their candidacy has to be justified much more explicitly.

Biases that affect women's selection and advancement have been identified across many fields and disciplines. A recent randomized study using identically qualified male and female applicants for a manager position demonstrated that the female applicant was perceived as less competent and qualified than her male counterpart, was less likely to be hired, and if hired was subsequently offered less salary and mentoring opportunities. Similarly, STEM faculty often ignore emails from prospective graduate students more frequently when they believe the sender is female.

In an experiment comparing identical applications, mothers received fewer recommendations for hire, promotion and management than non-mothers or fathers. They were also offered lower starting salaries than non-mothers. Yet fathers were perceived as more committed to their work and were offered higher starting salaries than non-fathers.

Women also frequently receive less recognition for their accomplishments, particularly when working on projects that require collaboration. When women are recognized at work, the feedback they receive is more ambivalent and less predictable than the praise awarded to men.

Tokenism - Women on their own

When women are relatively uncommon in leadership roles, they can be seen as the *token minority* within a firm. This results in additional scrutiny. Worse, it increases the likelihood that they will be subject to stereotyping and negative judgements. Women who are perceived as *tokens* become spokespersons for their gender, and their status as a woman overshadows their ability to be seen as unique individuals. They therefore may be judged on their gender rather than on their capability. This presents further obstacles to being considered for advancement.

International Perspectives

The barriers that gender stereotypes present to women's success may vary from one culture and country to the next. In a recent study of over 300,000 individuals across 66 countries, there was a positive association between a nation's stereotype that science is a masculine occupation and the proportion of men who were enrolled or employed in the science courses and careers. However, the large variation in these stereotypes across cultures provides clear evidence that it is possible to change stereotypes for the best.

The Macro issues

Biased Systems and Segregation

Industry and academia both remain challenging environments for women. Women remain disadvantaged by the lack of support they face at work. Hence, many leave before they are promoted. Not only does this deprive organizations from recouping their investment in human capital, it adds to the negative perceptions of women in leadership roles. Women are often not given the stretch assignments that are necessary to build leadership skills. This is compounded by the lack of certainty regarding the assumptions made by superiors and colleagues regarding promotability. Women in academia often avoid utilizing child-care facilities on campus, and the pre-tenure extension clock policies due to their concerns about being perceived as less committed to advancement.

Institutional Barriers to Advancement

Women suffer in terms of the wage gap and the additional time it takes for them to be considered for advancement. Women are given fewer challenging leadership tasks than men. This prevents them from competing effectively with their male colleagues. Thus women receive lower promotion potential ratings than men.

Men are more likely to be offered leadership roles, regardless of whether the field is male or female dominated. This phenomenon, known as the *glass escalator*, benefits men while maintaining the *glass ceiling* that stymies women's advancement. With fewer opportunities to learn the skills associated with leadership, women are less visible in the organization and frequently lack both the social ties and experience necessary to get ahead. These disadvantages accumulate over the course of a woman's career, owing to the pyramid structure of many organizations and the *tournament model*. This model relates to personal economics where incremental rewards, not absolute levels, determine effort. The spread of rewards impacts on motivation to succeed, with the greatest reward being given to the winner - i.e. those highest in the hierarchy. Within these organizational parameters, early success is a condition for later advancement. This impacts on the gender pay gap and makes it more of a challenge for women to reach the top roles.

Judging Potential

In most political settings, becoming a leader depends on being perceived to be a potential leader by others. Perceptions of suitability are particularly important when leadership roles are conferred by multiple people and where views may be disparate and conflicting (e.g., elections). Such

judgments of suitability or leadership potential are frequently influenced by our mind-set about whom or what makes a good leader. Political role models have traditionally been male. Women are less likely to fit the mental model of a political leader, or be perceived as sufficiently qualified to become a member of the political elite. According to the “*lack-of-fit*” theory, the traditional dominance of men in leadership roles can be explained by a perceived incongruence between qualities stereotypically assigned to women such as being relationship-oriented and caring. These are not qualities associated with successful leaders that are more stereotypically male such as being tough and achievement oriented.

This is problematic for women candidates who are fighting to be elected. Voters have the freedom to vote for an individual using whatever criteria they consider relevant or important. For example, research shows that voters make decisions about future political leaders based on their inferences, including perceived charisma, integrity, appearance and height. Studies have shown that, even if approved by their political party, women are less likely than men to be selected to fight for a winnable seat.

Are quotas the solution?

Fifteen countries now have some sort of quota for women's representation on boards and a further 16 have some sort of governance (i.e., non-legislative) approach. A recent Harvard Business Review paper looked at the differences in attitudes to boardroom quotas across countries with and without such legislation. Interviewing both directors and executive search consultants, they found the discourse in the US, where - progress in the figures has stalled since 2009, has not moved on. The excuses include not enough women of sufficient caliber; women do not want to be a token; and the problem will sort itself out. In contrast in the UK, Australia and European countries where either quotas or targeted governance interventions of between 25-40% are in place, the expected outcomes feared by many Americans, such as women not being taken seriously or too few talented women taking up the roles, have not occurred. What has happened is not just increased gender diversity but a more professional and formal approach to governance requirements, succession planning on the boards, clarified skills requirements and board appointment processes. Quotas have helped to overcome tokenism and to install highly visible female role models.

Recommendations

With so many potential biases coupled with the macro institutional factors, it is tempting to feel powerless in redressing gender imbalance. However, there is much that can be done.

First, examine data analytics. Countries and organizations which have the data on the reality of women's participation, attrition, selection, promotion rates, and so on, have a relatively accurate picture of what is happening. Therefore, they are able to address underlying issues. The data also help to justify the need for an intervention.

Second, specific, challenging, attainable goals and measurable objectives are necessary for behavioral change. In business, there is a truism of 'that which gets measured gets done'. Whilst this may seem obvious, it is only recently that in the UK, for example, organizations have started to publish targets for percentages of various 'protected' group characteristics (e.g., on gender and race). For example, the larger law firms have focused on data analytics and set targets for a certain proportion (e.g., 30%) of all new partner promotions each year to be female. A large corporation has a target to have 30% of its senior management team be female by 2020. The very public way in which these targets have been set reveals real intent and accountability.

Third, leadership must be upfront about the necessity for change. This is key for role modelling and signalling. A CEO must explain to employees what needs to change and why; calling out unacceptable behavior and painting the vision of an inclusive aspiration. Women must see other women ahead of them succeeding, continually and over long periods of time.

Governments should show leadership by role-modeling good gender balance in state-owned enterprises. Government departments should intervene with businesses who refuse to address the lack of gender balance. Capitalist ideology advocates intervention when market failure occurs.

HR Practices

The first step is to articulate the core capabilities. The use of objective measures and in-depth interviewing around core capabilities will add to the objectivity of the selection/ promotion process.

A second step is more radical. Remove incoming resumes of names in order to obscure the gender of applicants. The evidence indicates that it is an equitable way to complete the initial sift.

Third, in cases where individuals are being considered for promotion, evaluating application packets *in pairs* has

been found to reduce gender-based stereotyping because it promotes the salience of one's past performance.

Fourth, it is recommended that the assessment and interview process combines different perspectives and sources of data to inform the final decision.

The interview stage provides another opportunity for minimizing bias. Unstructured interviews enable biased perceptions. But structured interviews minimize bias especially when there is demographic diversity on the interview panel.

Recommended Approaches for the Future

Senior Men in Organizations

Initiatives that aim to increase the representation of women in positions of power have typically focused on providing women with targeted training or mentoring programs. There is now increasing recognition that it is important to broaden the focus to include men. Men have important roles to play in changing the masculine standards that are associated with most positions of power. It is they who must champion gender equality in the workplace.

There is evidence that masculine stereotypes have negative implications for men too. Men are sensitive to the extent to which they measure up to masculine standards.

Men who feel that they are not 'man enough' for a particular position often change their behavior in ways that serve to reinforce masculine stereotypes, by exaggerating their masculinity and avoiding behaviors that may be construed as feminine. Alternatively, they may choose to opt out of their job.

Importantly, the way in which men respond to masculine stereotypes influences their tenacity. This is because the men who are most likely to enter and stay in these positions are those who are most comfortable engaging in and endorsing hyper-masculine behaviors. All this means that, without the active involvement of men, it will be difficult to change the stereotypes that are associated with positions of power. In particular, it is possible that increasing the diversity of men in positions of power may, by eroding hyper-masculine stereotypes, will increase the representation of women.

Men's capacity to increase women's representation in positions of power goes beyond challenging masculine stereotypes. Indeed, recent burgeoning initiatives seek to involve men in gender equality efforts include the UN's "HeforShe initiative" which was launched in 2014 to involve men and boys as equal partners in building gender equal societies. "Male Champions of Change", an initiative of the Australian Human Rights Commission, aims to empower male leaders of some of Australia's most prestigious organizations

to take action in support of gender equality within their respective organizations as well as society more generally.

Although it is too early to assess the success of these initiatives, there is evidence that men can become effective champions of women's careers and play an important role in their attainment of top positions. There is widespread agreement among senior individuals in Fortune 500 and non-profit organizations that men have contributed to gender inclusivity by actively facilitating culture change (e.g., by pushing back against gender stereotypes) and mentoring women into positions of power. Men who were male champions tended to see gender equality as a moral imperative. Moreover, they perceived it as consistent with good business practice. These value-based and pragmatic motives are levers that organizational practitioners may focus on in their efforts to engage men in organizational gender equality.

Powerful Elites – Senior Executives

Senior leaders in business should energize and support women throughout their careers. They should sponsor and mentor them to gain upper management positions and to flourish in that environment. The question is how they can address the challenges and make the most of talented women for their organization.

To provide benefits and incentives to make change a reality, senior managers must be shown how women increase diversity of ideas and provide different perspectives on issues. Additionally, gender balanced firms increase employer attractiveness.

Therefore, senior management should:

- Place talent identification and development as a core objective for each of them to pursue and attain.
- Actively mentor women by encouraging and empowering them.
- Provide paternity and maternity leave of equal lengths and improve childcare services that they themselves use for their children.
- Encourage diversity as the norm. Institutional normative pressures and desires to belong and not to be left behind means that all-male management teams have now become socially unacceptable in the largest listed companies and professional service firms. Similarly, they will also become unacceptable in the medium and small enterprises of the future.

Organizational Structure, Processes and Behavior

Institutional action is needed to build true equality. Without corporate action, inherent biases will remain unchallenged. Top Management teams in organizations need to be role models for change. Organizations must encourage equality of opportunity and this can be supported by revisiting corporate culture and by reinforcing behaviors that promote fair treatment. Policies and procedures need to reinforce diversity and promote fairness at every level. There is a need to challenge stereotypes and promote equality such that gender equality becomes the norm.

Women in Organizations

Women who are on the career ladder can support their future opportunities in two ways. First, they must build their social capital, network effectively and develop a wider range of core capabilities. It is important to seek opportunities to contribute across silos and to undertake companywide projects. Second, women can enhance their impact by effective use of political will, enhanced influence, and by successfully navigating the power dynamics in the corporate environment.

Young women starting their careers

In the younger generation, women are increasingly gaining education and seeking opportunities beyond traditional corporate careers. Each additional year of secondary schooling that a girl receives increases her future earnings by 15% to 25%. When 10% more girls go to school, a country's GDP increases by an average of 3%. Eliminating barriers to employment for women could raise labor productivity by 25% in some countries. Companies with female leadership on their boards have a higher return on equity. Start-ups that have women on their executive team show a higher likelihood of succeeding. Corporations led by women are more likely to be focused on sustainability. If female farmers had the same access to resources as men, it is predicted there would be 150 million fewer hungry people in the world.

Conclusion

Women can support themselves and others to succeed in leadership roles by building their social capital and by actively aspiring to positions of power. Senior and mid-level women can be role models for women, and encourage the diversity agenda. But as we argue here, it is not sufficient to focus on women's actions alone or solely on their education and aspirations. We need to take a long hard look at the macro issues and institutional biases and to openly and actively

tackle these underlying issues. Men have a significant role to play both as mentors and advocates of women, and in redefining what is and is not acceptable behavior in the world of work. Diversity adds value to organizations and builds new opportunities for both men and women. In this way we will open the door for both genders and enhance the impact and power of women across the globe.

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