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Women in Leadership Roles

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The evolution of women in the workplace shows a journey from domestic confinement to significant labor force participation, driven by education, economic needs, and social change, moving women into diverse roles from factories to boardrooms. Over the last fifty years, women have become increasingly progressive in the work world, but gender inequality remains a persistent problem within professional leadership spaces. While women represent a large portion of the workforce, they occupy only approximately 37% of leadership roles worldwide and hold just 24% of senior management positions globally (World Economic Forum, 2022; Hoobler et al., 2018). The new trend of hiring women for leadership roles has created a "virtuous cycle" where increased representation makes an organization more likely to hire additional female leaders in the future.

Recent meta-analytic data suggest that women are often rated as more effective leaders than men in organizational settings, particularly in business and educational contexts (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Despite the challenges of ‘glass cliffs’, stereotypes, and ‘mother penalties’, women continue to excel in leadership roles across industries, which has the potential to surpass discriminatory biases that currently hinder capable females from leading in more global organizations. In the United States, the disparity is even more pronounced at the highest levels, where women hold only about 9% of CEO positions at Fortune 500 companies (Saygin & Knight, 2023). Inequality persists through several complex mechanisms. While the "glass ceiling" represents the invisible barrier to advancement, the "glass cliff" describes the phenomenon where women are disproportionately appointed to leadership roles during times of crisis or poor organizational performance (Ryan, 2023). These positions are often precarious and risky, setting women up for a higher likelihood of failure, stress, and burnout (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).
Examples of this include the appointments of UK Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher during a recession, Theresa May during Brexit, and Liz Truss during an energy crisis.

Another fundamental driver of inequality is the **"think manager, think male" stereotype**, which conflates successful leadership with decisiveness and agentic (stereotypically masculine) behavior (Schein, 1973). This creates role incongruity, where the communal traits traditionally associated with women (warmth, cooperation) are viewed as incompatible with leadership requirements (Nazrul, 2024; Torres et al., 2024). Consequently, women who exhibit agentic leadership styles may face a backlash, being perceived as less likable or "cold," while those who are communal may be judged as lacking the competence to lead effectively.

As previously referenced, mothers in the workplace face a specific **"motherhood penalty,"** characterized by perceptions that they are less competent and less committed to their careers (Torres et al., 2024). Professional spaces are often built around the "ideal worker" model, which assumes an employee has no domestic responsibilities and can dedicate uninterrupted long hours to work—a model that disproportionately disadvantages mothers who often bear the brunt of caregiving duties (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2001). This results in mothers receiving lower salaries, fewer challenging assignments, and delayed promotions compared to men and childless women.

The Trend of Hiring Women into Leadership Roles in Various Industries

There has been an evolving landscape of the hiring of women into leadership roles, which influences a global shift from individualized to systemic approaches to improving women's advancement. The "trend" varies significantly by sector, ranging from rapid growth in education to slower or even declining rates in specific technology fields. In higher education, a significant trend is the increasing number of women entering the academic pipeline. Since the 2008-2009 academic term, women have become the majority of doctoral degree holders (50.4%) in the United States. Between 1993 and 2016, the total number of female faculty members doubled that of men. In California, female assistant professors significantly outnumber their male counterparts in both public and private universities. Despite these gains at entry and mid-levels, women remain underrepresented in senior-ranking positions, such as full professorships. Globally, women currently lead only a quarter of the top 200 universities (Nicholson, 2020).

The trend in IT and software systems research is mixed, showing growth in supervision but a recent decline in lead authorship. A study of software systems research found that female-led studies have declined over the past five years, following a peak in 2021. Conversely, female-supervised studies (a key leadership and mentorship role) have gradually increased during the same period. Women remain significantly underrepresented in the most progressive sectors of IT, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and big data, where leadership roles are predominantly held by men (Cynthia et al., 2024). There is a growing emphasis on placing women on boards and in executive roles due to documented financial benefits, though actual numbers remain low. In Australia, the introduction of gender reporting led to an increase in women directors from 8% to 40% between 2010 and 2023.

Research in Jordan and other markets indicates that female directors significantly reduce the likelihood of financial distress and enhance corporate resilience. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the representation of female directors remains low at approximately 4.8%, although Jordan has reached near parity in general managerial positions. In the marketing sector, there is a trend toward "femvertising"—advertising designed to challenge gender stereotypes and empower women (Lawson et al., 2022).

There is an increasing number of campaigns portraying female social and agentic power, moving away from traditional stereotypical roles like caregivers or homemakers. Digital platforms like Instagram have intensified exposure to these messages, though they also create risks for "femwashing" (superficial appropriation of feminist themes) and self-objectification.

Evidence from S&P 500 companies shows that hiring women into senior leadership (CEOs and board members) triggers a reduction in gender stereotypes within organizational language. This creates a "virtuous cycle" where increased representation makes the organization more likely to hire additional female leaders in the future. Despite these positive associations, the percentage of Fortune 500 CEO positions held by women reached only 10.4% in 2023 (Mehmood, 2025).

Women in Leadership Roles Compared to Men – Are Men Better Leaders than Women?

The track of women in leadership roles is characterized by significant and persistent underrepresentation in high-level positions compared to men (Hill et al., 2016). As of recent reports, women comprised only 27% of the 117th Congress and held just 30% of college presidencies (Blazina & Desilver, 2021).

In the corporate sector, the disparity is even more acute, with women representing less than 5% of Fortune Global 500 CEOs (Hinchliffe, 2021). This gap appears to begin early in development; longitudinal research indicates that female students enter college with significantly lower leadership aspirations than their male counterparts (Wolniak et al., 2023). Furthermore, while women make up 46% of the private sector workforce and 38% of managers, their representation decreases drastically as one looks higher in management hierarchies (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Regarding the question of leadership quality, research indicates that men are not better leaders than women, and in many contexts, the reverse may be true. Major findings include aggregated meta-analyses of organizational and laboratory studies showing that male and female leaders are equally effective (Eagly et al., 1995). More recent meta-analytic data suggest that women are often rated as more effective leaders than men in organizational settings, particularly in business and educational contexts (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014).

Studies comparing leadership competencies in industries such as manufacturing have found no significant differences in the rankings of core competencies between women and men (Tomal & Jones, 2015). Women are more likely to employ transformational, democratic, and participative leadership styles, which are strongly correlated with effectiveness in modern organizations, while women tend to utilize more transactional or autocratic styles (Eagly et al., 1990). In public opinion surveys, women are rated superior to men on seven out of eight key leadership traits, including honesty, intelligence, creativity, and compassion, while men were rated higher than women only in the category of decisiveness (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Despite evidence of equal or superior competence, women face unique barriers and biases that track their careers differently than men. They are often subject to the "glass cliff" phenomenon, where they are more likely than men to be appointed to precarious leadership positions during times of crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Additionally, performance evaluations are often skewed by a "gender belief-outcome gap" (Erkal et al., 2021).

Additionally, experimental research shows that while discretionary rewards for male leaders are determined by both their perceived intentions and their results, rewards for female leaders are determined by outcomes only (Erkal et al., 2021). This implies that while good outcomes are necessary for women to receive bonuses, men can receive bonuses for bad outcomes as long as evaluators hold them in high regard. These systemic biases, rather than inherent differences in ability, continue to impede women's advancement to the highest rungs of leadership (Morrison et al., 1987).

Are Women More Trustworthy Handling Money?

Evidence suggests that while women are statistically more reliable and often more profitable when handling money, they face a "trust gap" from investors due to societal biases. Performance and Risk Management Research indicates that funds managed by women or mixed-gender teams produce similar, and in many instances, better risk-adjusted returns than funds managed solely by men (Schmidt & Chimes, 2023). Surviving funds with mixed-gender portfolio managers have been shown to perform better than male-only funds, suggesting that female managers may feel pressured to perform at a higher level to remain in the industry. Furthermore, women tend to exhibit better risk management skills and take lower risks, as evidenced by lower risk scores in various investment sectors.

In corporate environments, female Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) are significantly less likely to engage in accounting fraud (Liao et al., 2017). This increased reliability is attributed to the following factors. Women often have to meet a higher standard of effectiveness than men to attain and retain executive positions, providing a strong incentive to avoid violations. Women are generally more risk-averse, less overconfident, and more collaborative than their male counterparts. The presence of women on boards is associated with increased monitoring intensity and less risky decision-making (Faccio et al., 2016).

Female investors are often more profitable because they exhibit superior investment "hygiene". According to Wilson (2021), key behaviours relating to women include making fewer trades than men, which preserves capital by minimizing transaction fees. Women hold their investments longer—averaging 10.7 years compared to 8.3 years for men—and are less prone to emotional, "knee-jerk" reactions to market fluctuations. Research has shown that female economists are 44% less likely to be swayed by the identity or gender of an author when analyzing macroeconomic statements, suggesting they are more objective and less biased in their analysis (Javdani et al., 2021). Regarding corporate financial health, firms led by female CEOs or with a high proportion of women in top management are associated with reduced financial constraints. Fostering female involvement in management echelons helps firms elevate managerial efficacy and alleviate financing burdens (Xiao, 2023). Additionally, female representation on corporate boards can significantly lower agency costs and mitigate conflicts of interest.



Despite the empirical evidence of women's competence, they are often less trusted with capital by the general market. Net asset flows into female-managed funds are significantly lower than those for men, and the growth rate for female-managed funds is roughly one-third lower than their male counterparts (Atkinson et al., 2003; Niessen-Ruenzi & Ruenzi, 2017). This discrepancy is largely attributed to irrational gender prejudice and a societal perception that identifies "ideal" management qualities as masculine. Consequently, while women handle money with more discipline and less fraud, they are often given fewer opportunities to manage significant assets.

Gender Differences in Leadership Styles and Effectiveness

Through the investigative and analytical processes required in this course, my understanding of gender differences in leadership styles and effectiveness has been extensively developed. Women in leadership are significantly more likely to adopt democratic, participative, and transformational leadership styles (Shen & Joseph, 2020). This approach often emphasizes communal attributes, such as being supportive, expressive, and interpersonally sensitive (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In educational settings, specifically, subordinates often perceive female managers as being more intellectually humble and transformational than their male counterparts (Buljan Šiber et al., 2023). Conversely, male leaders are more likely to utilize autocratic or directive styles, which are aligned with agentic attributes like assertiveness and competitiveness (Lin et al., 2024).

Extensive research confirms that there is no significant difference between genders in terms of overall leadership effectiveness (Shen & Joseph, 2020; Kolb, 1999). However, women are often rated more highly in "social leadership" or in roles requiring high levels of interpersonal skill (Shen & Joseph, 2020). In the field of education, while women are well-represented, collegiate-level leadership remains a traditionally male-dominated context, which can lead female leaders to sometimes adopt more autocratic structures to fit in (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). Interestingly, an "ideal high school principal" is often associated with more feminine traits like being helpful and understanding, whereas the abstract concept of an "ideal leader" is still predominantly viewed in masculine terms (Funk et al., 2025).

Female leaders often navigate a "double bind," where they are criticized for being "too communal" (and thus perceived as less competent) or "too agentic" (Lyons & McArthur, 2007; Jamieson, 1995). This is rooted in Role Congruity Theory, which proposes that prejudice arises from a perceived mismatch between the female gender role and the traditionally masculine-coded leadership role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because of these societal pressures, you may experience gender stereotype threat—anxiety about confirming negative stereotypes—when performing agentic tasks like "initiating structure". This threat can be personally depleting, but research suggests that follower support acts as a critical buffer, mitigating the negative internal effects of these stereotypes (Lin et al., 2024).

I now understand that rather than a "glass ceiling," a female's journey in education leadership may be better described as a labyrinth, consisting of complex, indirect paths and subtle organizational obstacles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This includes the "glass cliff" phenomenon, where women are more likely than men to be appointed to risky or precarious leadership positions during times of institutional crisis (Ashby et al., 2007; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). To navigate this, I noted that successful female university leaders have often used a blended approach, combining characteristically feminine collaborative styles with strong business and academic acumen (Richardson & Loubier, 2008).

My personal goal to be an effective leader in education can now be summarized as what Rubio (2020) describes as a "balancing act" of amalgamating agentic and communal qualities to gain influence and lead effectively, and I am inspired to continue pressing on towards leadership in spite of the challenges that may be ahead.

"Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear." -Franklin D. Roosevelt

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