

## **Women in Leadership: Persistent Problems or Progress?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews and examines the most recent research regarding the issues impacting women's advancement into leadership positions to determine where there might be progress and where problems persist. Issues examined include ongoing problems such as the glass ceiling, role models and women's leadership development. A primary point that emerges from the current literature, however, is the impact of women's competing roles on their progress toward parity with men in influential leadership positions. In her ten-year retrospective of women and work, McRae (2005, 331) underscores this problem when she states that "the single issue that has gained more prominence is the role of family, how it affects paid work choices, and how women balance their often competing demands." This is a complex issue that has major implications for not only the workplace, but for society as a whole.

### **Introduction**

In the world of work, there is a scarcity of women in top leadership. Despite the documented progress of women in the workplace demonstrating that women now hold more than 40% of all managerial positions in the United States, there remains a paucity of women in executive roles and on corporate boards of directors (Eagly and Carli 2007; Wolfman 2007). A growing body of research suggests that women add value to companies when holding executive and board positions (Hillman, Harris, Cannella, and Bellinger 1998; Adler 2001; Carter, Simkins, and Simpson 2003; Richard 2000). However, in 2008 women held only 15.7 percent of corporate officer positions at *Fortune* 500 companies. The number of companies with no women corporate officers increased from 74 in 2007 to 75 in 2008. The number of companies with three or more women corporate officers also increased from 203 in 2007 to 206 in 2008.

Similarly, in 2008, women held 15.2 percent of directorships at *Fortune* 500 companies; this number was 14.8 percent in 2007. The number of companies with no women board directors increased from 59 in 2007 to 66 in 2008 representing an average increase of only 0.5 percent annually over the last 10 years (Catalyst Census of Women Board Directors website). It seems that little progress is being made in the United States toward parity with men in top leadership positions

These numbers are even bleaker in other countries. The top 300 European companies now have 9.7 percent of women on their boards, up from 8.5 percent in 2006 and 8 percent in 2004. Norway's impressive 44.2 percent women on boards is a result of quota legislation. Without Norway, the European growth average growth rate of around 0.5 percentage points over



each two year period from 2004 onwards parallels that of the United States (European Professional Women's Network website).

This problem of women's scarcity in top leadership positions first gained attention in 1977 when the nonprofit organization *Catalyst*, instituting a corporate board service to help introduce professional and business women to corporations, reported their findings that there were only 147 women directors represented on the 1,300 largest U.S. public companies' boards of directors (Schwartz 1980; Wolfman 2007). At the time, there was little data on the role of women in the workplace and this number caught the attention of many interested people.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the progress women have made toward advancement into top leadership positions and to examine the issues impacting this advancement by reviewing the current literature. Toward this end, a 1980 *Harvard Business Review* article by Felice Schwartz, founder of *Catalyst*, provides some important baseline observations as a starting place from which to measure advancement. In this article, Schwartz (1980) begins by reporting the tentatively optimistic increase in the number of women directors from 147 in 1976 to 300 in 1979. However, while this represented an impressive overall increase, the ratio of women to men on boards remained very small with 300 women as directors on 365 of the *Fortune* 1,300 boards to about 16,000 men on these boards (Schwartz 1980).

In an effort to understand the qualifications chairmen were seeking in potential board members, Schwartz (1980) reports that chief executive officers (CEO's) were the most desirable board members. This was due to the perception that, with experienced CEO's on a board, their combined experiences would cover most problems challenges and opportunities that might possibly arise. Noting that there were only two women CEO's of major corporations in the United States at that time and that only about twenty four women had CEO equivalent level of experience, Schwartz (1980) points out that

“thus it will very likely take two decades for the number of women in upper management to assume significant proportions and another five to ten years after that for these women to acquire experience and move up to the officer level, where they can obtain the broad perspective that is so desirable for the corporate board's planning function.”(p. 7)

The connection between top executive positions, often referred to as C-Suite positions (Eagly and Carli 2007), and board positions is clear. In order for there to be more women directors of large corporations there must also be more women in top executive positions in large corporations. In this 1980 article, Schwartz expressed optimism that women would continue to progress into these top leadership ranks.

Two decades later, at the time Schwartz (1980) predicted that women would be reaching parity with men in terms of top leadership positions, Judith Oakley (2000) observed in her article *Gender-based Barriers to Senior Management Positions: Understanding the Scarcity of Female CEO's* that, although the number of women in middle management has rapidly grown, the



number of female CEO's in large corporations continues to be extremely low. In this article, Oakley (2000) examines what has been described as "the glass ceiling" which is conceptualized as an invisible employment barrier impeding women's career progression from reaching the highest ranks of the corporate structures.

### **Glass Ceiling**

The term "glass ceiling" was first used in a 1986 *Wall Street Journal* article written by Hymowitz and Schellhardt. Subsequently, this "glass ceiling" phenomenon has generated a large body of research affirming the existence of an impediment to women's career progression into top leadership ranks as well as exploring the nature of the barrier (Eisner and Harvey 2009). Subsequent to much of this research, a *Federal Glass Ceiling Commission* was created in 1991. In 1992 the *Federal Glass Ceiling Commission*, after a year of research and investigation agreed that the glass ceiling does exist (MacRae 2005).

Studies exploring the issues comprising the glass ceiling suggest that this barrier is not a single obstacle but multiple obstacles (Kilian, Hukai, and McCarty 2005; MacRae 2005; Oakley 2000). Researchers demonstrate some consistency and overlap regarding their findings of what constitutes the glass ceiling as well as some unique findings. There is, however, more agreement than not.

Oakley (2000) lists the glass ceiling barriers as including: lack of line management experience; inadequate career opportunities; gender differences in socialization and linguistic styles; gender-based stereotypes; the old boy network persisting at the top of organizations; and tokenism. According to MacRae (2005), these barriers include: the common perception that men are leaders while women are supportive followers; lack of strong female role models; the existence of the 'good ole boy' network; the issue of family responsibility; and the need for women to develop a professional style with which male counterparts would be comfortable. Similarly, Kilian, Hukai, and McCarty's (2005) list includes: lack of mentors and role models; exclusion from informal networks of communication; stereotyping and preconception of roles and abilities; lack of significant line experience; and commitment to personal and family responsibilities.

Kottke and Agars (2005) condense these overlapping lists into what they argue are four basic underlying processes: social cognitions, justice, threat and utility. In this model, the authors present the concept of social cognitions arguing that change is a social process. As such, efforts to implement policies and practices related to the advancement of women are embedded in complex social schemas. Among the most critical of these social factors are gender stereotypes and social identity (Kottke and Agars 2005).

Justice is also a complex process that ironically hinders advancement initiatives. Problems in this process realm include issues of negative perceptions around family friendly



policies because they disproportionately address women's needs. This perception of injustice leads both men and women to resist the implementation of gender initiatives in organizations because of the attention they draw to differences rather than neutralizing differences as they are intended (Kottke and Agars 2005; Kilian, et al. 2005) .

The theory of tokenism, first presented by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) predicts this justice paradox by suggesting that individuals whose social category is underrepresented will face negative experiences such as increased visibility and social isolation. A very recent study by King, Hebl, George and Matusik (2010) found that women's token status, especially in the top management ranks, is associated with their perceptions of an inequitable gender climate in their organizations. Additionally, these perceptions of inequity were related to job satisfaction, affective commitment, helping behaviors and were positively associated with turnover intentions and job stress.

According to Kottke and Agars (2005), threat-rigidity theory argues that where there is a perceived threat there will be a rigid response that relies upon previously dominant responses. This theory predicts that at an individual level, any perceived threat will increase both genders' reliance upon gender stereotypes. At the organizational level, this threat will increase the organization's reliance on formalized practices and policies resulting in an unwillingness to emphasize developmental efforts (Kottke and Agars 2005).

Utility refers to the cost-effectiveness of an organizational endeavor. Kottke and Agars (2005) state that utility is pertinent for effectively every organizational decision, and that attempts to understand the barriers obstructing women's advancement to top leadership positions would be incomplete if the utility perceptions were not addressed. While there is research evidence of the value that women bring to corporate leadership, this evidence is largely based on correlational studies which leaves causation still in question (Kottke and Agars 2005; Hillman, et al, 1998; Adler 2001; Carter, Simkins, and Simpson 2003; Richard 2000). Kottke and Agars (2005) suggest that the lack of adequately explored utility is one reason why organizations are not compelled to proceed with initiatives that will effectively close the gender gap at top leadership levels.

### **The Role of Family**

One of the multiple issues comprising the glass ceiling that has received attention from numerous researchers is the role of family and its impact on women's competing demands (Brizendine 2008; Hoobler, Wayne, and Lemmon 2009; Kilian, et al. 2005; MacRae 2005; Oakely 2000). According to MacRae (2005), the pressure on women to perform multiple roles in paid and unpaid work persists. In her ten-year retrospective of women and work, McRae (2005) underscores this problem when she states that "the single issue that has gained more prominence is the role of family, how it affects paid work choices, and how women balance their often competing demands." (p.331)



Many of the issues identified as comprising the glass ceiling such as persistent stereotyping, lack of line experience and exclusion from informal networks (Kilian, et al. 2005; MacRae 2005; Oakley 2000) are issues related to this somewhat overarching issue of family responsibilities. Researchers have suggested that women's traditional roles as family caregivers and nurturers have created a double bind for women based on a complex blend of some real and some perceived differences between male and female managers. This double bind based on gender stereotypes puts women in a position where they are unassociated with management effectiveness because that label is associated with male characteristic and they are associated with nurturing communal roles (Hoobler, et al, 2009; Oakley 2000). The issue is not whether women are one or the other but that variation exists and women can be either or both.

Louann Brizendine (2008) is a neuropsychiatrist who studies brain gender differences. In her article *One Reason Women Don't Make It to the C Suite*, Brizendine (2008, 36) states that "...women in childbearing years undergo changes that intensify their focus on the viability of offspring. It's a passing phenomenon, but ill-timed for those with career ambitions." Brizendine's observations underscore what many other researchers have noted. Specifically that due to childbearing, childrearing and other caretaking responsibilities, women enter and leave the workforce more than men and that women accept part-time work at double the rate of men (Kilian, et al, 2005) often in efforts to balance paid and unpaid work responsibilities (MacRae 2005). This non-linear, interrupted career path hinders women at a time when many managers have gained the knowledge and perspective needed to begin taking on greater responsibility in business (Brizendine 2008).

While research demonstrates that caretaking responsibilities often compete for time and priority in women's lives, there is also research challenging the underlying stereotype that all women have caretaking responsibilities (Greenhaus and Powell 2006; Hoobler, et al, 2009). Research conducted on women who are highly career focused found little difference in work and family interference between men and women. Byron (2005) conducted a meta-analysis on work-family conflict and found that gender has a weak to near zero relationship with work-family interferences.

Hoobler, Wayne, and Lemmon (2009) hypothesized that the subconscious stereotyping of all women into these caretaking roles helps to explain the differences between men and women's upward progress in organizations. Based on person categorization and social role theory, Hoobler, et al. (2009) examined whether bosses perceive women as having greater family-work conflict thereby viewing them as less well matched to their organizations and less promotable. Results of this study supported the model that bosses' perceptions of family-work conflict mediated the relationship between subordinate gender and perceptions of fit. In turn, these perceptions were related to issues of development and promotability to line management and executive management positions (Hoobler, et al, 2009).



## Leadership Styles

The Gender differences in management and leadership styles have been the topic of much research demonstrating that the problems of gender stereotypes impact the leadership styles of men and women. Several studies have identified women's leadership styles to be more interactive and transformational whereas men's style has been identified as more directive (Gardiner and Tiggemann 1999; Grisoni and Beeby 2007; MacRae 2005). Based on their research findings that women in organizations with higher ratios of males to females adopted more male associated leadership styles, Eagly and Johnson (1990) postulated that women adopt more masculine styles in certain environments so as not to lose authority and position.

These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Oakley (2000) who found that women's linguistic styles may be misinterpreted or devalued by men. The less aggressive styles of many women may be perceived as unacceptable in the upper echelons of most organizations. However, in adopting a more traditionally masculine leadership communication style, women risk being perceived as too aggressive because of the inconsistency with female interaction stereotypes (Oakley 2000).

Gardiner and Tiggemann (1999) explored the relationship between dominant leadership styles and mental health. Although there were no overall differences between men and women's general mental health, the researchers did find that women in male-dominated industries reported worse mental health when they utilized more traditionally female oriented leadership styles. This research helps to uncover stress related barriers to women working in senior management roles in male-dominated industries.

Similarly, Grisoni and Beeby (2007) conducted an experiment examining the extent to which leadership as a sense-making process is impacted by gender. Results indicated that groups of all female, all male and mixed male and female managers quickly resorted to traditional male dominated styles of decision-making when under a time-pressure. There were expressions of frustration in the single gendered teams that more creativity was not used in exploring a decision-making style. The researchers concluded that both genders need to be aware that the behavioral legacy of male dominated command and control cultures is deeply embedded may **limit the emergence of more horizontal working relationships.**

## The Metaphor Barrier

For more than two decades, the barrier impeding women's progress toward executive leadership positions has been referred to as the glass ceiling (Eisner and Harvey 2009). Although this is the dominant metaphor used to understand women's career path obstacles to top leadership, the research has indicated that the idea of a singular transparent barrier existing at a point in time near the top of career advancement is too simplistic of a concept. The glass ceiling is instead comprised of many intertwined and complex barriers that obstruct career advancement at various



points along a career path. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest that the glass-ceiling metaphor itself has become one of the obstacles.

Positing that the glass ceiling metaphor misdiagnoses the problem thereby leading to ineffective remedies, Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest that a more appropriate metaphor would be a Labyrinth. This new metaphor captures more of what research has shown to be true about women's career advancement obstacles. More specifically, it addresses the problem that there is not one absolute unvarying barrier at a high level in organizations. It also addresses the misperception that women and men have equal entry access in organizations. The labyrinth metaphor additionally captures more of the complexity of a journey toward a goal acknowledging inherent obstacles without being discouraging (Eagly and Carli 2007).

## **Conclusion**

The growing body of literature exploring the value that women bring to corporate leadership elucidates some of the implications of women's scarcity in these positions. There is research correlating board and corporate management diversity with good corporate governance practices as well as with superior economic performance. Other studies have focused on the importance of women's perspectives in determining the strategic direction of organizations (Hillman, et al. 1998; Adler 2001; Carter, et al. 2003; Richard 2000, Wolfman 2007).

Women represent an important economic group in the changing composition of the marketplace and the global economy. In fact, women are a dominate force in the marketplace. In the United States alone, women represent the overwhelming majority of consumers and a growing segment of women-owned or women-controlled businesses generating trillions of dollars in sales and employing millions of people (Wolfman 2007).

In the 1980 Harvard Business Review article serving as the baseline for this review, Felice Schwartz expressed optimism regarding women's future advancement into top leadership positions. Despite this optimism, a review of the recent literature regarding women's advancement into leadership positions indicates that women have made little progress toward parity with men in holding positions of top leadership. The issues are complex and deeply embedded in attitudes, assumptions, social processes and structures as well as in business imperatives. Future research and efforts toward progress may require new approaches and paradigms as researchers and practitioners seek to understand and address this ongoing problem.



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