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# The evolution of women in business and female leadership in the business environment

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# The Evolution of Women in Business and Female Leadership in the Business Environment

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An Honors Program Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Interdisciplinary Studies  
James Madison University

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by Olivia Marie Deputy

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

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## I: INTRODUCTION

For centuries, men have stayed at the forefront of society, ruling countries and providing for their families financially while women worked tirelessly in the background, cooking, cleaning, and rearing children. Women raised the males who would go on to become educated and obtain public leadership positions. With the rare exceptions of female powerhouses such as Cleopatra and Joan of Arc, women didn't question the rigid role society had assigned them solely based on their gender and simply fell in line with the life they were predestined to lead, leaving the rich resource of their leadership potential outside of the home untapped.

Female work in the home required much leadership, but women weren't allowed to develop their particular style of leadership in the workplace until the last half century. Around 1948, The Women's Rights Movement ushered in a new era in which women began questioning why they weren't provided with the same educational and professional opportunities as men. A few feminists spoke for the masses until more women found their voice and declared that inequality will no longer be tolerated. Decades of speaking out against gender inequality and the unfair imbalance between men and women in regards to academic and professional opportunities has brought American society to where it is today. As Sheryl Sandberg so eloquently expresses in her bestselling book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, "We stand on the shoulders of women who came before us, women who had to fight for the rights we now take for granted" (Sandberg 4).

Nearly thirty years ago, women became 50 percent of graduates from colleges and universities across the country, yet today there are still far too few women in leadership positions (Patten). At the rate gender equality in government and industry is progressing, it will be another seventy years before women reach parity in Congress (Feldt 17). There are twenty women

senators and eighty-one women in the House of Representatives (Phillips 27). A meager 4.2 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are female (Sandberg 5). Five states are governed by women, a decrease from six women governors in 2012 (Phillips 27). Why does the number of female leaders remain so outrageously low? Why is this kind of blatant inequality still tolerated?

Partially due to the recession, women now hold the majority of the nation's jobs for the first time in the country's history (Krotz 162). In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education estimated that for every 100 male college graduates, there were 140 female graduates (Krotz 162). 9.2 million more college degrees have been earned by women than men over the past three decades, and women now outnumber men in a three-to-two ratio in graduate education (Krotz 162).

However, this increase in college educated women and women in the workforce does not correspond to a proportional increase of women in political and corporate leadership positions.

We must ask ourselves why this disparity between the number of women in higher education and the number of women in leadership positions exists. Enough is enough. Now is not the time to become complacent; less than five percent of corporate leadership positions being held by women is not equality by any stretch of the imagination. In spite of the tremendous progress made towards gender equality in the workplace and politics in recent decades, the revolution has stalled and internal and external factors remain which prevent women from achieving positions of high leadership.

## II: EXTERNAL FACTORS

From the centuries of male dominance in nearly every area of life, society has not yet fully relinquished its grasp on the traditional ideals of male leadership. As Fernando Pargas, a management professor at James Madison University and former Vice President of Time Warner International, outlines in his book *Ending the Male Leadership Myth: How Women Can Save Us From Destroying Ourselves*, civilization has entered the Aquarian age, characterized by thriving and feminine qualities, leaving behind the Piscean era in which survival and male qualities are emphasized (Pargas 3). As with any transition there is resistance, and women feel this friction as they try to rise in the ranks of politics and the business world. These antiquated Piscean views and ideals are external factors that contribute to the slow progress toward gender equality in leadership.

The assumption that females must behave “like ladies” is perhaps one of the most stifling stereotypes that women encounter. Females are socialized to be less vocal about their views than males and less assertive in entering negotiations. A study examining the starting salaries of students graduating with a master’s degree from Carnegie Mellon University indicated that only 7% of female students tried to negotiate their starting salaries for a higher offer compared to 57% of male students (Sandberg 45). When a man asks for more, he is seen as driven and ambitious. When a woman asks for more, she is viewed as demanding and unpleasant.

The desire to be liked by everyone, although impossible, and the fear of being seen as greedy hold women back from negotiating for the salary and other benefits that they deserve.

The reluctance to ask for pay raises and promotions costs women on average a half million dollars over the course of a lifetime (Feldt 19). Progress is being made in the right direction though, as the gender pay gap in the millennial generation is narrowing compared to other generations. Women ages eighteen to thirty-two earn 93 cents for each male dollar, whereas the

average is 71 cents across all age brackets (Torabi 5). Women under thirty also boast a higher median income than men in almost every major city in the United States (Torabi xii).

Ambition is a key quality possessed by leaders. Society expects men to be ambitious and views their motivation and drive to succeed in a positive light. Ambition is optional for women and, even worse, viewed as a negative trait in some circumstances (Sandberg 17). If ambition is a necessary characteristic for leaders to possess but women can be punished for their ambition, this presents a dichotomy faced by many women striving to reach the top of their careers.

Assuming that women do negotiate that higher salary and do receive that promotion, their accomplishments are not without cost. There is a negative correlation between success and likeability for women, whereas men's likeability increases with their success (Sandberg 40).

When women rise to the top of their career, others assume that they did so by being outspoken, aggressive, and more powerful than their male colleagues, none of which are considered to be qualities possessed by a lady. When a woman steps out of her traditionally feminine ways of interacting, men feel threatened and try to assert their dominance and retain their power by reinforcing the antiquated systems constructed, not surprisingly, by men.

Most people in first world countries agree that a woman simultaneously maintaining a career and being married is acceptable. However, she is not to earn a higher salary than her husband. Men are also socialized from the centuries of traditional gender roles, and they have a strong desire to be the breadwinner of the family. Whether verbalized or not, when a woman out-earns her husband, this presents further obstacles in addition to the difficulties that every married couple inevitably encounters. This scenario is encountered more often than in the past due to more women earning college and graduate degrees. Now 24 percent of all married



couples include a woman as the breadwinner, whereas in 1960 a meager 6 percent of wives earned more than their husbands (Torabi xii).

Modern women possess career goals of their own, and with excellent female role models in high leadership positions, they believe that professional success is attainable for them as well. The Pew Research Center (2012) conducted a study regarding young adults' attitudes toward their career goals. The study found that 66 percent of females aged eighteen to thirty-four rank their career at the top of their list of priorities, in contrast to only 59 percent of men (Patten). The study reflects women's changing attitudes toward their careers from women of past generations, and this trend has only become more pronounced during the recent recession (Patten).

When a woman makes more than her male significant other, there are certain realities that she must face. First, she is less likely to get married. Secondly, if she does get married, she is more likely to feel economic strain on her marriage and pressure to decrease the amount of time she invests in her career. Her marriage is also more likely to end in divorce (Torabi 2).

In the case of a marriage with a female breadwinner, other strange and unexpected phenomena often arise. Women who are more educated and have higher earning potential than their husband are more likely to opt out of a full time career (Torabi 3). If she does elect to stay in the workforce, she is more likely to revert to traditional gender roles at home (Torabi 22). In addition to bringing in the majority of the household income, she also performs the lion's share of cooking, cleaning, and caring for other family members: stereotypically female roles. When a woman has the potential to earn more than her husband, there is a greater likelihood that she will quit her job entirely than women who don't have that capacity (Torabi xxii). If she does opt to

continue working, the breadwinning woman is more likely to downplay her potential and avoid taking leadership positions (Torabi xxii).

Family relationship dynamics are further complicated when children enter the picture. Children are seen as a positive asset to a man's career, indicating responsibility and stability. For women, children are seen as a liability (Hamilton). The burden begins with the maternity leave following the pregnancy in which the woman is absent from the job for several months. If she decides to return to work, childcare options are explored. Even with the reliable childcare options available today, there will be times when a parent must leave work to take a child to appointments or care for a child while they are ill. More often than not, this parent is the mother.

Working mothers often revert to using their allocated vacations day for their children's appointments so they don't have to explain their absence at the office (Hamilton). Leaving the office to take care of a child unfortunately is not seen as the woman being the responsible parent that she is, but rather serves as a reminder that at times her motherly duties take priority over her career. Consequently, her dedication to her career is questioned, and the promotion is given to the male who has no family obligations to which he must attend.

Sheryl Sandberg asserts that from an early age, girls receive the message that they must choose between having a successful career and being a good mother (Sandberg 93). Sandberg supports this statement by providing the statistic that when asked to choose between their career and having a family, female students are twice as likely to choose having a family as their male classmates (Sandberg 93). Women are more likely to sacrifice their career for their family, and men are more likely to sacrifice their family for their career. Women are also more likely to have to choose one or the other, whereas men assume that they can "have it all."

While women are told that they must choose between their career and their family, they are simultaneously fed the falsehood that they in fact can have it all if they are ambitious enough and time life events correctly. While this message is meant to bring encouragement and hope to young professional women who want to flourish in their careers and start a family one day, it can actually come across as condescending advice from women who have made it to the top (Slaughter). Anne-Marie Slaughter addresses this issue in her article *Why Women Still Can't Have It All*. Slaughter admits that until recently she had not considered the pressure that women her age and older have put on young professional women. A woman deciding to take time away from her career and put her family before her job, even for a short time, contradicts the societal pressures placed on professionals. As Slaughter shares in her article, “leaving to spend time with your family” is a euphemism for being fired; after all, who would voluntarily leave their career to spend more time with loved ones?

The lack of women in leadership positions is not a problem of ambition. Ambition stems from having dreams, goals, and aspirations, and women have plenty of these. Gloria Feldt, cofounder and president of the Take the Lead initiative, postulates that it is rather an issue of intention. Less intention causes women to question their ability to fulfill their ambitious goals and take action to turn their dreams into reality (Feldt 20). Perhaps this is a product of the timeless fairytale of the damsel in distress waiting for her knight in shining armor to gallop in on his horse and give her the happy ever after that females have been socialized to strive for since childhood.

Men and women communicate with audiences and their peers differently. Conditioned over time to expect a strong public speaker to be male, audiences possess a favorable psychological bias towards men as speakers (Phillips 28). It is socially expected that men are

more rational and logical than women, with the ability to see the big picture, and have goals outside of their paternal roles (Phillips 28). Women on the other hand are stereotypically guided by emotions and impulsivity based on their feelings, therefore discrediting them as public speakers in front of political and corporate audiences. Based on these stigmas, women cannot be viewed as a strong public speaker so long as they maintain many of their feminine qualities.

Women differ from their male counterparts in how they communicate with smaller groups as well, such as in a business meeting, in two major ways. Women are more likely to be interrupted by men and by other women than their male counterparts (Sandberg 149). They also are more likely to fall victim to idea theft (Sandberg 149). This is when a woman raises a strong point, and then later in the meeting a man restates her point and claims the idea as his own. In addition to other forms of gender bias present in the business environment, these two challenges discourage women from sharing their ideas and freely contributing in a business meeting. As a result, female leadership is a rich resource that remains largely untapped.

### **III: INTERNAL FACTORS**

The external factors inflicted upon women from society which prevent them from reaching the top of their careers are also internalized to create barriers within women themselves. Traditional gender role stereotypes are ingrained in girls from birth, and they are socialized to carry these ideals with them into adolescence and adulthood. Several internal factors arise as a result of societal influence and are expressed in females' insecurity about their appearance, flaws in their communication practices, and retention of antiquated views of leadership.

While women are generally more adept at communicating than men, adjustments to their communication style according to whom they are speaking are beneficial. Females consistently compliment and encourage others while downplaying their own accomplishments and giving credit to others (Pargas 70). Women also apologize entirely too often for circumstances that aren't their fault. When a male boss shares about a mistake he has made, responding with, "Oh, I'm so sorry," can be interpreted as taking blame for the mistake rather than simply expressing empathy (Hamilton). Although being in tune with others' emotions is a positive female trait, women must also be careful about when and how they express their feelings (Phillips 29). Showing too much emotion can detract from a woman's credibility and rationality as a leader.

Regardless of what a modern woman's politics, beliefs, and intellect tell her is important, she still places excessive value on her appearance. This is partly due to psychological factors that are beyond her control. When a woman is told that she is being admired by a man, her brain activity increases, and male brains show more activity when they see a woman they perceive as attractive (Diller 120). There is a natural bias for beauty that fuels gender stereotypes and produces what is called the "halo effect." When one quality is perceived as positive, like someone's appearance, that positive connotation is translated across all of the person's characteristics (Diller 120). Attractiveness is associated with respect, genuineness, and power in

relationships (Diller 121). Perhaps knowing that good looks will also reflect these positive qualities on a woman contribute to women's desire to be viewed as attractive.

Teen girls hold the most potential impact on the nation's future leadership climate in regard to gender biases. An extremely impressionable group, many of these young women have been socialized since birth to passively take the backseat to their male siblings, friends, and classmates on sports teams, class projects, and student government councils. According to a study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education entitled *Leaning Out: Teen Girls and Leadership Biases*, teen girls must play an essential role in closing the gender gap in the midst of antiquated gender biases, specifically about their leadership style and capacity (Weissbourd).

The Harvard study gathered information from approximately 19,800 teen boys and girls through surveys, focus groups, and informal interviews regarding their preference between male and females as leaders in varying roles. The study found that both teen boys and girls prefer male leaders in powerful professions. A discouraging finding from the study is as follows:

*“Our results suggest that teen girls both hold biases and suffer from biases that may corrode their relationships and sense of justice, sap their confidence in their leadership potential, and dampen their desire to seek leadership positions, especially in high-power fields (Weissbourd).”*

Gender biases exist in both explicit and implicit manners. An example of an explicit bias found in the Harvard study is that 33 percent of boys report that they prefer male leaders in business professions. The study was also designed to uncover implicit biases held by teen boys and girls. Survey participants were given a scenario in which a principal increases the power given to a student government council consisting of either three white males, three white females, three black males, three black females, three Latino males, or three Latina females, and asked to which degree they agree with the principal's decision. The council members' gender

and ethnicity were to be inferred by using traditional male/female, white, black, and Latino names. Survey participants were most likely to support giving more power to a council of three white males and least likely to support giving more power to a council of three white females (Weissbourd).

The most discouraging implicit bias uncovered by the Harvard study is that girls often harbor resentment and negative bias toward each other. These negative biases stem from girls feeling threatened by their female classmates' success, insecurity in their own leadership ability projected onto other teen girls, and not trusting other girls because of their propensity to create "drama." Other factors include the pervasiveness of degrading depictions of women in media, inheriting bias-infused perceptions of gender roles from parents, and failure of adults to address instances of sexism and misogyny in both school and home settings (Weissbourd).

#### **IV: SOLUTION**

The falsehood of having it all is slowly being deconstructed as more people become aware of the roadblocks preventing women from excelling in their career and simultaneously being an engaged spouse and parent. Neither men nor women can have it all. Someone pays a price, and it may be that whoever is paying the price keeps quiet. Some people have a higher capacity than others, whether they simply require less sleep or have higher energy levels, but women can't compare themselves to the superwomen of the business world and expect to feel adequate. The goal should not be to have it all, because the way society is currently structured does not allow for anyone to rise to the top of their career and lead corporations while simultaneously being constantly accessible to their children, catering to their spouse, and maintaining a balance between their friends, hobbies, and other family members (Slaughter).

Instead of trying to act like men, women must retain their inherent feminine qualities to bring about a new kind of leadership. When a woman makes it to the top of her career by utilizing male models of power and leadership, she does not advance the gender leadership equality cause (Feldt 21). Instead, women must be comfortable implementing their own relational leadership model. Women lead by deep listening, inclusion, building of relationships through utilizing relational intelligence, and communicating effectively (Regine 54). This is the kind of leadership that the current business environment desperately needs. Business processes are continually transforming to necessitate collaboration, a skill that comes more naturally to women than men (Frankel 46). Fewer corporations work in silos with little contact between departments, and women in leadership positions foster an environment of open communication, allowing for collaboration to come into effect.



When asked to describe the necessary characteristics needed to be a leader, management professor at James Madison University, Carol Hamilton, answered with competency and consistency. To be an exceptional leader, however, she maintains that the skills of self-awareness and other awareness must be exhibited. These skills allow for good judgment. An exceptional leader must also be willing to change the status quo, and one must be comfortable with oneself before stepping into new spaces and challenging old thinking (Hamilton).

For an optimal work environment, both feminine and masculine styles of leadership must be present. Sometimes traditional male skills like being logical, analytical, decisive, and goal-oriented are necessary to accomplish tasks (Regine 54). However, if too much focus is put on the task and not the people who are working to achieve it, then relational problems arise and work cannot be done anyways. This is where female skills like listening, inclusiveness, and fostering of positive relationships contribute to the overall success of an organization.

There is now a science behind the assertion that traditionally feminine skills are necessary to optimize group work. Complexity science seeks to understand the world of complex systems and its key feature: emergence. John Holland, a University of Michigan physicist describes emergence as “much coming from little.” What arises from a complex system is determined by how the agents, or the people in the organization, interact with one another. How people in the organization interact with each other has everything to do with what emerges (Regine 56).

Collective intelligence is an emergent property that arises when a group collaborates. It is not determined by the most intelligent person in the group nor the average intelligence of the group’s members. Collective intelligence is greater than any single member’s contribution or the sum of all the contributions (Regine 57).

Positive emergence, such as high collective intelligence, arises in complex systems when an environment of mutuality, diversity, trust, and a level playing field is maintained. While there are many factors that contribute to a group's collective intelligence, a reliable indicator is the number of women in the group. For high collective intelligence, at least half of the group must be comprised of women (Regine 58). Without women, a group lacks the ability to remain in-tune with others' nonverbal cues and emotions. There is more interrupting, idea theft, and instances of one or a few group members monopolizing the speaking privileges. The feminine skills that are used to bring about positive emergence are essential to a group or corporation of any size. While these skills are not solely possessed by women, they do come more naturally to females and females are more willing to put them into practice (Regine 59).

Conversation must be started to bring about the remaining changes necessary to achieve gender equality in leadership. In their book *Midlife Crisis at 30*, Kerry Rublin and Lia Macko conclude: "What we discovered in our research is that while the empowerment part of the equation has been loudly celebrated, there has been very little honest discussion among women of our age about the real barriers and flaws that still exist in the system despite the opportunities we inherited (Slaughter)." Professor Carol Hamilton emphasizes the importance of mentors and support groups, both professional and personal, in the process of reaching one's full career potential and creating awareness of the barriers that still exist for female professionals. Men often don't realize when they are marginalizing their female coworkers, so a simple conversation to address unfair practices can bring about a greater understanding and respect across genders in the workplace (Hamilton).

A nugget of hope from the Harvard Graduate School of Education study is that awareness can significantly decrease instances of implicit gender biases and discrimination (Weissbourd).

When a girl detects gender biases in her school, she was less likely to exhibit implicit gender biases on the survey (Weissbourd). This finding further supports the need for open conversation about the leadership biases girls face to bring about greater awareness.

The Harvard report includes a list of recommendations for educators and parents to implement in an effort to minimize and ultimately destroy gender bias and discrimination. The report first encourages the reader to check oneself for one's own biases that may be perpetuating gender stereotypes and stifling girls on their leadership journey. Next, cultivation of family practices that prevent or reduce biases is encouraged. Thirdly, teens must be taught to spot and effectively confront stereotypes and discrimination. Similarly, do not simply let "boys be boys." A single degrading comment or interaction with a boy can damage a girl's perception of her self-worth and confidence in her leadership ability. Fifth, the report encourages the reader to respectfully challenge teens' biased assumptions and beliefs. Lastly, use programs and strategies that build girls' leadership skills. The report goes on to describe characteristics of programs that a parent should look for in enrolling their daughter in leadership development groups (Weissbourd).

When a woman successfully uses her feminine skills to obtain a leadership position and further her career, it is her duty to reach back and help her female colleagues do the same (Osborne 180). Women understand each other's obstacles and struggles in the workplace differently than men ever could, so it is essential that women join together to support each other in their quest for career fulfillment. Together, women create a much more powerful force than any single woman could produce alone and a force greater than the sum of its parts.

## V: CONCLUSION

While acknowledging the progress society has made toward gender equality in leadership, we must not become complacent in its current state. A stalemate has been reached in which women are allowed in leadership positions so long as they adhere to traditional male leadership tactics and do not outnumber men. This is not equality. Gender discrimination and stereotypes remain that must be addressed and demolished in order to bring about true equality and the best conditions in politics, the economy, and society as a whole.

Simply hoping that gender equality in leadership will come with time will not bring about leadership opportunities for women at the rate in which they are needed. With every day that a woman does not reach her leadership potential because of gender biases, we waste a valuable resource. So long as there is a single woman being held back from reaching the top of her career because of the external factors inflicted upon her from society or the internal factors she has been socialized to believe, there is still work to be done.

Our duty as Americans and as citizens of the global community is to speak out when we see instances of discrimination against women. By creating conversation and building awareness of gender inequality, we enable more women to step into spaces previously occupied solely by men. We must not rest until we achieve gender equality in leadership. The battle is not yet won. Men in positions of leadership who are enlightened and secure in their positions and leadership roles are beginning to take notice and are ready to join the fight. As more women speak up, these men will become valuable allies in the quest for leadership equality. It may appear that we are still in the Middle Ages, but a new dawn is breaking, and nothing will hold women back from taking their rightful place at the leadership table.

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