

# Numbers Don't Lie: Male vs Female Leadership in the United States

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses gender differences and females' leadership in the United States as represented by holding top-management positions such as top executive jobs at Fortune 500 or Fortune 1000 U.S. companies. In this paper, I argue that women are still under-represented in top-management because of the glass ceiling phenomenon and gender discrimination. However, more women are pursuing higher education; which was found to help individuals become more successful leaders. In addition, female managers tend to follow transformational and interpersonal styles of leadership which are desirable in today's business environment. Education and the style of leadership which women follow can help female managers reach top-management positions.

**Keywords:** gender differences, females, leadership, top management, United States

## 1. Introduction

Throughout most of history, women have had fewer job opportunities and legal rights than men have, were associated with mental and physical inferiority, and their main jobs were motherhood and wifehood (WIC, 2010). Despite the fact that women have earned the right to work, earn wages for their output and compete with men in the marketplace, they are still at a competitive disadvantage when competing for top-management positions, as well as when getting paid for the jobs they do (Powell & Butterfield, 1994).

Women represent more than half (50.7 percent) of the U.S. total population; which is equal to 155 million people (U.S. Census, 2009a). In addition, women comprise 46.8 percent of the total U.S. workforce and they are projected to comprise a higher percentage of the labor force over the next few years (U.S. Census, 2009a). Almost 74 percent of women workers have full-time jobs, and their unemployment rate is 8.1 percent; which is lower than that of men at 10.3 percent (U.S. DOL, 2009). Women have also earned a necessary tool for finding a "good" job, and succeeding in the marketplace; which is education (Lorentz, 2010). The percentage of women pursuing higher education has been increasing for the last several years (U.S. DOE, 2010). This particular group of society is of great importance to researchers, as well as organizations, because it has and is still suffering from different types of discrimination and unequal treatment in the workplace.

As of 2010, only 2.4 percent of Fortune 500 U.S. companies and 2.6 percent of Fortune 1000 companies are run by women (Catalyst, 2010). Only 25% of all chief executives in the United States are females (U.S. DOL, 2009) as many companies prefer to hire men for executive positions (Marlow, Marlow, & Arnlod, 1995). The earnings gap between men and women is still wide. In 2018, the average male worker with a bachelor's degree earned almost \$26,000 more a year than a female worker with the same qualifications. At the graduate level, the gap is almost \$38,000 per year (Carnevale, Smith, & Gulish, 2018). This pay gap could be attributed to the fact that the majority of female workers tend to cluster in poorer paying jobs or what is called "pink collar" jobs while men usually hold top paying jobs (Shaw & Barry, 2007). In 2007, about 40 percent of women workers held management positions in different companies. This percentage has only changed slightly from the 39 percent reported in year 2000 (Rampell, 2010). Women are still under-represented in top-management and leadership positions.

This under-representation negatively impacts women, as they will not be able to reflect their leadership skills. There are arguments that refer to women style of leadership as ineffective and less competent (Ridgeway, 1997). However, women have been successful in managing top companies such as Fortune 500, particularly when one takes into account the fact that 50 percent of all Fortune 500 companies run by women CEOs are among the top Fortune 100 companies in terms of revenues (Catalyst, 2010).

Leadership can be defined as the process of influencing workers and their behavior for the purpose of achieving organizational tasks and goals (Certo & Certo, 2006). Leadership and management are not exactly the same, but they are closely related, because both of them are concerned with employees and their behavior as part of their greater concern for organizational tasks' achievement (Certo & Certo, 2006). For the purpose of this paper, I define women's

leadership as the ability of a female top-manager to influence her employees to get tasks and goals achieved in an organization. The reason for choosing this definition stems from the fact that I am mainly concerned with women's advancement to top-level management positions (e.g., CEOs of Fortune 500 companies); which I use as an indicator for leadership. At the same time, this definition seems to coincide with that of Certo and Certo (2006); which refers to leadership as a subset of management. In other words, leadership is part of management and top managers are expected to be leaders for their organizations.

The purpose of this paper is to review the major literature pertaining to the topic of women's leadership, obstacles preventing women from reaching top level management positions in the United States of America, and their impact on women's advancement in the workplace.

The paper includes a literature review section; which is divided into four subsections, namely, glass ceiling and leadership, gender discrimination and leadership, education and leadership, and women's styles of leadership as compared to those of men.

The literature review section was designed to expose the reader to important concepts pertaining to the issue of women's leadership such as glass ceiling, glass cliff, and glass escalator phenomena, gender discrimination and occupational segregation, and feminine leadership styles. Four propositions regarding glass ceiling and gender discrimination's impact on women, women's education and leadership, and females' style of leadership and its impact on future employment are introduced. The literature review section ends with a conceptual model that summarizes the major factors influencing women's leadership in the United States. The paper also provides some practical implications for organizations to utilize, points out its main limitations and future research directions, and ends with a conclusion which sums up the main findings.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Glass Ceiling and Leadership*

Glass ceiling refers to "those artificial barriers, based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization" (U.S. DOL, 1995). It was also defined more precisely to refer to barriers preventing women and minorities from reaching the "top of the corporate hierarchy". The higher the level of a managerial position, the less likely a woman will fill it (Pai & Vaidya, 2009). Morrison, White, Van Velsor, and the Center for Creative Leadership (1987) only included women in their definition and considered the glass ceiling as a barrier to their advancement in the workplace. These barriers mainly result from organizational decision-making processes that favor male employees when a top-management position becomes available due to cognitive influences such as stereotyping (Powell & Graves, 2003).

Glass ceiling barriers take many forms. Reskin (1984) argues that men, in general, do not like to see women become independent by advancing to top-level managerial positions. The rational bias theory provides another explanation of the glass ceiling phenomenon. The theory argues that discrimination against women based on gender, and against minorities based on race, occurs at many organizations as a result of the decision makers' bias and consideration of

their superiors as well as clients' preferences for the ideal job candidate's gender or race (Szwajkowski & Larwood, 1991). Other scholars (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983) have suggested that stereotyping, which is a "cognitive process that relates to beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people" (Powell & Graves, 2003), prevents women from moving up the corporate ladder, because some decision makers consider women as incapable of doing certain jobs including top-managerial careers.

Related to the glass ceiling are the glass cliff and the glass escalator phenomena. The glass cliff is a "form of gender discrimination" in which women are placed in leadership positions associated with greater risk and higher probability of failure. In other words, women's leadership could be associated with poor performance or failure, because of the glass cliff (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007). On the other hand, the glass escalator phenomenon explains why top-management positions are mainly held by men. The glass escalator helps speed up men's climbing of the corporate ladder, even in female-dominated jobs (Williams, 1992). Based on the above discussion, I propose that:

*Proposition 1: Male leaders of Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 U.S. companies and their negative perceptions of women as leaders will continue to hamper women's advancement to top-leadership positions as long as these positions remain male-dominated.*

## *2.2 Gender Discrimination and Leadership*

Gender discrimination and leadership is a very popular topic in the literature of Organizational Behavior, particularly when female workers are involved, because they are more likely to be discriminated against when top-level management positions are considered, because of their gender. Gender discrimination against women is considered to be a serious challenge facing female workers in their workplaces, as it leads to occupying lower quality jobs with fewer benefits (Young, 2010), and a larger pay gap between women and their men counterparts (e.g., Anker, 1998; Besen & Kimmel, 2006; Hakim, 1996). Gender can be defined as the social role associated with being male or female and it decides the appropriate feelings, behavior, attitudes, and interests for males and females. Social scientists distinguish between gender and sex; which refers to the biological characteristics of males and females (Adayemi-Bello & Tomkiewicz, 1993).

A serious and widespread phenomenon labeled "occupational segregation" (Goldin, 1986) has resulted from these perceived appropriate societal roles of both genders. Such perceptions have categorized men and women into two distinct groups, capable of doing different kinds of jobs (Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009). As a result of occupational segregation, women tend to cluster in such occupations as architects, computer programmers, and software engineers, away from top-management positions (U.S. DOL, 2009). On the other hand, men tend to dominate managerial positions (Adayemi-Bello & Tomkiewicz, 1993). Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism suggests that women do not reach top-management levels due to the fact that they are a minority in top-management; which remains male-dominated and male top-managers normally like to work with people of similar gender. Occupational segregation leads to what Powell and Graves (2003) term "male-intensive" careers; in which almost one third or less of the labor force is female and "female-intensive" careers; in which one third of the labor force or

less is male. Top-management positions remain male-intensive.

Heilman (2002) argues that top-management positions have “role incumbent schemas” that include; aggressive orientation of achievement and toughness which are usually characteristics of men, and women who possess such characteristics and tend to be powerful are normally considered as acting masculine. Gender stereotypical traits have associated women with lower levels of competency, and as a result, women were viewed as less qualified than men to assume leadership and top-management responsibilities (Ridgeway, 1997). In general, women managers are usually held responsible for their job duties and performance more strictly than their men counterparts, because of their gender, and at the same time, they are less credited than men for success (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010).

Gender plays an important role in many organizations’ decisions related to leadership or top management positions and who should hold them (Mason, 2010). This organizational behavior leads to “gendered leadership”. Gendered leadership occurs when people or organizations have expectations of whether the leader should be male or female. In this respect, organizations view men as more effective leaders, because they are perceived to be more competitive and authoritarian than women (Kawadami, White, & Langer, 2000). Traditionally, successful managers or leaders were stereotypically associated with masculinity; which is one of men’s characteristics (Kawadami, White, & Langer, 2000). Negative perceptions (e.g., women do not hold their jobs as long as men do) of women tend to impact their advancement to higher levels of management. However, Ricker’s (2002) study of managers of financial services in the United States shows that women’s turnover rate was actually lower than that of their men counterparts, and those women who were recently promoted, tended to stay at their organizations for a longer period of time. The study attributes this lower rate of turnover to changes in women’s lifestyle and more commitment to their jobs. The “old boys’ network” (Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003) is a term used to describe an institutional phenomenon related to discrimination against workers (particularly females) based on their gender.

Such networks are usually formed by male managers or organizations to prevent women from advancing in the workplace, and to marginalize them (Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003). Overall, gender has been a hindrance to women who are seeking advancement to higher levels of managerial positions (Grove & Montgomery, 2000). Based on the above discussion, I propose that:

*Proposition 2: If more males continue to become top-managers or leaders of Fortune 500 or Fortune 1000 U.S. companies, they will keep hiring or promoting people of similar gender to top-management positions.*

### *2.3 Education and Leadership*

Education has been shown to assist individuals improve their leadership skills and success. Butler, Forbes, and Johnson (2008) suggest that MBA programs offering courses in leadership coaching help students develop and improve their leadership skills at work. In their study of the S&P global 1200 and the S&P BRIC 40 companies, Hanson, Ibarra, and Peyer (2010) found that CEOs with MBA degrees performed better and ranked higher than those who did not have

an MBA. MBA programs have also been found to help students develop team working and building skills as well as communication skills (Baldwin, Bedell, & Johnson, 1997); which are characteristics of “effective leadership” (Sheikh, 2009). Johnnie (1987) points out that formal education assists workers improve their communication and leadership skills. Sims (2002) argues that managers at all levels can enhance their leadership skills by acquiring formal education.

The number of American women attaining higher education has increased over the last several years. Women now comprise 60 percent of advanced degree holders who are between the ages of 25 and 29 (U.S. Census, 2009c). For academic year 2007–2008, American women earned more than 62 percent of all Associate degrees awarded in the United States compared to 61 percent in academic year 1997–1998, 57 percent of all Bachelor’s degrees compared with 56 percent in 1997–1998, 60 percent of Master’s degrees compared with 57 percent in 1997–1998, and 51 percent of Doctoral degrees compared with 42 percent in 1997–1998 (U.S. DOE, 2010). These figures show an increase in the number of women who have attained an education over the last several years. According to Lorenz (2010), finding a “good” job nowadays requires a college degree. Most people would agree that top-management positions fit this criterion of goodness. The above discussion leads to the following proposition:

*Proposition 3: Since more women are pursuing higher education and advanced degrees which help individuals improve their leadership skills, they are likely to hold more top-management or leadership positions at Fortune 500 or Fortune 1000 U.S. companies in the future.*

#### *2.4 Leadership Styles*

Women tend to follow a style of leadership that encourages participation, power and information sharing, and energizing workers (Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003). Loden (1985) argues that organizations can benefit from the “feminine leadership” style of women, and that female managers possess desirable qualities of management and leadership such as; team building and power sharing.

The following discussion involves this “feminine leadership” style of women as compared to that of men. It is necessary to emphasize, however, that the discussion of leadership styles applies to the majority (not all) women and men leaders. Generally, women leaders are stereotypically associated with an interpersonal style of leadership; which is concerned with employees and their well-being. On the other hand, men are associated with task style to leadership; which emphasizes the importance of achieving tasks (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Eagly and Johnson (1990) also found that women tend to follow a democratic style of leadership; which allows for subordinates’ participation in the decision-making process, and that men tend to exhibit an autocratic style of leadership; which does not emphasize such participation.

Women are also stereotypically associated with transformational leadership; which is characterized by the ability to motivate and lead subordinates to higher levels of achievement, whereas men are stereotypically associated with transactional leadership; which is focused on delegating responsibilities to subordinates and reacting to how well they were executed (Bass,

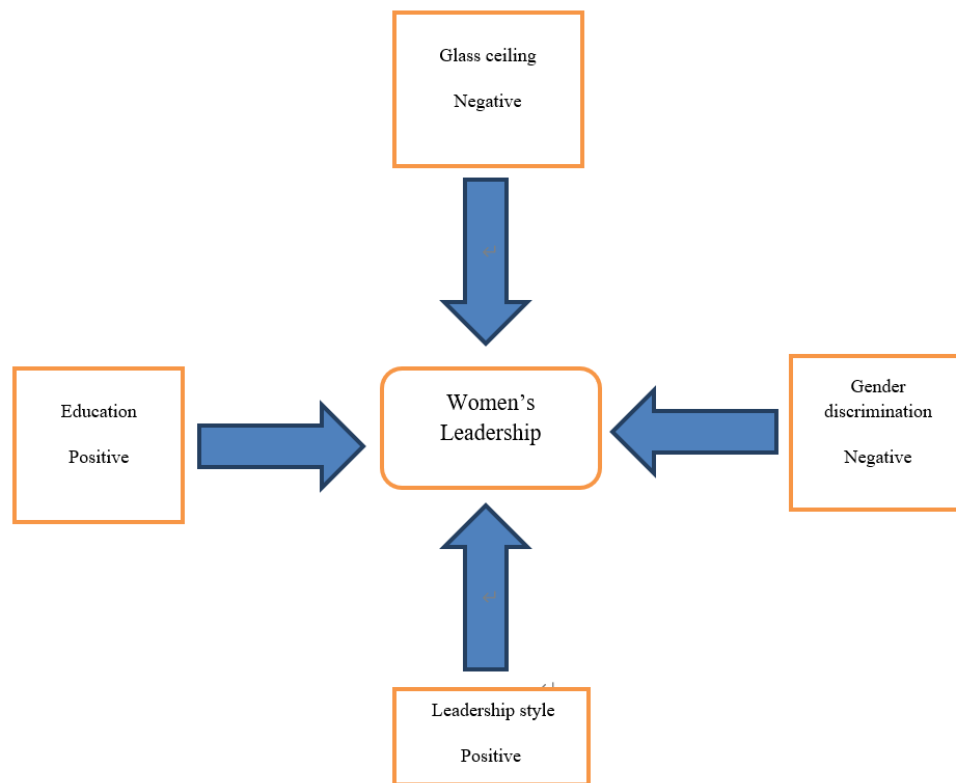
Avolio, & Atwater, 1996).

Although leadership theories do not suggest that either gender's style of leadership is more effective, some scholars (e.g., Powell & Graves, 2003) maintain that the transformational and the democratic styles of leadership are what today's business organizations need, as they increase employees' commitment to their organization (Lee, 2005). Transformational leaders build relationships with their subordinates that are beyond the "economical and social exchange" and this increases subordinates' trust and satisfaction (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders take into consideration spending time and effort to develop and to improve the skills and capabilities of their employees.

They can also increase the loyalty and performance of their employees by setting themselves as models of performance and contributing to the organizational success (Lee, 2005). However, transactional leaders do not emphasize the importance of higher level physical and security needs of employees (Bass, 1985). The relationship between the transactional leaders and their employees remains purely economical and work-related. Transactional leadership is characterized by using rewards such as: bonuses and promotions to get tasks accomplished, and it is mainly concerned with corrective actions of behavior and performance (Lee, 2005). Based on the above discussion, I propose that:

*Proposition 4: Because more women than men exhibit transformational, as well as interpersonal styles of leadership; which are desirable in today's business environment, more women are likely to reach top-management positions at Fortune 500 or Fortune 1000 U.S. companies.*

The following model summarizes the literature review section and it illustrates the factors that impact women's leadership in the workplace. The glass ceiling phenomenon still exists in today's professional business environment and it negatively impacts women workers and their advancement to top-management and leadership positions. Negative perceptions of women and stereotypically associating their gender with weakness and leadership ineffectiveness also play a major role in limiting females from reaching higher levels of leadership in organizations. However, women tend to have a unique style of leadership, namely, transformational and democratic which is desirable in the business arena, because it encourages team building and emphasizes the importance of involving employees in the decision-making process. At the same time, more women are pursuing higher education and receiving college degrees which are essential for advancing and succeeding in top-management careers. The transformational style of women and their higher levels of educational attainment are positively related to their advancement to top-management positions.



Model 1. Factors influencing women’s leadership in the workplace

### 3. Practical Implications

The resource-based view (RBV) which is a strategic management tool that organizations use to identify their key strategic resources that can help them create a competitive advantage over rivals, suggests that human capital or talented employees are one of these resources (Collis & Montgomery, 2005). Thus, utilizing the capabilities and the distinct competencies of women, in addition to those of men, can help organizations become more competitive and successful in the marketplace.

This participation in success-building cannot be achieved without allowing and assisting females to become part of the “team”, particularly the top-management team. Hence, having two styles of management (male and female) makes organizations more diverse and provide them with more than one way to leadership or management that can be used to deal with different workers at different times, especially in today’s business environment that is characterized by team-building and understanding (Oakley, 2000). Organizations normally increase their return on investment by helping their qualified employees (including women) reach top-management positions. Training and retaining competent employees are an investment that organizations regularly make, and hope to see their positive returns in the future by benefiting from employees’ skills and capabilities (Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003).



#### **4. Limitations and Future Research**

The paper has few limitations. The findings of this paper only apply to the United States and they cannot be generalized to other countries. I limited my review to the most important concepts related to the topic of women's leadership. There are, however, other important concepts; which I did not discuss; that could be further researched and expanded upon in the future. For example, I did not discuss the impact of stereotyping and prejudice on women and their advancement in the workplace, power & leadership and the difference between them, sexual harassment and its effect on women and their careers, human capital theory and its impact on leadership, and the role of the U.S. government in promoting women's leadership in the workplace.

Discussing these concepts would help the reader better understand the topic of women's leadership. Empirical research on the topic might not be easily feasible, because of the sensitivity of the issue of gender and career advancement and their impact on organizations. However, studying some Fortune 500 companies for example to examine the issue of women leadership is suggested.

#### **5. Concluding Remarks**

This paper aimed at investigating women's advancement to leadership (top-management) positions in the United States. Although women have made progress in this regard, they are still under-represented, particularly when one considers the fact that they represent almost 47 percent of the labor force. Many factors have contributed to this under-representation.

The glass ceiling explains the barriers that prevent women from advancing to higher levels of management, including gender discrimination and negative stereotyping of women. More women are pursuing college education and many follow transformational and democratic styles of leadership; which today's business organizations need to succeed. These two factors have helped female workers progress in the workplace. Women's leadership topic has several organizational implications such as: the importance of using all organizational resources, benefiting from different styles of leadership, and maximizing returns on investment.

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