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## Women in Leadership: How Far Have We Come and Where Do We Go?

Alexandra Hill  
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Women in Leadership:  
How Far Have We Come and Where Do We Go?

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A Thesis  
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Of the University of San Diego

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By  
Alexandra Hill  
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## Abstract

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Corporate leadership has evolved throughout the decades due to societal and organizational changes. With a shift towards a more equitable workplace, women have taken on higher executive roles. While there has been progress, women are still outnumbered in leadership positions. Where do we go from here? What can organizations and society do to advance the idea of leadership as a gender-neutral concept? This paper researches the evolution of leadership theory, the gender differences in women's leadership styles, and the challenges women encounter in their positions of power. Through analysis of the internal and external barriers facing women's advancement into and within executive positions, this paper provides recommendations for female leaders, organizations, and greater society to create equal leadership opportunities for men and women.

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## Introduction

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As of 2022, a little over half the United States population was female, yet women represent only 32% of senior management positions (Amar, 2023, p. 2). In fact, only 15% of Fortune 500 companies are currently led by women. While this was the highest percentage ever recorded, it is nowhere near an equitable balance with men and women in leadership roles. Unfortunately, this is the reality for many women today. Women consistently fall short compared to men in rising to higher leadership roles, which is attributed to both internal restrictions by women themselves as well as larger organizational actions. Even if women do overcome these obstacles to reach executive roles, gender bias and stereotypes overpower their experiences. To bring awareness to this subject, this research identifies the evolution of leadership theory and its impact on gender leadership differences, analyzes the barriers women have to overcome to rise in leadership roles, and outlines what additional steps need to be taken on an individual, organizational, and societal level to increase gender equality in the workplace.

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## What is leadership? Why is it important?

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While there have been countless scholars who have conducted research and studies on leadership, there has never been a single, concrete definition of leadership that the majority of scholars agree upon. This means that leadership is a flexible and fluid process that can ultimately take on many shapes and forms. For the purpose of this research paper, leadership is defined as *the process of motivating and influencing others to reach a common goal and make positive change in the environment*. Based on this definition, it is important to note that leadership is not a single action, but rather a continuous process that involves positive and ethical actions within a team. Additionally, this definition is framed in a gender-neutral perspective. It does not specify

different leadership processes for either men or women. This will specifically be addressed in subsequent sections, but it is imperative for the scope and purpose of this research paper to view this effective leadership definition as applicable to all genders.

Leadership is important in all walks of life. In a corporate setting, it allows employees to work together to achieve goals that support their department, industry, and corporation. In a broader scope, leadership allows society to unite under a common cause and work towards positive change. Society would not be where it is today without the leaders of the past, and in order to grow in the future, leadership is vital. Additionally, with the rise of technology and Artificial Intelligence, leadership is even more important. In the modern digital age, society is driven by technology. However, a relational component within organizational environments and leadership is necessary to progress, perform effectively, and influence others to make positive change. This rise of technology poses more challenges for leaders due to the absence of relationship building, so it is crucial for leaders to continue to emphasize making connections with teams.

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## **How has leadership evolved over time?**

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Leadership is a continuous, fluid process that constantly changes, especially due to societal and world developments. While the phrase “leader” has been in existence since before biblical times, the study of leadership was not fully introduced until the late 1700s and early 1800s (King, 1990, p. 43). Since then, there have been numerous researchers to categorize and define the different eras of leadership, which include: the Trait Era, the Behavioral Era, the Contingency Era, and the Relational Era. While there are countless leadership theories that exist within these eras, this paper will focus on the most important.

The Trait Era began in the early 1800s. The Trait Era claims that individuals are born leaders and have special traits that make them exceptional, such as intelligence, self-confidence, and persistence. At this time, society was in a pre-industrial era where singular “leaders” ran organizations, maintained complete control, and promoted a more authoritarian work environment. It was in 1840 that the first major leadership theory was developed: the Great Man Theory. British philosopher Thomas Carlyle coined this term, where he said that “great achievements can be attributed to the work of heroes, or ‘great men,’ such as Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte” (Shonk, 2023, p. 2). This theory suggests that these individuals are naturally born with specific traits that make them effective leaders. This theory emphasizes only the greatest of individuals can take on leadership roles, and leadership cannot be developed over time. However, this theory evolved into the Trait Theory. The Trait Theory argues that leaders can either “be born or made” (Buchanan, 2017, p. 32). This theoretical evolution builds upon the ideas of leadership being a natural phenomenon as noted in the Great Man Theory, but also proposes that these traits can be learned and developed over time. The Trait Theory sought to produce a comprehensive list of traits that all effective leaders possess. While there were

countless studies and research papers produced, no single, comprehensive trait list encapsulated leadership across all studies, which ultimately led to the decline of the Trait Era.

Transitioning away from leader's traits, the Behavioral Era began in the late 1940s and ended by the early 1950s. The Behavioral Era focuses on behaviors of leaders that can be measured, observed, and taught as compared to traits. During this time, corporations were growing in size, hierarchies were created, and managers began to develop efficient and direct ways of leading others. In the midst of World War II, workplaces were filled with women and minorities due to the need to sustain organizations while American soldiers were away, which led to the need for training more leaders in the workplace. This continued after the war, as the continuous growth of the economy required the need for a larger workforce. As society changed, so did the lens researchers used to view leadership, thus came the rise of the Behavioral Theory. This theory states that leadership is based on the behaviors of leaders, rather than specific traits leaders possess (Benmira & Agboola, 2021, p. 1). The Behavior Theory emphasizes actions, what the leader does, and ignores the environment. Studies on behavioral theory during the 1950s by Ohio State University and the University of Michigan reveal that all leaders contain two types of behaviors: task-behaviors and relationship-behaviors (Northouse, 2021, p. 84). Task-behaviors involve helping the group achieve specific tasks, goals, and objectives, while relationship-behaviors involve making connections with team members, showing concern for others, and creating a comfortable work environment. Blake and Mouton analyzed these two behaviors based on the extent to which leaders showed concern for people and concern for results. The resulting Managerial Grid established five different leadership styles, including Country Club Management, Team Management, Impoverished Management, Authority-Compliance Management, and Middle-of-the-Road Management, and each represents a different emphasis on these behaviors (Blake & McCauley, 1991, p. 4). With the dichotomy of these behaviors, scholars agree that neither task nor relationship leader behavior is more effective, but rather a combination of both is needed to be a successful leader. Additionally in this era, the Skills Theory of leadership became prominent. The Skills Theory involves leaders having a "set of skills rather than personality traits" (Indeed, 2022, p. 2). The three skills that leaders possess are technical, human, and conceptual skills. Similar to the Behavior Theory, the Skills Theory states that these three skills can be learned over time.

The focus on tasks and relationship behaviors evident in the Behavioral Era later evolved in the 1960s and became the Contingency Era. This era claims that leaders must evaluate their followers' competence and commitment to achieve a specific goal in a given situation. This time in history was filled with much social change and upheaval, as racial and gender equality protests were on the rise, as well as the conclusion of the Vietnam War. In a managerial environment during this time, the specific situation began to become important when describing leadership theories. Out of this research came the Situational Theory that is still popular today. This theory states leaders must be able to assess the situation and then emulate a specific leadership style based on the environment (Blanchard, 1985, p. 10). This theory focuses less on the traits of individual leaders and instead pays particular attention to the leader's environment, ultimately

emphasizing that leaders must be flexible and adapt their style to match the unique experience. Situational Theory became prominent due to the studies of Hersey and Blanchard. Within these studies, Blanchard coined the SLII model, which concludes that situational leadership is based on both directive and supportive behaviors. Directive behaviors involve assisting followers in accomplishing their goals, providing instructions, and clearly defining roles, while supportive behaviors involve making relationships with followers and making them feel comfortable. To further the theory, these behaviors are then separated into four situational leadership styles (Blanchard, 2023, p. 2). These styles include: S1 (directing), S2 (coaching), S3 (supporting), and S4 (delegating). Directing style has high directive – low supportive behavior, coaching has high directive – low supportive behavior, supporting has high supportive – low directive behavior, and delegating has low supportive – low directive behavior. Based on the specific skills and motivations of the followers in a situation, it is the responsibility of the leader to remain flexible in their leadership style in one of these four categories based on the needs of the follower.

The final era, the Relational Era, began in the 1980s and is still relevant today. This era focuses on the relationships and connections between followers and leaders, as well as emphasizes assisting followers to grow to be their best selves. During this time, there were a lot of significant national and global events occurring, such as the rise of terrorism with September 11th, school shootings, social concern for environmentalism, and the rise of social media and technology. Additionally, the priorities of leadership in corporations shifted towards a more team-based model that values strengthening relationships. There were three major theories to come out of this era. The first of these theories is known as the Transformational Theory, which states that leaders' roles are to “encourage, inspire, and motivate followers” (Benmira & Agboola, 2021, p. 2). Transformational leaders exhibit three main qualities, including charisma, paying attention to employee differences, and being intellectually stimulating (Bass, 1985, p. 20). These qualities allow for leaders to excite and engage followers, build trust, and push followers to be innovative problem solvers. Additionally, Transactional Theory also developed during this era. Transactional leaders “reward for follower effort and punish any follower who fails to meet their goals” (Benmira & Agboola, 2021, p. 2). Finally, Servant Leadership was also introduced during this era. Servant leadership was originally founded by Robert Greenleaf, where he found that “the servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve” (Purdue Global, 2020, p. 2). Servant leaders focus on helping followers grow as individuals, achieve their goals, and ultimately transition into servant leaders themselves by giving back to the community.

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## **Where do women come into play?**

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In the early 1900s, most women were not members of the labor force. Just about 20% of women were considered “gainful workers” according to the Census Bureau, including jobs such as nurses, teachers, and secretaries, while the rest worked domestic jobs and took care of their families (Yellen, 2020, p. 2). While not all women at this time were mothers with domestic

responsibilities, due to the expected norm of women not being included in the professional workplace, men dominated organizations, and therefore corporations were made by men, for men. Specifically, these workplaces benefited men with “few familial burdens, or whose home lives were one hundred percent separate from the demands of the work day” (Sangster, 2019, p. 1). Due to this, the standards of working in corporations were not created with women in mind, which has ultimately set women behind in corporate leadership for generations. Today, there are only 41 of the S&P 500 companies led by women, and more generally, only 32% of executive positions are held by women in corporations (Gilligan, 2023, p. 2). While these statistics have increased since the past, it is still nowhere close to being an equitable split between men and women. Women were not even considered in leadership theories until the 1970s during the rise of the Women’s Movement. Female scholars such as Jean Baker Miller, Carol Gilligan, Deborah Tannen, and Carol Tavris championed the way of looking at leadership with a gender lens, but there is still more research needed to have a complete scope of women’s leadership (Wright, 2011, p. 254).

The purpose of this research is to not only further the integration of women into leadership theories, but also challenge the perspective on leadership itself. While this thesis will explore gender differences in leadership styles, its intention is to bring awareness to the specific challenges that women must overcome while becoming leaders in the workplace. Ideally, leadership should not be considered as “masculine” or “feminine,” but rather take a gender-neutral approach. However, in order to achieve this gender-neutral approach, workplaces overall must first improve gender equity in leadership opportunities.

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### **Do all scholars agree with the viewpoint of leadership being dependent on gender?**

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The role of women in traditional leadership theories has been heavily debated within scholarly work. In early gender-leadership research, scholars such as Gregory Dobbins and Stephanie Platz believed gender did not have an important effect or impact on effective leadership styles (Dobbins & Platz, 1986, p. 8). However, since then, scholars have evolved towards the belief that there are actual concrete behavioral differences in leadership approaches due to gender. While early leadership theorists believed only men were born as natural leaders, because of the evolution of leadership theory and societal norms, it is important to include women within these leadership concepts. Addressing gender differences in leadership considers societal factors, such as gender stereotypes, parenting responsibilities, and organizational policies, as having a strong impact on why there are gendered leadership differences. More specifically, the sociocultural approach to power differences implies that “women and men display different psychological differences because they adapt to different social roles as expected for women and men” (Bark, Escartin, Schuh & van Dick, 2016, p. 474). Ultimately, a schism exists in the leadership styles of men and women.

However, there has been a recent shift, as modern leadership has begun to value and prefer more feminine styles of leadership. For example, “humility, self-awareness, self-control, moral sensitivity, social skills, emotional intelligence, kindness, a prosocial and moral orientation, are all more likely to be found in women than men,” which are key leadership qualities of effective leaders (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2021, p. 2). In a 2014 study conducted by the Morgan Stanley Capital Index, companies with at least three women on their boards earned higher earnings per share than companies with fewer women (MSCI, 2014, p. 1). Additionally in 2020, the Global Soft Power Index conducted a survey of over 100 countries, and they found that female-led nations “have a better reputation and a higher net positive influence than male-led nations” specifically in regards to “governance, international relations, and business & trade” (Salinas, 2021, p. 4). This proves not only that there are differences between men and women’s leadership styles, but also that women can positively impact the progress and results of an organization through their leadership.

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### **What main leadership theories and styles are most relevant to how women lead?**

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In order to discuss what styles of leadership are prevalent with women in the workplace, it is important to recognize the “stereotypical” traits of female leadership. Because of the history of the United States and the establishment of social norms, women are traditionally seen as having more communal, relationship-driven, and sensitive traits, while men are traditionally seen as having more assertive, direct, and agentic qualities. The following leadership styles described coincide with these “stereotypical feminine” qualities of leadership. Even though this is not the case for all individuals, as some women have more masculine traits and some men have more feminine traits, this divide in traits is evident throughout numerous leadership styles.

Elements of Behavior Theory are prominent within female leadership in the workplace. Behavior Theory involves both task and relationship behaviors. Because women traditionally embody more relational characteristics, such as valuing team collaboration, forming positive connections, and building a comfortable community, they emphasize the relational behaviors evident with this theory. Additionally, within Blake and Mouton’s Managerial Grid, women tend to align themselves with Country-Club Management. This leadership style involves high concern for people and low concern for results, and includes characteristics such as forming interpersonal relationships, acknowledging individual emotions, and maintaining an agreeable personality (Northouse, 2022, p. 88).

Situational or contingency leadership is prevalent in the way women lead in the workforce. Situational leadership revolves around the leader adapting their leadership style to the unique situation they are in. Situational leaders “pursue a trusting and open relationship” with their followers and establish a comfortable environment (Jenkins, 2017, p. 29). Women embody more agreeable and honest traits than men, and therefore match the qualities of situational leadership with focusing on followers' needs first and then acting accordingly. Due to societal



norms of women having to be both communal and agentic leaders, women have learned to become more situational leaders. Women have the capabilities to “demonstrate niceness and toughness in different situations,” which expresses the flexibility and adaptiveness evident within situational leadership (Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018, p. 7).

Additionally, the skills approach to leadership has some elements that are important to acknowledge in regards to women. The skills approach comprises three skills that are necessary for effective leadership: technical, human, and conceptual skills. Human skills are the “knowledge about and ability to work with people” as compared to specialized knowledge and ideas (Northouse, 2021, p. 57). Human skills allow for the creation of an atmosphere that is collaborative, comfortable, and encouraging to all. It is important to note that human skills are the only skills that are prevalent at all three levels of management, including supervisory, middle, and top management. These skills are also the most prominent in female leaders because they traditionally value communal relationships more than men.

Transformational leadership is one of the prominent leadership styles with women. Transformational leadership is a charismatic form of leadership where the leader positively engages and communicates with followers to build connections, and inspires others to achieve their full potential. Traditionally, women display more communal, empathetic, caring, and supportive characteristics as compared to men. These traits are all elements of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders “show concern for followers’ interests,” coach and mentor their followers, and “create a strong sense of belongingness” within the organization (Bark, Escartin, Schuh & van Dick, 2016, p. 475). Because women tend to value building connections and relationships in teams, these transformational qualities are present.

Finally, servant leadership is also an important leadership style that is prevalent among women. Servant leadership involves serving others first, prioritizing the needs of followers, and helping those followers grow during the process. Servant leadership revolves around moral actions and serving the less fortunate. Women are found to “emphasize social values that promote others’ welfare to a greater extent than men,” which leads to their involvement in “company philanthropy and corporate social responsibility” (Northouse, 2021, p. 399). While men are still involved in giving back and serving the community, women typically embody these characteristics more frequently, which exemplifies their servant leadership characteristics.

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## **What are the internal barriers to leadership that women face?**

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One of the main reasons why women face challenges in rising to higher leadership roles in the workplace is because of internal restrictions they force upon themselves. Having high levels of self-doubt and low confidence levels are internal restrictions that women initiate in their careers. Sheryl Sandberg, the former Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, is one of the notable female leaders who is a proponent of women’s leadership development. In her book *Lean In*, she mentions that we as women “hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in”

(Sandberg, 2014, p. 9). In a lot of cases, women literally and figuratively place themselves on the outskirts in the boardroom, often sitting on the side and not taking a seat at the table.

There are many factors why women suffer from lower confidence levels as compared to men. One reason is that women don't have many female superiors that they can look up to as role models. Close to 30% of top managerial positions are held by women, and this number decreases within larger, more prominent corporations (Statista, 2020, p. 1). While this number has been on the rise since the 1990s, progress has been slow. There is strong power in representation. Because women currently don't see themselves represented within executive leadership, this makes them question their own abilities to rise in the ranks as a female. Along with this, the lack of growth and development opportunities due to networking is something that women describe as a stressor in their work environment due to the lack of role models. A third of women studied by Forbes mentioned they believe stronger networks and development opportunities would make them feel more confident with themselves (Huang, 2022, p. 3).

In relation, Imposter Syndrome is a major factor of lower confidence levels in women. Imposter Syndrome is the belief that you are not deserving of your achievements, lacking intelligence and competence, and faking your way through your work (Psychology Today, 2023, p. 1). Imposter Syndrome is something that all individuals experience, but it is especially prevalent with women. Dr. Emily Hu, a director of workshops on Imposter Syndrome, says that individuals are "more likely to experience imposter syndrome if they don't see many examples of people who look like them or share their background who are clearly succeeding in their field" (Nance-Nash, 2020, p. 2). Because women are underrepresented in higher levels of management, this causes females to experience Imposter Syndrome more often than men. Additionally, due to underlying prejudice and gender stereotypes, women feel as if they are inferior to men, which ultimately causes self-doubt and lower confidence (Nance-Nash, 2020, p. 3).

The fear of coming across as aggressive or being disliked is another factor for why women struggle with doubt and self-confidence. Sheryl Sandberg mentions that "self-doubt becomes a form of self-defense. In order to protect ourselves from being disliked, we question our abilities and downplay our achievements" (Sandberg, 2014, p. 52). More than men, women are held to double standards. These double standards exist because of the history of gender bias, as well as how society and corporations were modeled around men. In the workplace, women are expected to be assertive, but as soon as they display these qualities, they are seen as aggressive and pushy. Because women are aware of these biases, it causes them to hold themselves back, make lower goals, and not challenge themselves in the workplace, ultimately restricting their confidence and heightening their self-doubt.

The double standards associated with women's confidence levels are also linked to another internal barrier that women encounter: ambition. Female ambition is a very fascinating and complex concept in regards to leadership development. On a surface level, women have similar ambition levels as men. As of 2022, 39% of women have earned at least a Bachelor's degree, while only 36% of men have earned the same degree, which proves that women have the drive and motivation associated with ambition to accomplish tasks (Statista, 2022, p. 1).

However, the understanding of women's ambition gets misconstrued from these statistics. Surveys have found that 51% of men and 38% of women consider ambition a characteristic that they possess (Van Ogtrop, 2015, p. 2). Clearly, women view themselves as ambitious individuals internally and value this as an important leadership trait. However, besides this self-description, there are external factors that begin to deteriorate female ambition. New York Times reporter Stephanie Clifford thinks that "when you say 'ambitious woman' there's a judgy tinge to it that doesn't happen for men" (Van Ogtrop, 2015, p. 6). Women constantly have to fight the battle of being ambitious enough to be taken seriously in the workplace, but not be too ambitious as to come across as bossy or overpowering. Because of this negative connotation of being ambitious as a female, women are not as direct with their goals and aspirations. It isn't that they are intrinsically less ambitious than men, but rather that they understand how this comes across in the workplace, so they ultimately restrict their true motivations and ambitions.

The evolution of women's ambition levels over their careers is important to note. For women initially beginning their corporate careers, ambition levels tend to be higher because they have less responsibilities and have a lot of potential to move into higher leadership positions. However, "workplace challenges and bias" are the "most significant barriers" to women's success (Marcus, 2016, p. 3). As more and more women face challenges such as bias, negative corporate cultures, and lack of growth opportunities, they eventually lower their interest in ambitious goals throughout their careers. This becomes even more prominent when women become mothers. Traditionally, ambition levels are lower in women who have more family responsibilities. In fact, 38% of women identify "personal and family obligations" as to why they are not as inclined to strive for career ambition, while only 22% of women without kids cited this for their reasoning (Alter, 2015, p. 5). Because women who are mothers and spouses have conflicting priorities with being a parent and having a career, they are less likely to take risks or embrace challenges. While this isn't the case for everyone, because women tend to take on more caregiving, ambition takes a secondary role.

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### **What external barriers to leadership impact women on an individual level?**

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Besides internal barriers, there are other outside factors that negatively impact women's leadership in the workplace. These external barriers fall under three categories, including: individual, organizational, and societal.

On an individual level, being a parent can oftentimes be an obstacle for women to overcome while increasing leadership skills. In the early and mid 1900s, most of women's lives were defined by being mothers, as society expected them to live a domestic lifestyle by cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. However, this has significantly improved over the years. In 1965, women spent around 34 hours per week doing housework, and this has decreased to 19 hours as of 2005 (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 50). On a similar level, men have increased their hours in the household from "5 to 11 hours per week" in response to the decline with women (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 50). While this is a positive, the major discrepancy in these domestic

responsibilities due to gender places a heavy individual burden on women to be the main caretaking contributors.

Due to these historical factors, women are often the ones who have to encounter trade offs between working and being a parent. A prominent challenge that women face is that “most male executives have wives who are not employed, but most female executives have employed husbands” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 51). Even if women are in positions of power in corporations, the sheer difficulty of not having a stay-at-home partner to balance home and work responsibilities poses a threat to the advancement of women in their careers. This is a major reason why women feel the need to restrict themselves in the workplace or even leave entirely. Whether it be with part time work, unpaid leave, or completely leaving the workforce, women often have to give up some aspect of their career due to family constraints. In fact, 43% of women who are highly qualified to continue in their careers identify having to leave the workforce to take care of their families (Sandberg, 2014, p. 124). While this is an issue in itself, the fact that men aren’t as likely to volunteer themselves to be the lead caretaker also poses a major threat to women’s careers.

In addition to this, women also struggle with the double bind of being a parent and having a career. Both men and women have family responsibilities, but women face the additional challenge of being judged for their intermediary role. There is a double standard with women in the workplace: women have to be good workers while also being good mothers. Sheryl Sandberg explains that “mothers and fathers both struggle with multiple responsibilities, but mothers also have to endure the rude questions and accusatory looks that remind us that we’re shortchanging both our jobs and our children” (Sandberg, 2014, p. 155). Working women are stuck in a gray area where they can neither dedicate their complete time towards their job nor towards their family. Due to this, some individuals believe women are incapable of balancing the responsibilities of a career and a family without being fully committed or available within both realms. Leslie Morgan Steiner, an advertising agent for the Washington Post, coined the term “mommy wars” to describe the double standards associated with working and parenting. She says that motherhood is “fraught with defensiveness, infighting, ignorance and judgment about what’s best for kids, family and women,” and rather “we need to focus instead on how much we are all doing right as we seek to balance working and raising children” (Steiner, 2007, p. 3). Due to the fear of being judged as an uncommitted employee and a distant mother, women feel insecure and guilty, and ultimately second-guess their decisions in their careers and as parents.

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### **What external barriers to leadership impact women on an organizational level?**

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On an organizational level, there are company and governmental policies that restrict the progression of women in leadership. The national wage gap has an immense impact on women in the workplace. According to the State of Working America Wages Report from 2019-2022, women are paid 22% less than men (Gould & deCourcy, 2023, p. 3). Much of this gap is due to

the fact that men have faster wage growth at the top of the distribution. Because men have always been paid more than women, they have a higher starting salary than women, which heightens this gap even further. This wage gap also increases in higher levels of management. “At the 10th percentile, women are paid 11.4% less than men,” the middle gap is paid 15.4% less than men, and the upper 90th percentile is paid 23.1% less than men (Gould & deCourcy, 2023, p. 4). This is especially negative for women striving to reach upper levels of management, as it holds them back from reaching their complete potential within leadership.

There are many reasons why the gender wage gap still occurs today. Two leading causes are “glass ceilings” and “sticky floors.” The glass ceiling is a metaphor that describes invisible or unconscious barriers that women encounter when progressing and advancing their careers in the workplace (Harvard Business Review, 2019, p. 3). The term “glass ceiling” was originally coined by consultant Marilyn Loden, who believed that for women in middle-management positions, “cultural challenges” would halt their career progression (Reiners, 2023, p. 4). The glass ceiling has been criticized for its lack of flexibility and its viewpoint that women are incapable of breaking through the glass ceiling. As a response, the “labyrinth” metaphor has instead been preferred because it addresses the same barriers that women encounter, but the labyrinth highlights the different paths these challenges take women through. The labyrinth also allows women to make it through to the end and accomplish higher levels of leadership (Harvard Business Review, 2019, p. 3). Sticky floors, on the other hand, affect women at all levels of their careers, not just during advancement, and they involve unfavorable conditions that women always face (Spiggle, 2021, p. 5). The OECD reports that 40% of the gender discrimination associated with sticky floors and 60% associated with glass ceilings has a direct impact on the gender pay gap (OECD, 2021, p. 1).

Another reason for the gender wage gap is that women are less likely than men to negotiate their salaries. Because of social norms establishing women as more accommodating and compliant, women often don’t feel as comfortable asking for what they want and challenging their baseline salary (Shonk, 2023, p. 3). Women who are more vocal and outgoing are often viewed as aggressive, so in order to shield themselves from the negative feedback, women often hold back. The fact that historical pay rates being consistently lower for women does not help with their negotiation skills. Since some women already start at a lower salary than men, if women are not negotiating, there is no way that they can ever reach the same salary level as men.

Additionally, women who have family responsibilities often fall victim to the gender pay gap. The American Association of University Women defines the “motherhood penalty” as “the phenomenon by which women’s pay decreases once they become mothers” (AAUW, 2023, p. 2). Not only are mothers less likely to be hired by companies (due to the fear of lower time commitment and availability), but also mothers are more likely to be offered lower salaries. In fact, mothers typically earn “58 cents for every dollar paid to fathers” (AAUW, 2023, p. 2). The motherhood penalty negatively affects short and long-term earning potential for women, as it impacts salary, hiring, and promotions.

However, the Equal Pay Act is one form of governmental policy that is in place to assist in decreasing the gender wage gap. The Equal Pay Act “prohibits sex-based wage discrimination between men and women in the same establishment who perform jobs that require substantially equal skill” (U.S. Employment Opportunity Commission, 2023, p. 1). This act was originally passed in 1963 when women were making \$0.59 for every dollar men were making (Bachman, 2023, p. 7). While there has been progress, women today earn about \$0.83 for every dollar men earn, which at this rate would eliminate the wage gap by 2056 (Bachman, 2023, p. 7). These are positive strides, however much work needs to be done to close the gap in a more efficient time frame.

Family leave is another governmental factor that is relevant to women’s leadership. On a global scale, there are only seven countries as of 2020 that do not provide mandated paid family leave, which include Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, and the United States (Miller, 2021, p. 11). In fact, the United States, one of the biggest nations socially and economically, offers paid family leave on a state-by-state basis, which currently presides with 12 states providing this benefit (Williams, 2023, p. 2). While this did change in 2021 with the passing of the Build Back Better Act that provides four weeks of paid family leave, the recommended length is at least ten weeks. While many large corporations provide this as a benefit to their employees, for lower-wage jobs, this is not a guarantee. As of 2021, only 21% of Americans had access to paid family leave, which leaves the majority of the population without these resources (Arneson, 2021, p. 1). Psychologists have studied the benefits of paid family leave and have found that it “reduces financial stress, allows parents to focus on bonding with their child, and increases gender equality when fathers have more time to participate in child care duties” (Abrams, 2022, p. 3). Paid family leave leads to higher productivity and employee morale, allows women to physically heal from having a child, and reduces employee turnover. A major factor as to why the U.S. national government has not enacted a federal policy is because there is a political division as to who is responsible for funding these benefits. There is much debate over the structure of these policies, as many Americans prefer employers to individually pay for this leave rather than the federal government, however, having employer-funded family leave policies would increase employer costs and lower employment (Arneson, 2021, p. 12).

Related to family leave, access to childcare services plays an important role with women in the workforce. As of 2022, only 6% of employers provided childcare services for their employees (Chen, 2023, p. 6). Independent childcare providers can cost anywhere from \$4,000 to over \$15,000 per year, which shows the significant financial burden childcare places on working families. Because of the expensive price of private childcare, some families see it more beneficial to have a parent not work at all and instead be a stay-at-home-parent, which a lot of the time this role is placed on women. Almost 60% of parents identify not having access to childcare as a significant reason for leaving the workforce (Caldwell, 2023, p. 4). Employer childcare allows for employee loyalty and satisfaction, better retention rates, increased productivity, and a healthy work-life balance. Childcare is an advantage for all families, but

especially for women who traditionally take on more of a caregiving role. If more and more women leave the workforce due to lack of childcare and family responsibilities, their likelihood of rising to higher leadership positions will begin to diminish.

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### **What external barriers to leadership impact women on a societal level?**

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On a societal level, there are social stereotypes and expectations that restrict women's advancement in leadership. Gender norms play a vital role in limiting the opportunities that women receive as leaders in the workforce. Gender norms are "social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society" (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020, p. 18). These gender norms are rooted in organizational standards and individuals' perspectives, and they restrict the abilities for women to thrive in the workplace.

A reason why women are sometimes perceived as having less leadership potential than men due to gender roles is because of leadership prototypes. Leadership prototypes are studied in implicit leadership theory, which argues that individuals have preconceived assumptions about who leaders are and the qualities they possess. These leadership prototypes impact the way people view leaders based on their society and culture. A common leadership prototype is "feminine leadership advantage," which argues that women thrive in cooperative, nurturing, charismatic, and interpersonal situations more than men (Paris, 2009, p. 2). These are stereotypical traits of women that have been ingrained in society's gender norms. While being a charismatic and personal individual displays positive leadership characteristics, the social construct of separating men and women by leadership traits within gender norms has a negative impact. This separation limits individuals' potential for growth as a leader, and these gender norms often stereotype men and women as having certain traits that the opposite gender are typically incapable of having.

The traditional norm of male and female leaders involve men possessing traits such as being a provider, assertive, strong, and driven, while women being more supportive, emotional, helpful, sensitive, and fragile (Pressner, 2016). These traits are immensely ingrained within societal perspectives. A 2017 New York University study found that six-year-old girls are "more likely to associate brilliance with the opposite sex" (Mahadawi, 2022, p. 4). What begins as a harmless perspective on differing leadership traits due to gender, however, evolves into a deeply rooted case of unconscious bias. Unconscious bias involves making mental shortcuts to establish what is truly important. Unconscious bias occurs with men and women because of how society has established the "traditional" roles that men and women must convey. Even though we live in a much more progressive society, historically, men are viewed as the "leader," while women are viewed as the "caretaker" (Pressner, 2016). It is because of these gender norms that we associate male leadership traits with men and female leadership traits with women. While most of society doesn't have malicious intentions with their perspectives on female leadership, the continuous distinction based on gender will proceed to consider women as possessing the weaker traits, which is why it is necessary to frame effective leadership in a gender-neutral perspective.

On a managerial level, these gender norms and social stereotypes still exist. In fact, “management seeks to fill its ranks, particularly at the highest level of management, with those persons that best fit the existing norm” (Wesson, 1998, p. 1). Because this “norm” involves men possessing the more desirable and profitable leadership traits, they are more likely to be promoted or move up in the ranks in management positions.

Additionally, the double bind is a societal factor that impacts women’s leadership. Both men and women are capable of displaying a wide variety of leadership traits, such as being communal and agentic. However, when men shift their traits they are praised for their flexible leadership capabilities, while women are judged for being too stern and aggressive (Wright, 2011, p. 4). Women often get stuck in the double bind because they “struggle to cultivate an appropriate and effective leadership style – one that reconciles the communal properties people prefer in women with the agentic properties people think leaders need to succeed” (Harvard Business Review, 2019, p. 10). Women are expected to be nice, but if they are too nice they are seen as a pushover. In relation, good leaders have to be assertive, but when women embody assertive characteristics, they are seen as unlikeable. Ultimately, women are confined in their leadership potential due to the double bind. This inequitable viewpoint is based in unconscious bias and reflects gender stereotypes that are still prevalent today.

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### **What can women do to become more effective leaders?**

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On an individual level, women need to become more aware of their leadership styles and characteristics in order to increase their leadership capabilities. One leadership style that women should lean into more is situational leadership. While this is a leadership style that women tend to display more frequently than men, it serves as a major benefit for women in the workplace. Situational leadership involves the movement through four different styles: directing, coaching, participating, and delegating (The Center For Leadership Studies, 2023, p. 5). Based on the needs of the follower, it is the responsibility of the leader to address the specific situation and adjust their leadership style. For example, if a follower has never executed a specific task before, a directing style would be preferred to closely supervise the follower. On the other hand, if followers are very autonomous and confident in their work, a delegating style would be utilized to allow the followers to make their own decisions.

Traditionally, it is assumed that women align themselves with the more supporting style in situational leadership because it emphasizes relationships and team collaboration, while men instead display more directive behaviors. While this may be the case, both directive and supportive behaviors are helpful in becoming an effective leader and fulfilling the needs of followers. Due to this, it is crucial for women to learn to be comfortable with all four styles of situational leadership, including directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. Women have to grow to become more comfortable stepping out of their comfort zone, which in this case is relevant to the directing and coaching styles. It isn’t that women need to fully change their leadership style to match more masculine traits, but rather learn to become comfortable with



organically utilizing both supportive and directive styles as resources to use when leading others depending on the unique situation. By simply practicing being more direct and candid in the workplace, women will slowly begin to become more confident and these skills will eventually become a norm, which will allow for women to be able to apply these skills in any type of situation.

In relation, women also need to embrace their unique leadership approaches. A major reason why women have difficulty rising in leadership positions is because of their lack of confidence in their own leadership. For many women, they believe that they have to change their leadership styles to become more masculine in order to rise in the workplace. According to 66% of the female respondents of the “Advancing the Future of Women in Business” survey at KPMG, women are the ones who have to change their leadership styles, and 80% said women have to be more adaptable than men (Walden, 2019, p. 2). It is crucial to embrace differences in leadership styles because there is no one form of leadership that is applicable in every situation, so different approaches are necessary in the workplace. Acknowledging your honest and authentic self promotes confidence and comfortability, and allows leaders to engage with their followers on all levels.

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### **What can organizations do to help women become more effective leaders?**

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There are many policies that individual corporations can implement to increase leadership opportunities for women in the workplace. One organizational strategy that would greatly contribute to a more equitable workforce is having open and honest conversations about gender and behaviors in the workplace. Sheryl Sandberg describes that “the simple act of talking openly about behavioral patterns [of men and women leaders] makes the subconscious conscious” (Sandberg, 2014, p. 187). Gender stereotypes and discrimination are deeply ingrained in corporate culture, and issues like sexism, discrimination, unconscious bias, and double standards still exist and present major issues for women’s leadership advancement. It is crucial to acknowledge these barriers in order for employees to understand the struggles women have to overcome to reach the same leadership potential as their male counterparts.

Google has a company policy where their engineers nominate themselves for promotions. After analyzing the results of this internal program, Google found that male engineers were much more likely to “raise their hands” for promotions as compared to women (Kang, 2014, p. 1). This clearly set women back in their careers and allowed men to surpass them financially and in hierarchical rank. However, rather than continuing the gender inequity, Google’s management team created an open and authentic environment by publicizing these results to their female employees. By taking these simple actions of addressing the inequity, women’s self-promotion skyrocketed in the company, and almost reached the same level as men. Organizations that take accountability and address injustice can make much larger positive changes for their companies. Speaking up is a stepping stone for making institutional change, as it transforms individual perspectives and behaviors, and can ultimately lead to larger gender equity policies.

Additionally, companies must create and foster organizational cultures that value differences in leadership. Organizational culture should revolve around embracing individual differences and promoting what each individual can contribute. In these types of organizational environments, “everyone has an opportunity to advance,” which creates a more equitable playing field for all and allows for more impactful leadership growth (King, 2020, p. 2). One way to promote this organizational culture is to reduce the denial in companies. Many employees and leaders don’t understand the complexity of women’s experiences in the workplace, with everything from unconscious bias to ignorance of employee behavior. Instead, leaders must create opportunities for open and honest conversation about issues such as gender discrimination and marginalization (King, 2020, p. 3). While many topics surrounding gender are often uncomfortable points of conversation, the more they are openly discussed, the more aware individuals will become with respecting differences and embracing gender inclusion. Additionally, it is important that leaders understand the root causes of many of these internal and external issues. Through reading and taking the initiative to learn about why these challenges occur, leaders can make active efforts to reduce gender barriers in the workplace. Finally, it is important to call out and manage discriminatory behavior in organizations. Rather than ignoring or downplaying the instances, it is important for leaders to educate their teams on the impact “exclusionary behaviors” have on women (King, 2020, p. 5). Personal communication and feedback are also necessary to introduce in team environments to emulate this effective organizational culture.

To create this positive and inclusive organizational culture, companies do not need to make grandiose efforts. Rather, efforts that may seem small will have a much larger impact and produce positive results. Holding once-a-week team meetings to discuss inclusive company culture, calling out individuals in one-on-one meetings for their discriminatory behavior, and taking courses and reading books on gender inequity in the workplace are small commitments that leaders should take to further support women’s leadership opportunities.

Finally, organizations can also maintain a gender-neutral perspective during their hiring processes in order to allow for more equitable work environments. Because men have traditionally served in higher leadership roles in organizations, some individuals tend to be incapable of imagining anyone other than a man fulfilling certain leadership positions (Streeter, 2023, p. 2). Due to this, it is imperative to “re-imagine that slot with a gender-neutral focus” in order to provide equal opportunities to all candidates and not take gender into consideration while hiring (Streeter, 2023, p. 2). It is common during hiring that individuals display an unconscious bias towards men. In multiple studies it has been found that while comparing identical resumes with only the names being different, the resume of the male candidate was chosen over the female candidate (Moss-Racusin, 2012, p. 16475). This proves that there is some form of gender discrimination occurring during a lot of hiring practices. However, Harvard University found that when holding “blind auditions” within symphony orchestras by putting a screen in front of each candidate, women musicians were selected 30% more frequently than if there wasn’t a screen (Goldin & Rouse, 2000, p. 720). Clearly, blind hiring practices are

beneficial to implement in order to significantly increase the number of female executives in the workplace. Some ways that companies can carry out these policies include using resume technology and removing all demographic and personal information of candidates during initial hiring phases.

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### **What can society do to help women become more effective leaders?**

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On a societal level, there are many larger-scale efforts that need to be made to further women's progression in corporate leadership. First, educational reform needs to occur to reduce gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes develop at an early age. Due to conscious and unconscious bias, many parents unknowingly raise their children in environments that restrict young girls. From an early age, boys are assumed to play with cars and trucks, while girls are expected to play with dolls and makeup (Zoromski, 2017, p. 2). This is even further enhanced within school, where a lot of cognitive development occurs for children. Even at a young age, girls are discouraged from exploring STEM courses because they don't match "female" characteristics. While it may not seem to have a prominent impact, girls face severe negative consequences as a result. In early development, studies have proven that girls devalue their abilities and intelligence, especially in subjects like math, because they expect boys to be stronger in these areas (Brussino & McBrien, 2022, p. 12). With girls recognizing these gender norms at such a young age, these stereotypes will only continue to negatively impact women as they grow up, which causes them to have lower confidence in their abilities and their careers.

Due to the impact of gender stereotypes on early childhood development, it is even more important to have strategic educational measures in place in schools. On a smaller scale, teachers can become aware of their words and actions. First, it is crucial for teachers to be aware of their own biases. Using inclusive language and avoiding traditional gender assumptions allows for students to feel comfortable in their identities and imitate this inclusive behavior. Additionally, highlighting "non-traditional" gender roles is important to break the mold of what is considered normal for men and women. Using examples such as a male nurse or a female police officer in a homework assignment allows kids to realize that gender is not a determinant of certain career paths, which raises their aspirations and ambition. While these actions may not seem like they play an important role, in the long-term, they will help future generations of women become more confident in themselves and pursue higher leadership roles. On a larger scale, there needs to be national educational reform in the lower-education curriculum. Textbooks should be modernized to include famous female leaders, and they should challenge traditional gender stereotypes in their word choices and messages. There should also be a stronger push towards promoting STEM courses for girls in order to eliminate the gendered aspect of "male-dominated industries." Lastly, schools should be required to teach about gender bias in their curriculum, in order to bring more awareness to the subject and correct it at a younger age.

In addition to educational reform, civic engagement is necessary to promote women's leadership. It is imperative that individuals realize how much power and influence they have if

they stay involved in social issues. Civic engagement is the way “citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 1). Civic engagement not only helps create a more just and equitable society, but it also allows individuals to voice their personal opinions on specific social issues (University of Minnesota, 2023, p. 3). Some examples of ways people can be involved civically include voting in their local elections, paying attention to the policies of their local school boards and city council, and even joining activist organizations on topics of their choice. While civic engagement is beneficial for addressing a wide variety of social issues, it is especially relevant for gender equality because it can allow progress to first be made on local community levels, which can lead to larger, national change as a result.

Finally, on a national level, there needs to be more governmental support structures established for women. In the United States, there are very limited national policies that guarantee paid family leave for men or women. There is also no federal policy for affordable childcare for employees. In fact, this is an issue that has been a topic of political debate for many years. In 1971, the Comprehensive Child Development Act was passed in Congress, which was one of the first bi-partisan bills to provide federally-funded child care centers for all American children aged three and four throughout the nation (Waxman, 2021, p. 5). However, President Nixon vetoed the bill due to concerns over the Cold War and the promotion of communist policies. Since then, it has taken fifty years to pass any form of federal policy on family and child benefits. In 2021, President Biden passed the Build Back Better Act, which provides \$200 billion for child tax credits and \$200 billion for mandated four weeks of paid family leave (Popli & Vesoulis, 2021, p. 7). While the Build Back Better Act is a major step through the creation of federal policy, it is not sufficient. Four weeks is not nearly enough time for women to heal from giving birth, nor enough time for men or women to sufficiently establish a connection with their newborn child. Additionally, there still lacks any policy on affordable and quality childcare opportunities for families, which is crucial for women’s progression in leadership positions. In order for women to have a real opportunity to balance being a parent and an impactful leader in the workplace, it is crucial for stronger federal policy to be in place.

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## **Conclusion**

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The progression of women’s leadership in the workplace is a complicated subject that will take years to reach true gender equality. However, it is vital that positive actions are taken to help improve women’s experiences in organizations. The evolution of leadership theory is crucial to the understanding of why there are gender differences in leadership styles, as well as what has impacted society’s viewpoint on leadership roles for men and women. While there are distinctive differences between men and women’s leadership, how individuals apply their leadership styles is a completely unique and individualized process, which further promotes this gender-neutral perspective on leadership. Due to barriers to women’s leadership growth, such as low self-confidence, gender stereotypes, and lack of federal support services, women experience

hardships in the workplace. However, there are individual, organizational, and societal measures that can be implemented in order to reduce these barriers and allow women to reach their fullest potential. Gender equality can oftentimes be an uncomfortable topic for many to discuss. This research is only the first step in bringing more awareness to the subject and making it a comfortable topic of conversation. Good leadership should be recognized regardless of gender, but until women are provided the same opportunities as men in the workplace, it is necessary to acknowledge the challenges women continuously have to overcome. Hopefully one day, as Sheryl Sandberg says, “in the future there will be no female leaders. There will just be leaders” (Sandberg, 2014, 217).

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