



Women's Leadership

What's True, What's False, and Why It Matters

By Judith Warner March 2014

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

We know that when women participate fully in their governments and economies, they and their families benefit, but so do their communities, their countries, and even the world as a whole.

– Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, September 24, 2012¹

Fully integrating women into a nation’s economic life is essential for a society to flourish. That is a message that our country, and other rich nations, have consistently sent to developing nations around the world.² And yet, here at home, we have somehow managed not to heed it.

Women have outnumbered men on college campuses since 1988.³ They hold almost 52 percent of all professional-level jobs,⁴ have earned at least a third of law degrees since 1980,⁵ and almost half since 2001.⁶ Women were fully a third of medical school students by 1990,⁷ and since 2002, have outnumbered men in earning undergraduate business degrees.⁸ And yet, women have not moved up to positions of prominence and power in America at anywhere near the rate that they should have based on their representation and early successes in higher education and in the entry-level workforce. In a broad range of fields, the presence of women in top leadership positions—as equity law partners, medical school deans, and corporate executive officers, for example—remains stuck at a mere 10 percent to 20 percent. Women’s “share of voice”—the average proportion of their representation on op-ed pages, as television pundits, on corporate boards, and in Congress—is just 15 percent.⁹ In fact, it is now estimated that, at the current rate of change, it will take until the year 2085 for women to reach parity with men in leadership roles in our country.¹⁰

Today, more than four decades after the start of the second-wave women’s movement, American women still encounter considerable barriers to reaching their full potential. Some of these barriers are, at least in part, self-imposed: the “lean-out” phenomenon of affluent women opting to slow or stop their highly demanding

careers greatly thins the ranks of women who could be leaders. Roughly a third of high-achieving women—those with graduate degrees or bachelor’s degrees with honors—currently leave their jobs to spend extended time at home, and 66 percent of high-achieving women at some point switch to career-derailing part-time, reduced-time, or flex-time work schedules.¹¹

Stereotypes and skewed perceptions remain powerful and still impede the advancement of women. The dearth of women in leadership roles—and in whole fields—creates the perception that women do not belong in those positions or professions. In the political world, this means that women are less likely than men to be recruited to run for elected office, are more likely to be discouraged from running, and are less likely to consider themselves “qualified” to run—even though women now raise as much money and are as successful as male candidates when they do run for public office.¹²

Some of the barriers are cultural—a double bind of competing norms for leadership stature and female likeability, for example, has made it very difficult for women to display the confidence and assertiveness associated with strong leadership and still be viewed as “likable” by their colleagues and superiors. Furthermore, longstanding assumptions about the so-called “ideal worker,” who is all work, all the time, with no competing demands on the home front, have relegated employees with obvious caregiving responsibilities—disproportionately women—to second-class status. A vast increase in the working hours required of Americans over the past 30 years has made the notion of 24/7 employee availability not just a cultural ideal, but the new normal. With a 40-hour-a-week job now considered to be part time, many professional women find themselves marginalized when they set aside time for family life. And far too many low-income women find themselves forced to leave their jobs outright because they cannot find affordable child care, lack access to paid sick days, and lack the right to the sort of predictable schedule that might permit them to successfully integrate their work and family lives—a package of impediments that traps them on the “sticky floor” of permanent low-status employment.

Still other barriers, perhaps the most prickly and tenacious of them, are structural. A shortage of role models, for example, means that women—and women of color in particular—lack mentors, sponsors, and opportunities in male-heavy organizations to develop the sorts of social relationships out of which mentorship, sponsorship, board appointments, or simply promotions, naturally evolve.

This combination of cultural barriers and structural changes in how we work has served to marginalize women, pushing them down or out of the workplace in the very era in which they were expected to take flight. The net result: The United States, once a world leader in gender equality, now lags behind other similarly wealthy nations in women's economic participation. In the two decades from 1990 to 2010, our country fell from having the sixth-highest rate of female labor-force participation among 22 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, countries to 17th on the list.¹³

At the same time, after a few decades of progress at the end of the 20th century, women's advancement in the leadership pipeline has stalled, both in the private and the public sectors. "Still No Progress After Years of No Progress" was how Catalyst, a nonprofit working to expand opportunities for women in business, headlined its findings from a 2013 survey of women in key leadership roles in U.S. Fortune 500 companies.¹⁴ Among other findings, the Catalyst study noted that women held only 16.9 percent of corporate board seats in 2012, "indicating no significant year-over-year uptick for the 8th straight year."¹⁵ The absence of significant numbers of women in corporate boardrooms is mirrored in the hallways of government. When it comes to women's political empowerment, the United States currently ranks 60th out of 136 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2013 global gender gap index.¹⁶

Addressing the women's leadership gap—all the ways that women are kept from reaching their full potential—has been a hot-button issue since the early 1990s. And yet, for all the ink spilled on popular books, most-read articles, and academic studies, all the hours devoted to launching human resource programs that aim to recruit and retain women, and all the money invested in researching the causes and cures, the net result has been a rather striking collective failure. There is a disconnect between the lofty rhetoric issuing forth from would-be women-friendly organizations and the results on the ground. "No business would tolerate a similar lack of achievement with respect to sales, revenues, earnings, or any of the other metrics commonly used to measure business success," noted the authors of the 2012 report, "Fulfilling the Promise: How More Women on Corporate Boards Would Make America and American Companies more Competitive," from the Center for Economic Development, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C.¹⁷

Our national tolerance for the stall in the advancement of women is surprising, particularly given that, over the past two decades, a considerable body of research has emerged to lend incontrovertible proof to the idea that when women thrive, organizations thrive—and nations thrive too.¹⁸ From that research, there is now a consensual view that women's leadership is not just a matter of fairness, but also has the potential to move companies, governments, and societies in new and better directions.

Removing the barriers to women's equal participation is good economic policy

Countries thrive when women thrive, and economies most fruitfully grow when women are most able to contribute fully.¹⁹ It is a common-sense matter of dollars and cents; women are breadwinners in fully 40 percent of American homes²⁰ and they control 80 percent of consumer spending in the United States.²¹ If women cannot work, earn, and spend to the full extent of their capabilities, it is our economy that suffers the consequences.

This is a clear lesson from our history: The long-term growth of the American economy in the second half of the 20th century was in large part fueled by the steady increase in women's labor-force participation during that period.²² This dynamic has been proven true for economies around the globe as well. "The most important determinant of a country's competitiveness is its human talent—the skills, education and productivity of its workforce—and women account for one-half of the potential talent base throughout the world," the authors of the World Economic Forum's "Global Gender Gap Report 2013," a cross-national study of 136 countries' progress in advancing the goal of economic, political, educational, and health care equality, argued this year. "Closing gender gaps is thus not only a matter of human rights and equity; it is also one of efficiency,"²³ the report states.

Just last year, the Congressional Budget Office, or CBO, predicted that the stall in women's workforce participation has been significant enough to play a notable role in slowing down American economic growth over the next decade.²⁴ And global management consulting firm Booz & Company has estimated that increasing women's labor-force participation to the same level as men's would increase our country's gross domestic product, or GDP, by 5 percent.²⁵

What is true for national economies is true for businesses as well—companies thrive when women flourish and are able to rise as far as their talents can take them.

Economists Eileen Appelbaum, Heather Boushey, and John Schmitt have calculated that if female employment had not increased as it did in the late 20th century, U.S. GDP would have been approximately 11 percent lower in 2012—a more than \$1.7 trillion reduction in output, which is roughly equivalent to total U.S. spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid combined in that year.²⁶

The reasons are simple: The failure to make the most of an organization’s human capital is a huge waste of skill, training, and intellectual energy that is extremely costly and shrinks the pool of future leaders. The Center for American Progress estimates that the cost of replacing an employee is one-fifth of that employee’s annual salary—and up to 213 percent of the annual salary for those in executive-level positions.²⁷ In law firms, the price of losing a single associate has been estimated to be as much as \$400,000.²⁸

Diversity, on the other hand, when well-managed,²⁹ pays off in a very big way.

Decades of research on the effects of affirmative action in the United States have shown that companies that tap into the widest possible talent pool are more high performing, productive, and profitable.³⁰ Companies with greater racial and gender diversity consistently outperform those with less diversity on measures of sales revenues, number of customers, and market share.³¹ This seems to be, in part, because homogenous groups tend not to function creatively and intellectually as well as diverse groups of people. Too much sameness stifles critical thinking and breeds complacency and overconfidence; the combination of which can yield practices such as the kind of “crony capitalism” that helped bring us the 2008 banking crisis, according to Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a Harvard Business School professor and one of the most influential longtime researchers in the area of leadership.³²

In contrast, researchers have found that groups that bring together and successfully integrate the views of men and women with varied perspectives—due to differences in education, experience, and family background—have a higher “collective intelligence,” or more creativity and better problem-solving, than teams made up of very similar thinkers.³³ Diverse perspectives—especially at the highest decision-making levels—enrich organizations by making them more representative of and responsive to the populations that they serve, and more savvy about the markets they seek to conquer. This is basic common sense—if you want to be able to reach the broadest possible variety of customers, you have to be able to know how those customers feel and think. Last fall, the Center for Talent Innovation in New York confirmed this axiom via data, finding that publicly traded companies with both “inherent and acquired diversity in leadership” were 70 percent more likely than companies without this “two-dimensional” diversity to have captured a new market and 45 percent more likely to have improved market share. The study’s authors define “inherent diversity” as that derived from differences with which leaders are born, such as race and gender; whereas “acquired diversity” derives from people’s diverse experiences, such as prior occupational backgrounds.³⁴

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Homogeneity can lead individuals to underestimate the actual complexity of group tasks because they assume that others' behavior is more predictable than it actually is. People in homogeneous groups tend to believe that because others look like them, they are like them in terms of having similar perspectives, knowledge, and behavior. This assumption of like-mindedness feels comfortable; it caters to our basic human need for social acceptance and inclusion. But it also creates blind spots in our judgments and behavior. We underestimate the potential for seemingly similar others to have substantively different perspectives and ideas, which can lead us to make oversimplified, perhaps even, objectively inaccurate, assessments in these contexts.

– Evan Apfelbaum, professor of management and assistant professor of organization studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management³⁵

The key is not being a woman, per se, it is being an outsider

When any group of people are in the minority, they behave differently than when their numbers are greater, as their outsider status deeply affects their attitudes and values. Women, long excluded from the most elite realms of power, retain an outsider status even when they ascend to senior leadership roles. And it is this outsider status that appears to have meaningful effects on how they go about the business of leadership. That is the conclusion that David A. Matsa and Amalia R. Miller, economists at the Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and the University of Virginia, respectively, have drawn from years of seeking to identify meaningful differences in women's leadership styles. According to Matsa and Miller, there are "large gender gaps in conformity and tradition, possibly related to women's exclusion from male social networks." As a result, they suggest "women may be more willing to challenge established practices."³⁶

The best and most recent research into women's influence as outsiders-turned-leaders does indicate that they have a track record of being more willing than men to break with traditional ways of exerting power and doing business.³⁷ Women appear to lead in ways that challenge existing hierarchies and have shown a particular willingness to break with practices that reinforce the wealth and influence of those who are already powerful, such as CEOs.³⁸ Women are less likely to lay off workers when times are tough.³⁹ They are more likely than men to join board-monitoring committees, auditing, nominating, and corporate governance committees in particular, and tend to be more exacting stewards of their companies.⁴⁰ The presence of women on corporate boards makes those boards more likely to protect shareholders by holding CEOs more accountable for poor stock price performance, forcing CEO turnover if a company performs badly.⁴¹ Boards that include women are more likely to align their interests with those of shareholders by taking more equity-based pay, compensation tied to long-term success,⁴² and their presence on boards leads companies to behave more ethically and engage in fewer bad business practices.⁴³

Women’s history of exclusion, researchers further speculate, may provide an explanation for why female politicians have typically been less corrupt than their male colleagues:⁴⁵ they have just been outside of the crony networks that allowed corruption to flourish.⁴⁶ Matsa and Miller suggest that this may explain why the presence of women on corporate boards tends to make those boards more socially responsible by spending more on environmental and corporate social responsibility programs,⁴⁷ engaging more in philanthropic activities, and giving more to charity.⁴⁸ It may also explain why, in societies around the globe, female politicians have proven to be more hard-working than men in performing their official duties⁴⁹—in the U.S. Congress, for example, female lawmakers work harder for their constituents, remain more involved with their communities, sponsor more bills, and obtain more co-sponsorship for their legislative initiatives⁵⁰—and why they tend to be particularly conscientious corporate board members, with better attendance records than men. In fact, they even make male board members behave better: Male directors have fewer attendance problems the more gender-diverse a board is.⁵¹

One might see this as the positive side of a legacy of discrimination: decades of having been held to a higher standard and having had to overcome the forces of prejudice and exclusion appear to have made today’s top-ranking women disproportionately effective. If they have proven themselves better leaders, it is perhaps because they have had no choice.

Norway, which in 2003 attempted a voluntary quota system for women on corporate boards, and then in 2006 adopted a law requiring that all publicly traded companies increase the female representation on their boards of directors to 40 percent within two years, offers an illustrative example. In their 2013 article, “A Female Style in Corporate Leadership? Evidence from Quotas,” Matsa and Miller looked at the performance of companies, both public and private, and found that between 2003 and 2009, companies affected by the quotas laid off fewer workers than did companies that were unaffected.

According to Matsa and Miller, the newly composed boards were willing to tolerate higher relative labor costs, and even reduced short-term profits, because they were thinking about creating value differently—counting their workforce as an asset worth saving in the service of morale and long-term growth, rather than a liability to be dispensed with in order to grow profits. Female directors, they wrote, may be “maximizing long-run shareholder value by avoiding layoffs ... increasing morale and avoiding recruiting and training costs when demand rebounds. Under this interpretation, the new women on these boards are encouraging their firms to adopt strategies that view employees as assets with specific human capital to be developed, rather than as costs to be cut.”⁴⁴

In the future, will women still act “like women”?

If women do have a track record of leading differently, it is in large part because their behavior has been shaped by hard experience.

Longstanding voter bias has meant that women have had to be twice as good—more talented, more qualified, more hard-working than their male competitors—if they want to be deemed viable candidates.⁵⁴ In the business world, the “twice as good” phenomenon has held true as well.⁵⁵ The population of women rising to the top is—and has long been—considerably smaller than the equivalent male talent pool, which means that the women who make it to key leadership positions are self-selected to have the strength, clarity of vision, drive, and outsized skills to push through all the barriers that would otherwise weed them out.

Many scholars now suggest that as the number of women in high positions of public and private leadership increases, we are likely to see a decrease in the attitudes, values, and behaviors that have, until now, differentiated them from men—a reality that we are already seeing in U.S. politics.⁵⁶ (see sidebar) These same scholars predict that bringing more women to positions of prominence may make visible a more varied assortment of women; and these far more numerous and representative women would no longer have to be stellar to rise to the top. In other words, should women reach leadership parity with men, they are likely to stop thinking and acting “like women”—defined by so-called traditional traits that set women apart in a man’s world—and instead discover the freedom of simply being who they are.

Are women more honest by nature? Not necessarily, according to Justin E. Esarey, assistant professor of political science at Rice University, who studied corruption levels in 157 countries and attitudes toward corruption in 68 countries from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. He found that whether women are more likely than men to refrain from corruption depends upon the type of government in which they serve. In autocratic governments, where bribery and favoritism are the norm, there are no meaningful differences in the behavior of male and female elected officials. But in democracies, where corruption is more commonly stigmatized, women behave in a more honest manner.⁵² In a 2013 article in the journal *Politics & Gender*, Esarey and his co-author, Gina Chirillo, speculate that this higher level of honesty is due to the fact that women “are more averse to the risks of violating political norms, and because gender discrimination makes violating institutional norms a riskier proposition for women than men.”⁵³

Do female U.S. politicians still act “like women”?

Historically, female legislators in the United States were more likely than men to make bills dealing with women’s, children’s, and family issues a priority. They were reliably more progressive than their male colleagues: more supportive of welfare policy, more likely to push for increased funding for women’s health, and more strongly inclined to vote in favor of women’s reproductive rights.

But over the past two decades, the polarization of our political parties and, in particular, the near-elimination of moderates from the Republican Party, has essentially brought an end to the longstanding gender gap among legislators. While the voting records of moderate female Republicans in Congress were notably more women-friendly than those of their male colleagues in the 1980s and early 1990s, a surge of conservative women in the Republican Party after 1994 has meant that, by the 108th and 109th Congresses, the voting records of female Republican members of Congress were “no longer ideologi-

cally distinguishable” from those of their male colleagues, political scientist Brian Frederick has found.⁵⁷ Because there were a number of moderate Republican women in the Senate, however, women in that chamber were still distinctly more “liberal,” and more likely to support women’s issues than are male senators.⁵⁸

“Party has made it virtually impossible for gender to matter,”⁵⁹ says Jennifer Lawless, director of the Women & Politics Institute in American University’s School of Public Affairs.

There is some evidence that Republican female legislators are still more likely to make a priority of discussing issues relating to women in committee, but when it comes to final voting, they hew to the party line.⁶⁰ However, it is worth remembering that “pro-woman” can be in the eye of the beholder.

If we are ever to reach the point where we might actually witness what can result when women are no longer in the minority, we need to greatly increase our population of female leaders.

More women are needed in the pipeline: When it comes to women's influence, numbers and hierarchy matter

A few token women will not do the trick. There is evidence that the power and influence of highly successful women can create a rising tide that lifts all boats by challenging stereotypes about gender roles and leadership and buoying other women, both within specific organizations and in society at large. In Germany, for example, when Angela Merkel was first elected chancellor in 2005, only one of the country's 16 states had been led by a women. By 2013, there were four acting female governors, and many more women moving up the political leadership pipeline.⁶¹ Female politicians around the globe have historically been more likely to support measures that help women, children, and families, including those that promote better health care and education.⁶² As corporate leaders, they are more inclined than their male counterparts to support practices aimed at reducing gender inequality.⁶³ And the presence of women as CEOs, board chairs, and board directors helps to narrow the pay gap between men and women.⁶⁴

But for women within an organization to make a difference for other women, a couple of conditions must be in place: Women have to be both present in sufficient numbers and occupy high-enough positions to have the power to bring change. The presence of women in high-status management positions, for example, does narrow the gender-wage gap, but the presence of women in lower-level management does not.⁶⁸

The presence of women in key elected positions has been shown to have a powerful effect both on voter attitudes toward female politicians and on the willingness of other women to consider running for office.⁶⁵

- Law firms whose corporate clients have a significant number of women in leadership positions go on to increase their number of female partners.⁶⁶
- In the media world, the more women there are behind the camera or the editor's desk, the better the portrayal of women. Films written or directed by women consistently feature a higher percentage of female characters with speaking roles.⁶⁷

Innovative leadership solutions are a must for female politicians and corporate leaders in the United States

Countries around the world that have vastly increased the representation of women on corporate boards or in politics have chiefly done so through the vehicle of quotas. But this is not an option in the United States.

In fact, there is little by way of public policy in our country that specifically aims to increase women's ascendance to top leadership roles. One measure that clearly attempted to bring such change was Section 342, the so-called Diversity Clause of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010. The law created 20 Offices of Minority and Women Inclusion at various agencies regulating the financial services industry. The offices were charged with assessing and monitoring diversity practices at the agencies, their contractors or subcontractors and in the entities they regulate. So far, however, there appears to have been much talk about assessment, but no action. Indeed, just last month, the National Urban League responded with thinly veiled contempt to a request for comment on a proposed interagency policy statement establishing joint standards for assessing diversity policies and practices in the financial services industry. The drafted standards, the National Urban League wrote in an open letter to the heads of the Minority and Women Inclusion offices of half a dozen regulatory agencies, lack real metrics to assess progress on diversity and contain no real provisions to require such assessments. "The Agencies' Standards seem to pass the buck to the regulated entities, and to the public, to conduct the assessments. This is not what Section 342 intended," the authors wrote.⁶⁹

We need to explore how the SEC might more stringently require compliance with our existing private-sector diversity rules, and whether there are more ways to require publicly traded companies to report the percentage of women on their boards—in executive positions, among top earners, and throughout their organization—and to provide explanations of their efforts to enhance gender diversity. Australia offers us one possible course of action. In 2012, Australia began requiring public and private companies with more than 100 employees to report

how many men and women they employed and by what percentages at different management tiers, and in different occupational categories. Starting in 2015, Australian companies will be required to provide information about recruitment, promotions and resignations; disclose the gender composition of their governing bodies and pay differential between men and women; and provide details about their flexible-work provisions, leave policies, and policies to help workers who have experienced domestic violence, gender discrimination, or sexual harassment. The availability of similar data in the United States might enable activist shareholders to use a company's lack of action on women's advancement as a pressure point to demand change.

We need to keep women in the workforce to increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline

For non-executive women, this means advancing public policy initiatives that are aimed at making it possible for women to flourish in the workforce over the totality of their working lives. Policies such as paid family leave, paid sick days, predictable scheduling, and the ability to request flexible work arrangements are crucial to ensuring all workers, especially women, remain in their jobs. All four of the top countries in the World Economic Forum's 2013 global gender gap index—Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden—offer a combination of use-it-or-lose-it paternity and maternity leave, federal paid parental-leave benefits, tax policies that support child-bearing, and post-maternity job re-entry programs that help women return to work after childbirth.⁷⁰ The combined effect of such measures is to support the wage-earning activities and advancement of women throughout all the stages of their lives. These policies also contribute to a cultural climate in which the successful integration of work and family, for men and women alike, is viewed as a social necessity—an integral component of economic growth—and not merely a privilege. Successful work-family policies that are aimed at both men and women create new norms of attitudes and expectations that enhance women's ability to stay the course.

While such policies do keep women in the workforce, they are not by any means a guarantee that women will rise to or near the top. Indeed, family-friendly policies—when used near-exclusively by women—can actually be a hindrance to women's advancement. Recent research by Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn of Cornell University has shown that women in OECD countries with generous paid family leave policies, part-time work entitlements, and government-subsidized child care are far more likely than American women to work part time and hold lower-level positions than men, and that American women are more likely to work as managers or professionals than women in these “family-friendly” countries. “There may be a tradeoff between some policies that make it easier for women to combine work and family and women's advancement at work,”⁷¹ note Blau and Kahn.

For women on the executive track, family-friendly policy is not enough to overcome the women's leadership lag. There also needs to be a change in the value system by which we evaluate and promote promising employees.

For women to thrive, the American workplace has to change in ways that alter the rules of the game for men and women alike

One of the biggest changes of the past half-century has been the dramatic convergence of the lives of men and women. Both sexes now expect to play an active role in caring for their families, and both need to earn a living in order for their families to thrive. Yet programs to address the women's leadership gap have tended to focus on men and women as different and distinct categories of people with different workplace issues. These programs, however unintentionally, have positioned women as a problem group requiring special accommodations that allow them to adapt their unique needs as mothers to the demands of the workplace. This orientation, however well meaning, has marginalized women and put them on a secondary track.

The women's leadership gap is a social problem, an economic problem, and a conundrum that poses a serious challenge to a core American value—the promise that every person should have the chance to fulfill her or his God-given potential and participate fully in the public and economic life of our society. Viewing it merely as a “women's problem”—a mismatch between the essential characteristics of women and the essential characteristics of the workplace—is both intellectually dishonest and inaccurate, and has led us to a state of long-term stall. We need to change the conversation around women's leadership to provide an enhanced understanding of its central importance to the progress of our country.

In doing so, we should take care not to fall into the trap of making the case for women's leadership in terms that reinforce age-old beliefs about women's essential differences from men. This kind of thinking had a particular resurgence after the 2008 financial meltdown, when much was made of the idea that the near-collapse of the world's banking system might well have been averted if women had been in charge, and if their greater “composure, sense of responsibility, and great pragmatism in delicate situations,” as then-French Finance Minister Christine Lagarde once put it, had been allowed to hold sway.⁷² The problem with framing

the call for women’s leadership in this way is not just that it rests upon outdated social science,⁷³ nor that popular Venus-versus-Mars notions of women’s superiority as leaders are rooted in many of the same fanciful ideas that once consigned them to the nursery. As renowned Harvard professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter has noted, “Good stereotypes of women can be just as confining and inaccurate as bad stereotypes.”⁷⁴ The bigger problem is that, in the real world, beliefs about women’s essential differences have translated into workplace policies that treat them differently and that, with all the best of intentions, aid in their marginalization.

Moving forward, we need solutions that focus not on women per se, but on the larger institutional structures that reinforce stereotypes about them, put them on separate tracks than men, and marginalize anyone—mother or not—who needs to invest time in caregiving. Specifically, this means we need to change our current culture of work. We need to reassess our current culture of professional achievement, where overwork, excessive hours, and the 24/7 work ethic are prized, and where disconnecting from work to connect with those at home is a recipe for falling behind. We need to look at the way hourly wage work is organized—or not organized—with employer-driven flexibility creating extreme unpredictability for low-wage and low-status workers, and consigning them to the least secure and most dead-end sorts of jobs. And then we need to change those overarching structures for everyone, men and women alike, to create workplaces that function to meet the needs of a 21st-century workforce, rather than a mid-20th-century married man.

Lehman Brothers versus Lehman Sisters

A number of people—researchers, columnists, pop culturists—have pondered the notion whether the financial crisis of 2008 would have been averted if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters. The “Lehman Sisters” argument was rooted in research showing women to be more trustworthy and risk-averse than men.⁷⁵ That research, however, was based on lab experiments involving college students—a quite different population from those women and men who make it to the top rungs of decision-making in the financial industry. Surveys of those executives have found quite the opposite. For instance, women board directors are actually “slightly more risk-loving than male directors,” according to Renée Adams, professor of finance at the University of New South Wales, and Patricia Funk, professor of economics at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, who surveyed resident directors and CEOs of nearly 1,800 publicly traded Swedish companies in 2005.⁷⁶ In other words, how gender expresses itself in the workplace may be very different from how it looks in the lab.

Context drives behavior. In fact, Alice Eagly, a social psychologist at Northwestern University, who has done much of the seminal research on gender and leadership, found that men and women appear more different in professions where women dominate, and more similar in professions where men dominate.⁷⁷

Conclusion

For women to thrive, the American workplace has to change. That transformation must come in ways that recognize the deeply altered nature of American family life, and in acknowledging this reality, change the rules of the game for men and women alike. A number of workplace redesign programs now aim to fundamentally restructure how businesses operate, motivate, and evaluate their employees, shifting away from a model that problematizes women's work-life conflicts to a model that seeks to integrate all employees' work-life fit. Such a reorientation will amount to is nothing less than remaking the American culture of work.

This idea is fully in line with our country's global ambitions. China, which now includes as part of its economic growth policies a provision that women employed in public enterprises get 98 days of paid maternity leave, is already taking steps in that direction.⁷⁸ And conservative Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last year announced a plan for long-term economic growth anchored, in part, in increasing women's participation in the life of the nation through work-family policy, including a call for the creation of 400,000 new child care spots by 2017.⁷⁹

It is time to realize that the old dichotomies between home and office, family and work, and caregiving and profit-making are as outdated as traditional notions about gender differences. Women cannot thrive in a world where the demands of a 21st century, 24/7 global economy coexist with "workplace policies that belong in a 'Mad Men' episode," as President Obama put it in his 2014 State of the Union address. Today's men cannot make it in such a world, either.

About the author

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