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## WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: HOW A WOMAN'S BACKGROUND AFFECTS HER LEADERSHIP STYLE

Serena Bahe

*University of the Incarnate Word*, bahe@uiwtx.edu

Richard Ruiz

*University of the Incarnate Word*, ruiz@uiwtx.edu

Armando Tejada

*University of the Incarnate Word*, tejeda@uiwtx.edu

Steven Sill

*University of the Incarnate Word*, sill@uiwtx.edu

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# WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: HOW A WOMAN'S BACKGROUND AFFECTS HER LEADERSHIP STYLE

*Serena Bahe, Richard Ruiz, Armando Tejada,  
Steven Sill, Monica Poole  
University of the Incarnate Word*

## **Abstract**

Stereotypes and beliefs about women have often kept them from equality with men. What is more striking is that women perpetuate the stereotypes and beliefs as much as men and society as a whole. This literature review focuses on three areas in a woman's background that influence her ability to lead: a) triggers that propel her into a leadership position, b) the "intersectionalities" or multiple identities and personalities a woman must have to be an effective leader, and c) how the context of where she leads affects her leadership behavior. It also addresses the need for more research to identify barriers and challenges for women leaders, and factors which may bring about cultural change within the United States, leading to an even more influential role for women leaders.

## **Introduction**

In the past 75 years, the United States has come a long way in the area of women's rights. Women gained the right to vote, entered the work place, and for the most part are considered equal to men. However, when looking at the number of women holding leadership roles in the United States it is clear that more needs to be done to advance women in the work place. There are three key areas of a woman's background that affect her ability to hold positions of power in an organization: a) triggers that propel her into a leadership position, b) the "intersectionalities" or multiple identities and personalities a woman must have to be an effective leader, and c) how the context of where she leads affects her leadership behavior. In order for real change to occur, both men and women in the United States must commit to changing their own cultural stereotypes and beliefs through personal behavior modification. Only then will future generations of women experience equality and individuality without the influence of past stereotypes.

## **Background**

Until recent years there has been relatively little study of women in

leadership. Of the few more recent studies, some contradict each other and/or point to weak areas. For example, Ayman and Korabik (2010) studied what other researchers have said over the years. They suggest that research in the area of culture and leadership as pertains to women is weak and suggest that a woman's culture affects her leadership style and ability to become a leader, especially for female minorities.

However, another study said that gender more than race affects a woman's ability to become a leader (Salas-Lopez, Deitrick, Mahandy, Gertner, & Sabino, 2011). In fact, the women in this study said that using race as the reason they could not move up into a leadership position was only an excuse. The researchers said that female leaders need to help other females who want to become leaders through mentorship and education. In other words, women must help other women become leaders in order for there to be more females in leadership positions.

Historically, very few women stand out as leaders—certainly far more men fill the history books. It is unclear why that is the case, but Mamiseishvili (2009) found that American born women culturally are more nurturing and have or behave in more traditional female roles than women from other cultures/countries. This suggests that a woman's behavior is cultural. Other countries, for example, have female presidents, but the United States has not had one yet. Statistics show that women are highly under-represented in major leadership roles (Northouse, 2013). No matter how far the United States has come to improve equality and opportunities for women, the historic female role seems to create an invisible boundary that holds women back.

One example of this is demonstrated by Mamiseishvili (2009). He compared the research and teaching habits of women from abroad and women from the United States. He noticed that the female, U.S. born professors spent more time on teaching related duties than on research, unlike their foreign-born colleagues. Women naturally and culturally in the United States take on the role of the more compassionate, nurturing sex.

Research reveals a challenging interplay between societal expectations and stereotypes, and women's own attitudes toward leadership. Women are increasingly more involved and successful in leadership roles, but face numerous challenges. Women represent less than 3% of Fortune 500 CEOs, less than 16% of the Fortune 500 board seats, and less than 15% of Fortune 500 executive officer positions. This suggests that women are highly underrepresented in major leadership roles (Northouse, 2013). This is in spite of the fact that women often have the kind of transformational leadership skills that the new global market requires (Hoyt, 2013). By

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failing to take advantage of the leadership talents of women, organizations are depriving themselves of ongoing strategic advantage.

### **Review of the Literature**

Salas-Lopez, Deitrick, Mahandy, Gertner, and Sabino (2011) discuss reasons why women aren't in more leadership positions, particularly in the medical and medical education fields. They cite a lack of female representation in the field, faculty's condescending attitude towards women, not enough time for women to become leaders, and that time overall will not be enough to change the gender inequities in leadership. The researchers suggest that more women leaders are needed to encourage and help other women become leaders themselves. That way more women will fill leadership positions—at least within the field of medicine and medicine education.

Generational differences also affect a woman's ability to become a leader and lead followers. Favero and Health (2012) compared how two groups thought about the workplace: baby boomers and generation X/Yers. This study focused on the differences of how each of these groups view work and the workplace/home balance. They found that the generation X/Yers value family time. However, the baby boomers perceive the generation X/Yers behavior associated with that value as an attitude of entitlement. In that study, researchers also discovered one possible reason why baby boomers think the generation X/Yers have that entitlement attitude. The generation X/Yers decision to value family time and a balance between home and work shows baby boomers what they had to give up for the pursuit of wealth and status. The researchers suggest that the generation X/Yers behavior may make the baby boomers think about what they gave up to work so hard. The researchers (as suggested by comments made by generation X/Y study participants) suggest that baby boomers may feel guilty or inadequate that they could have had wealth and status *with* family time, if they had pursued a balance like the Generation X/Yers. Generational gaps between older females and younger females may exist, but even more so are the tendencies for women—especially older women—to take on the caregiver role, which means they choose to stay at home with the children rather than pursue leadership opportunities at their workplace, if they even continue to work.

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### **Triggers That Propel Women into Leadership Positions**

In studying the data, one reason women pursue leadership roles is that something in their background triggers them into a leadership positions. These triggers propel them up the leadership pole. Dahlvig and Longman

(2010) found three causes that illustrate adequate reasons that trigger women into leadership positions. One is someone spoke of their leadership potential, which led them into leadership positions. The second is an event that reframed their previously held understanding of leadership. The third is a situation arose where they became leaders in order to stand up for what they believed. All or any of these propelled women into taking a leadership role when they otherwise would not have done so.

Just as a woman's background can trigger her to become a leader it can also keep her away from leadership roles. Dahlvig and Longman's (2010) study suggests reasons why women are not represented in more leadership positions, such as CEOs, principals, business owners, and presidents. Participants were interviewed for this qualitative study. The female participants cited that they originally had no intention of becoming leaders. In fact, some stated that they didn't want to be leaders because of the leadership they had already experienced. However, most said the key reason they became leaders themselves is the need to stand up for something.

Some researchers found that despite a woman's desire to lead there exists a glass ceiling of sorts that prevents them from doing so. Haslam and Ryan (2008) analyzed students, both college and high school, in an attempt to find more evidence of the glass ceiling phenomenon. They were looking for a way to determine whether there was perceived suitability for men over women in leadership positions. They found that despite the fact that most employees prefer leaders with traits natural to women, when a company is performing well workers prefer male leaders. However, if a company is in a precarious situation, struggling, or thought to be doing poorly, they found that study participants preferred a woman's leadership style over a man's. Overall, Haslam and Ryan (2008) found that most prefer female leaders over male, but the public's perceived stereotypes prevent women from acquiring more leadership roles, hence, the glass ceiling effect.

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### **“Intersectionalities”—Multiple Identities and Personalities Needed to Be Effective**

It seems that while women are propelled into leadership roles because of what they believe as opposed to their desire, the stereotypes associated with women make it difficult for them to acquire leadership positions, unless the company is in a desperate state. That is why a woman must have multiple identities and personalities to be an effective leader, otherwise known as “intersectionalities” (Walby, Armstrong, & Strid,

2012). Women have to behave like men, but not too much like them. They have to balance typical female home responsibilities with work roles common to men. In essence, for a woman to be a successful leader she has to be everything to everyone.

One way women do this is through the acquisition of education. Hoyt (2013) research demonstrates that women have become far more educated than men, but yet they still hold very few leadership positions when compared to them. She points out that there are social costs for women who are ambitious and become leaders, and that women must demonstrate both feminine qualities and male traits that typically make men good leaders. She says the key difference is that men ask for what they want where as women are less likely to do so.

Hoyt (2013) says it is unfortunate that women do not ask for what they want the way men do. Women have the kind of transformational leadership skills that the new global market requires. Finding a way to help women project what they want (e.g. a leadership role), balance feminine qualities with leadership traits, and accentuate their positive leadership skills will help women become great leaders – and encourage more of them to do so.

An earlier study by Hoyt (2005) shows how stereotypes and a women's self-efficacy affect women more than men. She said that race proved not to be a significant factor in a woman's ability to acquire a leadership position, and that gender alone was the cause for fewer leadership opportunities. In other words, being female affected a woman's ability to move into a leadership position rather than any other quality (e.g. race, history, education).

Hoyt (2005) also said that women's self-efficacy or beliefs about themselves and what they can do affect their ability to lead. She says that stereotypes affect women's view of themselves as they progress through life – and how previous stereotypes can affect their present life. This suggests that women are affected by what their culture says about them.

Kruse and Prettyman (2008, September) emphasize that point as well. They looked at gender stereotypes in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* and related those stereotypes to society for both the old and the new versions of the movie. When the two were compared, they found some interesting evidence of how culture is perceived through this movie as it relates to women. They found that the public's view of gender roles is affirmed by television and movies.

Interestingly, the movies put the female leader in a negative position, i.e. the witch. In both versions of the movie, there is both a good and bad witch, but in the end the male—the wizard—is the one with the real

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power. It emphasizes that women have leadership roles, but that men really have the power—that they are the true leaders.

The researchers point to society's labels of women and how women often succumb to those images and labels as the reason women are pushed down, remain inferior to men, and ultimately hold far fewer leadership roles as CEO, president, and so forth. In order to improve the image of females—to make them seen more in good leadership roles as opposed to negative ones (e.g. a witch), then the negative images of women presented and available to the public need to change.

However, stereotypes are difficult to change. Ryan, Haslam, and Hersby (2010) carried out three studies to learn more about women and their leadership roles within the workplace. The first study was designed to replicate (and extend) an earlier study (Schein). Specifically, this study focused on the stereotypical traits for both men and women. The second study was an extension of the first whereby researchers asked followers about his or her desired managerial behavior with regards to hiring decision and leadership evaluations. The third study was designed to learn how people think during a crisis. What they found through these three studies is that people's perceptions of leadership traits conflict with what people want from their leaders, but most especially during times of crisis. Interestingly, they found that what people really want in a leader is one with traits naturally found in women. Even though people want someone *like a woman*, stereotypes prevent people from choosing a woman to lead them.

Despite what some researchers say, that gender affects a person's ability to lead more than race, Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2012, April) say the exact opposite. They suggest that not only does being a woman affect a person's ability to acquire a leadership role, but women of other races have more difficulty than white women. They also state women in those situations have been affected in the past and that their past will affect their future. Furthermore, these researchers discuss what they call "stereotype threat," meaning having more than one racial background is better than being only one, i.e. being a one-third black, Chinese, and white is better than being an only black/African American person. Essentially what they found is that women who are white have a greater advantage in acquiring leadership positions than someone of another race. And, of the non-Caucasian women, those who are of multiple racial backgrounds have an advantage over women who are solely one race. For example, a woman who is part Chinese, part African-American, and part Native American woman will have more access to leadership roles than a woman whose heritage is strictly only Chinese, or only African American, or only

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Native American.

Besides ethnicity, a woman's generational identity also affects her ability to lead. Favero and Health (2012) found that female baby boomers and generation X/Yers question decisions made by each other. Baby boomers think the generation X/Yers are entitled when in turn those folks simply were choosing what was important to them, which was different than what baby boomers wanted (wealth and prestige). Generation X/Yers want more family time. The researchers found that baby boomers are offended because generation X/Yers make them "feel bad" and/or question their decisions to work as long, hard and often as they do. This is difficult for women, especially when it comes to childrearing. The decision to stay home or work away from home has great emotional, physical, and spiritual consequences for women. Some will forego leadership to stay at home with children, while others choose to take leadership roles and work late. Neither woman is right or wrong for her choices, but generational conflicts may arise within families, such as when a generation X/yer may be in conflict with her baby boomer mother's perceptions and opinions.

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*They really want a leader that demonstrates the traits typical to female leaders, but yet they will not choose them on their own.*

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### **How Context Affects Women's Leadership Behavior**

Leadership for women is also affected by the context within which she leads. Eagly (2007) focuses primarily on how women have advanced and continue to do so in reference to equality of the sexes as pertains to leadership roles. According to her, women are currently earning more of the college degrees and have more of the desired skills to be effective leaders in today's global workforce. However, something still prevents women from moving up. She points to old stereotypes, but like many others she does not make an indication as to how we, as a society, can change those old images.

Ryan, Haslam, and Hersby (2010) found through their three studies that people's perceptions of leadership traits conflict with what people want from their leaders, but most especially during times of crisis. They really want a leader that demonstrates the traits typical to female leaders, but yet they will not choose them on their own. This means that if a woman works for an employer who does not value women and their contributions to the organization and instead reinforces typical stereotypes, the women within that organization will not have many leadership opportunities. This means that the context within the organization where a woman works affects her leadership behavior. If a woman works in an environment that has destroyed old stereotypes, then she and as well as other women working there will have many

opportunities for leadership.

Eagly (2007) suggests that old cultural stereotypes still prevent women from moving up. She points out that women, according to research, tend to possess more of the leadership skills necessary to be effective, good leaders. However, when asked, people still prefer men. Eagly critiques past research, but states that many of the impediments currently preventing women leaders can be removed. Interestingly, as a society we have difficulty removing them. Even though Eagly says we have the ability to do so, she makes no recommendations as to how to remove those impediments. She does suggest that current female leaders have a responsibility to stand up and lead other women into leadership positions.

### **Discussion**

The literature illustrates an increase in leadership roles for women, but it also points out that there are still relatively few women in leadership positions. Women's backgrounds play a significant part in determining how women move into leadership roles, and how they perform in those roles. In addition, pervasive societal attitudes still impede women's ability to enter many leadership roles. Society's passive affirmation of stereotypes, biases, and discrimination make leadership opportunities out of reach for some women. The eradication of these ills in the psyche of men and women alike must occur for there to be real transformation and more efficiency to propel women into leadership positions and roles within organizations. America needs a transformative consciousness that transcends the formidable and pervasive barriers in a revolutionary manner.

This means people have to be open to the idea of thinking differently about gender, race, culture, and leadership. For a change of this magnitude to occur, women leaders must take a stand to help radically change policies against female discriminating practices and truly change themselves and their ways of thinking to keep themselves, society, and other women free from stereotype activation and reaction. The problem is one of positing and enacting new transformative ideas that may be on the minds of many but not in their practice. An example would be for corporations and other large entities and firms to change their internal and external hiring policies.

### **Conclusions**

Women themselves must stop thinking and behaving in ways that enforce negative stereotypical female behaviors. That is not an easy feat.

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More research is needed to address how women can most efficiently and effectively avoid affirming negative stereotypes themselves, as well as identifying and addressing the challenges women face in the workplace – and society as a whole. American women must find a balance between being women and being true to their own personal identities, without feeling bound to societal norms based on past bias. It is then that others in American society – men, children, and other women – will begin to transform away from those typical female stereotypes. This is a difficult problem to solve as it requires change in both inward attitudes and outward behavior.

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