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Review Article

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Climbing the Ladder Beyond the Glass Ceiling: Barriers for Women Seeking Leadership Positions in the Rehabilitation Field

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ABSTRACT

Women as leaders provide a positive influence and often better outcomes to institutions and the workforce, yet they remain relatively underrepresented in leadership positions. While the challenges women face are acknowledged, less recognized are the factors that impact the experience and achievement of women who, against substantial odds, ascend above the glass ceiling. This paper examines current knowledge on women and leadership by investigating the circumstances under which women are promoted to top leadership positions and exploring the opportunities and barriers they encounter before and after being promoted.

Keywords: leadership, glass ceiling, mentor, stereotyping, barriers

INTRODUCTION

Currently, women are entering the workforce in most industrialized countries with more professional and managerial responsibilities (Burke & Richardson, 2017). Women in workforce such as healthcare and academia are affected by intransigent obstacles to their leadership goals. The term glass ceiling is commonly used to describe the obstacles and dilemmas of women in the workforce. Specifically, the one final barrier to reaching the top, not the entire series of successive barriers, that confront many women as they progress through the hierarchy of their elected business but are able to progress only so far before being obstructed from reaching higher tiers (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

Although some women have succeeded in rising above the glass ceiling, the fact remains that barriers still exist. These barriers prevent women and organizations from accomplishing their full potential and block women from achieving higher aspirations as a consequence of gender disparity and unequal opportunity in leadership (Wang & Shao, 2017).

Women, in contrast with men, have more complicated occupational roles and career histories (Tischner, Malson, & Fey, 2019). Carli (2018) proposed numerous metaphors to describe the position of women in management: glass ceiling, sticky floor, glass cliffs, leaky pipelines, concrete celling, and labyrinths. The three most shared metaphors are glass ceiling, sticky floors, and labyrinth, and the author contemplates the strengths and weaknesses of each; it is recognized that some women do reach the top (Carli, 2018).

Schuller (2017) noted that even women who outperform men in academic programs before entering the workforce, must then confront cultures of discrimination and not fitting into the men's networks. Attaining gender equality in leadership is, first and perhaps most importantly, a matter of fairness (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017). Leaders can be powerful, so when women are excluded from top leadership, they are deprived of the power to make a difference in the world. Leaders notably enjoy higher status and privilege, which further strengthens the incentives of leadership (Yaghi, 2017). In organizations, the top leader is also the most highly compensated; managers and supervisors tend to have higher salaries than workers who are not in leadership position. Equity concerns are reason enough to close this gender gap, but other factors are equally compelling (Schuller, 2017).

Notwithstanding social movements and advances legislation and practices, numerous factors support and strengthen the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017), which is considered a serious problem due to diversity issues and its important connection to gender equity (Cook & Glass, 2013). Women's representation in leadership will not increase substantially without major changes in the culture, policies, and practices of the organizations in which women learn and work. Accountability at the same time requires action, so public policies are needed to ensure that employers are doing the right thing (Acar & Sümer, 2018).

This paper will provide insights to help address women's leadership topic by (1) examining the extent to which women have achieved leadership positions in selected professions, (2) discussing the benefits of women's leadership and the barriers women face in becoming leaders, and (3) clarifying strategies to

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overcome the barriers impeding women's leadership. Additionally, the paper will explore and examine the knowledge bases of other professions and conclude with observations that may shed light on the state of female leaders, including possible solutions to increase leadership opportunities and aspirations.

Women in Leadership Roles

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2018) women represent more than 50% of the U.S. population and approximately half of the labor force. Women serve as "breadwinners" in over 40% of homes and control 70–80% of consumer purchasing and spending (Glynn, 2010). Women earn approximately 60% of all bachelor's and master's degrees, roughly 50% of doctoral degrees, and hold about 50% of managerial and professional-level jobs (Warner & Corley, 2017). Yet, despite the advanced degrees and workforce presence in most professional sectors, including healthcare, business, and higher education, women are often absent from top leadership roles, such as chief executive officer, board member, president, and dean (Warner & Corley, 2017).

Women are more underrepresented in the leadership ranks of mid-cap and private businesses, holding just 4.5% and 6%, respectively of executive positions (Hunt, 2014; Hunt, 2016). Considering that women are 30% less likely than men to be promoted from entry-level to managerial-level positions, it is clear that companies are missing opportunities to develop future leaders, thereby squandering the talents of prospective women trailblazers (Hunt, 2014, 2016). These numbers are clear and definitive: women are severely underrepresented in leadership positions in the business sphere, academia, the health professions, and healthcare in general (Barnes, 2017). These disparities cannot be attributed to a lack of education as women are receiving bachelor's degrees and post-graduate or professional degrees at equivalent or higher rates than men. Therefore, there are other explanations for the gender-based leadership gap (Hunt, 2014, 2016).

Benefits of Women in Leadership

Galbreath (2011) stated that the presence of women in business leadership has considerably enhanced various aspects, such as financial performance, firm value, financial development, improvement, and social awareness. Wagner (2011) mentioned that Catalyst, a nonprofit organization focused on expanding women's leadership roles in the workplace. Furthermore, Wagener (2011) discussed the significance of women's presence on companies' boards of directors and found that having more women resulted in better returns on equity and sales, and higher return on investment compared to companies with fewer women on the board. Moreover, having women on the board helps companies have more rigorous supervision and fewer legal violations, such as fraud and embezzlement (Cumming, Leung, & Rui, 2015).

A study on "collective intelligence" highlighted the ability of a team with more women to accomplish the required tasks (Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010). Participants had greater collective intelligence than teams with fewer women; the findings were essentially related to social sensitivity, awareness of social context, and interpreting cues—characteristics women are more likely to possess than men (Woolley et al., 2010). In another study of nine leadership behaviors that have a positive impact on organizational performance, women used five behaviors more than men: role modeling, expectations and rewards, people development, inspiration, and decision-making (Desvaux & Devillard, 2012). More than 70% of study participants considered that these five behaviors were underrepresented in their organization's current leadership. This is not surprising when one considers the deficit of women in leadership roles (Desvaux et al., 2012).

A survey published by the Pew Research Center found that a preponderance of Americans think women are qualified and capable of embracing leadership positions in business, politics, and government. The majority of these same respondents believed that both genders have significant leadership characteristics. The survey also discussed the reasons why women may not be suitable for leadership positions. The most significant themes that arose in the responses were societal and cultural limitations—the United States is basically not prepared to appoint or elect women leaders (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Barriers and Obstacles Toward Women's Leadership

Previous studies have provided considerable research to identify some barriers that most women face on their journey in pursuit of executive and senior-level positions (Pew Research Center, 2015). According to the National Academy of Sciences, unintentional biases and outmoded institutional structures are hindering the access and advancement of women (Bernstein, 2016).

Gender Stereotyping

Gender stereotypes as well as conscious and unconscious prejudices play a fundamental role in obstructing women's access to executive-level positions. Unfortunately, masculine characteristics are widely used as the default or standard beliefs and expectations in determining whether how women are hired, retained, or promoted, while feminine characteristics are diminished (Girod et al., 2016).

Women face more distinctive expectations in the workplace than men do, prompting increased scrutiny for reasons other than ability, such as appearance and age. Additionally, they are frequently evaluated more severely, particularly women in management and leadership roles, and must face the dilemma of being perceived as too feminine or not feminine enough (Johns, 2013).

Johns (2013) noted that women tend to be penalized for showing too much or too little independence, assertiveness, and competitiveness. Thus, women encounter a binary expectation in their professions if they want to progress: not only doing their jobs well but also overcoming stereotypes that may hamper perceptions of their leadership potential.

A Washington Post article published in August 2016 accused The National Institutes of Health (NIH) of gender bias in employment practices and in grant-funding decisions (Bernstein, 2016). The article described claims that conscious and unconscious gender biases had manipulated decisions concerning

the tenure of women scientists at NIH where just 22% of tenured research scientists are women (Bernstein, 2016).

A recent study was published in Academic Medicine discussed significant gender-based differences in the review process of grant renewal applications in the NIH Research Project Grant program, and reported that women received considerably lower scores on grant reviews than their male colleagues (Kaatz et al., 2016). Moreover, the study provided evidence that different standards were applied to the grant applications of men and women. To lessen the destruction done to women's careers, it is mandatory that NIH and other institutions across the United States focus on issues of blatant gender bias. Without such action, institutional leadership will remain soundly within the sphere of men, and women's enthusiasm to combat such inequity will be thwarted, much to the detriment of institutional growth, innovation and performance (Kaatz et al., 2016).

Lack of Role Models

The deficit of women in leadership positions creates another serious barrier—a lack of role models, sponsors, and mentors for women who are emerging as potential leaders (Warner & Corley, 2017). The absence of role models may contribute to the absence of leadership mentality among women; women are inclined toward leadership but do not see other women thriving in leadership positions are less likely to develop the confidence to pursue such positions (Woolley et al., 2010).

The significance of mentorship to the success of women seeking executive and senior roles cannot be overstated (Henkel, 2018). Mentors play a key role in encouraging women to pursue leadership positions, particularly in the rigorous early-career period. Mentors are crucial as they act as advisors offering career guidance and assistance in navigating institutions; it is proportionately essential to have sponsors who take on the role of advocates in advancing the cause of others (Henkel, 2018). Research has demonstrated that women may not have access to mentors and sponsors, especially of the same gender, which has been ranked as an important criterion in mentor selection (Freund et al., 2016). The absence of mentors or sponsors may negatively affect women in myriad ways.

In a study of gender-based differences in productivity among medical faculty, Freund et al. (2016) surmised that women faculty members who do not have supportive mentors may have more trouble getting articles they have authored accepted by peer-reviewed publications, which may account for the lower rate of publication found among women compared to men (Freund et al., 2016). This finding is especially worrisome because publication is a crucial prerequisite for advancement to higher faculty ranks. Hindered access to mentors, who might be able to share their own experiences and provide guidance, aggravates the existing chain of challenges for women in achieving their goals while juggling a work-personal life balance (Westring, McDonald, Carr, & Grisso, 2016).

Caregiving Role

Women frequently find themselves in the role of caregivers, and this can hold them back from advancing in the workplace and leadership. According to the American Council on Education's (2017) college presidents, 32 percent of women presidents altered their career progression to care for a dependent, compared to 16 percent of men. Many women are still expected to take on caregiving roles for spouses, children, and elderly parents. These additional responsibilities and time-consuming tasks can be a strain on women's career success (Fodor & Glass, 2017). The lack of flexible work arrangements, supportive policies in organizations, such as maternity or family leave, and flexible scheduling options to accommodate family responsibilities are other barriers for women in the workforce (Johns, 2013).

Women are more likely to leave work due to caregiving responsibilities and encounter significant repercussions at the workplace as a result of family obligations (Thibault, 2016). Women struggling to balance work with family obligations may deter them from progressing through the professional hierarchy; as a consequence, some women feel obligated to choose between having a family and having a career (Cho et al., 2016). Moreover, some research suggests that women may have fewer children or forgo having children altogether due to career aspirations and pressures (Sherman, 2015).

Weis and Lay (2019) discussed that, in general, men are less likely to undertake caregiving duties. Women bear the burden despite working full-time and then return home to another full day's work of caregiving and house hold responsibilities that compete with career demands (Svarstad, Draugalis, Meyer, & Mount, 2004). In the academic profession, 44 percent of tenured women faculty remain childless (Sherman, 2015). If women feel deprived of that choice due to untenable career pressures, expectations, or penalties, that is unquestionably problematic; only women feel forced to choose between having a family and having a career (Sherman, 2015).

Another barrier directly related to caregiving is the "lean- out" phenomenon, when women tend to slow or cease their highly-demanding careers (Warner et al., 2014). More than two-thirds of women with graduate or bachelor's degrees with honors cut back their work hours at some point in their careers, and approximately one-third take extended leave from their jobs in the interest of work-life balance (Warner et al., 2014). Therefore, organizational policies and practices that normalize more flexible work schedules and prioritize quality of work over "time served" would be an immeasurable help in overcoming work–life barriers to facilitate women's contributions in leadership roles (Warner et al., 2014).

Lack of Internal and External Networks

An article published by global consulting firm McKinsey & Company (2016) discussed additional barriers to women leadership—the absence of internal and external networks, recognitions, opportunities, and resources. Women have fewer opportunities to cultivate formal and informal networks for a variety of reasons, such as limited available time to attend professional meetings in which networking often occurs due to family or work commitments (Carbajal, 2017). Another reason is the lack of mentors or sponsors to introduce them to internal and external colleagues and decision-makers. Johns (2013) found that male managers and executives have broader informal networks,

social interactions, and substantive work interactions with senior leaders than do female managers and executives that are known to be advantageous when pursuing higher-level positions (Johns, 2013).

Leadership Style

The leadership style of some women may result in a dearth of recognition for their efforts. For example, women may choose a facilitative or selfless style of leadership that highlights the accomplishments of the team rather than their own, taking little or no credit for their role in those successes. This may create a perception that women leaders are not contributing to organizational achievements, and in turn result in fewer high-profile assignments and restricted resources (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

Luxen (2005) discussed women's greater capability in balancing demanding and affiliative interaction styles of leadership to foster harmony among their followers or employees, compared to men who prefer an authoritarian leadership approach. Therefore, women's communication style is warmer, less commanding, and more bilateral than men. This style of communication can lower perceptions about women's abilities as leaders as well as holding women to a higher standard of competence and evaluating female managers and leaders more critically than their male counterparts (Jalalzai, 2013).

The Salary Gap for women in the Workforce

The salary gap for women in the workforce is a barrier to leadership; multiple factors contribute to salary disparities. The Joint Economic Committee stated that as much as 40 percent of the gap is the consequence of discrimination; on average, women in the United States are paid 79 percent of men's earnings for the same job, a 21 percent gap in compensation. This gap widens slightly when education is considered. Women with bachelor's or advanced degrees make approximately 75 percent of what men with the same degrees earn and are often paid less than men with less education (US Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2016).

At the professional level, women earn just 58 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts (Johns, 2013). In select health professions, for example, women pharmacists earn 87 percent, women medical scientists earn 79 percent, and women physicians earn 75 percent of their male counterparts make (Seabury, Chandra, & Jena, 2013); women healthcare executives earned 20 percent less than male executives (Johns, 2013). Interestingly, pay disparities are found even in those professions traditionally dominated by female, such as registered nurses; female nurses make only 90 percent of their male counterparts' pay (Herman, 2015).

Salary disproportions are also found in higher education, where women faculty members earn just 85–94 percent of men's earnings at every rank. Among academic leaders, fewer than five women made the Chronicle of Higher Education's list of the fifty highest-paid chief executives at public universities in 2014 (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016).

Platt, Prins, Bates, and Keyes (2016) uncovered an important connection between the salary gap and increased rates of depression and anxiety disorders among women relative to men. Mood disorder rates were improved when women's income exceeded men's. Women's work and contributions, as symbolized by the salary gap, may have the effect of discouraging women from aspiring to leadership roles, thus resulting in fewer women pursuing such positions and causing even greater deficits in women's leadership.

Barriers to women's leadership are numerous, widespread, and rooted in the organizational and societal mentality. The next step will be multilevel petition to action and an enumeration of strategies to break down the numerous barriers to women's leadership and achieve a more equitable future for all women leaders.

Strategies to Overcome Barriers on the Path to Leadership

Strategies to promote women's leadership must be developed and implemented on multiple levels—the individual, the institutional, the professional leadership levels, and, eventually, the societal level (Draugalis, Plaza, Taylor, & Meyer, 2014). At the institutional level, organizations need to highlight gender equity and be equitable in their efforts to broaden leadership opportunities for women; this includes creating comprehensive programs and policies that address barriers limiting the access of women to leadership career tracks (Sexton, Lemak, & Wainio, 2014). Organizations should enthusiastically support, recruit, develop, and train women for leadership roles; instigate mentoring and coaching programs; assist in identifying sponsors; and endorse policies that facilitate work and life balance for women (Sexton et al., 2014).

The procedures for hiring and promoting, and policies and decision-making regarding compensation should be assessed and supervised to guarantee that they are fair and uninfluenced by conscious and unconscious gender bias (Girod et al., 2016). As part of developing more equitable hiring practices, organizations should use diverse hiring committees when applicable and provide training that addresses conscious and unconscious imbedded gender bias (Westring et al., 2016).

At the societal level, there are several legal and policy changes the federal government should consider to facilitate a culture that is more supportive of women in the workforce. For example, mirroring the progress in countries such as Finland, Norway, and Sweden, legislation regarding parental leave, the need for childcare and eldercare, and flexible work schedules might be helpful to open opportunities for achieving work-life balance equally for women and men (Warner et al., 2017). The United States should also attempt to diminish and eliminate salary disparities between women and men to conclusively achieve equivalent compensation and pay for the same work (Platt et al., 2016). At the individual level, women have to be active and perform as their own advocates by working toward establishing their own networks, sponsors, and mentors, developing social capital, and promoting themselves and their contributions to the organization (Azara et al., 2019).

Furthermore, there is a notable absence of research on intersectionality and how women of color and diverse ethnicities experience leadership and develop as leaders. Research on intersectionality issues is needed to consolidate deeper

understanding of the ways that racism, sexism, classism, ethnicity and other social realities affect an individual's lived experiences in the workplace (Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009). Research in this paradigm must seek to examine intersectionality and explore the professional development of leadership roles to offer more opportunities for new perspectives of workplace values and beliefs. (Gatrell & Petyton, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Women have made remarkable strides in increasing their representation in the workforce. Nevertheless, a substantial disparity remains as an obstacle in rising to leadership positions across most fields. The glass ceiling persists, unbroken and intact, apparently off limit. Despite considerable research delineating the numerous benefits associated with the inclusion of women in institutional and organizational leadership, barriers obstruct the progress and desires of women leaders in most professions—cultural prejudice, stereotypes, the absence of mentors and sponsors, and challenges involving life balance. Women's leadership roles can be achieved if we overcome these barriers and adopt policies and strategies on the individual, institutional, professional, organizational, and societal levels to change preconceived ideas, biases, and assumptions about women's leadership abilities.

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