

What Barriers Hold Women Back?

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Despite the fact that we have a female U.S. Supreme Court justice, a female secretary of state, and a woman who is a leading candidate for the presidency, almost a half-century after the modern women's movement began to press for equality in the workplace, a new wave of books and articles is still debating whether women have made it into the ranks of top leadership. What obstacles remain in their way? Why? Perhaps most important, why have they not made more progress?

Pamela Stone, Hunter College: There are signs that the irrationality of the loss of these highly talented women is being recognized, that their absence is being noticed, and their actions are making a difference. Leading business schools are starting to pay attention to the large proportion of women alumnae who are being sidelined, for example; bar associations are convening task forces and studies to address the female brain drain in the legal profession; the academy is starting to think about slowing tenure clocks. Major firms ... are starting work-life initiatives that increasingly challenge the time norms and ideal-worker expectations of their workplaces, seeking to make flexibility "normal," and to base rewards on output and work quality, not on face time and the number of hours logged. While many of these efforts are admittedly aimed at retaining high-priced talent, the larger cultural and organizational challenges they bring about can trickle down (and up) to benefit women and men at every level of the organization. Working mothers themselves are also demanding change, confronting the anti-motherhood (and more broadly anti-caregiving) culture characteristic of too many workplaces. Pregnancy-discrimination and other lawsuits involving employment discrimination related to family caregiving responsibilities are dramatically increasing in number, and plaintiffs are prevailing.

Simultaneously, women at home are showing signs of increasing mobilization and collective awareness. ... Many of [their] efforts are aimed at changing the prevailing cultural attitudes around motherhood, which, for all the talk of family values, are still ambivalent to negative. (Opting Out?: Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home)

Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Center for Work-Life Policy and Columbia University: Why does a model that fits the needs of white men — who make up a shrinking proportion of the talent pool — continue to hold sway?

Here's my theory: Accommodating discontinuity or nonlinearity in career paths can be deeply disturbing to business leaders because it spells the end of an era. ...

What men continue to rely on to propel them to the top is a significant advantage on the hours-spent-at-work front — particularly in the key decade of their 30s. ... If you are a man, it's hard not to appreciate these facts — albeit on a subliminal or unconscious level. I am not arguing that there is any kind of male conspiracy at work here; rather, it's just that a pre-established model

offers men an advantage they'd be foolish to pass up. (Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success)

Patricia Sellers, journalist: There's lots of good news about the rise of women in the corporate world, such as the 29 CEO's of public companies in our global Most Powerful Women rankings and an impressive lineup of female CEO's-in-waiting. Behind the headlines, though, there is a hidden phenomenon. A surprisingly large number of corporate giants still have no women directors on their boards. ...

Isn't it possible that the guys who run Bear Stearns and Countrywide Financial, which both took on way too much risk and suffered in the recent credit crises, might have benefited from a little estrogen in the boardroom? (Fortune)

Barbara Kellerman, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and Deborah L. Rhode, Stanford Law School: Women's unequal representation in leadership positions poses multiple concerns. Most obviously, the barriers to women's advancement compromise fundamental principles of equal opportunity and social justice. These barriers impose organizational costs as well. Researchers consistently find a positive correlation between the representation of women in leadership positions and business performance measures such as market share and return on investment. Although correlation does not always imply causation, there are strong reasons to believe that diversity in leadership has tangible payoffs.

The most obvious reason is demographic. Women are now a majority of college graduates and a growing share of the talent available for leadership. Organizations that create a culture of equal opportunity are better able to attract, retain, and motivate the most qualified individuals. ...

To perform effectively in an increasingly competitive and multicultural environment, workplaces need individuals with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and styles of leadership. The point is not that there is some single "woman's point of view" or woman's leadership style, but rather that gender differences do make some difference that needs to be registered in positions of power. (Women & Leadership: The State of Play and Strategies for Change)

Alice H. Eagly, Northwestern University, and Linda L. Carli, Wellesley College: Arguments by evolutionary psychologists that aggressiveness and dominance are of overriding importance for leadership are particularly out of sync with contemporary organizations. ...

Successful leaders most often have an androgynous balance of traits that includes gregariousness, positive initiative and assertion, social skills, intelligence, conscientiousness, integrity, trustworthiness, and the ability to persuade, inspire, and motivate others. In short, effective leadership surely is not enhanced only by feminine qualities or only by masculine qualities. ...

Women who blend agency with communion address both sides of the double bind by demonstrating that they are sufficiently directive and assertive to be good leaders but that this agency does not undermine the warmth that women are expected to display. Women who

achieve this amalgam of assertiveness and sociability should find it easier to maneuver skillfully in organizations.

Leadership roles are changing toward the model of a good coach or good teacher, and this model is more congenial to women than earlier models. (Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders)