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Gender and leadership: Introduction to the special issue



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The recent surge of research on gender and leadership is remarkable. A Web of Science search for articles in this area estimated approximately 3000 published journal articles since 1970, 38% of which have publication dates of 2010 or later.¹ This growth demonstrates the rising academic interest in women as leaders, which accompanies growing public interest and widespread agitation for women's inclusion in the ranks of powerholders. Organizations such as 2020 Women on Boards (<https://www.2020wob.com/>) advocate for women in business leadership, and groups such as Emily's List (<http://emilyslist.org/>) support female candidates for political offices. The increasing visibility of female leaders—including Hillary Clinton as a potential President of the United States and Christine Lagarde as the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund—has intensified this interest. Although media have concentrated on women achieving political offices and high-level corporate positions, questions about women as leaders have emerged across many types of organizations (see Vinnicombe, Burke, Blake-Beard, & Moore, 2013). In a period when public opinion appears to favor more women in leadership roles (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2015), the perpetual question remains: Why aren't there more women leaders?

Researchers and scholars have responded to this question with a torrent of articles and books. Although applied psychology, management, and business offer the greatest number of studies, important work has emerged from many academic fields. Therefore, in compiling this Special Issue, we sought contributions beyond these best-represented fields, specifically from economics and political science. In the interdisciplinary spirit that accompanied the founding of the *Leadership Quarterly*, we hope that this group of articles encourages more integration of knowledge about leadership across the disciplines.

Given this richness of contemporary scholarship, our principal aim as editors of this Special Issue is to take stock of the knowledge about gender and leadership that has recently emerged in social science fields. Therefore, we especially welcomed focused reviews of empirical research on particular topics within the broad area of gender and leadership. Yet, we also welcomed some examples of new research that provides important insights into women's leadership. The resulting collection of twelve articles gives readers wide exposure to differing topics and points of view.

The first two articles in this Special Issue challenge some widely accepted understandings about gender and leadership. A common theme, probably the most popular emphasis of research in this area, is that discrimination is the main obstacle that women face in becoming leaders. As we have argued in our own work (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983, 2012), this discrimination flows from the definition of leadership primarily in culturally masculine terms that disfavor women. However valid this claim, it is possible that researchers and the general public have underestimated the extent to which women fall behind men in accumulating important career capital that can qualify them for leadership roles, especially at high levels. To correct this omission, Terrance Fitzsimmons and Victor Callan explore the importance of career capital and discuss the many settings in which women and men can gain this capital.

Another common narrative is that the presence of women on corporate boards, and in high-level leader positions more generally, enhances business organizations' financial success. This argument became known as the "business case" for women, whose participation presumably enhances companies' financial outcomes. This claim has been put forth in reports from advocacy

¹ This search identified documents in all databases with titles that contained the words *gender* or *women* or *woman* or *female* or (*sex difference**) combined with *manager** or *leader**.

organizations (e.g., Catalyst, 2004) and management consultant companies such as McKinsey (e.g., Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Baumgarten, 2007), but their evidence derives from relatively simple displays of relevant data. In contrast, as René Adams explains, economists have provided far more sophisticated analyses that probe causal relations. The results she presents call for serious rethinking of the business case rationale for greater inclusion of women on boards.

Even though the research literature offers multiple reasons why women do not ascend to leadership roles at the same rate that men do, stereotyping and prejudice remain important. The understanding of how these obstacles reduce women's opportunities has expanded greatly in recent years, and this Special Issue includes four articles illustrating these advances. In the first of these articles, Crystal Hoyt and Susan Murphy review research showing that the threat of being stereotyped as incompetent can damage women's leadership performance and aspirations. They explore the intricacies of workplace stereotype threat effects, showing how they are reliant on stereotypes about women, men, and leaders in interaction with situational factors and individual differences among potential female leaders. As Andrea Vial, Jaime Napier, and Victoria Brescoll explain, these same stereotypes can make it difficult for women to achieve legitimacy for their leadership when they do hold power. A cascade of consequences can follow from women leaders' perceived illegitimacy, including a precarious psychology that can foster inadequate leader behavior.

Despite the focus on stereotyping in much research on gender and leadership, the stereotype of women as emotional has been neglected, despite its strength and ubiquity. Victoria Brescoll makes a compelling case for the importance of this aspect of the female cultural stereotype. As Brescoll explains, being viewed as a representative of the more emotional sex constrains women's leader behaviors, with potentially damaging consequences. Finally, researchers have begun to take into account that gender stereotypes vary across racial groups in society and that these differences affect reactions to women as leaders. Ashleigh Rosette, Christy Zhou Koval, Anyi Ma, and Robert Livingston provide a compelling analysis of the ways that overall stereotypes about women as less agentic than men vary across racial groups. Their analysis inspires deeper thinking about the dimensions that researchers use to represent stereotype content and about the interactions of gender and racial stereotypes in influencing women's opportunities for leadership.

In considering the reasons for the scarcity of female leaders, researchers have also investigated the impact of group and organizational structures. As work in this area has become more elaborated, it spans many different issues and perspectives (see Kumra, Simpson, & Burke, 2014). We include four articles that represent some of these research endeavors. The first paper, written by Michelle Ryan, Alexander Haslam, Thekla Morgenroth, Floor Rink, Janka Stoker, and Kim Peters, reviews research on the *glass cliff*—the tendency for women to have access to high-level leadership positions that are inherently risky and ultimately prone to failure. The authors not only provide evidence of the glass cliff but also explore the processes that give rise to it and the conditions that regulate its occurrence. Their analysis yields insight into some of the unique problems that can be faced by women at the highest organizational echelons. For another perspective on women who attain high-level leadership positions, Belle Derks, Colette Van Laar, and Naomi Ellemers examine such women's treatment of other women. They identify a *queen bee phenomenon* whereby women leaders in male-dominated organizations can be prompted to distance themselves from more junior women and in the process legitimize gender inequality in their organizations. These authors propose that this behavior is as much a result as a cause of discrimination against women in the workplace.

Aspects of group structure illuminate the emergence and participation of female leaders. Based on their two studies, James Lemoine, Ishani Aggarwal, and Laurens Bujold Steed explore the conditions that favor the emergence of women as leaders in groups composed primarily of men. Their research demonstrates the importance of group personality composition—specifically, group-level extraversion—in fostering women's emergence. Beyond the issue of women's underrepresentation in many decision-making groups lies the matter of how influential women are in such groups. This question is the subject of the article by Tali Mendelberg that examines influence in both natural and controlled settings. She makes the case that groups' procedures for making decisions can profoundly affect whether women have influence equal to men. This research illustrates one of the ways that group-level norms and procedures can mitigate or exacerbate women's lesser voice and authority.

The last two articles in this Special Issue focus on the efficacy of organizational and societal remedies for increasing women in leadership roles. In an effort to determine the effects of family-oriented work-life practices, Kateryna Kalysh, Carol Kulik, and Sanjewa Perera examine the availability of these practices within organizations and their subsequent effects on the proportion of women in management. Their findings indicate that work-life practices can have a positive effect, especially family-friendly leave arrangements and direct provision of services (e.g., childcare or eldercare), but only after a substantial time lag and only in some organizational contexts. Although this research thereby demonstrates the positive effects of some family-oriented work-life practices on women's representation as leaders, it also challenges some overly broad assumptions about the effectiveness of such initiatives.

The final article, authored by Victor Eduardo Sojo, Robert Wood, Sally Wood, and Melissa Wheeler, describes several studies assessing the effectiveness of various policies that act more directly on the number of women in leadership positions: diversity reporting requirements, the setting of targets, and the implementation of quotas. Analyzing data from boards of directors of both Fortune 500 companies and publically traded companies across 91 nations as well as from parliaments across 190 nations, they demonstrate the importance of goal-setting in inducing higher female representation. The broad scope of their findings furthers understanding of some of the types of interventions that can remedy women's underrepresentation in a wide spectrum of leadership roles.

The way forward

This impressive set of twelve articles provides evidence of considerable investment in research on gender and leadership and its payoff in enhanced knowledge. The scope of findings is much larger than what one of us encountered 10 years ago when

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