
**Miles to Go Before We Sleep:
Barriers to Leadership Faced by Women in the
21st-century Workplace**

A Report to the Women's Resource Center

La Sierra University

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In the 21st-century workplace, women have been presidential candidates and vice presidential nominees, they hold senate offices and serve in presidential cabinets. They not only run large universities and fortune 500 companies, but they own their own companies. When it comes to entrepreneurship, women are one of the fastest growing groups, “with a woman starting a business every sixty seconds” (Wilson, 2007, p. 3). Women have risen to leadership roles in every sector of the workplace that one would think women are already running the world. However, though women have come a long way in the workplace, there’s still a long way to go.

The Leadership Gap

In 2006, women accounted for 46 percent of the workforce in the United States. Though women practically made up half of the workforce, only 9.4 percent of women were top executives and 15.6 percent were corporate officers. When looking at the board seats for Fortune 500 companies, only 14.6 percent of those seats belonged to women. Out of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives, 70 belonged to women and of 100 senators, only 16 were women (Wilson, 2007, p. xii). Though many polls show that Americans are ready to see a female president, no woman has been elected to the highest office in the land. If continued at the current rate, Wilson points out that it will take women forty-seven years to reach a point of parity with men when it comes to being corporate officers and seventy-three years to do the same in boardrooms of Fortune 500 companies. The National Women’s Political Caucus does not anticipate political parity for another two centuries if things continue at the current rate in politics.

Internationally, with a rank of sixty-seven, the United States is behind Afghanistan and Cuba in women’s participation in political leadership roles (Wilson, 2007, p. xii). Statistics

gather by the White House Project (2009), a nonprofit organization with the mission to advance women's leadership in all communities and sectors, highlight women's international leadership roles as follows:

- Out of over 180 countries, only 11 have elected women heads of state.
- 16% of members of national parliaments worldwide are women.
- Rwanda has the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world — 49%.
- In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation to grant women full voting rights.
- In the 21st century, Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that does not have universal suffrage.
- There are 39 women ambassadors to the United Nations.
- In over 60 of the world's states, women's income is 50% lower than men's income.
- In every election since 1980, US women have voted in higher rates than men.
- In 1964, Margaret Chase Smith became the first US woman nominated by a major political party for President.

When looking at the statistics presented, it is evident that women are not only underrepresented in the U.S., but in the world. Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of The Children's Defense Fund, said, "You can't be what you can't see" (Wilson, 2007, p. 123). Former president of Iceland, Vigdis Finnbogadottir who served an unprecedented 16 year term that begun in 1980, "likes to tell of boys who asked their mother's during her long term if men could be president of Iceland" (Wilson, 2007, p.11). For centuries young girls around the world have only seen males in leadership roles. Nevertheless, with the recent U.S. election in 2008, the whole world experienced a slight change in paradigm.

The 2008 election will go down in history not only as one where racial barriers were significantly shattered, but also as one that placed millions of cracks on the glass ceiling. With Hillary Rodham Clinton as a viable female presidential candidate, she is accredited for placing 18 million cracks on the glass ceiling. On the contrary, vice presidential nominee, Sarah Palin, is blamed for having plastered over some of those cracks. Putting all qualifications aside, the fact that women were in line for such high leadership positions has led to consider 2008 as the “Year of the Woman.” As a result of the 2008 election, more women than ever before will serve in the 111th United States Congress, with 17 serving in the Senate and 74 in the House of Representatives. When comparing the current United States Congress to the former one in women participation, the percentage change is rather minimal, but the societal transformation was indeed significant. As Wilson points out, “[women’s] business is no longer just gender equity, but the more sweeping industry of societal transformation” (Wilson, 2007, p. xvii). Nevertheless, barriers to leadership that are deeply rooted within culture and society are still very present and continue to keep society from achieving a transformation where men and women no longer see gender differences; but rather focus on the individual strengths that each one can bring to the table to positively change and lead the world.

Cultural Barriers

The biological differences between women and men have specified the gender roles that members of society are expected to abide by. “Women’s ability to bear and nurse children gave them clear advantages in the domestic realm while men’s superior strength gave them work advantages” (Babcock, 2003, p. 65). As women’s roles expanded into the workplace, the jobs that they typically performed also tended to reflect the expected gender roles. “As recently as 2001, 98 percent of child-care workers, 82 percent of elementary school teachers, 91 percent of nurses, 99 percent of secretaries, and 70 percent of social workers in the United States were

women. In the same year in the United States, 87.5 percent of the corporate officers of the 500 largest companies, 90 percent of all engineers, 98 percent of all construction workers, and 70 percent of all financial managers were men” (Babcock, 2003, p. 65).

Identifying jobs with gender also suggests that in order to excel in those positions, one must possess the stereotypical qualities attributed to the gender that the job is identified with. As women had the opportunity to attain higher levels of education, interest to participate in male dominated jobs also increased. However, because of gender, women were discouraged from pursuing such interests as they were thought to lack the competence to perform the job well. Former chair of the Psychology of Women Division of the American Psychological Association, Roberta Nutt, notes that as a result of such clear gender role expectations, “When women first entered the workplace they often tried to do things like men, but it didn’t work. We don’t accept from women what we do from men” (Babcock, 2003, p. 86).

Choices in Communication Styles

According to Connie Glaser (2009), one of the country’s leading experts on gender communication and women in leadership, “when you believe in yourself and what you are saying, your voice, facial expression and stance reflect that” (para. 3). However, for many women being able to communicate effectively and portray the right level of confidence has been a true challenge in the workplace. When it comes to communication, gender stereotypes have a great influence on the way individuals may be perceived. Stereotypically, “men are thought to be assertive, dominant, decisive, ambitious, and self-oriented, whereas women are thought to be warm, expressive, nurturing, emotional, and friendly” (Babcock, 2003, p. 62). When women communicate in ways that are stereotypically expected of men, there are risks attached and what has been classified as a “gender-norm violation” occurs. Such violations can result in penalties

called “societal sanctions” that can range from resentment towards women for acting like men to devaluing a woman’s skills and effectiveness

Nonetheless, there is good news for women in the horizon. Recent research has shown that characteristics stereotypically expressed by women are rising to be that middle ground of preferred expressed behavior in the workplace. In negotiation for example, while assertive or aggressive practices have been favored over time, research shows that an approach of such nature will often only yield short-term results. On the contrary, a more cooperative approach that looks at the situation as a whole and not only at the “what’s in it for me” factor tends to yield more solid long-term results (Babcock, 2003, p.165). This new perspective on the most effective approach to negotiation lines up very well with the communication styles and practices often expressed by women.

Kristin Tillquist, author of *Capitalizing on Kindness* (2009), puts it this way, “21st-century professionals can’t afford not being nice” (p. 19). The characteristics stereotypically expressed by women are often times associated with being nice. Though many times being nice has been mistaken as a sign of weakness, corporation’s recent adoption of “nice” practices also known as corporate social responsibility are slowly changing this stereotype. Corporations who are “nice” or socially responsible tend to be more profitable than those that aren’t. Translated directly to 21st-century professionals, the nicer you are the more successful you will be.

The Wage Gap: Women’s Work Undervalued

In the 21st-century, women’s work continues to be undervalued. It is no myth that women who perform the same job as their male counterparts tend to earn less than them. According to information gathered by the Census Bureau, in 1960, women made about 61 cents for every dollar earned by men. In 2007, women were making 78 cents for every dollar earned by men (The Wage Gap Over Time, 2008). The April 2009 issue of Marie Claire honors April

28, Equal Pay Day, by providing a brief salary report that reads like this, “We’re still getting shortchanged,” and provides the following information:

- For every dollar a man makes, a woman makes 78 cents. That number has climbed 1 cent since 2006.
- Fresh-out-of-college women make \$15, 498 less per year than the boys; over a 35-year career, they’ll make \$210, 000 less.
- A 25-year-old female PR specialist makes the same as her male colleagues; 20 years later, she’ll make about 35,000 less.
- She-EOs make \$303,000 less than their male counterparts.
- Male primary-care physicians make 22 percent more than lady docs.
- Male IT workers make 11.9 percent more than geekettes.
- According to the American Association of University Women, at the current rate, we’ll reach pay equity in 2040.

Though the wage gap has narrowed, it has done so at a very slow rate. It’s been fifty six years since the enactment of the Equal Pay Act and still wage parity has not been achieved. Such a slow narrowing rate of the wage gap is mainly due to a combination of the many challenges that women face in the workplace.

A major factor that seems to have a significant impact on women’s earnings and greatly contributes to the wage gap is that a majority of women fail to negotiate their first salary. In her research, Professor Linda Babcock from Carnegie Mellon University has found that “57 percent of men negotiate their initial compensation, compared with only 7 percent of women” (Agnvail, 2007, p. 7). Accepting an initial salary offer without negotiating can cost women a significant amount of money over the course of their life. As explained by Professor Babcock, if two college graduates, a man and a woman both 21, land a job offer starting at \$25,000, the young

man will very likely negotiate his salary to \$30,000 while the young woman will accept the \$25,000. If they each received a 3 percent raise every year, when they are 60, the man's salary will be at \$92,243 while the woman's salary will only be at \$76,870. Over a 38 year span, the man will have made \$361,171 more than the woman (Agnvail, 2007, p. 70).

In addition to the lack of negotiation, inequality due to ethnicity among women's salaries is another factor affecting the overall wage gap. In a 2004 research study, the Institute for Women's Policy Research reported that while "white females earned 73 cents for every dollar earned by a white male, Asian women earned 68 cents, African-American women, 64 cents, Native American women, 58 cents, and Latina women earned 51 cents per dollar" (Lewis, 2004, para. 3).

When accounting for hours spent in the workplace, women tend to put in fewer hours than men, thus directly impacting women's earnings and the wage gap as a whole. This is mainly due to the fact that women are the primary caregivers and therefore more likely than men to choose to take time off when the kids are sick. Though many contributing factors of the wage gap are known, a recent study released by the American Association of University Women "found that even after controlling for hours, occupations, parenting and other factors that might affect earnings, one-quarter of the pay gap remains unexplained" (Agnvail, 2007, pg. 70).

Societal Barriers

In addition to the deeply rooted cultural barriers to leadership that women still come across, society as a whole also sets its own barriers by feeding in to the cultural norms and expecting women to abide by them.

Effects of Socialization of Women

According to recent case studies and research, women tend to be more communal while men tend to be more independent. "When women have to make a decision they will often

process and look at options out loud while men tend to process internally until they come up with a solution” (Lieberman, 2008, p.1). Because women are more relationship oriented, they tend to lead by consensus. “Men tend to be more hierarchical and include only the people closest to them at their level in the decision making process when they think it is necessary” (Lieberman, 2008, p.1). Since most women are predisposed to the ideal that they must be part of a team, anything that contradicts that notion would be going against their socialization. These contradictions occur when women need to be competitive, assertive, and ask for pay raises. When working in the workforce, contributing ones talent and skills to the team is imperative; but establishing your credentials, taking credit for your own accomplishments, and having ambition are important as well.

Women often confuse or see competition as a negative thing. “Competition is more pronounced at the top, because the men who win these positions are self-selected at the highest levels. They are always thinking, 'I've got to dominate, I've got to beat you, and I've got to show that I've won” (Rubin, 2007, p.3). When women reach these upper levels of a company, they need to express more assertiveness in order to succeed. This does not mean that they need to act “manly” or overtly aggressive. However, they can have ambition and be confident in their abilities to do the job well. “Ambition is a complex internal drive, and it relies heavily on a belief in one's own potential. In order to have high aspirations, you have to have a sense of your own competence” (Nordell, 2006, p.2).

Asking for a pay raise is another challenge that some women face. This process is perceived to be too intimidating for some women, causing them not to ask at all or easily agree to what is offered by the employer. Insecurities created through socialization make it difficult for women to negotiate when asking for a higher salary. Women may feel that they are not experienced or qualified to obtain a raise. “For the most part, women tend to experience less

success when negotiating, because they are more willing to concede things that they really should not concede in a negotiation (like accepting a lower salary than they should)” (Fereyra, 2007,p.1). By being properly prepared to ask and again relying on their skills and abilities, the negotiation process can be a successful process for women. “As Lynda Obst, producer of "Sleepless in Seattle" recently noted ‘Women will fight for everyone but themselves. Women need to learn to demand more, negotiate better and tougher and walk away when the money's not right’” (Shattering Glass Ceilings and Walls, 1996, p.4)

However, it is hard for women to break away from their socialization partly due to the way they are raised not to seek recognition. “[According to a case study] a woman must be 2.5 times as productive [then men] to be judged equally competent, she receives that much *less* recognition for equal productivity” (Nordell, 2006, p.1). In fact women have to work harder than men in order to receive any recognition. “If women try to overcome this misattribution [false characterization] by claiming their ideas, they may be seen as boastful and experience a negative reaction” (Pfirman, 2004, p.2). Therefore, by seeking recognition for their accomplishments, women are falsely characterized as arrogant. Furthermore, women receive negative signals, such as comments or stares, which reinforce the concept that they should not compete and seek credit for their own accomplishments. Despite the negative effects of socialization, women should start to take actions to counteract them.

Balancing Work and Family

“Family is the driving force of our [women’s] lives. You need family to support you and in most homes you need money to support your family” (Houde, 2008, p.1). In the 21st century, the increasing pressures in the workforce pose a challenge for women in the Unites States to have both a successful career and a good family life. “Success at both depends on the circumstances: Raising both a healthy family and having a professional career depends on certain critical life

circumstances, including the woman's desire to do both” (Zappert, 2002, p.2). Traditionally, before 1960 in America, women were confined to the role of housewives, being solely responsible for all the domestic responsibilities at home.

Men were the “breadwinner” and provided financially for the family. During World War II women started to work due to shortages of employees because the men went to war. Since then women have continued to be in the workplace. However, the traditional family is not that prevalent anymore. “Today 55% of working women provide half or more of their families’ income. Only 1/5 of families with children fit the stereotype of Dad as breadwinner, Mom full-time at home” (Women and Work, 2008, p.4).

As more women are in the work force and pursuing their career, they are tending to have children later on in life. “It [a study] suggests that delaying motherhood may have some benefits for women—probably related to being more career focused and having higher social standing” (“Deciding When to”, 2007,p.1). This is one of the reoccurring trends seen today. Long hours at work, continuous strain perform one’s job, and job insecurity make balancing a career and family difficult when trying to establish a high power position in one’s career. The organizations in which these women work are not family oriented and clearly demonstrate signs that mothers are not welcome, and pregnancy on the job is not tolerated. Therefore, most of these women have their children in their late thirties and early forties, when they are more professionally secure. A study done by Shelley Correll, in the American Journal of Sociology, gives further evidence to why some women are deciding to have children later on in life as oppose to in the beginning or middle of their careers.

She and her colleagues at Cornell University created an ideal job applicant with a successful track record, an uninterrupted work history, a buff resume, the whole deal. Then they tucked a little telltale factoid into some of the resumes with a tip-off about

mom-ness. It described her as an officer in a parent-teacher association. As a result, Moms were seen as less competent and committed. Moms were half as likely to be hired as childless women or men with or without kids (Goodman, 2007, p.1). This study reaffirms the notion that balancing work and family is not acceptable. Either one chooses work or faces tremendous difficulty being hired.

However, women working for a family-friendly organization face considerably less stress and heartaches when it comes to juggling their career and family. The terms “family-friendly workplace,” “family-friendly company,” and “family-friendly employer,” refers to the accepting and caring environment that employers create within the organization that allows quality family life (Pitt-Catsouphes, 2002, p.1). These organizations foster an environment that goes to support the concept that a woman can have balance—a family, career, and a social life effectively. Laws such as The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 offer women more flexibility and protection when taking care of children, in the event that they become seriously ill. There are other laws enacted that help women balance a family and career efficiently; however, the organization in which a women works for is responsible for implementing them properly. An employer that cares for the well-being of their employees and families, “might reduce employee stress by offering flex-time, more part-time employment opportunities, and support for employees who need to take family leave time” (Grandon, 1999, p.2).

Overall, there is no perfect time to have children. How a person values a family or a career influence when they might be ready to have children. In the 21st century there are more employees gravitating towards being family oriented, especially male employees who have a wife or children, “[these male employees are] much more interested in getting family and work time in the right proportions” (Garfinkle, 2006, p.1). Working parents are taking more of an active role in their children’s life. “In order to retain a productive and competitive work force,

issues related to family well-being must be part of the overall employment picture” (Zappert, 2002, p.2).

Networking

The phrase, “It’s not what you know but who you know” is a common terminology that is used in the workforce. It is important to work hard, gain the expert knowledge needed in one’s career, and learn how to properly apply that knowledge at work. However, forming good networks will give women more insight, knowledge, and connections to other people within the workforce. For example, in the profession of law, many hours networking outside the office are required in order to move up the law firm ladder. “Women juggling careers and families sometimes decide to skip some of those functions because of the time involved. And by doing so, they miss out on opportunities to establish the kind of relationships it takes to advance professionally” (Gannon, 2006, p.1). In order to get more exposure, networking is crucial. Even though women might miss out on their work- related networking activities, creating their own networks can also help counteract the opportunities they miss.

Through networking, women can “share [better] practices, learn from each other, gain visibility, develop leadership skills, and enhance their career development - providing value to both the company and the women” (O’Brien, 2000, p.2). However, it is imperative that women select beneficial contacts that will help them advance themselves in their careers. They can do this by aligning themselves with established professionals in the career or position they want to obtain. These important relationships may result in job opportunities that would not have been previously available without the contact.

Developing a good image and presence are important in networking as well. “The other communication piece that is of extreme importance when networking is to present a powerful image” (O’Brien, 2000, p.3). The phrase, “birds of a feather flock together” is another saying

that is relevant to human interaction. Therefore, if one presents themselves as powerful, then other powerful people will want to network with them. Powerful does not mean women have to be overly aggressive, but to support their ideas and opinions and be confident in their capabilities. Having a good network can help women to succeed in the workforce today.

Perception of Women

A common misconception is that many professional women gain power in the workforce by utilizing their flirting skills and sexuality to entice men. Gomez quotes, “Now although some women in certain circumstances have used ‘their assets’ to get what they want, the majority of women have worked hard and stared adversity straight in the face to achieve their desired success” (Gomez, 2007, p1). In fact, research in the past and present on this topic reveals that there are fewer promotions for women that act flirtatious in the workplace.

A study done by researchers at Tulan University supports and provides actual data confirming this. In this study, women who dress and interact provocatively with male co-workers or superiors are less successful moving up the career ladder. “The other half [women who did not use their sexuality] said they never engaged in such activity, and those women have earned an average of three promotions, vs. two for the group that had employed sexuality. Those who said they never used sexuality were, on average, in the \$75,000-\$100,000 income range; the others fell, on average, in the next-lowest range, \$50,000 to \$75,000” (Jones, 2005, p.1). Flirting seems to be less successful than just doing one’s job excellently.

Women are and should be treated as competent professionals. One way to overcome stereotypes that are placed on women in the workplace is by women acting how they want to be treated. “Don’t act the office mother for your male colleagues, pouring their tea or delivering their post. Don’t be flirtatious or cute otherwise you will be treated like a girlfriend” (Arlene, 2008, p.1). Women should have strictly professional relationships with male co-workers. This

does not mean you have to be mean and cold, but it is important to have and maintain boundaries.

Sexual Harassment

One of the most reviewed topics and work issues discussed in the workplace is that of sexual harassment. Although the majority of women say they haven't suffered discrimination or sexual harassment, this does not mean it never happens. Many Americans believe that sex discrimination no longer presents a significant problem for working women. However, according to Gomez, 40% of women between the ages of 35 and 49 have been sexually harassed. A recent form of sexual harassment is soft sexual harassment.

Offensive comments and jokes can be regarded as a soft form of sexual harassment. They usually make you feel uncomfortable and defensive. Soft sexual harassment is very hard to document or to hold the person responsible for their actions. Research shows, “more difficult to pin down are subtle innuendos, inappropriate gestures, suggestions or hints, leers, jokes and degrading remarks” (Arlene, 2008, p.1). Jokes and innuendos have multiple meanings making it hard for the person being harassed to convince their superiors that the comment was offensive. When a soft sexual harassment comment is made, women should confront the issue and clearly express how inappropriate the comment is and how it is not appreciated. If this issue cannot be resolved by communicating to the person directly, a third party might be necessary. Women’s goal should be to, “create [and maintain] a climate of courtesy and respect which will be appreciated by colleagues, clients and customers alike” (Arlene, 2008, p.1).

Conclusion:

As women’s leadership roles in the 21st-century workplace continue to increase, women must take advantage of those positions and use them as a tool for change. It is through

leadership positions that new policies to eliminate disparities, decrease sexual harassment and encourage family friendly work environments can be created. It is time to redefine what a leader is all about. For way to long has the definition of a leader been the picture of a man. As Marie C. Wilson clarifies, in no way is this asking of men to give up their power, women are simply asking for that power to be shared with them and to be allowed to help as equals (Wilson, 2007, p. 6). Though in the words of Robert Frost there are many “miles to go before we sleep”, it is also important to remember that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with one single step”.

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