

The Leadership Gap in Education

Tanya Tarbutton

The Gender Gap in Education

Women are more visible than men in almost every area of education; however, they are underrepresented in top-tier leadership positions. There is no shortage of female educators; however, there is a shortage of female leaders. Scholarly have highlighted this discrepancy, shedding light on a century-old problem.

This article explores some of the reasons women are underrepresented in top-tier leadership positions within educational institutions and identifies possible solutions for addressing the problem. To fully comprehend the issue, a brief historical context is provided to introduce the topic.

Women Entering the Workforce

Women have been fighting for equal representation for decades. As early as 1868, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution provided equal protection of the law for all citizens, including women. In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution provided women the right to vote and to hold a greater status within society, allowing them the opportunity to enter the workforce more freely.

The start of World War II demanded women enter the workforce in greater numbers as many men went off to serve

their country in battle. The struggle for gender equality continued with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX in 1972 (Polka, Litchka, & Davis, 2008).

More recently, initiatives such as the Workplace Gender Equity Act of 2012 and the HeforShe movement of 2014 as well as the #MeToo movement of 2017 have continued to highlight the efforts of women to secure gender equality. Nevertheless, the battle has not been won. Underrepresentation of women can be viewed as recently as 2016 in even the most powerful governmental bodies, such as Congress, which is comprised of 75% men and only 25% women (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2016).

These numbers are by no means reflective of the constituent population, since women obviously make up approximately 50% of the population. It appears that government laws, mandates, and action plans have done little more than provide rhetoric concerning this issue. In 2016, while women made up approximately half of the U.S. population, and they occupied more than 50% of workforce positions (U.S. Census, 2016), they nevertheless received roughly 80 cents to every dollar a man earned for similar work (Schmitz, 2017).

In examining the U.S. educational system, this same trend is evident. According to an American Association of School Administrators survey, 94% of female superintendents earned on average \$2,100 less than their male counterparts (Schmitz, 2017). This tendency extended into higher education institutions, where women earned an average of 11.4% less than men in similar positions (Grove, 2015).

Could it be that women are less qualified than men and therefore earn fewer dollars? Not according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2013), which found that women are earning more degrees than men at every level, including bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

Women in School Administration

A review of research on both K–12 educational systems and higher education institutions revealed a skewed gender distribution of corner office leadership positions (Maranto, Carroll, Cheng, & Teodoro, 2018). Within K–12 systems, women made up approximately 75% of the teaching force and held approximately 21% of superintendent positions (Polka et al., 2008).

The American Association of School Administrators (2014) noted that only 20.5% of 1,711 surveyed superintendents identified as female. The American Association of University Women (2016) concurred, reporting that 20% of superintendents were women. An examination of higher education data showed that 48% of higher education faculty positions were held by women (American Association of University Professors, 2014), whereas 23% of university presidencies were occupied by women (Branch-Brioso, 2009).

The disproportionate underrepresentation of female leaders can be seen across the fabric of American education. Research reveals that White men are still more likely to be visible in top-tier leadership positions than are women or members of any ethnic minority (Morrison, 2018).

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Why Are There So Few Female Leaders?

Scholarly research has suggested several reasons why women are less visible than men in top-tier leadership positions. These reasons comprise both internal and external barriers. Three common barriers identified in the research include women's personal "choice" as well as career positioning and the glass ceiling effect (AAUW, 2016).

Women's Personal Choice

According to the AAUW (2016), "personal choices are never made in a vacuum. Organizational, cultural, economic, and policy barriers shape both men's and women's choices and opportunities" (p. 15). Women have been viewed as caretakers and family nurturers for decades. Women are often responsible for taking care of children, aging parents, and other family members.

Responsibilities surrounding personal relationships are identified as one of the top reasons women are less visible in corner office leadership positions (AAUW, 2016; Polka et al., 2008; Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004). Managing the conflicting demands between career and family responsibilities has been a *bona fide* barrier women have shouldered and has often resulted in women removing themselves from the workforce (Sandberg, 2013; Tarr, 2018).

Research has suggested that female superintendents are more likely to be widowed, single, or divorced or to have commuter marriages than their male counterparts (Reed & Patterson, 2007). According to Cheung and Halpern (2010), there is a *motherhood wage penalty* in academia whereby women with children are viewed as less capable than women without children.

In other research, the White House Project (2009) found that 63% of female university presidents were married compared to 89% of male university presidents and that 68% of female university presidents were parents compared to 91% of male university presidents. A similar finding was also present in the U.S. business sector (Sandberg, 2013).

Other external influences surrounding a woman's so-called personal choice include the lack of family-friendly leave policies at the administrative level and wage-earning differences between men and women (AAUW, 2016). Maranto et al. (2018) explained that female leaders might have been more inclined to stay in teacher roles due to the favorable, family-friendly

policies and increased time off surrounding such positions. Women's personal choices appeared to be heavily influenced by organizational theory and practice.

Career Positioning

Career positioning is viewed as a barrier to women pursuing top-tier leadership positions in K–12 education (Glass, 2000; Miller, Washington, & Fiene, 2006; Superville, 2017). The path to the superintendency is very closely aligned to the high school principalship (Sharp et al., 2004; Superville, 2017), and according to the NCES (2013), almost 70% of high school principals are men.

More in-depth research has continued to reveal that the road to being a high school principal is also closely aligned to that of the athletic director. Not surprisingly, men are three times as likely as women to be athletic directors (Maranto et al., 2018). Women, on the contrary, are more likely to hold entry-level leadership positions at the elementary level or to be employed as curriculum specialists, neither of which aligns directly to the superintendency.

To complicate the issue, men are promoted at an increased rate compared to women (Maranto et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2006; Tarr, 2018). Men advance from entry-level leadership positions to advanced leadership positions at an accelerated rate compared to women. Barriers such as these are thought to have an impact on women's leadership opportunities.

Glass Ceiling Effect

The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) defined the glass ceiling as "those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organizations into managerial level." The glass ceiling effect is significant in the blocking of women from top-tier leadership positions (Williams, 2010).

The glass ceiling effect is influenced by multiple factors, including, but not limited to, cognitive stereotyping of roles (Williams, 2004), hierarchical gender positioning in careers (Washington, Miller, & Fiene, 2007), and decision makers being disproportionately male (Bonawitz & Andel, 2009).

It is important to acknowledge that the preceding factors are often unintentional. Such unintentional or *implicit bias* (AAUW, 2016) was addressed by the AAUW's report *Barriers and Bias: The Status of Women in Leadership*. As part of

the report, it was noted that an individual could take a test to determine his or her level of unconscious bias as it related to gender. *Implicit bias* can be found in both men and women. (Check out your level of bias by visiting the site and taking the test at <https://www.aauw.org/>.)

The glass ceiling effect is thought to have had an impact on women's advancement toward executive leadership positions in educational systems. Superville (2017) acknowledged that "educators also see subtle biases in how school boards and search firms recruit candidates, and negative stereotypes about women's abilities to lead large institutions are still pervasive" (p. 10). Narrow thinking patterns continue to influence women's circumstances.

Why Is This Important, and What Can Be Done to Solve the Problem?

Female leaders bring unique insight and skill sets to leadership positions. According to one nonprofit study, having women in top leadership positions brings increased diversity and growth mind-sets to organizations (Schechtman, 2004). Another study found that businesses with higher numbers of female executives saw increased profits and employee satisfaction (Catalyst, 2013). It was reported that the more gender diversified a company was, the more success the company enjoyed.

With closer analysis, one study found that women outperformed men on 12 out of 16 leadership competencies, including *relationship building, displaying high integrity and honesty, driving for results, developing others, and inspiring and motivating* (Catalyst, 2013). Skills such as these are exceptional building blocks for strengthening America's public education system.

Female leaders bring promising opportunities for change and advancement. The Villa Leadership Group (2015), a nonprofit research organization, identified the largest pool of unexplored leadership potential as resting with women. Given the diverse tapestry of the U.S. educational system and the unique needs of the student body, female leaders are a necessity if students are to receive the best possible educational experiences.

As a world leader, the U.S. is obligated to unleash and embrace the power and potential of female leaders so that other countries can follow suit. According to Grogan (as cited in Superville, 2017), "board members who don't look for diverse backgrounds when they consider candidates

are compounding the problem, which also plagues other sectors of society trying to address underrepresentation of women, African Americans, Latinos, and other groups” (p. 11).

Maranto et al. (2018) pointedly stated that “gendered educational leadership career paths violate 21st century workplace norms of gender equality” (p. 14). Women around the globe and across America can connect with, inform, and educate one another, empowering all to challenge outdated practices that support the gender gap in education.

Organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (2015) have adopted gender equality as a sustainable development goal. Such deliberate and intentional efforts focusing on gender equality are needed if gender parity is to transpire.

Ana Maria Menendez, senior policy advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General, advised, “This is a long and overdue issue. Our aim was to achieve gender parity in the UN System by 2000. 18 years later we’re still not there” (UN Women, 2018, para. 4). Women have not yet made it to the top of any profession anywhere in the world (Sandberg, 2013). Women continue to be underrepresented as top-tier leaders in government, the business world, and the private sector, including among nonprofit organizations (Marinosdottir & Erlingsdottir, 2017; Villa Leadership Group, 2015). In examining the practices of our allies across the globe, there is much to be learned.

Countries such as Norway, Finland, and Sweden have made it to the top of the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index by addressing and decreasing the gender gap (Marinosdottir & Erlingsdottir, 2017). Perhaps Iceland has the most to teach others, as it is ranked first in the world for closing the overall gender gap (Marinosdottir & Erlingsdottir, 2017).

On this same index, the U.S. ranks 49th out of 144 countries. Based on the report’s findings, gender parity in North America will be reached in 168 years. We can gather two powerful lessons from Iceland’s experiences: (a) Women need to unite in support of gender equality and (b) women and men need to be equally empowered as decision makers (Marinosdottir & Erlingsdottir, 2017).

Conclusion

To advance women’s careers toward the trajectory of school district superintendents or university presidents, a focused

effort needs to be made to intentionally promote and interview female leaders on pace with men. Hiring committees and school boards need to implement practices for advancing men and women at a similar rate (Maranto et al., 2018).

Pathways to top-tier leadership positions must be broadened to include nontraditional avenues, thereby offering alternative paths to the superintendency and presidency. Family-friendly policies that recognize and appreciate the struggles associated with familial responsibilities should be adopted and implemented within organizations with fidelity.

Finally, professional development training highlighting *implicit bias* should be undertaken to update accountability measures and evaluations. Trends such as these are needed to deconstruct and challenge the leadership gap status quo.

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