

# TURNING STEPS INTO LEAPS: WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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*In the past year, we as a society have made some big steps in gaining gender equality within leadership positions; however, we still have many leaps left to go. Women leaders are still significantly lacking in almost every field, including education, medicine, business, politics, and film. And yet, women have been popularly regarded as just as effective at being leaders as men. Why then do women struggle to get into these high leadership positions? Gender discrimination, unrealistic and unfair expectations for women, and internal doubts are just some of the reasons making it more difficult for women to become powerful leaders. So how do we fix this? By listening, learning, observing, and communicating with one another, both women and men can close the gap standing between women and leadership. Both groups have much to do before gender equality is obtained, but that does not mean it is impossible. The barrier seems large and intimidating, but if recent events have proven anything, it is that the barrier is breakable.*

There is no denying that a barrier exists between women and high leadership positions, especially in politics and business. In 2018, there were more women elected into Congress than ever before, which was an amazing feat. However, women make up 50.8% of the U.S. population, but only about 24% of Congress is comprised of women, and it only gets worse from there (Desilver, 2018). According to “The Women’s Leadership Gap,” written by Judith Warner and Danielle Corey (2017) in *Center for American Progress*, “[women] are only 25 percent of executive- and senior-level officials and managers, hold only 20 percent of board seats, and are only

6 percent of CEOs” (Warner & Corey, 2017, para. 8). It is even more difficult for women of color; according to the Center for American Women and Politics (2018), women of color only take up 4 out of 100 seats in the Senate. Women of color also only occupy “4 percent of top corporate jobs [and] 3 percent of board seats” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 5). In addition, there is a significant lack of female leaders in film, medicine, education, and the list goes on and on (Warner & Corey, 2017). Don’t get me wrong, any strides women make in gaining recognition, leadership positions, and equality should not be taken lightly and ought to be celebrated. But now, more than ever, it is important to continuously make our voices heard so these accomplishments become more impressive as time goes on. If we sit idly by, content with just this current leap into leadership positions, then it is very likely we may lose the ground we have gained. This essay will delve into why women are valuable assets in any and all leadership positions, as well as what women and men can and ought to do to help each other succeed.

So, what specifically do women bring to the table? According to the *Pew Research Center* in their article “Women and Leadership 2018” by Horowitz, Igielnik, and Parker (2018), a majority of the public see women as having many benefits within leadership roles. The authors explain that the majority see women and men as equal in creating safe and respectful working environments, valuing diversity, and providing fair pay, fair benefits, and guidance. Furthermore, “In both business and politics, majorities say women are better than men when it comes to being compassionate and empathetic, and substantial shares say women are better at working out compromises” (Horowitz, Igielnik, & Parker, 2018, para. 7). The article describes how most adults see women as better “role models for children” and at being respectful and civil (Horowitz et al., 2018). This is not to say that men are not effective leaders; the same study also states how men are more willing to take risks than women (Horowitz et al., 2018). In fact, 57% of Americans believe that, although women and men may have different leadership styles, neither is necessarily more effective than the other (Horowitz et al., 2018). Both women and men have an abundance of skills and knowledge to utilize, which is the issue at hand; despite women being popularly regarded as just as deserving of leadership as men, they still struggle to get into those positions.

So why exactly are women not in more leadership positions? As Sheryl Sandberg (2013) so candidly put it in her book, *Lean In*, “The blunt truth is that men still run the world” (p. 5), and gender discrimination is still a huge problem in many industries and fields. Sandberg (2013) described her own experiences, specifically as a pregnant woman who realized that no other pregnant women in the company before her understood they were entitled to ask for help and better accommodations. Women who are too afraid to speak up for themselves within their careers are another reason why we are not making any huge strides in gender equality. *Both women and men* have to listen to and communicate with each other, as well as be aware of the struggles the other is facing.

Another issue is that women sometimes feel as if they must prove themselves significantly more within their field than men, which definitely correlates to the problem of gender discrimination (Horowitz et al., 2018). In the article by Horowitz et al. (2018), a majority of Republican women stated that another reason for women not achieving higher positions is because of “Americans not being ready to elect women” (para. 13), which again just means a majority of Americans are discriminating on the basis of gender. However, this idea that Americans are not ready to elect women is interesting considering the article also says “a majority of Americans (59%) say there are too few women in top leadership positions in politics and in business today, with about half saying, ideally, there would be equal numbers of men and women” (Horowitz et al., 2018, para. 18). So perhaps there are some unconscious biases happening in certain areas of our culture.

Another issue is that women leaders can be stuck in a liminal space, where they must appear and act in contradictory ways. *Harvard Business Review* posted an article titled “How Women Manage the Gendered Norms of Leadership,” written by Wei Zheng, Ronit Kark, and Alyson Meister (2018) explaining how women leaders have to appear both “warm and nice (what society traditionally expects from women), as well as competent or tough (what society traditionally expects from men and leaders)” (para. 1). The article clearly states how it is unfair that women have this “double-bind,” in which they are expected to do two contradictory things at once, and how the system needs to change. It also acknowledges

that, until we can fix the system, women will have to figure out strategies on how to get around this issue (Zheng et al., 2018). The article offers advice for how women can change their behavior in order to be respected more as leaders. Unfortunately, this seems to be a disappointing necessity in today's political and business arenas.

In the past couple of years, discussion of equality between women and men has been brought up more often. The "Me Too" movement raised awareness of sexual assault and encouraged women and men alike to make their voices heard. The first statue of a woman in Parliament Square was created and unveiled in 2018. Even more recently, Gillette created a short film called "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be," which was released January 2019 and shined light onto the idea of toxic masculinity and how we all ought to treat each other with respect and compassion. It is important we keep these conversations going so that changes will be made. As heartbreaking as a comparison this is, we do not want gender equality to fall into the same trap as school shootings, where our country heatedly discusses the tragedy of the shootings and demands changes before losing all steam after about a month of it happening. Thus, school shootings continue with little to no changes being made. Women and men need to continuously and consistently discuss the issues of inequality and the barriers that lie between the two so they are not forgotten so easily.

But how exactly can we do this? It is not a simple feat. However, there is much we can do just as individuals in our day-to-day lives. Earlier, I mentioned how just being willing to listen to and communicate with each other is a small step towards reaching an understanding. When women and men can understand where the other is coming from, it will be significantly easier for us to work together and make the changes necessary to achieve equality. It is important to note that women are far more likely to notice gender-related barriers than men, which means it truly is vital for women speak up about these barriers (Horowitz et al., 2018). An article titled "The Most Undervalued Leadership Traits of Women," which was posted on *Forbes* and written by Glenn Llopis (2014), agrees: "My experiences have taught me that great women make it a point to teach men about women" (para. 4). It's not really a secret that women and men often tend to struggle to understand each other. However, just as it

is necessary for women to speak up, it is just as important for men to pay attention, because there may be cases where a woman is too afraid to speak up due to fear for her personal safety or security within the workplace. Llopis's article describes how he was able to learn from the women in his life, which is an awesome sentiment and is something everyone can learn from. By being open and willing to learn from one another, it will be significantly easier for us to reach gender equality.

The truth of the matter is this: We should certainly be happy and grateful for all the small steps our society is taking towards gender equality, especially when we see how far behind other countries are regarding the same topic. However, just because "things could be worse should not stop us from trying to make them better" (Sandberg, 2013, p. 5). Many leaps are left to make before we can even think of relaxing for a moment. We cannot lose sight of what equality means and how all people are entitled to have it. Just as some men ought to come to the realization that masculinity is not the cruelty of your words nor the strength of your fist, so must some women understand that we are strong, important, and meaningful. We must not let harmful, heartless phrases seep into our minds and scare us away from having aspirations to become powerful people. Don't let others' doubts become your doubts. Support one another and learn from each other. And as for that barrier? Don't worry, it's breakable.

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