

## Leadership Development and Women's Advancement into Leadership Roles

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- There are a number of varied reasons behind the dearth of women in leadership positions.
- Solutions in the form of development programmes aimed specifically at women can miss the complex, structural issues underpinning the problem. They can imply women are less able as leaders and need 'fixing' to address deficiencies.
- Focusing on the systemic barriers to women's advancement can unearth inherent biases that maintain inequalities. This can encourage more workable and context appropriate solutions.

Developing fair and inclusive workplaces is an enduring challenge for leadership development. A core concern is fostering leadership practices that enable both women and men to thrive. Yet women's progression into influential leadership roles remains slow.

Our research on gender equality statistics<sup>1</sup> reveals the complexity of the problem: representation, pay, and managing family responsibilities alongside a career, all form a web of interconnected issues. These issues are further complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stead, V., Martin, A.V. Remke, R. Leitch. C. 2020. Gender Matters 2020. Lancaster University Management School.

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Hupkau, Barbara Petrongolo 22 April 2020 COVID-19 and gender gaps: Latest evidence and lessons from the UK

## The lack of women in leadership: A complex, persistent problem

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The 2019 Hampton-Alexander review<sup>3</sup> looked at how to increase women's representation at senior levels. Recent figures<sup>4</sup> show that a third of FTSE 100 board members are now women, up from 12.5% less than a decade ago. However, this represents a yearly average increase of barely 1%, and pockets of unequal representation remain, for example, only 15% of FTSE 100 finance directors are women.

Further evidence of the difficulty in developing diverse leadership practice comes from recent pay gap reporting. Legislation introduced in 2017 requires organisations of more than 250 employees to publish data on their gender pay gaps - the difference between the average hourly earnings of men and women in the organisation, across all types of work. Reporting shows a gender pay gap of 15.9% for full-time employees in the private sector and 10.6% in the public sector.<sup>5</sup> It also notes that the pay gap is more pronounced among the highest earners<sup>6</sup> There are currently no sectors in the UK economy where women are paid the same

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Stead, V. May 2020. HR Magazine Finding gender equality in the blur between home and work

<sup>3</sup> Hampton-Alexander Review, 2019

<sup>4</sup> Government press release \* February 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/third-of-ftse-100-board-members-now-women-but-business-secretary-says-more-needs-to-be-done>

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons Briefing Paper Number 7068, 2 January 2020. The Gender Pay Gap.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, M & Kaya, E. 2019 Understanding the Gender Pay Gap within the UK Public Sector. Research Report for Office of Manpower Economics (OME).

as men. While there is progress towards closing gaps for younger workers, older women experience a wider pay gap.<sup>7</sup>

A major stalling point for women's careers is at middle management level. This career stage often coincides with choosing to have a family or becoming responsible for elderly parents. As women continue to be the main care-givers in our society, this can negatively impact their careers. Through increased working from home due to Covid-19, this problem is exacerbated with women having limited access to support for childcare or dependants.<sup>8</sup> Government has acted to support new parents at work through a shared parental leave policy. However, take-up has been minimal: fathers feel unable to take advantage due to lost income and the risk that leaving may affect job prospects.<sup>9</sup>

Together these issues reveal a continued gap between policy efforts on the one hand, and women's progress into leadership roles on the other.

### The problem with the solution of women's development

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There has been a significant rise in women's leadership development programmes as a response to the lack of gender diversity in leadership roles.

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<sup>7</sup> GOV.UK, <https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/> reported in the Financial Times April 23 2019 <https://ig.ft.com/gender-pay-gap-UK-2019/>

<sup>8</sup> Stead, V. May 2020. HR Magazine [Finding gender equality in the blur between home and work](#)

<sup>9</sup> House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee. Fathers and the Workplace. First Report of Session 2017-2019. March 2018.

This response has typically centred on equipping women with skills and knowledge to build leadership capacity and develop peer networks. Initiatives include bespoke mentoring and coaching to enable women to work with experienced senior leaders on a one-to-one basis or in small groups.

The value of such initiatives for women's development, including the opportunity for women to freely exchange experiences, is widely recognised. It is supported both by organisations and in demand from individuals. Yet women's progress into positions of power remains slow. Why is this kind of development not having more of an impact on women's access to senior roles?

One critique is that adopting women's development programmes risks promoting a 'fix the woman' approach. Such approaches might imply women require specialist training over and above what may be seen as standard leadership development. This in turn can inadvertently emphasise traditional stereotypes of men as naturally good leaders and women as needing to be 'fixed' in order to be as capable as men.<sup>10</sup>

Another criticism is that by focusing on women's personal development, women are seen not only as the problem, but also as responsible for the solution. One illustration is the popular 'Lean In' approach developed by Facebook's Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg. This approach offers women strategies to progress, and promotes success as available to those

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<sup>10</sup> Ely, R.J., Ibarra, H. & Kolb, D.M., (2011) Taking Gender into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs. Academy of Management learning & Education. Vol. 10(3): 474-483.

willing to work hard.<sup>11</sup> The focus on the individual woman as responsible for her own success, or lack of it, has received strong criticism as disconnected from structural barriers that perpetuate gender inequality.<sup>12</sup> This disconnect fails to account for gendered assumptions that might advantage some over others. For example, a culture of presenteeism places those with family responsibilities, still typically women, at a disadvantage. While working from home may seem to mitigate this issue, additional domestic burdens can constrain women's presence in an online environment. If women then fail to progress, this can reinforce a 'blame the woman' attitude whereby lack of advancement is viewed as the woman's fault rather than due to structural barriers.

### Rethinking our approach to leadership development

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If women's development is insufficient as a response to the persistent under-representation of women in leadership roles, what else can leadership development offer? Perhaps we need to re-examine our approach to the problem.

My research with colleagues reveals a need to shift our thinking from focusing solely on the individual who feels the effect of workplace inequalities, to engage with the organisational context in which inequalities occur.<sup>13</sup> If issues of inclusivity are centred

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<sup>11</sup> Sandberg, S. with Scovell, N. (2015) *Lean In. Women, work and the will to lead*. London: WHAllen.

<sup>12</sup> Rotenberg, C. (2014) *the Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. *Cultural Studies*, Vol.28(3): 418-437.

<sup>13</sup> Stead, V. and Elliott, C. (2019) 'Media Artefacts as Public Pedagogy for Women's Leadership Development' *Management Learning*, Vol 50 (2): 171-188. Stead, V., Martin, A.V., Remke, R., Leitch, C. 2020 *Gender Matters 2020*. Lancaster University Management School.

only on marginalised groups, this can distance the wider organisation from taking responsibility. It can also fuel perceptions that it is up to those particular groups to find solutions to 'fix' themselves.

Adopting a 'fix the system' approach enables leadership development to initiate conversations both within and across different groupings about everyday workplace practices. Understanding how employees experience the everyday - from formal meetings and processes such as promotion, to informal social networking - can help uncover inherent bias in our systems that may be preventing or stalling women's progression. For instance, one woman's experience from my research<sup>14</sup> highlighted the difficulty of putting diverse recruitment panels into practice at leadership level. As there are typically fewer women in top roles, women can be called on more frequently than men to participate in senior recruitment panels. This can leave less time for the strategic tasks that are often required for promotion. A focus on 'fix the system' in leadership development can help leaders to examine how policy is put into practice and how it is experienced. Taking the example of the leadership level recruitment panel as an illustration, a focus on 'fix the system' helps us to think about how to maintain diverse recruitment policy that does not place an unfair burden on women. This can also raise issues for other underrepresented groups at leadership levels. Recognising that we may experience things differently and providing the space to share these experiences can help to reveal opportunities for positive change and to

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<sup>14</sup> Stead, V. (2013) *Learning to deploy (in)visibility; an examination of women leaders' lived experiences*. *Management Learning* 44(1), 63-79.

drive policies that can make a real difference. The move from a focus on an individual 'fix the woman' approach, to a spotlight on our practices - a 'fix the system' approach - therefore enables us to get at broader issues that can inadvertently reinforce and maintain inequalities.

Research into programmes that tackle gender diversity in leadership through a 'fix the system' approach could provide actionable insights, frameworks and case studies for leadership development practitioners.

Valerie Stead is Professor of Leadership and Management at Lancaster University, and Director of the Lancaster University Management School research collective, the Academy for Gender, Work and Leadership. Her research focuses on understanding how and why gender inequalities persist at work and how this in turn informs leadership and management pedagogy. Current research projects involve examining the relationship between leaders' representations in the media and gender equality in the workplace.