

# Preface

Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions in private as well as public sectors. Popular explanations include the following: Women choose to focus on family rather than work responsibilities and therefore have their careers stagger with motherhood. There are not enough (sufficiently) qualified women in the talent pipeline to choose from—implying once these numbers will have risen, women in leadership will increase proportionately. Women are held back by stereotypes and socialization and do not assert themselves enough in the workplace. Women are discriminated against, if not explicitly at least implicitly, as their talent and suitability are overlooked due to gender bias.

The first three of these explanations focus on women's deficits (or career-adverse behaviors). They are not empirically supported: Statistically, the talent pipeline has been "feminized" as women have been earning secondary and tertiary degrees at rates equal to or greater than men in Western countries for at least two decades. Still, the substantial increase of women with relevant education and mid-level leadership experience on the supply side has not resulted in proportionate increases of women in top positions. Qualified women are childless at rates much higher than average female populations. Women managers without children were found to experience significantly worse career development than male peers (with or without children) for many industries. Particularly often cited reasons for a gender achievement gap in leadership hence fail to explain the phenomenon. The focus of this analysis is on the working of gender stereotypes, in the concrete in talent assessment, as well as on organizational context factors that allow for gender bias to thrive.

To understand the impact of stereotypes in the organizational context, this author conducted a personnel selection experiment for a "masculine" typed profession. Women (and men) who asserted themselves as highly qualified, and disposed of desired professional and personal traits for the "masculine" typed profession, were presented to participants from the respective field under controlled conditions. So long as experimental recruiters were unaware of applicant gender, women were accurately identified as qualified talent and selected for a job interview. Once

recruiters recognized applicants also by gender, women faced significantly worsened chances to be selected compared with a gender-blind setting. Worse, selection arguments made it clear women's personal and functional qualities became overlooked once they were identified as women. Highly qualified women not only lost out to equally but under some conditions also to *worse* qualified male competitors. Team "fit" in a demographically homogeneous organizational context was also studied. Participants in the experiment were found to overwhelmingly apply "fit" as a criterion of demographic similarity to existing team members, not as a measure of actual qualification or social similarity (expressed via adapted, "masculine" behavior by both men and women). An organizational culture requesting compliance with binding equal opportunity laws was not able to moderate recruiters' bias and discrimination against qualified women in recruitment.

Establishing current organizational reality is not meritocratic in nature based on these empirical results, and women who "have what it takes" still suffer disadvantage by their gender alone, the issue of workplace discrimination is reframed as a matter of economic, legal, and ethical responsibility to implement equal opportunity. Concrete suggestions are presented for organizational practice as well as for policy makers with a view to lessen gender discrimination in personnel selection processes. Such reform would hold the potential to benefit also members of other marginalized social groups by weakening arbitrary, socially unjust, biased talent selection and thus ultimately strengthen a culture of meritocracy.

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