

Understanding How the Leadership Gender Gap Affects Women



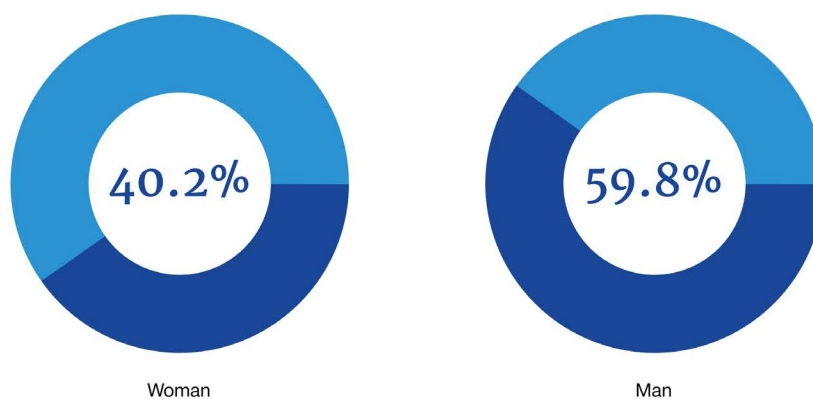
Examining the negative impact of systemic and gender-based barriers on women's corporate success.

The Gender Leadership Gap: Understanding the Glass Obstacle Course Faced by Women

The concept of the “glass ceiling” has been widely discussed in the corporate world since it was first coined by Marilyn Loden in 1978. However, there is another, lesser-known obstacle to workplace equality that may be even more insidious: the “glass cliff.” This term was coined by Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam in 2003. It occurs when women are promoted to leadership roles during times of crisis, only to be blamed and pushed off the “glass cliff” if they fail. This practice allows companies to appear progressive while reinforcing the idea that women and other marginalized groups are not fit for leadership. Famous examples of women who were put on the glass cliff include Jill Soltau, Theresa May, and Marissa Mayer. Although the glass cliff primarily affects women, it can also impact other marginalized groups who are promoted to leadership roles during difficult times.

Achieving women’s leadership in the workplace is not only about having female representation, but also about ensuring that women are given equal opportunities to succeed. While the FTSE Women Leaders Review reported that female representation on UK FTSE 350 boards has increased to 40.2%, and 16% of chair positions are now held by women, there are still significant obstacles like the glass cliff that need to be addressed. Furthermore, the percentage of women in executive committee roles and CEO positions in FTSE 350 companies is still low, with only 27% and 8%, respectively, held by women.

UK FTSE 350 Boards Members



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This percentage reduces further when considering the global picture. According to the [World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2022](#), women make up only 5% of global CEOs, a gender gap that will take 132 years to close based on current progress.

The Financial Reporting Council's recent report, [Navigating Barriers to Senior Leadership for People from Minority Ethnic Groups in FTSE 100 and FTSE 250 Companies](#), comments that women of Colour are almost completely missing from leadership positions across the workplace. Of the minority ethnic groups, Indian and Chinese people have made the most progress, but Black women, as a double minority, face the biggest challenge of breaking through the 'concrete ceiling.'

Women have often worked harder and longer to get to these positions, and consequently, they do not take their positions lightly or for granted. So why are attrition rates among female leaders so high?

This paper examines the reasons why women leave and considers the impact of outdated societal expectations of leadership, fixed ideas of 'fit,' and why the workplace culture still does not meet our needs.

To Be Liked or To Be Respected: How Our Ideas About the Ideal Leader Hurt Women

Picture a leader... What is the first image that comes into your mind?

When we think of leadership and authority, many people tend to visualize White, straight, male leaders with stereotypical male attributes such as drive, ambition, and authority. This is an outdated stereotype, but we all have biases, and it relates to societal expectations of what is 'normal.'

Authority, power, and impact are linked to what we say, how we say it, and how we look - stature, height, and physical presence. It is, therefore, potentially much harder for a shorter leader, a disabled leader, or a female leader to be seen as authoritative, command respect and 'fit-in' as a leader.

According to the [Broken Ladders 2022 report](#), 61% of Black women report changing themselves to 'fit-in' at work, from the language or words they use (37%), their hairstyle (26%), and even their name (22%), as they try to adjust to emulate what traditional expectations of leadership look like.

Many ethnic minorities experience microaggressions in the workplace and report feeling either hyper visible or invisible. This feeling of 'otherness' contributes to high attrition rates and alternative career paths, such as self-employment.

“For many, the move to self-employment was to protect mental health and well-being, gain the flexibility needed to balance work and family life, and to escape ‘career blocking’ or continuous workplace bias and discrimination.”

—[Broken Ladders: The Myth of Meritocracy for Women of Colour in the Workplace 2022](#)

“Either they (women) appear as confident as men, running the risk of being disliked, or they do themselves down. Yet, modesty too is damaging, for other people are quick to mistake confidence for competence, and therefore under-confidence for lack of competence.”

—[Mary Ann Sieghart, The Authority Gap](#)



It is incredibly difficult for women, particularly ethnic minority females, to be respected leaders when there is an authority bias in leadership ingrained in our systems, structures, and society globally. To be successful, leaders need to be both liked and respected, and women who behave in a more ‘male’ way to gain respect are rarely liked, and those who try to be liked are rarely respected. This is known as the double bind.

“...children are absorbing the false stereotype that boys are cleverer than girls from a really early age and internalising it as true. No wonder girls grow up less confident of their intellectual abilities than boys. [People] from countries all over the world associate ‘brilliant’ much more with men...”

—[Mary Ann Sieghart, The Authority Gap](#)

It All Begins in Childhood

In her book [The Authority Gap](#), Mary Ann Seighart explains that gender norms create expectations of how male and female children should behave, which later impacts us in adulthood. Parents and teachers praise girls for being quieter, better behaved, and conscientious learners, and, in turn, they learn to smile and defer to others. Expectations seem to be lower for boys. They learn how to exert minimal effort to keep teachers and parents off their backs and are praised for what they do achieve, and this builds their confidence:

Additional Factors Contributing to the Leadership Gender Gap

The Authority Gap

“The authority gap is a measure of how much more seriously we take men than we take women. We tend to assume that a man knows what he’s talking about until he proves otherwise, whereas for women, it’s all too often the other way round.”

—Marry Ann Sieghart, [The Authority Gap](#)



The authority gap means that women are taken less seriously than men when it comes to leadership. Sieghart asks us to notice if in meetings, we listen less attentively to women or interrupt them more than men, or when women are confident or assertive, whether adjectives like ‘aggressive’ or ‘strident’ immediately come to mind, rather than capable or credible.

Historically, women have tended to adopt masculine leadership traits to fit in with a masculine workplace and system. As the first female prime minister in Europe, Margaret Thatcher was an authoritarian leader. She polarised opinion but was arguably successful in politics due to adopting stereotypically male traits.

A high-profile exception to this in recent times is Jacinda Ardern, ex-Prime Minister of New Zealand, who developed a reputation as a modest, kind, and compassionate leader, exalted by many for openly displaying stereotypically female traits. Globally, Ardern has become a role model for demonstrating a new leadership style.

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“One of the criticisms I’ve faced over the years is that I’m not aggressive enough or assertive enough or maybe somehow, because I’m empathetic, it means I’m weak. I totally rebel against that. I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong.”

—[Jacinda Ardern, New York Times 2018](#)

Ardern clearly had to fight to be accepted as a leader with her different leadership style. In her resignation statement, she demonstrates self-awareness, honesty, and compassion. Some have accused her of weakness, but many have praised her humility, which is rarely seen in politics or leadership.

“I’m leaving because with such a privileged role comes responsibility – the responsibility to know when you are the right person to lead and also when you are not. I know what this job takes. And I know that I no longer have enough in the tank to do it justice. It’s that simple.”

—[Jacinda Ardern, 2023](#)

The Maternity Gap

Ardern took six weeks of maternity leave after giving birth to her daughter in 2018. Did she feel ready to return to her role, or did she feel that it was expected of her? Many other women take short maternity leaves. Some do so out of choice, some out of financial necessity, and some because they feel it is what society and the workplace expect of them.

Maternity leave laws and employer support, both financial and practical, vary widely from country to country, as do expectations on acceptable timeframes to return to work. Often, women place unnecessary pressure on themselves to return to work quickly. In some cases, short maternity leaves are even seen as a 'badge of honour.' This needs to change. There can be a significant impact on women's health when they return to work too early after having a baby, particularly if they return to a full-time role.

The motherhood penalty is real. The more maternity leaves a woman takes, the less seriously she is taken at work.

A recent UK study, states that by the age of 45, 82% of women are mothers. The average age of a first-time mother is 30, and it is at this point that the gender pay gap begins, increasing from 1% to 14.9% by the age of 40.

The study shows that 89% of women leave the full-time workforce within three years of having children. Women are conflicted by their desire for a career and to be a mother, and they feel guilty for leaving their children to go to work. Many managerial and leadership roles are only designed for full-time employees. Part-time roles appear to offer a solution of sorts, although what is actually needed is autonomous and flexible working.

Women can feel 'grateful' to be given a part-time job, even if it is a role below their capabilities, and are 'accepting' that in taking a part-time role, they have chosen not to progress their career. In many workplaces, there appears to be a perception that by going part-time, you are no longer invested in the company; reduced hours equal reduced ambition leading to reduced promotion and progression.

Despite the recent shift towards remote and hybrid working brought about by the pandemic, presenteeism remains a pervasive issue in many organizations, with its impact felt particularly strongly by capable and talented women. Sadly, these women often find themselves stuck in lower-level roles, unable to achieve their full potential or even leaving the workplace entirely due to feeling disenfranchised and unaffordable childcare costs. Childcare costs are a significant obstacle facing women in leadership positions, as well as those at any level of any profession, and can reinforce presenteeism biases. [According to a report](#) from the charity [Pregnant Then Screwed](#), 76% of mothers who pay for childcare say that it no longer makes financial sense for them to work. For 1 in 10 parents, their childcare costs are equal to or greater than their take-home pay per day, while for 1 in 4 parents, it now accounts for over 75% of their take-home pay. The combination of exorbitant childcare costs and low entry-level salaries creates a significant hurdle for women, preventing them from advancing to middle management, let alone the C-suite.

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As women leave their jobs, the female leadership pipeline dwindles. Later in their careers, around [900,000 women in the UK](#) exit their positions due to menopause's impact and inadequate employer support. Infertility is another issue that impairs women in the workplace. [About 12.5% of women](#) of reproductive age face infertility issues, making infertility among women more prevalent than Type 2 diabetes. Fertility treatments come with an emotional, physical, and financial toll that is often overlooked in discussions about workplace inclusivity. Most women fear disclosing their infertility struggles to employers due to a lack of understanding, and the potential negative impact on their career progression.

Females of menopausal and childbearing age are leaving the workplace in significant numbers. Imposter syndrome is not the issue. The structure and culture of the workplace, together with the expectations of 'acceptable' authoritative leadership, are causing a lack of belonging and disassociation for many women.

The system is broken, not the women. We need to stop trying to fix the women and instead focus on fixing the system.

The Parent Gap

There is such significance and importance in raising children, and there is a real necessity in forming strong bonds between parents and children at all stages of their development, from early years through to teenage years and early adulthood. Children are influenced by their parents, and they deserve and need our time, respect, and guidance.

Nowadays, many households comprise single parents or dual-career couples. In the UK, almost three-quarters of families are dual-income households, but companies are still working to the traditional, yet outdated model of male hunter-gatherer and female caregiver. In the past year, there has been a growing trend of employers expecting a return to the office when people want and need flexible and autonomous work environments.

Organizations need to change their policies and approach to suit the needs of the modern family, crucially elevating the importance of raising children by enabling parents to look after their own children while also encouraging and providing clear career development.

Shared parental leave needs to be normalized (as modelled in countries such as Norway and Sweden). Maternity leave is outdated and should become paid parental leave (shared or not) to encompass adoption, same-sex couples, surrogacy, etc. Finland is leading the way on this, although pregnant women must be given sufficient paid time to recover from childbirth; an additional month is not enough.

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The motherhood penalty is well-documented, but the fatherhood penalty or fatherhood forfeit is less well-known. This refers to the bias that men can experience when applying for parental leave or part-time/flexible working. Men are often concerned to mention their childcare responsibilities for fear of judgment, lack of promotion, and stigma. They fear that their careers will suffer, and their authority and credibility will be questioned, as they are no longer conforming to their gender stereotype.

We need more male role models to take parental leave and work part-time or flexibly to inspire others. Employers must openly treat these individuals with respect and ensure continued career progression. We are all responsible for normalizing this and removing the stigma. Women need to support this as much as men.

Critically, if men are not supported and enabled to do this, we will not achieve gender equality in the workplace.

The Domestic Gap

Men looking after their children are sometimes described as ‘babysitting’ rather than being their father, which is simply not right. Men and women should welcome and support new fathers as they transition into fatherhood and childcare responsibilities by facilitating access to child-oriented social circles and networks. The role of the father as a caregiver needs to be recognized as important as the role of the mother as a leader.

Men need to fairly share the practical domestic tasks in the home and the ‘hidden load.’ Also known as the ‘mental load,’ this is the immense and unacknowledged job of planning and organizing everything such as organizing dental and medical appointments, ensuring children have completed homework, are on track at school and eat a healthy diet, buying gifts, arranging childcare, birthday parties, etc. In essence, it involves preparing, organizing, researching, making decisions, and anticipating everything needed to make life flow. Women typically shoulder this responsibility and need significant help to lighten this load.

Caring for elderly parents and relatives also tends to fall on women. Unfortunately, society judges women harshly if they delegate these responsibilities to anyone else, and ironically, the most judgmental of all are women themselves.

The Education Gap

The responsibility for providing care and undertaking domestic duties is further exacerbated by the state education system which, in countries like the UK, requires significant involvement from parents. This exacerbates the stress for working parents who are already time-poor and struggling to juggle work and children. This is particularly challenging for women as there is still an expectation that the mother is the default parent.

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In short, the education system expects your primary role to be a parent, not a worker. The workplace expects your primary role to be a worker, not a parent. Your children's expectations (rightly so) are that they are your priority.

There is significant conflict, and even the most organized of parents can feel overwhelmed and exhausted.

There is no hope of achieving the mythical work/life balance, as people feel that they must 'be on' at all times. Having it all seems to really mean doing it all.

Boards and leadership teams need to take the time to consider why people are not engaged. They need to step outside their own bubble and try to understand.

“We all live in bubbles – of familiarity, comfort, and ‘impressive people.’ As human beings, this is our default approach to making sense of the world. The problem is not that we have bubbles, but that most of the time we do not even see them. Of those who do, few of us are willing to take ownership for how they distort our decision-making, and fewer still take action to prevent this from happening... Instead of asking ‘Does my board or executive committee operate in a bubble?’ try asking ‘How do we operate in a bubble?’ and ‘What can we do to have a more mindful approach?’”

—Justine Lutterodt, MD of the [Centre for Synchronous Leadership](#) and author of [Mindful Exclusion](#)



The Leadership Gap Solution

No wonder women are leaving the workforce; they are weary of trying to fit into a system that was not made for them and is not fit for purpose. We should consider whether flexibility and autonomy might be one of the reasons why there is greater female representation in non-executive director roles than in executive roles.

We need a significant shift in mindset to take culture, engagement, and belonging seriously. We must change the workplace through building flexible and autonomous working cultures where the focus is not on input but output.

Change will only work if it is initiated, supported, and upheld by leadership. Leadership behaviour defines the culture of an organisation by setting the tone for what is and is not acceptable. There are still too many 'dinosaur' leaders and not enough human leaders to champion the underrepresented groups. Women are often still the unrewarded and unrecognised inclusive leaders.

“Call it emotional labour, call it good leadership: they (women) do far more of the sponsorship than their male peers. They disproportionately hold the diversity and inclusion responsibilities. They check in with employees more on wellness, on workload, on balance. And so, they're showing up the way that companies say they want. But they don't get rewarded formally for it, and so many of them are looking around and saying, “There's got to be a better deal.”

—Alexis Krivovich, [Mckinsey Women in the Workplace: Breaking Up to Break Through](#)

We must see the authority gap for what it is and then challenge and change our ingrained gender-stereotypical beliefs. This will take time and significant commitment.

We need to open our minds and act by rethinking job design, particularly for leadership and management positions. Why do these roles have to be fulltime? We need to provide proper parental leave that is fit for purpose and tailored to the situation. We need to educate ourselves by engaging in reciprocal mentoring and providing sponsorship to someone who does not look like us. We must replace empty tokens of appreciation such as pizza and “fun” rewards, with genuine thanks. We need to be transparent and collect, analyse, and report the data to measure the progress we are or are not making.

Importantly, we must address recruitment practices and work with a wide range of search firms, pay attention to the language used in recruitment briefs, openly share flexible working policies, provide diverse interview panels, and clear, unbiased recruitment and promotion processes. Leadership development must include coaching and allow significant time for self-reflection. We must check ourselves to ensure that we do not expect more from a woman or a minority candidate and we need to question whether candidates are going to 'add' value rather than 'fit' culture or simply be 'impressive.'"

We need to acknowledge the authority gap, challenge our biases, and openly support underrepresented groups to lead, instead of undermining them for being different.

Commit to Eliminating the Leadership Gender Gap in Your Organization

Across the world, structural and systemic discrimination exists - in childhood, the education system, domestic life, the health system, care system, and the workplace.

In creating diverse and sustainable boards and leadership teams it is vital that we understand the critical relationship between ethics, good governance, and belonging.

Fundamentally, we need to rethink and then redefine what it means to be a leader.

The leadership gap will remain unless we accept responsibility and act.

About the Author



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Eleri Dodsworth is a Partner at the London office of Stanton Chase and Head of the Diversity and Inclusion Practice Group for Europe, Middle East, and Africa. Eleri represents the firm on the AESC Diversity Leadership Council for Europe and Africa. The AESC (Association of Executive Search & Leadership Consultants) sets the quality standard for the executive search and leadership consulting profession.

Eleri is a passionate advocate of equity, inclusion, diversity, and belonging, and she strongly believes in helping her clients build diverse leadership teams. She views diversity and inclusion as ethical imperatives that ultimately drive business performance. Eleri places C-suite leaders, divisional directors, and non-executive directors for listed companies as well as private equity, family, and privately owned businesses. She specializes in Board and ESG appointments across a wide range of sectors with a particular focus on the industrial sector.

Eleri is also a dedicated mother to three children (two boys and a girl).

[Click here](#) to learn more about Eleri.

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