**Breaking the Glass Ceiling: A Systematic Review of the Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Roles**

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A Qualifying Paper

Ph.D. in Strategic Leadership and Administrative Studies

Marywood University

Fall 2020

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**Abstract**

Women constitute over half of the world’s population but are drastically underrepresented in leadership positions. Women have pioneered social reform and social justice. They have become highly educated in law, Higher Education, and medicine; however, the number of women in high level and leadership positions is regrettably low. This paper will trace women in history from the middle ages to the present. It will then highlight several female Social Work pioneers who have contributed to the betterment of society as well as surpassed gender biases. This paper will then identify the barriers that women face on their path toward leadership on a Macro, Meso, and Micro Level. It will also describe several solutions and policy recommendations to closing the gap in women’s leadership on an Institution/ Employer Level, on an Individual Level, and on a Societal Level. Ethical considerations will also be considered by analyzing Utilitarianism, Ethics of Care, and Transformational Leadership. The paper will conclude with future research suggestions.

**Introduction**

The role of women in society has been disputed since the Middle Ages. Women have been perceived as property and vessels to bear children. With the dawning of the Feminist Movement in the 1970’s, women began to see reform and gain more access to different fields of study and employment. Women constitute over half of the world’s population but are drastically underrepresented in leadership positions. Women have pioneered social reform and social justice. They have become highly educated in the law and Criminal Justice System, the Higher Education field, and medicine; however, the number of women in high level positions is regrettably low. The main question that will be addressed within this paper is, “How do the obstacles women working within the Criminal Justice System, Higher Education, and in the Medical Field encounter, contribute to the fraction of women in leadership roles within those occupations?” This question will be examined through a comprehensive literature review highlighting statistics of women in leadership across different occupations, it will discuss the barriers that women face on their path toward leadership, as well as, describe solutions to closing the gender gap for women in leadership. Ethical Implications, Policy Recommendations, and an Integrated Summary will follow the analysis of the research question.

**Definitions**

For the purpose of this paper, several terms have been defined. The meanings of these terms are derived from general sources.

**Gender:** For the purposes of this essay gender is defined as the biological, behavioral, cultural, and psychological traits associated with one sex: male or female. Gender is also described as an organizing principle of society resulting from social norms that emerge from everyday social interactions.

**Leadership:** The action of leading a group of people or an organization. It is the state or position of being a leader.

**Inequality**: Inequality refers to the lack of equality or fair treatment in the sharing of wealth or opportunities.

**Perception**: A perception is a thought, a belief, or an opinion often held by many people and based on appearances.

**Gender Equality**: The act of treating women and men equally.

**Literature Review**

Throughout history women have been perceived in different ways. They have been portrayed as being inferior to men; however, there is literature that suggests that women have been warriors, priestesses, and political leaders throughout the world and throughout history. In ancient times, rulers such as Cleopatra and Esther had great power; however, Greco- Roman culture depicted women as caring for children and the home and absent from politics. Additionally, women could not participate in elections. In Europe, the woman’s role in ancient times was quite different. Women fought as warriors alongside their husbands and in some cases acted as political and military leaders (<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Women-Through-History>).

In Medieval Europe, Christianity and the church dominated society. In the first and second centuries it was learned that there were female bishops in the Christian church. Mary Magdalene was also said to be an important religious leader. However, by the fourth and fifth centuries, a degradation of women occurred. Women no longer had affluence within the church

and were thought to be weak and susceptible to temptation. It was hypothesized that the church blamed Eve and therefore all women for the downfall of humanity. The impact of this thought was so great, that even today, women cannot be priests in the Catholic Church. During Medieval times, women were healers. They helped family and friends without the aid of modern medicine; however, as the Middle Ages continued, herbal remedies and the women who healed were cast aside for apothecaries, alchemists, and medical doctors. These fields were dominated by men. Women were unable to study at universities. Surprisingly, male doctors became experts on women’s health and marked them as “vessels that merely hosted the male seed.” Women continued to be persecuted and the Middle Ages ended with women being executed for practicing witchcraft which consisted of the use of herbal remedies (<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Women-Through-History>).

During the Renaissance Period, beginning in the late 1500’s, women were defined as homemakers. They were unable to vote, rarely owned businesses, and were forced into arranged marriages. Women’s rights stalled until the twentieth century when the Suffragette Movement gave women the right to vote. The two world wars saw women working outside the home and greatly contributing to the economy. Women returned to the home after World War Two ended, but by 1970, a feminist movement changed women’s rights forever. This movement referred to a series of political reforms and changes on issues such as reproductive rights, equal pay, domestic violence, sexual violence, and sexual harassment. Women have been working and balancing family life for many years. They have made contributions to many fields of study including Social Work (<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Women-Through-History>).

When the field of Social Work originated women were described as Social Welfare Reformers and feminist scholars. Women in Social Work advocated for oppressed people; however, they were oppressed by the lack of gender equality within the Social Work field. There is limited information regarding female contributions to the Social Work field. Few have been written and studied including Florence Kelley (1859-1932) who influenced worker’s rights and was instrumental in forming the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Sophonisba Preston Breckinridge (1866-1948) was influential in setting standards for Social Work education. She also worked toward political reform. Lucile Evans (1869-1953) researched financial stability for women later in life. This was an important area of study because women were paid low salaries and their role as family caregiver made it difficult to save for retirement. Ophelia Settle Egypt (1903-1984) was instrumental in originating reproductive rights and birth control. She helped establish the Planned Parenthood organization. Inabel Lindsay (1916-1983) was a pioneering Social Work educator who was the first woman to become dean of a School of Social Work. She advocated and published work on gender, race, the elderly, and community leadership. Many of these women were actively working and researching during the same time period. These women were strong advocates of social justice and their ultimate goal was to blur the lines between social work, sociology, psychology, education, social reform, community outreach, and political activism (Anyikwas, Chiarelli- Helminiak, Hodge, and Wells- Wilbon, 2015).

There is a gap between the amount of women and the amount of men in leadership roles worldwide. Women currently make up 50.8% of the United States population. Educationally, women earn 60% of all undergraduate degrees, 60% of all Master’s degree, 47% of all law degrees, 48% of all medical degrees, and 38% of all Master’s in Business Administration Degrees. Women comprise 47% of the United States workforce and 49% of the college educated workforce. These are admirable statistics, but American women lag behind American men regarding their representation in leadership positions. In Standard and Poor’s 500 (an American stock market index) women compose only 35% of all executive and senior level officials, they hold only 20% of company board seats, and only 6% of women are Chief Executive Officers. In the legal field, 45% of women are law firm associates, but only 22% are partners in law firms. In the medical field, 37% of women are physicians and surgeons, but only 16% are deans at medical schools. Additionally, in colleges and universities, 31% of women are full tenured professors and only 27% are college presidents. Finally, in the entertainment industry only 17% of women are employed as directors, producers, writers, and/ or editors of top grossing films. It seems that the Twentieth century has brought progress in the advancement of women; however the process has been unequal and it has begun to stall. Women are still falling short of their male counterparts (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports>).

Women are also underrepresented compared to men in the political arena. Across the world, only 23.4% of women represent their governments. Specifically, in the United States, only 19.3% of women hold seats in the government, with 10% of women being governors and 20% being mayors. It is projected that it could take until 2117 for women to have numbers equal to men in the United States government. These figures are staggering. Women have outnumbered men on college campuses since 1988, but they have not moved into positions of prominence. Shockingly, it is projected to take until the year 2085 for women to reach parity with men in key leadership roles (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports>).

Specifically, literature displays that women account for 47% of working Americans, but only 15.5% are sworn federal law enforcement officers. Additionally, of the 900,000 police officers in the United States only 12% are female. Women first entered the federal law enforcement system in 1971; however, a woman was not promoted to head a federal law enforcement agency until 2002. This agency was the United States Park Service. Several factors contributed to this 30-year gap including male police officer’s refusal to accept females in law enforcement roles and masculine tradition. Many people in society view law enforcement as a traditionally male occupation due to its association with crime and danger. It has been established that men continue to believe that women cannot physically or mentally handle a career in law enforcement (Yu, 2015).

Institutions of Higher Education such as colleges and universities are perhaps in the greatest position to shape young minds. These institutions are organized by two sets of practices. There is an administration entity that creates the budget for the institutions and manages the day to day business of said institution. At the same time, the other entity of Higher Education is faculty, which has less power over administration, but great power over tenure decisions, teacher unions, and academic freedom (Chin, 2011). Even though women comprise 59% of college and university students, women in leadership positions within Institutions of Higher Education remain disproportionately low compared with male leadership. Within Higher Education, women are most likely to be Associate Instructors or Assistant Professors than tenured faculty or senior administrators. Additionally, it should be noted that women are more likely to head Associate Degree or Baccalaureate Colleges rather than Master’s Colleges and Universities or Doctoral- Granting Institutions (Teague, 2015).

Within the field of Medicine (clinical environment) and Academic Medicine (medical school and education) women have been underrepresented in leadership positions. In 2003, admissions at medical schools for women and men where nearly equal. Currently, only 18% of tenured professors and 12% of department heads in America’s medical colleges and universities are women. Reasons for the attrition of women in leadership positions throughout medicine and academic medicine can be attributed to the undervaluing of women’s leadership styles, organization culture, and lack of role models or mentors. In the study *Women Leaders*- *Challenges, Successes, and Other Insights From the Top*, the authors explained that women in the medical field “had to be smarter and work harder and for longer hours than their equal male counterparts to be recognized and or advanced to leadership positions (Salas- Lopez, Deitrick, Mahady, Gertner & Sabino, 2011, p. 40).” When all data was analyzed Salas- Lopez et al. (2011) concluded that gender surpassed all other barriers as the key issue women leaders and potential women leaders must learn to reconnoiter when attempting to gain leadership positions in the medical field (Salas- Lopez et al., 2011).

Gender bias and underrepresentation remains a challenge for women in their workplaces, especially as they attempt to move up the career ladder. In the article, *Women in Leadership and* *the Bewildering Glass Ceiling* the authors describe the glass ceiling as the indistinguishable barrier women face as they advance through their chosen professions with the knowledge that they could only progress so far before being hindered in their efforts to reach the height of their field. Barriers to breaking the glass ceiling still exist (Chisholm-Burns, Spivey, Hagemann & Josephson, 2017). Women are severely underrepresented in leadership positions across the business world, academics, healthcare, pharmacy, and Social Work education. Several studies have been completed in an attempt to determine why women are falling behind men in leadership positions.

A new theory or metaphor has been established within private sector occupations. This theory has been labeled the Glass Cliff Theory, which suggests that when women earn leadership positions, it is during a period of crisis when the risk of company failure is higher. The Glass Cliff Theory further explains that when an organization or company is at risk of failure, women are more likely to be granted leadership positions. This can be explained by the fact that precarious leadership positions or situations are viewed as an opportunity for women whereas, risky situations are hazards for male leaders. Evidence of the Glass Cliff Theory has been found in several settings. The theory has been evidenced in legal cases in which the likelihood of victory is low, running for a political office when winning the position is unlikely, representing a declining community or musical festival, and companies where problematic practices have already been established (Smith, 2016). The following section of the literature review will define and analyze the barriers that are placed in the path of women on their journey towards leadership.

**Analysis of Barriers to Women in Leadership**

Many studies have been conducted in an effort to identify and determine the barriers that prevent women from advancing to and succeeding in leadership positions. In their qualitative study, *Making the Invisible Visible: A Cross Sector Analysis of Gender- Based Leadership* *Barriers*, Amy B. Diehl and Leanne Dzubinski (2016) analyzed two studies in regard to women leaders in different occupations. The first study analyzed, involved face-to-face interviews with 26 women employed in the Higher Education field. The women included presidents, vice- presidents, and provosts of colleges and universities in the Mid- Atlantic region of the United States. The second study examined involved face-to-face interviews of women in executive leader positions in religious mission organizations or nonprofit evangelical institutions. Both Higher Education and religious mission organizations are currently dominated by male leaders, although over half of those employed in said agencies and occupations are women. Through comparing these studies the authors were able to identify and compare gender- based leadership barriers that impede women from gaining desired leadership positions within their occupations, as well as, advancing further within their place of employment (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

After analyzing the studies of women leaders in the Higher Education and religious mission organizations, the authors were able to identify 27 barriers to women in leadership. These 27 Gender Based Leadership Barriers were further organized into three areas of society in which they are applied. The levels of society are labeled as Macro Level Gender- Based Barriers, Meso Level Gender- Based Barriers, and Micro Level Gender- Based Barriers. The Macro Level Gender- Based Barriers encompass society as a whole and work to prevent women from advancing and succeeding in leadership positions. Macro Level Gender- Based Barriers make it difficult for women to contribute their leadership expertise to their organizations. On a societal level, women in leadership positions and those seeking leadership need to be taken seriously by both men and women (Deihl & Dzubinski, 2016).

Six Macro Level Gender- Based Leadership Barriers were discovered through Diehl and Dzbinski’s (2016) research. The first barrier discovered was Control of Women’s Voices, which is described as restrictions on when and how women contribute to the conversation within their organization. Many times, women feel they are interrupting conversations or that they should wait until it is their turn to talk. The second barrier described is Cultural Constraints on Women’s Own Choices. This barrier is explained by women thinking that their career and educational choices are already planned for them. Women may have grown up thinking that they could not be anything other than a teacher or nurse because those where female- oriented occupations. The third barrier discovered was Gender Stereotypes. This barrier encompasses an attitude that is fixed and over- simplified regarding women. Society has fixed ideals regarding women. For example, should a woman become pregnant, then it is finally time to stop working and stay home. The authors also highlighted the barrier of Gender Unconsciousness which is a “lack of knowledge or awareness of the role gender plays in the workplace (Deihl & Dzubinski, 2016, p. 188).” Persons do not seem to be educated in gender bias and gender oppression, believing that a woman can be just as successful as a man. The concepts of the Glass Ceiling Theory and the Glass Cliff Theory are not considered. Scrutiny is also identified as a barrier to women in leadership. In many occupations, it appears that as women perform their occupational duties, they are intensely examined and scrutinized by their superiors. They are scrutinized much more than their male counterparts (Deihl & Dzubinski, 2016).

Leadership Perceptions are also identified as a barrier to women seeking leadership positions. Society as a whole associate’s leadership with masculinity. Studies have concluded that it is not talent that hinders the advancement of women, but unintentional and intentional biases. It has been found that women encounter a double burden in their careers if they want to get ahead: They must do their jobs well, but also overcome stereotypes that may impede perceptions of their leadership potential (Chisholm- Burns et al., 2017; Madsen & Andrade, 2018). Women face gender stereotypes as leaders and on the path to leadership. They face different expectations then men. Males in leadership positions are associated with specific traits such as charisma and vision. Simply put men look and act like leaders and are usually in leadership positions, so the social construct has already been formed within the public and followers’ minds. It has been proven that men and women lead differently. Men adopt a more autocratic, directive, and competitive form of leadership, whereas women adopt a more collaborative, cooperative, and democratic style of leadership. Many companies and organizations have resisted change and subsequently have stayed with the status quo or familiar style of leadership, which is displayed in men. Additionally, women face the dilemma of being too feminine or not feminine enough. If a woman is too feminine, they are not assertive enough and if they are not feminine enough, then they are too tough or too assertive (Chisholm- Burns et al., 2017; Elias, 2018).

Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) also identified 16 Gender- Based Leadership Barriers on the Meso Level. The Meso Level of society operates at the level of organizations and groups. Since leadership takes place within organizations and groups, many barriers are identified at this societal level. The first Meso Level Gender- Based Leadership Barrier is the Devaluing of Communal Practice. This barrier is defined as the lack of acknowledgement or support during the organization or workplace’s shared activities. Male management style tends to be more demanding and forceful, whereas women’s leadership style appears more collaborative. This difference in leadership style causes the barrier. Another Meso Level barrier is Discrimination, which can be blatant or subtle. An example of this barrier is having a search to fill a leadership position but promoting a man with seniority although he may not be qualified. Female applicants may be more educated; however, the male employee would still be promoted to the position. Women can also be excluded from Informal Network Functions. They may not be invited to certain social gatherings or functions due to gender or employment position. The authors also highlight the Glass Cliff Theory which places a woman in a leadership role that has a high risk of failure (Deihl & Dzubinski, 2016).

The next three Meso Level Gender- Based Leadership Barriers are Lack of Mentoring, Lack of Sponsorship, and Lack of Support. Women lack mentorship in their places of employment. There is a limited number of roles models and mentors for women who are up and coming in their career paths. Research has revealed that mentors may play a major role in encouraging women to pursue leadership positions. Mentors can offer career advice, guidance, and assistance. Chisholm- Burns et al. (2017) report that if women do not observe other women in leadership positions, they may not believe that they can achieve such positions. Men are at an advantage in regard to mentors, because there are more men in leadership roles; therefore, there are more examples to be observed (Elias, 2018). Regarding the barrier of Lack of Sponsorship, there seems to be a limited number of women in higher leadership positions that can recognize other women’s capacity and recommend them for future leadership positions. Because there are a limited number of women in leadership positions, there is a lack of support for women trying to advance in their career (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

The barriers of Male Gatekeeping and Male Organization Culture are similar. Male Gatekeeping is the act of controlling which women have access to advancement within their organization. An example of this barrier is cited when the president of a company or organization first talked to the female employee’s husband or significant other to learn their opinion of their partner being promoted. Male Organization Culture is described as an organization or company’s culture and values being tremendously male. This is the “old boys club” mentality when men make lewd jokes or harassing comments expecting women not to be offended (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

A surprising barrier to leadership is the Queen Bee Effect, which is when women working together within a company or organization fail to assist each other or prevent other women from receiving promotions. Women are not helping other women advance in their careers. Women do not seem to want to help other women climb the ladder of success. Some women hold the mentality: Since they had to work hard to succeed, they are reluctant to share that success with other women. Also, women can be jealous and even resentful of female colleagues. They are more likely to be critical than supportive. Women must learn to change this negative way of thinking and be more supportive of other women’s career aspirations (Elias, 2018). The authors also highlight the barrier of Salary Equality, which implies that women are not being compensated as much as their male counterparts, even if women have more experience and education. Also, Tokenism is a Meso Level Gender- Based Leadership Barrier. Tokenism is described as being chosen for a position because the company or organization needs to fill a quota, such as having a certain number of women working within the place of business (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

The last two Meso Level Gender- Based Leadership Barriers are Unequal Standards and Workplace Harassment. Unequal Standards hold women to higher standards when they are seeking leadership positions. One study participant explained that, “men seem to get respect and whatever it is they’re doing they’re thought highly of (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016, p. 191).” Workplace Harassment is a tactic used to frighten, intimidate, provoke, or bring discomfort to women seeking leadership positions. Women experience verbal abuse when they do not acquiesce to what male leaders want (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

The third and final level of barriers are Micro Level Gender- Based Leadership Barriers, which are defined as barriers that operate at an individual level within the individual’s daily activities. These barriers involve the woman directly and personally. The first Micro Level Gender- Based Leadership Barrier is Communication Style Constraints. Women feel as if they must choose their words and express their thoughts more carefully compared to men. They also must choose a tone of voice to convey their meaning, many times causing constraints in getting the information transferred to colleagues or employees. The second Micro Level Gender- Based Barrier is Conscious Unconsciousness, which is the “deliberate choice not to notice, be affected by, or challenge the role gender pays in the workplace (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016, p. 192).” When women observe gender discrimination within their workplace or organization, they predominately choose to ignore the discrimination, rather than fight the battle or speak to the unfair treatment. The third Micro Level Gender- Based Barrier discussed is Personalizing, which is when the leader, most likely a woman assumes personal responsibility for problems within the workplace or organization. Women leaders more than male leaders feel personally responsible for their team and are affected by criticism of said team on a personal level. There is also the barrier of a Psychological Glass Ceiling. This is an attitude displayed by women when they undervalue their own abilities, they do not believe in their own abilities, and when they do not want to appear assertive to colleagues (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

The final Micro Level Gender- Based Leadership Barrier is perhaps the most discussed in academic journals and articles. It is the barrier of Work Life Conflict, which is simply explained as the challenge of balancing one’s professional life and responsibilities with personal and family responsibilities (Deihl & Dzubinski, 2016). Perhaps the most researched obstacle on the path towards leadership for women is the fact that when women are ready to advance to a leadership position or gain tenure in their career, it coincides with the optimal time in their childbearing years. Women who have children must take absences from employment before, during and after the birth. The reality is that there is no good time within a woman’s career to have children and the longer a woman diverts from her career path the harder it is to reestablish themselves upon their return. Ironically, fatherhood is seen as a career asset and both marriage and children increases the likelihood of a man advancing in his career. Where it may be seen as a detriment for women to take time away from work for childrearing, men are able to remain in the workforce in fulltime service (Dominici, Fried & Zeger, 2009; Anyikwa et al., 2015). Along with balancing work with motherhood, women also have the responsibility of being caregivers to an ill spouse or an elderly parent. This has been termed the “Second Shift,” which is exhibited when a woman works a full day at their place of employment then must return home and do household work such as cooking and cleaning and provide care for children or for an ailing relative. Some women have been forced to choose between their career and their family. It has been proven that attempts to balance work and the caregiver role delay women from advancing in their chosen career. Research has also shown that women have had fewer children or have foregone having children all together due to career aspirations (Chisholm- Burns et al., 2017).

**Analysis of Possible Solutions to Lack of Women’s Leadership**

Research studies have been able to provide advice and possible solutions for women to break into more leadership positions. In her article, *Lessons Learned from Women in Leadership* *Positions: How Working Women Survive and Thrive*, Eileen Elias (2018) offered advice to women concerning how to work with both men and women to achieve better performance outcomes. Women bring many essential qualities to the workplace. They are compassionate listeners, they value teamwork and collaboration, and are concerned with building quality relationships with colleagues and team members. Women bring these qualities to the workplace and these qualities mix well with male leadership characteristics including self- confidence, risk- taking, and assertiveness. When women and men work well together it results in new and different viewpoints, ideas, and improved problem-solving skills. For women to be successful and gain leadership positions, they must learn to navigate in “a man’s world.” Women must gain an understanding of the values and cultures to counterbalance the gender- based attitudes of their male counterparts. Women in leadership positions offer that humor should be used to make points in a discussion. Also highlighted is the importance of networking, serving on professional and charitable boards, publishing articles in professional journals, and presenting at conferences (Elias, 2018).

One of the most important tools a woman on the path toward leadership can possess is the ability to network. Research has shown that men network more than women. It appears that women network less because they resist asking for favors: even small favors such as getting an introduction to an important business contact. Women may not see the benefits of being part of a network; however, a network can provide a collective knowledge, guidance, and support. Elias (2018) reports that being active in professional networks as well as online networks such as LinkedIn are helpful to a women’s professional career. Taking time to cultivate networks can aid in problem- solving and provide guidance and support (Elias, 2018).

Mentorship is essential for women who are seeking leadership positions but is often underutilized. Workplace mentorship has been proven to boost careers and job skills; however, in the business world as well as other organizations, mentorship is nearly nonexistent. Mentoring is a “pay it forward” relationship, meaning that the person being mentored cannot give back to their mentor, but the mentee can become a mentor in the future. Elias (2018) learned that women should not limit mentoring to just other women. Men can also be valuable as a mentor. Men are successful within the workplace and can offer knowledge and experience to women seeking leadership positions. Perhaps, the simplest advice is to find a mentor and be a mentor (Elias, 2018).

There are unwritten rules within workplaces and organizations. These unwritten rules are usually designed by men even when women are leaders because the structure of the organization is usually designed by men. Women may earn a leadership position, play by the rules, and still be thwarted by unwritten rules. For women attempting to enter leadership roles it is important to “learn the unwritten rules in your office by paying attention to words and behavior in your workplace (Elias, 2018, p. 178).” Unwritten rules include Dressing the Part. In the workplace, it is important for women to remember that they are being judged by both men and other women. Women must look professional in all settings. Another unwritten rule for women to be aware of is the Ability to Speak Up. Women must speak clear, be specific, and ask for what they want. Speaking up is difficult. When a woman speaks about her ideas in a professional setting, many times she is ignored or barely heard or is judged as being too aggressive. However, when a male counterpart says nearly the same thing, he is met with approval. They female leader is subsequently charged with finding the perfect balance between being too aggressive and being too soft spoken (Elias, 2018).

There has been a tendency for women to avoid leadership positions. It has become quite common for qualified women to evade putting themselves in a position to obtain leadership positions within their organization. It is assumed that women avoid these types of positions because they cannot handle the responsibility or do not want the responsibility of the leadership position; however there are clear factors that contribute to why women do not pursue these positions. There has been a recent trend of women leaving their place of employment, thinking that freelancing, consulting, or starting their own company would be more lucrative. This is happening because women are still experiencing salary inequality, get promoted at a slower rate than men, and rarely reach the height of their field. The chief reason that women are leaving organizations is salary. Women are more likely to leave an organization due to compensation. Society as well as business leaders believe that women are leaving the workforce at the average age of 30 because of the life work balance; however, this is not accurate. Women are leaving their organizations due to unequal compensation with their male counterparts. Another factor in avoidance of leadership positions is the woman’s unwillingness to relocate or spend a substantial amount of time traveling for a leadership position. Due to the possibility of relocation, women do not apply for these positions. Women are receiving the message that to be successful and hopefully secure a leadership position, they must make their work the focus of their life. Also, it is important to be coherent of leadership style. It is important for a woman to retain their feminine qualities while leading a company or organization. Women do not want to be labeled as harsh or overly aggressive. That potential label may keep women form pursuing leadership positions. Surprisingly, aggressiveness in male leaders is viewed as a form of self- confidence and dedication. Elias explains that “females are abrasive for doing the same things that males do, who are instead labeled as forceful (Elias, 2018, p. 179).” The author concluded that women should seek out leaders, both male and females and learn from them (Elias, 2018).

In certain situations, such as business meetings, women tend to unknowingly disparage themselves. They make statements such as “I’m not an expert” or “I don’t know much about that subject” despite actually knowing enough if not more about the topic. Male leaders tend to speak with confidence, even if they have less knowledge or experience than their female counterparts. Men in leadership roles seem to have a natural or innate level of confidence. Elias (2018) highlights three final pieces of advice for women attempting to attain leadership roles. The first is to Be a Team Player. Working in teams inspires trust and could result in improved job performance. Teamwork fosters creativity and new strategies that may not have been attempted previously. As young children, males (in many cases) grow up playing team sports and may be involved in organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Little League Baseball, whereas females (in many cases) tend to play alone with dolls or at solitary games, never learning the value of teamwork. The author also highlights the advice of Managing Your Emotions, which implies the stereotype of women being too emotional in the workplace. This stereotype has held women back from progressing further in their careers. Due to the false stereotype of being too emotional, women are often thought to be too unstable for leadership positions. Th advice taken from this stereotype is that it is important for women to manage their emotions in their professional workplace. Finally, another important piece of advice is to Be Confident. Having or even acting confident can establish a person’s career. It is critical to radiate confidence when working with colleagues and clients. Women tend to belittle themselves in a self- deprecating manner. This self- deprecation can cancel the expertise the woman has regarding a certain subject. According to Elias (2018), women must “believe in yourself, exude confidence, and do not be emotional in the workplace (Elias, 2018, p. 180).”

**Ethical Implications**

An ethical leader relinquishes personal success in an attempt to drive and inspire others to reach a shared goal or numerous goals. They should have high moral standards and values. Ethical Leaders should lead with incentive that motivates the whole company or organization to work together. They should develop a sense of loyalty throughout their company or organization ([www.ethicsmonitor.co.za](http://www.ethicsmonitor.co.za); Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Traditional ethics has predominately focused on the man’s perspective with little regard of the women’s perspective. Within business and organizations moral reasoning is viewed through a set of rules, values, and rights from a male- dominated perspective. The female approach to ethical reasoning emphasizes relationships, teamwork, and responsibility. Women seem and even prefer to lead from a place of emotion.

Utilitarianism holds that the greatest good for the greatest number should be considered. Utilitarianism, a consequence- based theory states that “we ought always to produce the maximal balance of positive value over disvalue (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001, p. 341).” In other words, the theory holds that the most ethical or best choice is the one that will produce the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals. Utilitarianism can be described in terms of a cost/ benefit analysis which entails calculating the costs associated with a particular action and then projecting the benefits of that action. Utilitarianism requires the “moral agent” or leader to be unemotional. Decision- making is expected to be logical and rational. The focus should be for the greater good of the company or organization while focusing on universal morals and values. Many leaders are concerned with what is better for their organization and do not seem to account for emotional well- being of the organization’s employees (D’Olimpio, 2019). The fact that women leaders value teamwork and collaboration clashes with the principles of Utilitarianism. Women leaders foster the relationships within the organization while trying to do what is best for their colleagues and subordinates.

Research has postulated that women leaders are more attuned to emotions and relationships than male leaders (Shonk, 2020). Women leaders have a stronger sense of morality than male leaders and in turn bring that into the workforce. Women leaders are moving toward a style of Transformational Leadership and more likely to lead from a standpoint of promoting the welfare of others resulting in a more ethical style of leadership. David Evans (2014) reports that the most important change made in the past decade has been the switch to a Transformational Leadership style that is more suitable to a women’s leadership style. The Transformational type of leadership is an important change because an emphatic and emotionally intelligent approach is needed in the workplace and women have the ability to offer these traits.

Perhaps, one reason why so few women are in leadership positions is because they lead differently than men. Women have been discriminated against since the beginning of time. From this discrimination came a more cooperative and flexible model of leadership. Women exhibit such characteristics as communication, conflict resolution skills, and the ability to prioritize. These skills are inherent in females and are further developed by experience such as raising children while juggling a career and managing a household. Many women can be considered Transformational Leaders. Peter G. Northouse (2019) defines Transformational Leadership as a “process that changes and transforms people. It is concerned with emotions, value, ethics, standards, and long-term goals (p. 163).” Women are strong role models. They have positive interactions with their followers, have self-confidence, have strong moral values, and desire to have a work environment where everyone is involved.

Transformational Leaders look beyond their own interest and work for the good of the whole company or organization. These leaders exhibit traits of future vision, supportive leadership, empowerment, staff development, focus on teambuilding and teamwork, inventive thinking, and charisma. James V. Donovan and James MacGregor Burns coined the term Transformational Leadership. Later, Bernard M. Bass (1999) defined Transformational Leadership further by identifying four characteristics that these types of leaders utilize. Bass posited that Transformational Leaders exhibit behaviors which include the establishment of large- scale vision for the organization or company, they employ great efforts to achieve goals, and perform beyond expectations. The first characteristic that a Transformational Leader should possess is Attributed Charisma, which refers to the leader’s level of self- confidence as well as their “assertiveness in inspiring trust and respect in their subordinates (Flynn, 2020, p. 3).” It is also important to have Idealized Charisma, which describes the leader’s attempts to promote their own beliefs and influence on subordinates within their organization or company. Transformational Leaders must also have the ability to Inspire. They must be able to believe in colleagues and subordinates and have high expectations for them. Additionally, it is important for Transformational Leaders to Intellectually Stimulate members of their organization or company by encouraging creative and proactive problem- solving techniques. Finally, a Transformational Leader must take Individualized Consideration to promote connections with each member of the organization or team (Flynn, 2020).

Women have been characterized as being more emotional than men. It appears that leading within the guidelines of Ethics of Care would be beneficial for not only female leaders, but also male leaders. Carol Gilligan was the originator of Ethics of Care, which is a feminist ethical theory that emphasizes the relationship with an individual and not with society. This theory of ethics provides opportunity to reimagine leadership ethics by focusing on women’s agency, care, nurturing, and networking. Within Ethics of Care it is assumed that individuals are understood to have differing degrees of dependance and interdependence to one another. People depend on other people for emotional support and guidance. It is also assumed that individuals affected by the consequences of other individuals’ actions or choices deserve consideration. The individual who is affected by changes in a company or organization deserves explanation and support, especially if the decision or consequences are detrimental. Lastly, Ethics of Care assumes that situations determine how to safeguard and promote the interest of all involved. Decisions affect everyone employed within a company or organization. The leader of a company should be cognizant of the sacrifices and consequences of all involved in the project (Beauchamps & Childress, 2001; Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Ethics of Care has been influential in the educational field, the medical field, and in counseling services (D’Olimpio, 2019). Perhaps, if Ethics of Care were more widely used, women would be more accepted in leadership positions. Ethics of Care coupled with Transformational Leadership would open doors that have previously been closed.

**Policy Recommendations**

Several strategies have been formed in an effort to overcome the previously mentioned barriers. These strategies must be implemented on several levels including the Institution/ Employer Level, the Individual Level, and the Societal Level. On an Institution/ Employer Level, Chisholm- Burns et al. (2017) have devised several strategies to expand leadership opportunities for women. These strategies include creating policies that address the barriers that limit access of women in leadership roles, actively recruiting women as employees, developing and supporting women in leadership roles, implementing mentoring and coaching programs for women, and enacting polices that would aid women with childcare and/ or eldercare. Additionally, prospective leaders should be identified and cultivated early on in their careers. Women should also encourage other women by sharing success stories of current and past female leaders to inspire others (Chisholm- Burns et al., 2017).

At the Individual Level, women need to be their own advocates. They must seek out mentors and market themselves to their organization or company. Women can do many things to promote themselves including making connections within their organization and outside of their organization. They could volunteer or sit on boards of nonprofit organizations to bring recognition to their skills. Women can also develop a career plan and pursue additional or continuing education in their field of study. This can help the potential leader gain self-confidence and possibly apply newly learned knowledge within their organization. Along the same lines as pursuing further education, women can attend leadership seminars and conferences to develop management skills. Also, women should say yes to the task that no one else wants to undertake. By taking on difficult tasks, women could gain recognition for being a problem- solver and a team player. This could also help women overcome diversity in the workplace. In his article, *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Current Contexts,* Jean Lau Chin (2011) suggests several factors for navigating the path toward leadership. These include “articulating the vision” of leadership by identifying your personal values as well as being able to adapt to any situation one is faced with by being aware of different leadership perspectives (Chisholm- Burns et al., 2017; Chin, 2011).

Finally, on a Societal Level, women can work to create policy changes that are more supportive to women in leadership, such as instituting policies concerning parental leave, childcare in the workplace, as well as eldercare options. Perhaps the largest societal change that can be made is to eliminate the salary disparities between women and men. Men have traditionally earned greater salaries than women. On average men earn 21% more compensation than women for performing the same duties. In the education field, women earn 58 cents to every dollar a man earns. This salary gap can discourage women from aspiring to leadership positions. Salaries and bonuses for each employee, male or female should be assessed by years of service and amount of education, not by gender (Chisholm- Burns et al., 2017).

**Summary**

The role of women in society has long been disputed. Women constitute over half of the world’s population but are drastically underrepresented in leadership positions. They have pioneered social reform and social justice and have become educated in the law, the Higher Education field, and medicine; however, the number of women in high level positions is regrettably low. The preceding paper attempted to answer the question, “How do the obstacles women working within the Criminal Justice System, Higher Education, and the Medical Field encounter contribute to the fraction of women in leadership roles within those occupations?”

Women have been perceived as inferior to men since the beginning of modern history. At different times in history, women have held powerful positions; however, with the dawning of the Christian religion, a degradation of women occurred. Women were unable to study at universities, become doctors, or vote. They were forced into arranged marriages and rarely owned businesses. In the late Twentieth Century, women gained the right to vote and by the time World War Two ended, several political reforms began as part of the Feminist Movement. Female social workers began improving lives by working for social justice and social change.

Statistically, there is a gap between the amount of women in leadership positions compared to the amount of men in leadership positions worldwide. Men outnumber women in leadership positions within law firms, the medical filed, law enforcement agencies, Higher Education, politics, and the entertainment industry. Shockingly, it is projected that it could take until 2117 for women to have equal numbers to men in the United States government. Additionally, it is projected to take until the year 2085 for women to reach parity with men in key leadership roles.

The Glass Ceiling is the indistinguishable barrier that women face as they advance through their professions with the knowledge that they could only progress so far before being hindered in their efforts to reach the height of their field. This is a barrier to promotion for women attempting to advance into leadership roles. Many studies have been completed in an effort to determine why the Glass Ceiling still exists. A new theory or metaphor has been hypothesized in recent years. This theory has been labeled the Glass Cliff Theory and suggests that when women earn leadership positions, it is during a period of crisis when the risk of company failure is higher. This phenomenon is explained by the fact that precarious leadership positions or situations are viewed as an opportunity for women, but as a hazard for male leaders.

Amy B. Diehl and Leanne Dzubinski (2016) identified 27 barriers to women trying to gain or already in leadership positions. These 27 Gender- Based Leadership Barriers were further organized into three areas: Macro Level Gender- Based Barriers, Meso Level Gender- Based Barriers, and Micro Level Gender- Based Barriers. Macro Level Gender- Based Barriers make it difficult for women to contribute their leadership expertise to their organizations on a societal level. The authors highlighted six Macro Level Gender- Based Leadership Barriers including Gender Stereotypes and Leadership Perceptions.

Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) also identified 16 Gender- Based Leadership Barriers on the Meso Level of society. The Meso Level is centered within the employee or leader’s organization. Meso Level Gender- Based Leadership Barriers include Discrimination, Informal Network Functions, and Lack of Mentoring and Sponsorship. Currently, there are a limited number of role models for women who are trying to advance into leadership roles. Mentors can offer advice, guidance, and assistance. Because there are a limited number of women in leadership positions there is a lack of support for women trying to advance.

The final level of barriers to women in leadership are Micro Level Gender- Based Barriers, which are defined as barriers that operate on an individual level within the persons’ daily activities. Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) identified five Micro Level Gender- Based Barriers including Communication Style Constraints, Conscious Unconsciousness, and Life Work Conflict. Perhaps the most researched barrier to women seeking leadership roles is the barrier of Like Work Balance, which is explained as the challenge of balancing one’s profession life and responsibilities with personal and family responsibilities. When many women are in a position to advance in their career it coincides with their optimum child- bearing years. The longer a woman diverts from her career path, the harder it is to reestablish themselves upon their return.

Research has been able to provide advice and possible solutions for women to break into more leadership positions. Women bring essential qualities to the workplace, including being compassionate listeners, valuing teamwork and collaboration, and are concerned with building quality relationships with colleagues and team members. These qualities are not enough, women must gain an understanding of the values and cultures of leadership to counterbalance the gender- based attitudes of their male counterparts. Also important for women on the path toward leadership is the ability to network and the utilization of mentors. There is also an emphasis on understanding unwritten rules within the woman’s company or organization, such as knowing how to dress and knowing how to express ideas in a confident manner.

Eileen Elias (2018) offers the advice that women should seek out leaders and learn from them. Women should also speak with confidence and avoid self- deprecation. There is also a strong emphasis on the ability to work in a team. Teamwork fosters creativity and the implementation of new strategies. Men have had a strong inclination to work in teams throughout childhood and into adulthood. Women must be more accepting of the teamwork process. The author also believes it is important for women to manage their emotions within the workplace.

Traditional Ethics has predominately focused on the male perspective with little regard of the women’s perspective. The female approach to ethical leadership is teamwork, relationships, and responsibility, whereas the male approach emphasizes a strong set of rules, values, and rights. Utilitarianism holds that the most ethical or best choice is the one that will produce the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals. Many leaders are concerned with what is the best outcome for the organization and do not seem to be concerned for the emotional well- being of the employees. The fact that women leaders value teamwork and collaboration clashes with the principles of Utilitarianism. Women leaders foster the relationships within the organization while trying to do what is best for their colleagues and subordinates.

Women lead differently than men. In the past two decades, traditional leadership practices have become more cooperative and flexible. This type of leadership is identified as Transformational Leadership, which is described as a type of leadership that is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and the long-term goals of the organization. Women have become strong role models. They have utilized Transformational Leadership by having positive interactions with their followers, having self- worth, having strong moral values, and having the desire to have a work environment where everyone is involved. Transformational Leadership may be achieved by leading within the guidelines of Ethics of Care, which is a feminist ethical theory stressing the relationship with the individual and not society as a whole. This theory of ethics provides opportunity to reimagine leadership ethics by focusing on the woman leader’s agency, care, and ability to network.

Policy recommendations have been proposed on an Individual Level, an Institution/ Employer Level, and a Societal Level. These recommendations include actively recruiting women as employees, developing and supporting women in leadership roles, and implementing policies that would aid women in childcare and/ or eldercare. Women need to feel that all the hard work, degrees they have earned, and sacrifices they have made are worth their time and effort. That fulfillment could be made by being promoted to a leadership position and earning equal salary to their male counterparts. Still, more questions need to be asked and further research is needed in the area of women and leadership. The research could focus on ways to balance motherhood and career and on ways to crumble the glass ceiling. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study the reasons as to why women are held to higher standards than men and why people believe women cannot be effective leaders. Another interesting factor that could be studied is determining if women with children make better leaders than women without children. Policy changes must be made to advance more women into leadership roles. Attitudes must be changed to convince society that women can be effective and empathetic leaders.

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