

# A Study of Gender Bias against Female Leaders

## Abstract

The present study investigates the gender bias against female leaders in male and female employees working in different organizations. Despite the significant educational achievement, women are not represented at higher position at the workplace. This trend is present even in developed country like United States. Catalyst survey (2015) reveals that only 5% of the companies in the standard and poor's 500 index had female chief executive officers. Although women are outnumbering men in educational achievements, they are stuck at the bottom or middle level at workplace. McKinsey survey report (2015) reveals that India's corporate sector has only 4% women at senior positions, compared to 25% of women at entry level. The question arises that what are the factors which refrain women from moving ahead to higher positions at workplace. This study aims to analyze those factors. 100 men and women employed in different government organizations participated in the study. 50 respondents were male and 50 were female and the age range was 30-45 years. Respondents were working as bank officer and College lecturers. Their income ranged from 45000 to 1,00000 per month. A 25 item questionnaire was used to measure attitude towards female leader/boss. This questionnaire has 25 items related with three areas (i) Competence (ii) Work family balance and (iii) Relationship/Communication skills. Mean S.D. and t test were conducted to analyze the data. Results indicated that female leaders were found to be less competent by male and female participants. Work family balance was also found to be a more significant barrier for female leaders. Relationship with employees was not found to be a significant barrier by men and women respondents. Results and implications have been discussed with reference to the role congruity theory and social stereotype theory.

**Keywords:** Barriers, Work-Family Balance, Stereotype, Role Congruity Theory, Ambition Gap, Cost of Success.

## Introduction

Despite having all educational qualifications and achievements women are unrepresented at leadership level and top levels at workplace. This trend can be found everywhere from corporate boardroom to hours of parliament, from universities to the courts, from religious institutes to philanthropy organization. Women are lagging behind men in leadership positions. In 2015, only 5 percent of the companies in the standard and poor's 500 index had female chief executive officers (catalyst, 2015). This gap is present in nonprofit sector too. Boston club (2015) reports that in a 2015 Massachusetts study, only 21 out of 151 nonprofit organizations has board with at least 50 percent women. Although women are outnumbering men in educational qualification but they are stuck at bottom and middle level at work place. They are hardly visible on leadership positions. A report of McKinsey survey on 'women matters' showed that India's corporate sector has only 4% women at senior positions compared to the average of 11% in Asia. The survey reported that the number of women at the entry level is 25%, mismanagement level is 16% and at top management level only 4% women are present. Aarti Shyamsunder et al (2015) have presented the representation of gender leadership position in India. Women are 24% at entry level against 76% men, 21% at managerial direction level against 79% men, 19% at senior manager level and only 14% at executive level against 86% of men. Thus the pipeline of women starts small and continues to shrink. Deloitte (2015) found that women hold only 7.7% of board seats and just 2.7% board chair. He found that only in media telecommunication industry and in technology women are present in highest percentage at leading position. Aparana Banerjee, Shalin mahatma, Rath Sealy and Susan vinnicombe (2010) found that out of

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323 executive directorship position, only 100 are held by women and 54% of companies on the Bombay stock exchange have no women board directors.

Thus women are present a significant amount at the entry level and middle level but not at managerial top position. Reason behind this is not the work life issue or any lack of ability and requisite qualification. According to Pew research survey (2015), relatively few adults pointed work family balance as a key barrier for women seeking leadership roles. While earlier researches have shown that career interruptions related to motherhood makes it harder for women to advance in their career and complete for top executive jobs, the survey shows that women are equally qualified but there are many social and cultural barriers behind women low representation on top positions.

#### **Review of Literature**

Gender bias against women leader has been extensively researched in recent years and main barrier responsible for this have been identified. A brief review is presented in following headings

1. Stereotypes against women
2. Balancing work and family
3. Leadership ambition gap
4. Cost of success
5. Role ambiguity theory

#### **Stereotype against Women**

The image of working women is not very positive. They are blamed for neglecting family responsibilities. She is treated as selfish, careless and ambitious. At workplace, women hardly aspire for higher positions. Darshan Goux (2012) has found in study of millennial men and women in a senior role that only about 20% women wanted to emulate her career. For men it is considered normal to have a successful personal and family life. But it is not the same for women. It is portrayed that trying to have a happy family life and a successful career is impossible for women. They are indirectly forced to choose between family and career. But women at present time are falsifying these stereotypes. They are successfully running their professional life and personal life as well. Sharon Neers and Joan Strobe (2009) have found in a comprehensive review of government social science and original researches that children, parents and marriage all can flourish of working women. They found that sharing the financial and child care responsibilities leads to less guilty moms, more involved dads and thriving children. Rosalind Chait Barrett (2001) had also reviewed the studies on work life led once and found that women who participated in multiple roles actually had lower levels of anxiety and higher level of mental well being. Chiryle Buchly and Mariun O Brain (2007) have also concluded that being an employed woman reaps rewards including greater financial security, more stable marriages better health and in general increased life satisfaction.

But stereotypes exist when women aspire to go in to higher positions at work place which were only reserved for men earlier. Employers discourage women's career progression aspirations. They are afraid women will not be able to perform at top

positions because of dual responsibilities. Women are not considered suitable for challenging and demanding jobs. Koenig et al (2011) have found in a Meta analysis of 69 studies on stereotypes and leadership that stereotypes about leadership are decidedly masculine. Crites et al (2015) have also found that stereotypically male characteristic like independence aggression, competitiveness, rationality dominance, objectivity all cordite with current expectation of leadership. Problem increase when these stereotypes affect women's well being. Stereotypes threat increases the problem of women. Social science has found that when members of a group are aware of negative stereotypes they begin to behave according to that stereotype. This is proved in many studies. Logel et al (2012) Hoset et al (2010) found in their studies that when women are negatively stereotyped their performance at workplace also decreases. Hoyt and Blascovich (2010) have found that this stereotype threat can reduce working memory and because of its relationship with stress anxiety and disengagement, it can lead to many negative behaviors and consequence.

#### **Balancing between Families**

Balancing work and family responsibilities and is one of the biggest challenges ousted for women. Eagly and carli obstacle 2007, Sandberg (2013) have found this as a main obstacle responsible for women carrier progression. Generally, taking care of family is taken as women's role. Cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and elderly parents are taken as women primary responsibility. Whenever women excellent workplace, they have to ignore their family responsibilities. If she has chosen work over family she is evaluated as selfish and ambitious women and not good women. And when she prefers her family responsibilities she is worse performer at work place. She is accused of not giving enough time at work place. For men this is totally different. They are praised for performing well at their workplace. Ignoring family responsibilities are excused for them. Rather family responsibilities are reserved for women. This dilemma pushes women back from going to higher position at workplace. They often deny their promotions. Promotions may bring greater responsibilities and time consumption they forego promotion and career advisements. Men, on the other hand rarely do so. In a study Sprunt et al (2013) found that men hardly leave their jobs or take break for week family balance. It was women who left jobs to handle work family pressure. Sandberg (2013) finds it shocking that women take job break even at peak of their carrier to take care of their family. It is always the women and not the men who decide to take break from job to take care of smaller kids'. In United States many women leave their job after having children since maternity leave is not paid there (U.S. department of labour 2015). Klerman et al (2012) found that even employers offer family friendly politics worker do not use them as their work commitment will be questioned. In India too private sector organization prefers unmarried females to married females. Married female will seek family benefits in future so their recruitment is discouraged marina and family

planning seem to detrimental. Thus women are discouraged continually at every single step of their carrier ladder. Those who could succeed to go on tops are really very courageous and competent.

#### **Leadership Ambition Gap**

Women are far behind men in their ambitions. They are many times willingly stuck at the bottom levels at workplace. This is referred as leadership ambition gap by Sheryl Sandberg (2013). She has presented an extensive review of this leadership ambition gap. She has found this gap as a dominant factor reframing women from leadership position at workplace. Despite having all educational and essential qualification women are bar behind men at higher positions. Sandberg finds that career progression depends on risk taking and self promotion. And these qualities are considered masculine in the society. Women are not expected to advocate for themselves and be bold at workplace. This is the main reason behind women slow career progression. Sandberg S. (2013) found that the pipeline that supplies educated workforce is chock – full of women at the entry level but by the time the same pipeline is filing leadership position it is overwhelmingly stuck by men. Women lag behind men in their ambitions at workplace. Researchers show that men are more ambitious at work place than women. McKinsey survey (2012) is of more than four thousand employees of leading companies found that 36% of the men wanted to reach the c – suite compared to only 18% of the women. Konrad etal 9(2000) found that when jobs are described as powerful, challenging and involving high levels of responsibility , they appeal to more men than women. This ambition gap is not only present at leadership level only , rather it is found to be present at every step of career .Linda Schweitzer etal (2011) found in a survey of college students that more men than women chose reaching a managerial level as career priority in the first three years after graduation .

Leadership traits are expected frails of men “not women”. Being ambitious is a negative trait for a woman. While being ambitious is a compliment for men. They are praised for being ambitious and successful. Heilman. M.E. and Tyler G.(2007) have found that men are continually applauded for being ambitious and powerful and successful. But women who display the same trials pay a social penalty.

This gender ambition gap starts from childhood. Boys and girls are treated separately for their achievements. When a girl displays leadership qualities, she is called a bossy while boys are never called “bossy” for displaying the same leadership qualities. They are rather praised for being bold and ambitious. This gender stereotype of childhood affects the girls throughout their lives. They think that leadership positions are held by men, so women do not expect or even try to achieve them.

#### **Cost of Success for Women**

Women's success brings many negative outcomes too. This is labeled as a cost or penalty of success. Successful professional women are labeled as less feminine, dominating and selfish. They are blind for ignoring family roles. But for men, success

brings no such negativity. This has been found in a study by Heilman, M.E. and Okimoto, T.G. (2007) in their study, “why are women penalized for success at male Tasks: The Implicit community Deficient.” They found that success and likability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women. Similar results have been reported in many studies. Kernahan C, Bruce, D, Ann, B (2008) found in studies that we evaluate people based on stereotype of gender, race, nationality age etc. The stereotype of women considers them as caregivers, emotional, less rational. But men are considered as providers, decisive, assertive and independent.

Professional success for men is welcomed all over, while success for women all brings many negative perceptions. Sandberg S (2013) names it ‘punishment for success.’ When a woman excels in her career, she works hard and goes forward. She is being accused of behaving like a man, not a woman. She is not liked for behaving like a man. Most women curtail their ambitions because of these negative perceptions. In order to be liked by others, they compromise over their ambitions. Famous author Ken Auletta (2002) has summarized this phenomenal Self-doubt becomes a form of self defense. Women begin to suspect and underestimate their capabilities to protect themselves to be disliked. Professor Deborah. H.Gruenfeld (2012) have explained women for success the, cost paid by to Sheryl Sandberg (2012) in a discussion. She writes, “Our entrenched cultural ideas associate men with leadership qualities and women with nurturing qualities and put women in a double bind.”

#### **Role Congruity Theory**

One explanation for gender bias against female leader is the discrepancy between the traditional female gender role and the new leadership role (Early and Karau 2002, Schein 1975). In our society female gender roles include nurturing, caring, sensitivity and tolerance .While male roles are more agnatic with men often being considered more aggressive, ambition assertive and direct .When individuals behave in different ways from their sex role, they are evaluated negativity Eagly and Karau (2002). This in incongruity between the traditional gender role and new gender role creates a problem for the female leaders. Schein (1995) has found that the incongruity creates problem for a female leader because it does not match with their traditional role and the successful leader role that is associated with male gender role earlier. Thus the incongruity between female gender role and leadership role creates a conflict for the subordinates in employer. They are confused how to accept their new leader who is a female in spite of a male.

Eagly and Karau (2002) Johnson etal (2008) say that role congruity theory predicts that's female leader suffer two type of prejudice.

#### **Descriptive and Prescriptive Biases**

Descriptive bias occurs when female leaders are stereotyped as possessing less potential for leadership than men. Prescriptive bias occurs when actual female leaders are evaluated less favorably because leadership is seen as more disable for men

than for women. Both sources of bias have negative effects for women. If they behave like traditional gender roles, they are not able to handle the leadership position and if they adopt new gender role of successful leaders. They are evaluated a negatively and masculine not feminine.

**Significance of The Study**

Women account for almost half of our own total population. Both men and women contribute to development of a society and its smooth functioning. So, gender quality is important in all spheres of life. When women are not given equal opportunities and leadership position they are denied power to make their presence in the world. Leadership or a top position in an organization gives power status and confidence. If women are deprived of these virtues how we can claim for gender equality? No society can prosper and flourish without making women equal partner's .This study aims to address the biases behind this leadership ambition gap .This study will reveal the social and cultural biases that refrain women from leadership position, so that these barrier could be removed and the women should secure the positions, they deserve.

**Objectives of The Study**

1. To assess the preference for leaders at workplace in male and female participants.
2. To analyze the causes of biases against female leaders.
3. To assess the difference in biases of male and female participants towards female leaders at workplace.

**Hypotheses**

**Present Study has Three Hypotheses**

1. Male and female employees would prefer male leader over female leaders at workplace.
2. Female leaders will be rejected because of three baises
  - i. Low competence and leadership qualities
  - ii. Preferring family over workplace and
  - iii. Lack in communication skills and relationship at workplace.
3. There would be significant difference in attitude of male and female participants towards female leaders.

**Sample**

100 men and women participated in the study. Amongst them 50 were men and 50 were women .They were employed as college lecturers and bank officers. Age range was 30-45 years. Monthly income ranged between 45000 to 100000per month. Purposive random sampling technique was used.

**Tool**

A self structured "Attitude towards female leader/boss scale" was used. Scale contains 25 items. First item of the scale is on preference for male or female leader at work place .Remaining 24 items of the scale are grouped in three categories.

1. Low competence and leadership quality (10 items)
2. Balance between family and workplace (7 items)
3. Communication skills and relationship with subordinates (7 Items)

Each item has two alternative 'yes' or 'no' 1 mark is allotted to 'yes' response and 'o' mark is allotted to 'no' response .Higher score denote negative attitude towards female leader bosses

**Data Collection Procedure**

Data was collected on college teachers and bank employees at their workplaces respectively. Prior consent and appointment was taken and the attitude towards female leader /boss scale was administrated to male and female participants. The participants were keenly interested in filling the questionnaires and were enthusiastic about the finding.

**Data Analysis and Results**

**Objective One: Preference of Leader at Workplace**

The preference of leaders at workplace of the male and female participants is presented in table 1. It is evident that out of 100 participants, 62 participants preferred male leaders,10 preferred female leaders and 10 participants had no preference. Thus on the whole, male leaders were preferred than female leaders. Gender difference is also found in preference for leaders at workplace. 76% men participants preferred male leaders and only 8%preferred female leaders. In women participants 84%preferred male leaders and only 12%preferred female leader .So, the women participants too have not preferred female leaders at workplace. Both group of participants, men and women have preferred male leader over female leaders and surprisingly more women participantshave preferred male leaders (84%than men participants 6%).

**Table 1 Preference of Leader at Workplace N=100, men=50, women=50**

Sample	Preference					
	Male Leaders		Female Leaders		Any	
	F	%	f	%	f	%
Men	38	76	4	8	4	8
Women	42	84	6	12	2	4
Total	62		10		6	

8% men have opted for any gender choice, while any 4% women have opted this choice. It is clear that women are more in favor of male leaders and are less ready to accept any gender leader at workplace.

**Objectivell: Identifying The Gender Biases against Female Leader in Men and Women Participants**

In the present study mainly three baises against female leadership were investigated.

1. Lack in competence and leadership qualities
2. Difficulties in balancing between family and workplace responsibilities.
3. Communication skills and relationship at work place.

Obtained results have been presented in table no. 2; Mean S.D. and t ratio of the three biases in men and women participants are presented in table 2. It is evident that mean of lack of competence in men participant was 5.48 and it was 3.42 in women participants. T-Test was significant at 01 level of significance. It reveals that both men and women accuse female leaders for having low competence and leadership qualities .But men participants found

women leader less competent than women participants did.

Mean for work family balance in men participants was 3.37 as compared to 1.32 of women participants' .Both men and women participants accepted the difficulties of women leaders in balancing between family life and work place but here too was more negative than women participant.

T-Ratio was 10.25 that were significant at 0.10 levels. Men participants were more negative towards female leader because of their dual responsibilities. They were perhaps afraid that women leader cannot work as efficiently as men can due to their family concerns and women are always accused of preferring family over work.

The third bias of communication skills and relationship at workplace was present more in men as compared to women participants .Mean of men was 3.20 against 2.96 of women participants but the T – ratio was not found to be statistically significant.

**Objective III: Gender Difference in Biases against Female Leader**

The finding clearly indicates more gender biases in men as compared to women participants. In two out of three biases investigated in the study, men were significantly more biased than women participants. The biases of low competence and leadership qualities and work family balance were significantly found more in men than women participants.

There was no significant difference in bias of communication skills and relationship at workplace. Men and women participants both had not this bias against women leader .It seems that women leader have been considered having more communication skills and good relationship with co-workers at work place .Women leaders communication skills have not been found significantly different by the male and female participants .

**Table 2**  
**Mean S.Dand T Ratio of Three Gender Bias Again Women Leaders H=100, Men =50, Women =50**  
**Competence and Leadership Qualities**

Sample	N	Mean	S.D	S Ed	t ratio	Level of significance
Men	50	5.48	1.55	.42	4.90	0.01
Women	50	3.42	2.68			

**Work Family Life Balance Problem**

Sample	N	Mean	S.D	SEd	t ratio	Level of significance
Men	50	3.37	1.27	.20	10.25	0.01
Women	50	1.32	0.72			

**Relationship and Communication skills**

Sample	N	Mean	S.D	S Ed	t-ratio	Level of significance
Men	50	3.20	1.02	.20	1.20	Not significant
Women	50	2.96	1.05			

**Discussion**

The finding of the present study clearly demonstrates the preference for male leaders at workplace by men and women participants. Similar finding have been reported in many studies. Elesser. K.M. and Lever, J. (2011) have found in an exhaustive

survey Of 60,470 men and women that participants reported preferring male over female bosses by more than 2:1 ratio.The justification for preferring male over female boss is mostly based on gender stereotypes .Women are stereotyped as being less tough and strong as men.Lips (2008) have found that more negative traits are associated with female than male and persistent gender stereotyping affects our judgment about others. Preko, Alaxander (2012) has also reported preference for male bosses in his study on male employees working under female leader in selected organization in Ghana. He found that 69.5% of the male employers preferred to work under male managers and coded managerial position as masculine position. Garcia Retamers and Lopez Zafra (2006), Parks Stamm etal (2008) Rudmam(1998) have also found that women reacted more negatively than men to female leaders.

Gender biases about women leadership at workplace is found in almost every part of the world, not only in developing country like India but also in a developed country like U.S.A. This is present in 2015, only 5%of the companies in the standard and poor 500 index had female chief executive officers (catalyst, 2015) this leadership gap is not only limited to business, but it can be seen in nonprofit sector too. Women are unrepresented in nonprofit sector too. Boston club (2015) finds in a Massachusetts, study that only 21 out of 151 nonprofit organizations had boards with at least50% women.

Gender bias is rooted in our psyches since very early. In the present study three biases against women leadership were investigated. First bias was that women leader lack behind in competence and leadership qualities. Top positions of work places are considered masculine job. Women are not considered capable of doing difficult decisions and responsibilities. It is common notion that managerial position is for men not for women 'Women ability to do difficult and challenging job is generally suspected. Preko, Alexander (2012) found in this study that female heads of an organization were not understood as capable of doing responsible and challenging jobs. Female heads were found inconsistent in discharging their duties. They were found incapable of doing serious management decisions and contributions. In present study too, women leaders were considered having low competence and relationship qualities. Men participants were significantly more biased about women leader competence than women participants. It seems that men participants had severe negative attitude towards women leaders' competence and abilities. Therefore they have shown more bias against women leader. Men participants were more willing to work under male bosses too. Men do not have faith in women leader capability. They consider top position as a masculine job and not a feminine one. Men do not rely on feminine boss. They believe more on male boss. Because of emotionality and tenderness, women leaders are not considered capable of discharging tough and challenging duties required at higher levels.

Second bias investigated in the study was the difficulty in balancing between family and

responsibilities. Finding of the present study demonstrate that women are blamed for preferring family over workplace. They do not have enough time for workplace. They are always busy in dispersing their family responsibilities. So they overlook their workplace responsibilities. They do not have enough time for business promotion, outstation tour and late hour office meetings. That is why women are considered incapable for higher position at workplace. In the present study, both men and women participants had shown this bias. But men participants were significantly more biased than women participants. It seems that women understand that they can manage effectively both the responsibilities and can perform well at-workplace. They can successfully manage their family role that it does not interrupt with workplace roles. But men do not think so. They constantly blame women for ignoring workplace our family. Eagly and Carli (2007), S. Sandberg (2013) have found similar results in their studies. They have found that balancing between work and family responsibilities as the most challenging obstacle keeping women away from leadership. This finding can be explained in terms of role congruity theory of Eagly and Karau, (2002). When a woman works as a leader she behaves more aggressively and assertive and ambitious. While in society, a woman is considered as caring, nurturing, gentle and tolerant and when a woman behaves different from this traditional role, she is judged negatively. This incongruity between the traditional female and new leader female creates problem for female leaders. Schein (1995) has found that the incongruity creates problem for female leaders because it does not match with their traditional role and successful leader role, which was earlier associated with male role. The incongruity confuses the subordinates as how to accept the female leaders.

Third bias investigated in the study was 'the communication skills and the Relationship with the subordination at workplace.' Both men and women participants rated women leaders low on this quality. Female leaders were not considered good at communication skills and mentoring the subordinations. They were blamed for not creating good work environment among the subordinates and were accused of not having good relationships with the subordinates at workplace. But in the present study, gender difference regarding this bias was not statistically significant. In other words, it can be stated that women leaders can do better because of the soft and humble attitude and motivate their subordinates their nutrient and caring approach can motivate others to work harder.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Findings of the study support the existence of many biases related with women leadership. Women are stereotyped for feminine and nurturing roles. Although they are equally qualified for leadership roles, many barriers still exist and refrain them from moving ahead in career leader. Women leaders are constantly blamed for ignoring family roles and behaving like a man, not like a woman. People in general do not appreciate the idea of working under a

female head. Many obstacles come in front of women leaders. They are less paid, less praised for their accomplishments and underestimated. That is why, women limit themselves to lower positions at workplace. And this gender disparity at higher positions is not good for any organization. In many studies it has been found that managerial gender diversity is related to positive outcomes. Mengue and Auh, (2006). A 2007 catalyst report on S and P 500 companies found a correlation between women representation on board and a significantly higher return on equity, a higher return on sales and a higher return on invested capital.

This gender disparity should be removed from the society and workplaces. We should try to maintain gender parity at individual level and social level too. It will require a planned and diversified approach. Individuals, organization, educational institutions and government should try to inculcate the genders equality in people from early stage. Gender equality must be attained if we want to lead successfully our home and organizations as well, otherwise, we will be deprived of women at top position at workplace and we will have to pay a lot for this. No organization can flourish without proper representation of both the genders. Women's equal representation is essential at all levels of organizations. It is, therefore recommended that organizations should recruit women at higher positions and should stop discriminations. Women should be encouraged to accept leadership positions. Studies show that companies where women are strongly represented at board or top management level are the best performing companies as founded by a research "women matter" by McKinsey and company in 2007.

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