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Women in Power

Margaret A. McKenna

The country is filled with powerful women, but women in power remain significantly underrepresented across a variety of professional fields, in business, academe, politics, and the media. With more women enrolled in colleges today than men, continued underrepresentation of women in leadership roles throughout society is not just morally unacceptable, it is economically damaging. The nation needs to maximize all human capital, in order to meet our own challenges and stay competitive in this global economy. Young women need to be supported in developing the knowledge and skills necessary for being leaders and catalysts for change.

Reflecting on a career that has spanned law, advocacy, politics, government office, university leadership, and experience on a variety of corporate boards, the author ponders the often vexed relationship that exists between women and power. She discusses what higher education can do to create a new generation of women leaders, who can not only break through the glass ceiling, but change the leadership paradigms that created it in the first place.

The country is filled with powerful women, but has a scarcity of women in positions of power. The reasons for this are complex, but the consequences of this persistent gender gap take a real toll on girls' and women's aspirations, and on societal productivity, ingenuity, and innovation. While progress for women has been made in many fields, women still have a "vexed" relationship to power and the language of power. And society still has a "vexed" relationship with women in power.

Leadership is not gendered, as great women leaders through the ages have doubtless shown. But most women are socialized early, in their families and in their communities, to emphasize nurturing and collaboration. While these qualities are not antithetical to leadership, per se, they are often at odds with the pursuit of, if not the exercise, of power. The world is changing more slowly than we like or thought it would, but we do have more ex-

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amples and more diverse examples of women overcoming these dominant socialization patterns. Education, mentoring, and modeling leadership, even language can transcend the stereotypes of power and gender that permeate much of our culture.

PERSISTENCE OF THE GLASS CEILING

Statistics never tell the whole story and are subject to manipulation and interpretation, but they do provide a backdrop for understanding these issues. The picture is not a good one. Sixty-seven of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are held by women, only 14 in the United States Senate, only 23 percent of the nation's 7,382 state legislators,¹ and only 16 percent of the nation's governors.² Around the globe women represent just 16.3 percent of all legislators,³ and an even smaller proportion of world leaders and government ministers.⁴ In business, women make up less than 2 percent of Fortune 1000 CEOs and less than 14 percent of their corporate boards.

While women represent 52 percent of the voting age population, a majority of registered voters, and often more actual voters, their voices are frequently absent from the nation's political discourse. Only 30 percent of correspondents on evening news shows are women and only 14 percent of guests on Sunday morning talk shows.⁵ Much was made of the appointment of the first-ever woman as the sole anchor on one of the national networks. While women have made substantial strides into leadership positions in some professions, academe among them, the upper echelons of American business and politics are still overwhelmingly male-dominated.

According to Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, two political scientists who have recently studied women's willingness to run for political office, these disparities are the result of "longstanding patterns of traditional socialization that persist in United States culture,"⁶ including gender-specific family roles, the male-dominated ethos of our political institutions, and what these authors term "the gendered psyche":

When women operate outside of their traditional and "appropriate" realms, they tend to express less comfort than men. Contemporary studies that assess psychological development uncover gender differences in levels of confidence, the desire for achievement, and the inclination to self-promote. Several studies of business executives, for example, find that, in salary negotiations, women often downplay their achievements. The net result is that women garner significantly lower salaries than equally credentialed men. Women, in essence, tend not to be socialized to possess the qualities the modern political

arena demands of its candidates and elected officials. Whereas men are taught to be confident, assertive, and self promoting, cultural attitudes towards women as political leaders, expectations of women's family roles, and the overarching male exclusiveness of most political institutions leave an imprint suggesting to women that it is often inappropriate to possess these characteristics.

These sociocultural, institutional, and psychological manifestations of traditional gender socialization serve as the major source of the substantial gender gap in eligible candidates' political ambition.⁷

The founding sisters of the feminist movement in the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies are now its benevolent grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Young women are frequently unaware of the movement or its struggles or the debts of freedom and possibility they owe to feminists and pathbreakers such as Gloria Steinem, Adrienne Rich, Betty Freidan, Mary Daly, Bella Abzug, Barbara Jordan, Geraldine Ferraro, or Shirley Chisholm, to name a few. Because of their contributions, many limitations to ambition and achievement have been lifted. But many still remain, some deeply internalized by young women at the level of cultural mores that define "appropriate" gender roles.

LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND POWER

The study of language and gender provides additional perspectives on the women's leadership gap. Robin Lakoff's seminal article on "Language and Women's Place" argued that

Women have a different way of speaking from men — a way of speaking that both reflects and produces a subordinate position in society. Women's language . . . is rife with such devices as mitigators (sort of, I think) and inessential qualifiers (*really happy, so beautiful*). This language . . . renders women's speech tentative, powerless, and trivial; and as such, it disqualifies them from positions of power and authority. In this way language itself is a tool for oppression — it is learned as part of learning to be a woman, imposed on women by societal norms, and in turn keeps women in their place.⁸

Lakoff's theories have been hotly debated for nearly three decades, spawning at first two different camps of thought — the difference and the dominance approaches.⁹ The former focuses on fundamental gender differences in their approach to language between women and men. The latter focuses on such differences as the result of male domination and subordination of women. Over time, scholars found these dichotomized categories mislead-

ing, recognizing the performative role of both language and gender, that is, less as immutable qualities that people have, than performative acts that they *do*.

The “performance turn” has led many language and gender scholars to question familiar gender categories like *woman* and *man* and to explore the variety of ways in which linguistic performances relate to constructing both conventional gendered identities and identities that, in one way or another, challenge conventional gender norms.¹⁰

As someone who has held leadership positions in law, human rights, government service, academe, and on corporate boards, I have experienced firsthand the “boys’ club” of American politics and economic institutions. How often, at a meeting, do women ask, “May I ask a question?” as opposed to just asking a question. Studies show that women, even those in positions of authority, such as doctors and lawyers, are interrupted significantly more than men and by both men and women. I have seen, even on a campus that is considered feminist, these different gender-based actions. A woman will knock, normally wait until the knock is answered, stand at the open door, start by apologizing and asking if she is interrupting. A male administrator will knock, come in, and sit down, while asking if I am busy. At numerous meetings, while I was in the role as University President, lead White House lawyer, or nonprofit executive director, questions were directed to my male subordinate instead of to me. After a meeting or encounter, I am often asked my position, even though I was introduced earlier. The reality of my position is not consistent with the stereotype and therefore easy to dismiss.

When it comes to talking about power, women are socialized to downplay ambition, to listen quietly, and to be polite. You can often see this on display in the tentativeness with which young girls express their opinions, particularly in mixed-sex classrooms, compared to boys who are more likely to take an authoritative tone, regardless of the substantive merits of the points they are making. The chilling climate in the classroom has been widely studied, and documents that, regardless of whether the teacher is male or female, boys are called on many times more than girls. This early socialization, with its overt and subtle cues, has a long-lasting impact. When one of Lesley’s undergraduate colleges recently went coed, we watched what effect it would have on the young women in the classroom and out. One faculty member worried that our “women” would become “girls.”

It is not only personal experience but what we read and see that reinforce a “woman’s appropriate role.” Many of our cultural and internalized images of leadership are based on male models and the belief that women who wield power are profoundly threatening. From Medea to Lady Macbeth, Western cultural archetypes of powerful women have been tinged

with a kind of primordial dread.¹¹ Or, like Cassandra, women who spoke truth to power were often marginalized and sometimes put to death.¹²

Such images are not only historical but also contemporary. Consider televangelist Pat Robertson's observation: "The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians."¹³ While easy to dismiss this kind of extreme case, the unease that powerful women continue to provoke in the boys' club and the continued gender discrimination in leadership positions is real. The loss in perspectives, productivity, and *possibility* that ensues from single-sex dominance of key leadership functions in our nation is difficult to calculate, but it is substantial.

Indeed, recent research has suggested that competent women who succeed in traditionally male-dominated fields are likely to be characterized as "more selfish, manipulative and untrustworthy — your typical 'bitchy' characteristics," according to psychologist Madeline Hellman. Her findings published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* suggest that both men and women penalize women for success, particularly in previously male-dominated fields.

Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, social scientists who have studied women leaders have found that they tend to lead in ways that are more inclusive, empowering, collaborative, and transformative than men.¹⁴ In politics, moreover, they ensure that substantive issues that might not be on their male counterparts' radar screens get attention and funding: gender equity, daycare, flextime, reproductive freedom, minimum wage increases, and the extension of the food stamp program are examples that Lawless and Fox cite.

POLITICAL AMBITION?

When it comes to politics, ambition is far from gender blind. The Citizen Political Ambition Study that Lawless and Fox conducted found that:

- Women are less likely than men to consider running for office.
- Women are less likely than men to run for office.
- Women are less likely than men to express interest in running for office in the future.¹⁵

It does not help that female politicians are portrayed even more negatively than women in other professions. Think of the different ways politically ambitious men and women are depicted in the media. Hillary Clinton is often characterized as brittle, grasping, and power-hungry. John McCain,

no less ambitious, is seen as a straight-talker and an unusually principled politician. Both are highly able individuals who have succeeded because they are strong leaders who understand how political power can be used to pursue substantive agendas based on deeply held values.

Women's presence in political governing bodies not only gives us as a society the full range of talent from which to choose our leaders, it brings different leadership styles, different policy agendas, and, as important, the right symbols and models. At both the national and state levels, male and female legislators' priorities and preferences differ. Both Democratic and moderate Republican women are more likely to support "women's issues." Another example can be found in the sorts of medical research the government funds:

Up until 1993, the National Institutes of health (NIH) specifically excluded women from large research studies, even on predominantly female diseases like breast cancer. Congress never questioned it until a critical mass of women swept into office in 1992 — the "year of the woman," when the number of female legislators doubled (to 10 percent). Viewing the NIH decision-making process through the gender lens, and not through the convenience lens that the agency had been using, the women set out to change the system, and did so. They used their power and numbers to create the office of research on Women's Health at NIH and to mandate the inclusion of women and minorities in clinical trials.¹⁶

SUCCESS STORY

One sector of society that has seen the rapid advance of women into leadership positions is colleges and universities. In the American Council on Education's most recent survey of the college presidency, women led 21 percent of the nation's colleges and universities, up from just 10 percent fifteen years earlier.¹⁷ These CEOs are in an unrivalled position to support the creation of new paradigms for women in leadership, a new way to think about power and its uses and new ways to educate young women and men. In my conversations with other women CEOs, it is clear that their leadership styles vary, but in regard to power, there seems a common thread. Women want power to make a difference, to be effective, to improve the way things are, not just as an end, but as a *means*.¹⁸ Many men want power for the same reasons, but too often the exercise of power in society is seen as an end in itself. This may have less to do with the nature of gender than the nature of power. But until we have greater gender equity in leadership positions across society, we will never know, or have the opportunity to experience, the difference that difference makes.

Around the globe, there is a handful of countries with women leaders, and a smaller handful still that come closer to gender parity in parliamentary positions. The differences in the role and status of women in these societies are striking. Take Norway, for example, where there is a 50/50 ratio of women and men in the Norwegian cabinet. It has introduced a law calling for 40 percent women's representation even in private companies, after voluntary measures failed. The proportion of women legislators in Rwanda is nearly fifty percent. Women in Rwanda are contributing to that nation's reconstruction, and the country has recently passed new marriage, land, and antiviolenace laws that protect women's rights. Sweden has been a leader in gender equity in government for two decades, and has some of the world's most progressive policies toward women, families, and the workplace in the world.¹⁹

Jane Addams, in talking about the status of women, once said, "We have not wrecked railroads or done other unholy things but then we have not been given the chance." There have not been enough women in this country to see if, given a chance, it would make a difference, but there are indications from other parts of the world that it would.

THE HOPE AHEAD

The gender gap in leadership *can be overcome* and not simply by women trailblazers. While the goal is not to live up to Congresswoman Barbara Jordan's proposition "that equality will come when there are mediocre women in Congress like the mediocre men," it is, through education, system reform, and more and more diverse role models, to raise aspirations and create opportunities. Leadership education for women and men can help combat the negative stereotyping that stigmatizes women who seek, gain, and wield power. By providing young women and men access to powerful women role models across a variety of fields, knowledge about the social and historical roots of discrimination and an understanding of the importance of networking and mentoring, we hope for more gender-neutral choices in careers. In encouraging young women, it is important that they understand both the formal and informal rules and systems and that they be prepared to face challenges because of gender.

Lesley University has undertaken a variety of programs that support young women in becoming leaders. Part of the effort has been to help draw connections that are more explicit between involvement in the political process and changes in policy that support women's work and family roles. We have found it important to show through contact with strong women leaders in all walks of life, the unique contributions that powerful women

make in a variety of professional, institutional, political, and civic settings without sacrificing their identities, their values, or their dreams.

In the summer of 2004 Lesley played host to a Young Women's Leadership Conference, which brought over two hundred college-age women from across the country to participate in leadership seminars and activities coinciding with the Democratic National Convention held in Boston that year. Speakers in the series included: Carol Moseley Braun, former Texas Governor Ann Richards, Congresswomen Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) and Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, and Massachusetts Lt. Gov. Kerry Healey, among others.²⁰ The following responses are typical of the catalytic impact of exposure to powerful women role models, in an environment that supported women's voices and aspirations:

The single [greatest lesson] I took away from this conference was that I can be a leader. I can speak my mind and not be hesitant about my issues and experiences, just because I did not want to offend anyone. I am most excited to get people to register to vote, starting from my family and friends and just let other women know what I experienced and change the way they see things as well.

I came to this conference as a Republican knowing that I would probably be with 199 Democrats! I went into the conference hoping that it would be a tremendous learning experience for me and it was. I learned it's not about the "R" or "D" next to your name it's about being an American and being a young woman who is going to make a difference in the world.

I have been inspired to become more involved in my community. First, I plan on bringing Rock the Vote to my college. I also want to get involved in a club or organization that [shares] my beliefs. This conference has helped me develop the confidence that I can, as a woman, make changes in my world.

The sense of self-efficacy and empowerment that these students express should be every young woman's birthright. Ensuring that they receive it should be a top priority for every educator and every individual leader who cares about the nation's future.

The stakes are high for the nation. With more women enrolled in colleges today than men, continued under-representation of women in leadership roles throughout society is not just morally wrong, it is economically damaging. Given increased globalization and internal challenges, the need to maximize the nation's human capital has never been greater. We cannot afford the loss of potential, innovation, and creativity from half of our citizens. Young women need to be supported in developing the knowledge

and skills necessary for being leaders and catalysts for change. More important, they need to be empowered to raise their voices and their sights and to seek and use power with a confidence that comes from insight, guidance, and knowledge.

Notes

1. "Women in Elected Office Fact Sheets and Summaries" (2006), Center for American Women and Politics, www.cawp.rutgers.edu/facts.htm.
2. "Advancing Women's Leadership" (2006), The White House Project, www.thewhitehouseproject.org/v2/researchandreports.html.
3. "Absence of Women From Leadership Positions Undermines Democracy" (2006), United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, www.un.org/news/press/docs/2006/wom1541.doc.htm.
4. Ibid.
5. "Who's Talking Now," (2005), The White House Project, www.thewhitehouseproject.org/v2/researchandreports.html.
6. Jennifer L. Lawless, Richard L. Fox, *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11.
7. Ibid.
8. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 4.
11. Margaret Thatcher was known as the "iron lady" because of her adamant character, but the term also recalled the medieval torture device of the same name.
12. The example of Cindy Sheehan is a contemporary case in point of a woman leader who was vilified for speaking truth to power. A founding member of Gold Star Families for Peace, Sheehan helped crystallize anti-war sentiment through her five week long vigil outside the summer White House in Crawford, Texas. Sheehan's protest was profoundly enraging to the white male pundits on Fox News and other conservative media outlets.
13. Pat Robertson 1992 Iowa direct mail fundraising, letter cited in the *Washington Post* "Equal Rights Initiative in Iowa Attacked," August 23, 1992.
14. A. H. Eagley and B. T. Johnson "Gender and Leadership Style: A Meta-analysis" (*Psychological Bulletin*, 1990): 108, 233–56. More recent studies have downplayed such stark differences and highlighted the importance of organizational cultures and contexts as more determinative of women's leadership styles. See Marloes van Engen and Tineke M. Willemsen, "Gender and Leadership Styles: A Review of the Past Decade," WORC Paper 00.10.09 Tilburg University, The Netherlands. Subsequently, van Engen and Eagley joined forces with a third colleague to produce "Transformational, Transactional, and Laissez-faire Leadership Styles: A Meta Analysis Comparing Women and Men." It found that women were "slightly more

likely than men to have a “transformational leadership style.” Women were also more likely to reward good performance than their male counterparts, according to a 2004 interview with the lead author in the Northwestern University Institute for Policy News.

15. Lawless and Fox, *It Takes a Candidate*, 146.
16. Martha Buck, *Cult of Power: Sex Discrimination in Corporate America and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Scribners, 2005), 205.
17. The American College President: 2002 Edition, ACE.
18. A recent study by researchers at the Simmons School of Management examined attitudes toward leadership among 500 professional and managerial women. Researchers noted “The majority were not motivated by traditional models of leadership focusing on rank, position, or ‘turf.’” Only 28 percent reported that it was important to them to “be in charge of others.” Nor were they primarily motivated by status or rewards. Indeed, only 52 percent reported that it was important to make lots of money. Rather, more than 70 percent of the women reported that it was important for them to “make a difference, help others, contribute to their communities, and make the world a better place.” Deborah Merrill-Sands, Jill Kickul, and Cynthia Ingols, “*Women Pursuing Leadership and Power: Challenging the Myth of the ‘Opt Out Revolution,’*” in *CGO Insights*, Briefing Note 20, Center for Gender in Organizations, 2005 available at www.simmons.edu.so.doc/centers/insights_centers.pdf Deborah Merrill-Sands, Jill Kickul, and Cynthia Ingols. Center for Gender in Organizations, 2005.
19. U.N. Commission on the Status of Women Press Statement, February 28, 2006.
20. A second conference was held in concert with the Republican National Convention in New York City, hosted by Barnard College.