

girl scouts

of southeastern michigan

March 2024 White Paper

From Girlhood to Leadership:

Transformative Pathways to Equality and Inclusion



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I. Abstract

Women in leadership improve business, encourage and enhance team collaboration, demonstrate innovative management, and dismantle harmful stereotypes.ⁱ Despite the many benefits of women in leadership and diversity in the workplace, women are still underrepresented in positions of power.ⁱⁱ This disparity is even more apparent when looking at women who identify as Black, Indigenous, or as Women of Color (BIPOC women).ⁱⁱⁱ While women's representation in leadership positions have increased over time, this progress is slow and evidence-based interventions must be continued and expanded to remove barriers women and, more specifically, BIPOC women face in obtaining leadership positions.

II. Introduction

In a time of shifting organizational dynamics and societal expectations, emphasizing the importance of gender and racial equity in leadership is crucial. Despite established research and growing recognition of the transformative impact women bring to leadership roles, disparities continue to exist in the public and private sectors. This paper explores the interplay of gender and racial disparities in leadership, focusing on the glaring underrepresentation of women, particularly those identifying as Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIPOC women). The exclusion of these voices not only hampers individual professional growth, but also deprives organizations and society of the diverse perspectives and innovative solutions that women leaders provide.

III. Disparities in Leadership

Gender and Race Disparities in Leadership

As technological and cultural landscapes rapidly evolve, the persistence of gender disparities in leadership across the United States limit progress and equality. While women make up just over half of the population of the United States^{iv} women CEOs run



only 10% of Fortune 500 Companies^v and hold just over a quarter (28%) of seats in the United States Congress.^{vi}

The disparity becomes larger when looking specifically at the experiences of BIPOC women in leadership. 2021 set a record with two African American women holding Chief Executive Officer positions in Fortune 500 companies,^{vii} and to date only four have held this position.^{viii} Black women have historically had the highest levels of participation in the labor market in the US,^{ix} but are precluded from holding the highest positions in leadership.

Why Still So Few?

Women's equality in the workplace is documented as a social and political movement in the United States since the 1800s.^x The impact of historical discrimination and exclusion still impacts women today. Black women have participated in the workforce at much higher rates throughout history, however throughout the 1800s until the mid-1900s employers would only hire these women into domestic labor positions.^{xi} In the early 1900s most women in the workforce were unmarried and low-income, generally holding teaching and clerical positions. Even as married women began to enter the workforce, they were not considered for leadership positions within the office.^{xii}

While this historical discrimination continues to affect the gender leadership gap, current practices continue to reduce opportunities for women to develop important leadership skills and move towards higher positions. Research as recently as 2019 finds that once women enter the workplace, organizations do not provide them with the same types of mentorship opportunities (especially in upper management positions) and are less likely to be placed in challenging positions that would lead to career advancement. The lack of support in these situations, paired with societal expectations and lack of emotional support to pursue these opportunities outside of the workplace, makes it less likely that women will attain top leadership positions.^{xiii}

When women achieve the highest positions in leadership, they often face continued challenges to maintaining these positions. Women, and more specifically BIPOC women are often placed into more risky and precarious leadership positions than men, a phenomenon that has been called "the glass cliff."^{xiv} When companies face a time of crisis, opportunities often arise for women to rise into leadership positions that were not previously available or offered to them.^{xv} This may be because companies, during



challenging moment, look to women for the collaborative skills needed to stabilize volatile situations.^{xvi} While this leads to new opportunities, the women put in these positions are often scapegoated when the company continues to fail or do poorly.^{xvii} These high profile situations, such as Rosalind Brewer stepping down as the CEO of Walgreens in summer 2023,^{xviii} can add additional obstacles to entry for women seeking out leadership positions and can discourage women from pursuing situations that they perceive as challenging.

Women make up about half of the workforce in the United States today. Looking more specifically at education, women hold 57.3% of bachelor's degrees, 59.9% of master's degrees, and 51.4% of doctorate degrees in the United States.^{xix} When organizations and society keep women from leadership positions, we lose out on the opportunity to harness the skills, talents, and insights of a diverse and important part of our community.

IV. The Need for Women in Leadership

Women's contribution to leadership in both public and private sectors are integral to successful, thriving environments. Research shows that women tend to work in less hierarchical, more participatory, and more collaborative ways than men.^{xx} Women in the public sphere ensure that political issues specifically impacting women are publicly discussed and addressed in legislation.^{xxi} Studies show that African American women state legislators focus to make important changes in policies and practices that affect women generally and BIPOC women more specifically,^{xxii} working to make sure that the needs and interests of all people are considered and addressed.

Women in leadership positions have been linked to increased profitability and organizational performance, improved national productivity and economic growth, more resilient workplaces and national economies in times of volatility or crisis, and enhanced organizational reputation and ability to attract talent.^{xxiii} Environments with more women lead to more creativity and innovation, as well as a better understanding of what customers or constituents want and need.^{xxiv} Racially and culturally diverse organizations include a wealth of experience and perspective, experience a higher likelihood of seeing positive change, and encourage increased awareness of the organizational landscape including employee experiences, constituent experience, and client experience.^{xxv} When looking at corporate environments, research shows that



diverse workforces are 70% more likely to capture new markets than homogenous companies.^{xxvi} The contributions and impact that women have on society when given the opportunity to lead effects not only women, but everyone around them.

V. Recommendations

Despite transformational leadership styles and essential influence in the workplace today, women's continued underrepresentation in leadership exposes the need for innovative programming and supports to girls and young women. In 2023 the American Psychological Association (APA) synthesized existing research on women in leadership and consulted with industrial and organizational psychologists to generate a list of evidence-based strategies to address this issue.^{xxvii} The APA's recommendations included:

1. Identifying potential leaders early and providing comprehensive feedback to grow their professional careers, establishing mentorship programs where mentors "provide career guidance, support, feedback and knowledge"^{xxviii}
2. Creating effective sponsorship programs of individuals who go beyond mentorship to "use their position and influence to proactively advocate for a junior employee's advancement."^{xxix}
3. Encourage and support women in joining women-led professional organizations, something that has been shown to develop women's leadership abilities and network with other women leaders.^{xxx}
4. Focus on allyship, encouraging this to be "examined through an intersectional lens as well, she added, with White women serving as allies for women of color, able-bodied allies for those with disabilities, or heterosexual allies for those within the LGBTQ+ community,"^{xxxi} intervening in instances of discrimination and oppression at the workplace. Men in leadership "who are trained on how to be allies are far more likely to speak up about incidents of gender inequality than men who are not trained in this approach."^{xxxii}

A study conducted in 2020 with Black and African American women executives provided similar recommendations within a different context. This study recommended that organizations create networking and mentoring opportunities specific to Black and African American women in the workplace, as well as promoting opportunities to create alliances with other Black women professionals outside their organizations.^{xxxiii}



Connecting with others facing similar barriers in workplace advancement can create relationships that support professionals personally as well as professionally and build social capital.^{xxxiv}

Connection, encouragement, and the removal of structural barriers are integral to the development of more women leaders, but that does not mean that leadership development is only necessary after women enter the professional world. To create meaningful change, we need to start earlier, providing girls with the leadership skills and support they need as they grow and develop.

Our community must provide the same evidence-based approaches to girls before their first job. Mentorship, an intervention strongly supported by the research, can start as young as kindergarten. If girls are surrounded by women and older girls who support the development of leadership skills and encourage girls to take on challenges, they will have important skills entering jobs and organizations, setting them up to take on leadership positions from an early point in their lives. Having experienced a mentor relationship, as girls enter these environments, they will know to seek out mentors and supports.

Also supported by the research, building a strong community of like-minded girls can help set girls up to take on roles with more responsibility as they grow up. Seeing other girls take risks and achieve can encourage girls to do the same, and having a community to support them when they experience setbacks in their pursuit of leadership positions is essential to their resilience as they navigate a world that was not created to promote them to their highest positions.

Lastly, teaching girls how to speak up in the face of systematic oppression and discrimination is essential in creating more opportunities for all girls. If girls are taught from a young age that it's important to directly confront policies and practices that perpetuate disparities in opportunity, and they are taught how to effectively do so, they will be change agents that create not only more opportunities for themselves, but for others around them. If we follow these steps, we can not only identify potential leaders among the girls in our community, but we can help develop potential leaders who may not have otherwise had the ability or interest to lead.



VI. Girl Scouts Approach

Girl Scouts of Southeastern Michigan is at the forefront of identifying, developing, and encouraging girls in leadership to create a better world and more wholistic communities. In 2008 Girl Scouts of the USA launched the Girl Scout Leadership Experience focusing on developing girls who lead with courage, confidence, and character to make the world a better place.^{xxxv} This Leadership Experience is girl led, ensuring that Girl Scouts themselves are deciding what they would like to do and how they would like to do it, involves learning by doing to give girls hands on experience while they gain leadership skills, and emphasizes the importance of cooperative learning.^{xxxvi}

The Girl Scout Leadership Experience is incorporated into all aspects of Girl Scouts and is considered when developing new programming at Girl Scouts of Southeastern Michigan. The goal of this programming is to support girls in gaining specific knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and values that support them in becoming leaders and maintaining leadership positions throughout their lives.^{xxxvii} The important elements discussed in the recommendations above are woven in from the time girls start Girl Scouts which can be as early as pre-school.

Girls received mentorship through troop leaders, other volunteers, and older Girl Scouts in their community. They are encouraged to try new things and gain new skills while hearing how these mentors have done the same in their lives. Girls can see themselves in the women and older girls in positions of power and leadership that they interact with. The girl led nature of the programming encourages them to explore their interests, and adult volunteers and staff then seek out experts in those areas to nurture girls' passions. Girls also create a community of like-minded and driven girls through their connection with other Girl Scouts their age. These communities help build confidence and support for girls as they experiment with their own leadership styles and reach for new opportunities.

According to a 2017 study, girls who participate in Girl Scouts experience a stronger sense of self and hold strong positive values as important to them, expressing that it is important to them to act ethically, honestly, and responsibly.^{xxxviii} Girl Scouts report challenge seeking, taking appropriate risks, and learning from their mistakes. They report healthier relationships and are almost two times more likely than girls who did not participate in Girl Scouts to want to impact the world in positive ways, identifying problems and creating plans to solve them.^{xxxix}



Girl Scout alumni are two times more likely than the general population to serve on a committee or in a leadership position for a location, national, or international organization.^{xi} Girl Scouts are important civic leaders in the community, with a 10% higher voter registration rate a 13% higher voter turnout rate than non-alumni.^{xii} The evidence shows that, when provided with the necessary support, it does make a difference in girls' lives. This leads to a lasting change in their actions, pursuits, and outcomes in life. When a high-quality program provides evidence-based practices to reduce barriers to entry in leadership, meaningful change is created.

VII. Conclusion

In Southeastern Michigan we have witnessed the significant impact that women have on our community. From the important civil rights impacts of women like Rev. Dr. JoAnn Watson to the work Ruth Ellis did progressing equity for people regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation, women have changed our community for the better despite the barriers presented.^{xiii} Currently three of the four elected members of the state of Michigan Executive Suites are women^{xiii} and powerful leaders like Dr. Darienne Hudson navigate challenges like the 2023 merger of two major United Way organizations^{xiv}. This is the time that our community must harness the momentum of women leading in Southeastern Michigan.

Organizations in our community have the unique opportunity to provide the support girls, and more specifically BIPOC girls, need from a young age to remedy the centuries-long leadership gap created by discrimination and societal expectations of girls and women. Our community can harness the evidence-based approaches above, providing skills training, connection, mentoring, and promotion of girls that sets them up for success as they mature into adulthood. In doing so, we not only create a more efficient, collaborative, and innovative community, but also a more just and equitable community.

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