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## Patriarchal Culture's Influence on Women's Leadership Ascendancy

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## Patriarchal Culture's Influence on Women's Leadership Ascendancy

### Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgment: I would like to thank my wife and grandmother for inspiring me to pursue this topic.

### **Patriarchal Culture's Influence on Women's Leadership Ascendancy**

Women have not experienced much leadership advocacy from men. The first question asked when this paper was presented at the *Faith and Justice: The Crisis of Empathy* conference was, “*What does a man have to say about women?*” This response was not surprising. What was surprising? No men attended this seminar. This lack of attendance reinforced the fact that there is a lack of empathy and advocacy to help women ascend to leadership positions. Factors contributing to this lack of empathy are inequality that women experience in the workplace, perceptions about women, and the subtle discrimination that women experience overall. A brief discussion is provided below on how a patriarchal societal system influences women in leadership.

From a patriarchal societal perspective, which is highly influenced by the Bible, women are considered inferior to men (Gellman, 2006; Tribble, 1979), a perception based on biblical interpretations. For example, Genesis 2:18 (NIV) states, “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a **helper** suitable for him.’” The interpretation of the word “helper” is assumed to convey inferiority (Eckman, 2017). However, if we critically analyze the text and look at other passages using that same word, helper—or in Hebrew, ‘ezer (עֵזֶר)—the implications convey much more than subservience (Chennattu, 2012; Tribble, 1979). Psalm 54:3-4 (NASB) states, “For strangers have risen against me and violent men have sought my life; they have not set God before

them. Behold, God is my **helper**; the Lord is the sustainer of my soul.” The common interpretation here is that God is superior and can rescue one from adversity. Thus, helping conveys superiority, not inferiority. 1 Corinthians 7:4 (NASB) is another passage commonly used to reinforce the idea that women are inferior to men, “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does . . . .” The problem is most individuals forget the second part of this verse, “. . . and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” The complete verse indicates that both are responsible for each other. This verse treats the couple as equal partners, not as a hierarchy. Thus, a patriarchal system only reinforces and interprets that which is beneficial to its survival, e.g., when the Bible is used to interpret women’s role in society.

Women’s societal role has been institutionalized, resulting in biased treatment in the workplace. In this paper, gender inequality and leadership styles are reviewed to illustrate what research shows regarding the obstacles that women must overcome to obtain leadership positions. Gender inequality is an unjust, culturally accepted norm, creating a cognitive bias of categorization for women (Nelson, 2001) that is reinforced through a patriarchal societal system.

### **Gender Inequality**

Climbing the leadership ladder has not been easy, or even manageable, for women (Ahrens, Landmann, & Woywode, 2015; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004; Guillaume & Pochic 2009). As Moen (2005) stated, “Liberal feminism’s quest for

equal opportunity failed to address a key premise of the career mystique: that jobs are fundamentally arranged for workers with no family responsibilities” (p. 195).

This labor structure addresses the issue that not all values can be maximized simultaneously (Moroney, 1981). However, this issue could be remediated by shifting old rules and expectations. As Rose and Hartmann (2004) reported,

For many families, the quality of children's care and education suffers from women's low earnings throughout their child-rearing years. Even with increased time in the labor market after their children are grown, women cannot make up the loss in lifetime earnings (p. 31).

The work schedule is set in a way that does not allow for adequate family time or dual responsibilities. According to Stone and Lovejoy (2004), women leave the workplace because of “inflexible and highly demanding workplaces” (p. 80).

Women must leave work to give birth (and often for child rearing). Thus, the choice of having a family often necessitates abandoning the lifetime earnings and opportunities from ascending to a leadership position, i.e., women who have children can be hindered from obtaining leadership positions (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016).

Besides family roles and responsibilities, power and type of employment contribute to inequality, which is why feminization of occupations has contributed to inequality and is associated with devaluation. For example, occupations that

traditionally employ mostly women attest to the reality that women's wages are lower (Magee, 2001). The social work profession is a perfect example: Women have been the primary workers in this field, and their numbers have held steady, at 82% (Center for Health Workforce Studies, 2006; Pease, 2011). However, 89% of women social workers are paid less than male social workers (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). Thus, even in traditionally female jobs, men earn more than women. Furthermore, men who enter a women-dominated field do not change the pay status of women (Karlin et al., 2002).

Feminization of occupations provides insight into why women are paid less (England, Allison, & Wu, 2007; Noonan, Corcoran, & Courant, 2005). The reason leads to a compensating differential: Men earn more because they seek higher-paying jobs. However, women will not necessarily earn more by switching to male-dominated jobs (Karlin et al., 2002). The social work profession demonstrates the compensation-differential effect, with men earning more than women despite being in the minority. Whitaker et al. (2006) found that men social workers were earning 14% more than women social workers, especially after controlling for other factors, indicating the higher value placed on men's work.

Networking, or a lack thereof, is another explanation for gender inequality. Networking has been the most influential factor in increasing social capital, as workplace networks boost the likelihood of promotion and increased authority (Smith, 2002). Kanter (1977) found that a lack of social networks

contributed to inequality for women. However, the type of social network is key, i.e., networks that influence promotion and authority are more effective (Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014).

Therefore, to climb the ladder, a sponsor, i.e., a mentor who guides a worker up the ladder, is critical. Furthermore, sponsors at the top levels can mediate for a worker and guide his or her upward mobility better than anyone else. If someone wants to climb to the top without a sponsor, this person will hit a brick ceiling. Kanter reported, “sponsors often provided the occasion for lower-level organization members to bypass the hierarchy: to get inside information, to short-circuit cumbersome procedures, or to cut red tape” (p. 3759, Kindle edition). Aside from bilaterally overcoming bureaucracy, sponsors provide influential resources to give workers an edge over others.

Sponsorship for women may be crucial, but Kanter found in her study that it is difficult for women to find sponsors willing to guide them, as “men could not identify with women, and very few women currently held top positions” (p. 3810, Kindle edition; Claes, 2001). This lack of sponsorship could explain why there were no men at the *Lack of Empathy for Women Ascending to Leadership Positions* seminar. In Kanter’s study, men avoided dealing with women, and were uncomfortable being around women, or at least around women who wanted to climb the management ladder. This tendency toward avoidance holds other more problematic implications. As Kanter reported, “Professional women sometimes

said they felt pressure from male managers to live up to the expectations stemming from what the wives were expected to do” (p. 2242-2243, Kindle edition). Women were not necessarily judged for their career potential and capabilities but instead viewed as mothers or wives. They automatically were subjugated under a cognitive bias (Nelson, 2001). This bias, which will be discussed in the next section, has not changed over time despite research indicating otherwise (Goldbeck, 2016; Kaiser & Wallace, 2016).

### **Women and Leadership**

The literature shows that leadership has been gendered, i.e., women in leadership encounter their gender’s social context. The effect of gender bias diminishes the quality of leadership for women, i.e., women’s worth is perceived based on their gender rather than on their leadership qualities (Kanter, 1977; Sheridan, McKenzie, & Still, 2011; Yoder, 2001). These perceptions are reinforced by a patriarchal societal system that misconceives women’s leadership potential (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Colijn, 2002; Muhr, 2011; Richards, 2011).

One approach to counter the patriarchal perception is the cyborg-leadership approach, which asserts that for women to obtain careers in top management, they must adopt male characteristics (Hekman, 1999; Kerfoot & Knights, 1998; Pini, 2005). Muhr (2011) asserted that the cyborg approach creates a “super-leader” persona that top female managers take on “to fight gender stereotyping and break through the glass ceiling” (p. 341). The cyborg approach



does not work well for women, as it undermines their femininity. However, these are the male standards of leadership, as those who seek leadership positions are expected to act like men, i.e., women often are viewed as emotional and subjective, whereas men are viewed as rational and objective (Vinkenburg, Van Engen, Eagly, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011). The perception has been that “the more ‘masculine’ characteristics possessed by women, the more likely women are to be perceived as successful managers and located in powerful corporate positions” (Fagenson & Jackson, 1993, p. 315). This perception goes against oft-perceived female characteristics, including “interdependence, cooperation, receptivity, merging, acceptance, awareness of patterns, wholes and contexts, emotional tone, personalistic perception, being, intuition, and synthesizing” (Marshall, 1993, p. 124). The male leadership style is more about domination and power, whereas the female’s approach is more relational (Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Power status and hierarchical structure often diminish women seeking leadership roles (Yoder, 2001), as expectations are geared toward men being in leadership positions (Boatwright, Egidio, & Kalamazoo College Women’s Leadership Research Team, 2003).

Also, women in leadership positions often face opposition from other women, as well as men (Kanter, 1977; White & Özkanli, 2011). This opposition may be related to the cyborg approach, as women using this approach cannot be effective role models for other women (Muhr, 2011). In a study conducted by

White and Özkanli (2011), which investigated leadership perceptions of women and men at universities in Turkey and Australia, women were found to judge other women in leadership harshly. In Turkey, they found that although “. . . Senior managers argued that it did not matter if they worked with men or women,” they “preferred to work with men” (p. 8). In Australia, men preferred women because they focus on the problem and are more creative. White and Özkanli concluded that in Turkey, there was more of a traditional view of leadership, whereas, in Australia, there was a broader view of leadership. This broader view is open to other approaches that are less hierarchical and patriarchal.

Yoder (2001) investigated the transformational approach as a possible style for women (van Engen & Willemsen, 2004) by testing nine components (p. 824):

- 1) Vision
- 2) Inspiration
- 3) Role modeling
- 4) Intellectual stimulation
- 5) Meaning making
- 6) Appeals to higher-order needs
- 7) Empowerment
- 8) Setting of high expectations
- 9) Fostering collective identity

The transformational approach is not tied to masculinity or femininity, but instead to the nature of leading effectively. Yoder discovered that followers are more satisfied with transformational leaders. In Vinkenburg et al.'s (2011) study, they found that women who use a transformational leadership style and contingent reward behavior are more likely to get promoted: "Leadership style is thought to be important for promotion, especially inspirational motivation" (p. 19).

However, the transformational approach is not always effective, except during an organization's birth, growth, and revitalization stages (Baglia & Hunt, 1988). The larger the corporation, the more difficult this leadership approach is to use.

Therefore, leadership based on context is best (van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Some organizations might need more autocratic and traditional hierarchical leadership styles, whereas others may need a more egalitarian and transformational style. Thus, leadership encompasses a continuum (Yoder, 2001). The patriarchal system has created the perception that one style is better than the other. Furthermore, the model of leadership traditionally has been consistent with masculine characteristics. Women might be more relational (democratic) in their approach and thereby dismissed because they are perceived as weak. However, a leadership style is based on personal and organizational needs. As Vinkenburg, et al. (2011) reported women were not perceived as lacking effective leadership skills. Rather, the prescriptive nature of leadership was the problem: "Prescriptive gender stereotypes may lessen women's advancement because they entail different

norms for how women and men should lead” (p. 13), which is based on gender rather than leadership skills.

A crucial point about women in leadership is aspiration to leadership positions (Boatwright et al., 2003). This issue is at the heart of socialization and how the patriarchal system has reinforced its values. Boatwright et al.’s (2003) study confirmed this problem with their findings they investigated women’s leadership-aspiration attributes, developing and testing three aspects that were essential to these aspirations: “connectedness needs, self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation” (p. 663). Fear of negative evaluation was not correlated with leadership aspirations, but connectedness needs, self-esteem, and gender roles were. They discovered, “...the more women considered themselves as fitting in with the traditional feminine gender stereotype, the less likely they were to report leadership aspirations” (p. 661). Thus, women view fitting into feminine gender stereotypes as a hindrance to their leadership aspirations. Again, this is an invisible reinforcement tied to the patriarchal system. However, “the greater a woman’s interest in healthy and meaningful connections with others, the greater the likelihood that she would express an interest in future leadership positions” (p. 661). This runs contrary to a traditional view of leadership from the patriarchal perspective. For example, they also found that “connectedness needs” were the most influential factor in women’s leadership aspirations, which is on the opposite end of the hierarchical leadership-style spectrum. These findings align more with

the relational leadership style, or democratic style (shared power, collaboration, and teamwork), as opposed to the autocratic (traditional hierarchy) style. Another style that resembles the democratic variety is the collaborative leadership style, which focuses on communication, e.g., providing feedback, and worker empowerment. These approaches neither diminish women's femininity nor reflect a patriarchal system.

Therefore, the standard needs to change to incorporate styles that are compatible with women and diverge from the patriarchal perspective. As Goldman (2009) recommended leadership training for women must not compromise their femininity as they become leaders, i.e., to be an effective leader, male characteristics should not be necessary. The most important leadership quality is to be aware and lead others with a vision (McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnston, 2008). A good leader is attuned to himself or herself and others (McKee et al., 2008). As McKee et al. (2008) stated, "Leaders who have developed emotional and social intelligence are effective because they act in ways that leave the people around them feeling stronger and more capable" (2008, p. 487-488, Kindle location). This type of leadership has nothing to do with gender characteristics, as the patriarchal system suggests; it has to do with qualities of leadership, which are the most important.

## **Discussion**

The hypothesis that women do not have sponsors in the workplace can be found in many studies. Additionally, the patriarchal societal system reinforces leadership based on masculine characteristics. Since women lack sponsorship, preventing them from acquiring leadership skills needed to ascend to leadership positions (Boatwright et al., 2003). Also, the patriarchal system might quash women's aspirations to leadership roles, as work experiences are key elements in leadership ascension (Goldman, 2009; Madsen, 2010). Goldman stated, "If female managers do not have some of the experiences that develop their ability to think strategically, their organizations may suffer, and their career advancement may be hindered" (Goldman, 2009, p. 413). Settles, Cortina, Stewart, and Malley's (2007) study provided further insight on women in the workplace. They found that "mentoring by females (but not males) and effective departmental leadership were related to greater perceptions of voice" (p. 277). This mentoring utilizes a different leadership style that differs from the traditional autocratic one (Vinkenburg et al., 2011). It requires using a relational collaborative approach, as opposed to the cyborg approach. That might be the reason why women might lack leadership career aspirations: Their voices might not be heard if there is no support system in place, and no other women are mentoring them.

The patriarchal system is ingrained in society and affects the leadership style that women choose to adopt. According to Billing and Alvesson (2000), women usually conform to the organization's expectations and norms, rather than

use their attributes and lead from within (Hekman, 1999; Pini, 2005). Women leaders are not renormalizing leadership or inequality in the workplace. There are still more men CEOs in the workforce, and the leadership standard primarily has been based on masculine characteristics. This male-dominated situation is a direct effect of the patriarchal system. Thus, women are forced to follow the same traditional leadership style, even though their preferred style may be egalitarian (Smith, 2002), rather than autocratic. This expectation undermines women, as the expected norm of leadership is masculinized, which creates an unjust and hostile work environment.

This patriarchal system segues to another issue that is invisible—the perception of discrimination. In studies conducted by Nogueira (2009) and White and Özkanli (2011), women did not perceive any discrimination in the workplace. Nogueira discovered two major themes in her study: *essentialist discourse* (denial of gender discrimination and female competencies) and *resistance discourse* (explicit gender discrimination and female competencies; p. 79). According to Nogueira, essentialist discourse might occur when women do not want to be perceived as fragile or incompetent by acknowledging gender discrimination. This discourse is a reinforcement effect from the patriarchal system since a feminine category is not the expected norm within the workplace. Thus, women must deal with a complex dilemma: Remain true to their femininity and never attain

leadership roles, or get accepted in their workplaces' upper echelons by not showing female characteristics so that they are not perceived as weak.

### **Conclusion**

There is a need to redefine cultural beliefs and categorizations of women (Coltrane, 2004; Ridgeway, 1997). Many times, women are characterized as weak, and the role faith plays can help change this perception. A biblical example can be found in the Book of Judges. Deborah was a judge and a prophetess—a valuable figure in the Old Testament who delivered Israel from its oppressors. Therefore, the perceptions of these characteristics need to change to those of strength, and a balanced view of gender is necessary. Male and female characteristics are balanced when both are held together in harmony. One is not better than the other; rather, they are complementary. It is essential to understand the spectrum of gender characteristics. Thus, the construct of gender must be reconstructed. Nelson (2001) stated,

The argument is that gender is a strong cognitive construct—for both men and women—and that breaking the sexist association between gender and value is the first step toward a more cogent view of human behavior and welfare, to be practiced by both men and women (p. 380).

Like Nelson, Tichenor (2004) stated, “Real movement toward gender equality must also address issues of identity. To strike at the heart of the gender structure,



we must aggressively disrupt and reconstruct assumptions that lie at the very core of who we think we are” (Kindle locations, p. 188-190). The false assumptions and misconceptions are the ones that need to be challenged and redefined, as the gender construct reinforces old patterns and expectations (Ridgeway, 1997). The role one plays in society further reinforces this. As Yodanis (2000) asserted, “Through the work that they do and the way that they do their work, women are constructed as women, men are constructed as men, and women are constructed as inferior to men” (p. 269). The construct of women being perceived as inferior to men is the problem, and biblically, the notion of women being inferior to men is not supported (Chennattu, 2012). This perception is a fallacious assumption and an adulterated understanding of women. It might be that the environment needs to change to a climate free from bias. A bias-free climate could lead to structural and societal changes to the gender construct. As Settles, Cortina, Stewart, and Malley’s (2007) study found, having a voice was important to women’s job satisfaction, whereas a sexist climate or negative climate provided less job satisfaction. The combination of individual development and exposure might be the mechanistic key to begin changing the erroneous understanding of gender inequality, or at least challenge ingrained beliefs about women. That is why Billing and Alvesson (2000) stated, “Feminine leadership would then contribute to a de-masculinization of leadership, not necessarily meaning a feminization of it, but loosening up management being culturally connected to men and, in

particular, masculine men and given a masculine meaning” (p. 155). If women are elevated in the workplace, indicating the importance of their role in society, social changes will occur.

### **Future Research**

Future research should focus on the effect that the patriarchal system has on women in the workplace. Additionally, it would be important to understand women’s biblical interpretations to determine whether they might be influencing their leadership aspirations. Furthermore, more data are needed on women’s unperceived discrimination, i.e., if women do not see gender inequality, they will not see a need for change. Discrimination might be the glass ceiling, along with a lack of social networks, which are more likely to increase promotion and authority (Smith, 2002). Finally, old biblical interpretations based on a patriarchal system needs to change. A research question could be, “What are women’s perceptions of the role of faith and their career development?” In other words, how much has faith influenced women’s aspirations to leadership positions?

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