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Barriers to Women's Leadership

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Abstract

Despite the fact that women are making inroads into the boardrooms, they are still underrepresented in higher management positions in companies, in politics, and in institutions of higher education. This assertion is the consensus view not only of social and organizational researchers but also of women who have managed to accrue substantial experience as leaders. What emerges from the reviewed studies is that a consensus prevails on societal and cultural expectations that leaders and the requisite leadership qualities are male. Social roll and gender-stereotypic roles of women and men perpetuate unequal distribution of, access to, and progression to, leadership and power position.

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INTRODUCTION

As noted, women have made significant strides over the past half a century in terms of advancements into the workforce (Sule et al., 2017). However, it is well-documented that women occupy top executive positions in politics and industry much less frequently than men (The World Economic Forum, 2015; Sui Chu Ho, 2015; Sule et al., 2017). Bias and discrimination against professional females could take place when members of a society hold certain stereotypes that are in contrast with the actual characteristics of these women. These stereotypes can prevent females from achieving their goals as a result of the expected social roles they have to uphold. This paper argues social role theory and gender stereotypes to explain a deeper motive as to why women to some extent are being underrepresented in leadership positions. Moreover, this literature review provides a comprehensive overview of gender discrimination barriers to leadership.

Societal Barriers

Social role theory proposes that people's beliefs about social groups in their society come from associating specific behaviors to their normal social roles (Koenig and Eagly, 2014). According to Morris (1988), socialization is the process through which a child becomes an individual respecting her or his social environment's norms, laws and customs. Thus, individuals conduct particular social behaviors once they have formed into a social group (Turner and Tajfel, 1986). A study by Schmitt et al. (2009) found that these behaviors are enacted and reproduced in an effort to strengthen and protect a group's perceived collective identity. These leads to the constituted social group's identity; an inherent form of demarcating itself from other groups. Such behaviors, partly because they de facto bar outsiders from access, contribute to maintaining the status of a social group so that the group's leaders can maintain control or power over a population as well as resources and established hierarchies (Tolbert et al., 1999). Among different social group identities, gender is a particularly common and potent one (Tolbert et al., 1999). Indeed, most individuals tend to manage information with a certain level of conscious or unconscious regard for their gender as a method of differentiation from others (Kottke and Agars, 2005).

To understand the dynamics of gender interactions, this paper draws heavily on Eagly's (1987) social role theory and her research on gender stereotypes (Carli and Eagly, 2007; Eagly and Karau,

2002; Cejka and Eagly, 1999; Eagly and Steffen, 1984). According to Eagly's (1987) theory, gender differences are a "*product of the social roles that regulate behaviour in adult life*" (p. 7). This theory explains that the differences between women and men in their behaviors are a result of the different roles the two genders play based on the expectations held by their society (Eagly, 1987). As a result of this theory, gender roles are the common beliefs that individuals in a society hold and behave accordingly to fulfil, based on their social identity, which means the ways that people's self-concepts are based on their membership in social groups. The social-role theory explains the common gender stereotypes society holds that organize men and female roles. It illustrates the differences in their behaviors and the division of labor based on stereotypes that are defined as "*a set of attributes ascribed to a group and imputed to its individual members simply because they belong to that group*" (Heilman, 1983, p. 271).

One notion of Eagly's social role theory and gender stereotypes emphasizes that women are communal, and men are agentic. The communal aspect of the gender stereotype in social role theory is that women are believed to be helpful, emotional, kind, affectionate, sympathetic, and concerned with the welfare of others. While, the agentic aspect of the gender stereotype is that men are believed to be controlling, forceful, assertive, aggressive, direct, ambitious and independent from other people. These gender-stereotypic aspects divide female and male roles in family and work are responsible for the differences in their behaviors (Eagly, 1987).

Another concept of this theory is that women and men occupy certain occupations according to these gender-stereotypical views. For instance, men are more likely than women to occupy roles in athletics, business, construction, engineering, and other jobs that demand assertiveness, competitiveness, aggressiveness, and physical strength (Cejka and Eagly, 1999; Eagly and Steffen, 1984). Contrarily, women are more likely than men to occupy jobs that require helpfulness, collaboration, and nurturing, for example, teaching, nursing, and assistance (Cejka and Eagly, 1999; Eagly and Steffen, 1984). Eagly's (1987) social role theory suggests that women and men have differential status in society because of their social roles. Men tend to occupy high status in the hierarchy at work and in the family. Therefore, a husband's common stereotypic role has the most power and decision-making authority in family affairs. In contrast, a wife's general role is to carry

out childcare and domestic chores, which carries lower status. This division within family boundaries is transferred to the workplace. Men are likely to occupy higher status, with more advancement, power and influence than women. These gender-stereotypic roles of women and men perpetuate unequal distribution of, access to, and progression to, leadership and power positions (Eagly, 1987).

Eagly's social role theory evolved through her collaborative work with Karau in developing role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Eagly and Karau (2002) suggested that role congruity theory extended beyond social role theory in the sense of congruity between leadership roles and gender roles to reach the form of prejudice against females. They proposed that female leaders face two types of prejudice because of the incongruity of the expected leadership role and women's gender role. The first type of prejudice is related to perceiving potential female leaders to be less promising than males because of their stereotypical gender roles, where the leadership position is perceived as one embodied by masculine-stereotypical traits. The second type occurs through evaluating actual women leaders to be more successful in carrying out their leadership positions as a result of the incongruity between their leadership role and expected gender role. Eagly and Karau (2002) pointed out that these two types of prejudice against women created a culture of less access to leadership roles more obstacles to overcome in order to succeed in leadership positions for females. Eagly and Sczesny (2009) went further by arguing that the shortcomings and gains that women leaders tackle are manifested in the differences and similarities between the cultural stereotypes of men, women, and leaders. Hence, cultural stereotypes have created two forms of cultural expectations. The first form of expectation is about actual traits of each group, which were called descriptive beliefs. The second form relates to the expectations about what the members of a group must be like, labelled perspective beliefs. These stereotypical expectations play an important role in society because individuals carry them and behave according to them, regardless of the organizational or social contexts. Eagly and Sczesny (2009) argued that females face a double bind here because there is a contradiction between the prevalent stereotypes about leaders and their gender stereotypes and social expectations. Thus, Female leaders encounter prejudice related to this mismatch between perspective and descriptive beliefs. This prejudice impacts women's access to leadership positions and promotion prospects and women leaders' evaluations as effective leaders.

Although Eagly and Sczesny (2009) mentioned that there is an epochal shift toward women leaders because of change in leadership stereotypes, yet, this change is so glacial, especially in male dominated fields, that it continues to perpetuate and hinder women's access to leadership roles (Eagly and Sczesny, 2009).

Drawing on these results, there is an accepted difference between sex and gender, with sex a biological concept based on innate psycho-physiological characteristics, while gender primarily concerns personal, societal and cultural perceptions of sexuality (Kottke and Agars, 2005). The historical and ongoing 'othering' of females in society (including in the workplace) and the rationale for it is attributed to the biological differences encapsulated in the term 'sex'. It should come as no surprise, then, that despite many years of often impressive social progress and legislation, women still find themselves as society's underdogs, especially in developing countries, where female participation in the workforce, in particular regarding leadership positions, reflects specific and pervasive socialization patterns hostile to the advancement of women (Sidani, Alison, and Charlotte, 2015).

What emerges from the reviewed studies is that a consensus prevails on societal and cultural expectations that leaders and the requisite leadership qualities are male (Williams, 2000). This gender stereotype prevents females from advancing through the organizational chart and hierarchy, with Heilman (2001, p. 671) finding that this "*can derail even the most competent woman's ascent to the top.*" Feminist scholars consider cultural and societal expectations as embedded in early childhood learning, and subsequently reinforced throughout adulthood (Thorne, 1994). Studies of female leadership suggest that "*societal attitudes toward appropriate gender roles discourage women from seeking leadership positions*" (Baran, 2012, p. 4). In the majority of societies worldwide, females have traditionally shouldered the bulk of family and children responsibilities the care of the elderly, while men are viewed as financial providers and are associated with physical professions and jobs in the military and national defense (World Bank, 2016). Many women must seek (and struggle) to maintain both a profession with a leading role in family life, but this is not equally a life choice facing men. It might seem natural that employers would prefer to hire individuals with few distractions outside of work, distractions which might divide loyalties between

other areas of life and the organization (Acker, 1990). This excludes women, given the likelihood that they hold primary care responsibilities for their family members and children (Acker, 1990).

Such environments, which still exist today, require that females who gain power and leadership positions adapt to the masculine style of leadership to prove their accountability as leaders. Number of studies emphasize this ‘think manager-think male’ syndrome. Many women and men strongly believe that for women to succeed in their advancement to leadership roles, they have act and think like men (Schein, Mueller, and Lituchy, 1996). In that sense, females suppress their own typically behaviors to be suitable for top management positions (Boulgarides, 1984). When these women leaders display their abilities as assertive and directive leaders, people often dislike them because their behaviors do not match the stereotypical image. At the same time, people frequently “consider women unqualified because they lack the stereotypical directive and assertive qualities of good leaders” (Carli and Eagly, 2007, p. 128). Therefore, women are faced with double standards where neither choice is valued and appreciated (Carli and Eagly, 2007).

Conclusion

This literature review has outlined how women face obstacles in different historical and socio-political contexts, limiting their ability to achieve empowerment by aspiring to and achieving leadership roles. Moreover, this literature review has argued that a role congruity theory was an extension of Eagly’s social roles theory (1987), whereby both females and males relate to women’s expected roles in the society. Therefore, gender stereotypes shape the unequal relationship between men and women and establish men’s superior position over women in a society. Not surprisingly, such status affects both one’s performance and perceived status, which in this case is lower if they were women and higher if they were men. Furthermore, when women leaders try to exercise authority outside their gender stereotypes, they face lack support and negative reactions for their violation of gender stereotypes.

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