



For Women to Lead, They Have to Stay in the Game

Why We Need Public Policy to Level the Playing Field

By Judith Warner December 2014

Introduction and summary

The issue of women’s “leadership” is, at its core, about women’s economic empowerment and advancement: their ability to get into the workforce, stay in the workforce, and rise. At a time when roughly half of all American workers are women and two-thirds of families rely on a female breadwinner or co-breadwinner to make ends meet,¹ the ability of women to fully deploy their resources and work to the full extent of their capabilities is of urgent importance to family economic security—and to the fortunes of our nation as a whole.

And yet, the public conversation about women’s leadership in the United States—kick-started over the past 18 months by the colossal success of Sheryl Sandberg’s best-selling book, *Lean In*²—has been strikingly narrow. In the scope of the problem it depicts, the population of women it addresses, and the range of options it envisions as means for change, the discussion has been limited in ways that have left the vast majority of women out in the cold. Its thought leaders have been mostly white, wealthy, prestigiously educated business leaders, politicians, and media celebrities. And the solutions they have typically aired—from negotiating for better salaries to closing the “confidence gap”³ through self-improvement—have presupposed levels of choice, control, and empowerment far out of the reach of all but the most privileged.

The narrowness of the conversation is particularly striking because the problem is, in fact, so broad. Women have outnumbered men on college campuses since 1988.⁴ They hold almost 52 percent of all professional-level jobs.⁵ They have earned at least a third of law degrees since 1980,⁶ were fully a third of medical school students by 1990,⁷ and since 2002, have outnumbered men in earning undergraduate business degrees.⁸ And yet, in a broad range of fields, the presence of women in top leadership positions—as equity law partners, medical school deans, and corporate executive officers, for example—remains stuck at a mere 10 percent to 20 percent. (For more detail, please see “Women’s Leadership: What’s True, What’s False, and Why It Matters.”⁹)

A truly meaningful approach to addressing and closing the women's leadership gap has to involve all women. The social and economic realities of American life today require us to broaden the concept of leadership. Instead of focusing exclusively on rare, elite, top-of-the-pyramid hyper-achievers, we instead must look at how every woman—regardless of her background, education level, or professional status—can participate to the greatest extent possible in the public life of our society. That change of perspective means taking a very close look at the issues that cause women to stall out in the career pipeline or drop out altogether, as both high-level professional women and low-income women are too frequently compelled to do.¹⁰ Re-examining the issue of women's leadership through this lens means shifting the conversation away from what women can do for themselves and looking instead at the structural impediments that keep them from achieving their goals.

And that shift, this report argues, inevitably points to the need for public policy. Public policy directed at increasing women's leadership opportunities falls into two main categories. One set of measures directly aims to increase women's representation in politics and in top corporate leadership roles through mandated numerical targets or through "report or explain" provisions, which require companies to publicly disclose the percentage of women on their boards and executive committees.¹¹ The other category is work-family policy—measures such as paid family leave, paid sick days and vacation days, flexible work scheduling, subsidized child care, and part-time work with proportional pay and benefit parity. In addition to fostering more opportunities for women, these policies also serve a powerful symbolic function, signaling at every level of our society that women's economic empowerment and advancement is a public good.

Examples of such policies are detailed in this report, and include:

- Tax policies that encourage women's labor-force participation
- Policies that make high-quality, early childhood education accessible and affordable
- A national system of paid family leave
- Legislation guaranteeing all workers the right to request flexible work arrangements
- Laws that protect low-wage and hourly workers against abusive scheduling practices
- The use of existing anti-discrimination laws to pursue employers who stigmatize workers for taking leave
- Policies that incentivize companies to step up their efforts on behalf of women's advancement through better reporting and greater transparency

The need for public policy springs from the fact that relying upon employers to “do the right thing” for women just does not work. While employers are now greatly motivated to attract and retain top female talent—i.e., high-earning professionals—through programs and policies that aim to help these women stay in their jobs and thrive, they have few, if any, incentives to cultivate and invest in their lower-wage female workforce. Public policy can and must be used to help women who are not already part of the professional elite to integrate their work and family responsibilities, stay in the workforce, and rise above the “sticky floor” of low-wage, low-status employment. Without such a goal, the women’s leadership conversation will necessarily continue to exclude a great many women who could be the key decision makers of tomorrow.

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