

## Women's Identity in Business and Leadership

What is the identity of female leaders in business? I have reflected on my own life and my future business goals while pondering this question. As a female college student studying business and pursuing a career in it, I know I will face an uphill battle entering a field overpopulated with male leaders. Women are not getting a seat at the table, which is further destroying their chances at gaining leadership positions (Sandberg). In a corporate world dominated with men in executive positions, female businesswomen, especially in leadership positions, feel overshadowed and struggle with their identities. Women in leadership positions are pressured to have two separate identities: one for their family and home life, and the other for their professional and work life.

For generations, many societies around the world, including the United States, have been gendered. These societal norms were set long ago with the bias that men are more powerful than women. "Women's work" has always been viewed as less valuable (Elam 333). From their work as hunter-gatherers, to their selling of domestic products (like eggs, baked goods, and homemade products), and even to their roles in housework and childcare, women's roles are perceived as less important than men's. These gender biases unfortunately continue in many professions today, including in corporate business.

Women are underrepresented in leadership positions in the workforce. Less than 6% of CEOs in the US are women, and female CEO candidates are 28% less likely to achieve the position than their male counterparts even if they have the same qualifications (Fuhrmans 11). Why is this? Is it because women are not qualified? Is it because women are not pursuing leadership positions? Perhaps there is a greater gender bias lying underneath the surface. A major cause of this lack of representation is the type of jobs that men and women receive. Men are

rewarded with the "P&L" (profit-and-loss) jobs that put them on track to becoming executives and CEOs while women are handed the "C-suite" jobs with less power and lower compensation than "P&L" roles (Fuhrmans 3). "C-suite" jobs are the lower-level, immaterial jobs that do not place women on the path to executive positions. Because women are being placed in these smaller jobs that do not have the same upward mobility as the men's positions, they are automatically at a disadvantage to earning placements at higher roles. At the macro-level, women are disadvantaged in the workforce because of norms and cultures that view masculinity and leadership as intertwined. When people think of executives, they think of middle-aged white males who are polished, professional, and prepared. Because of societal standards, people do not think of women when they think of business leaders, especially because there are so few examples.

Women's business training is typically focused on people, while men's training is concentrated on operations and production (Fuhrmans 7). In other words, men are taught the "harder" skills how to run the meat and bones of a company, while women are taught the "softer" skills of working with others. This results in men being more valuable for companies because they are proficient in specific niches of managing a business. At the micro-level, women are suppressed by "double-blindness," which is the idea that their characteristics are lose-lose situation: they will always be too much or never enough (Fisk 319). No matter how they act or what they know, companies will view them in a more critical way than their male-counterparts. Although both men and women acknowledge and agree that women face discrimination in leadership roles, there is little motivation to address it, which belittles female business leaders' identities even more (Fisk 323). The lack of addressing and fixing the biases in leadership cause women to feel pushed to the side because they feel that although men know that this is an issue,

their male counterparts do not care enough about their women partners to give them a chance at leadership success. Women feel ignored and unwelcomed in many leadership positions simply because many men are not giving them the space or chances to grow. This knowledge that men are placed in better positions to succeed, with specialized training and less criticism, can also cause men to be overly confident and women to be overly cautious.

Becoming a female leader requires a fundamental identity shift (Ibarra 2). Women feel pressured to change large parts of their characteristics and attributes to play the “part” of a business leader, because being themselves simply is not enough. Many female leaders are known to be cold and distant while in the office. Some believe that the only way they will gain respect from others is by acting unfriendly and reserved. The Role Congruity Theory is the idea that “women who pursue leadership may be perceived as – and penalized for – being assertive (lacking warmth) at work” (Goodwin 470). Women are self-defeating. They are “taught to downplay femininity or to soften a hard-changing style” (Ibarra 10) in order to mold themselves into the workers that businesses want. Typical characteristics of male executives are “gullible, awestruck, and dependent” (Kroska 91). Female executives are perceived in a much more negative way: “ruthless, violent, and abusive.” One of the biggest problems is that if a woman has those attributes, companies do not want them because they are “too much.” At the same time, if a woman does not have those attributes, companies do not want them because they are “not enough.” Women must balance on this tightrope to work in a company, which puts a strain on their identity since they have to conceal parts of their true selves. The constant polarizing pulls from both sides of having and not having said attributes creates tension within a female leader’s identity, because they do not know what aspects of themselves they can show, and what they must keep hidden in order to have a successful, impactful career.

When applying for a job, if a woman displays these stereotypical male attributes, like competitiveness, and not stereotypical female attributes, like helpfulness, she is considered to be less socially skilled and less hireable (Kroska 77). By companies wanting men to be helpful but women to not be competitive, they are encouraging the double standard. Women in the workforce are expected to adopt and show the characteristics of “engagement, self-confidence, level-headedness, and responsibility” (Chirikova 48), while men are expected to have these qualities but are not required to show them regularly. Men do not have the same worries about being overly ambitious or appearing too weak that women do. While women have a fine line they must proceed carefully on, men do not even have a path they must follow.

Female leaders are also perceived as less likeable and approachable than male leaders. According to Herminia Ibarra, “accomplished, high-potential women who are evaluated as competent managers often fail the likeability test, whereas competence and likeability tend to go hand-in-hand for similarly accomplished men” (Ibarra 9). Even if a female business leader is respected or has proven herself worthy of her executive position, she is still not treated the same way a male leader is. Regardless of her success, she is still viewed as “unlikeable.” Female business leaders have a stigma that they are ruthless, ambitious, and aggressive to attain their positions. Even if a woman in a leadership position does not portray those qualities, others around her will be skeptical and cautious of her and see her as a threat, instead of an ally.

Women struggle with credibility in the workforce far more than men. Women have to be tougher on themselves and their work because they feel a constant need to prove their worth. They face greater penalties and reputational losses for failure than their male counterparts, because they are held to a much higher standard (Fisk 320). Knowing they are constantly being watched and judged makes women feel overly cautious and apprehensive about their work. For

example, if a woman makes a single mistake their status in the company is diminished, they are viewed as less competent, and their credibility further drops. The lack of credibility gives female business leaders a heightened level of unnecessary fear and anxiety because they face even more external pressures than they should have to address. Women must always consider the worst-case scenarios for situations and prepare themselves for things to go wrong. This gives them a pessimistic outlook on their careers and on themselves. Unlike men, they must prepare for things to go wrong, instead of hoping for things to go right. Women should instead be able to play to win rather than playing not-to-lose.

Business leadership is a confidence game and is one that women are not winning. Women anticipate greater rejection, discrimination, and social exclusion, which reduces their motivation to pursue leadership positions (Goodwin 469). They do not perceive that pursuing a leadership role is worth trying because they have been pushed down and away so many times. Their perception of their own identity and level of confidence is negatively impacted by companies' expectations that women will be seen and not heard. Women feel the need to settle for positions for which they are overqualified because they do not believe that they can make it to the top.

Women are less willing to take risks than their male counterparts. This is because society has instilled confidence and ambition into men's identities from an early age but has taught women to be cautious and subservient. Because of the psychological effect of being pushed to the side, women tend to place limits on their own abilities and begin to doubt their worth and skills. As a direct result, men seek out powerful opportunities whether or not they are qualified because they think they deserve it. For example, men will threaten to leave a company if they are not promoted while women will wait for the validation of a promotion and not speak up. Even if

the woman has more qualifications and has been at the company longer than the man, the promotion or position will almost always go to the man simply because he has the confidence to speak up. This further puts women at the risk of becoming pigeonholed in their jobs, and because companies will not give them more opportunities for advancement, their chances at attaining higher power roles are even more limited.

Having a greater sense of power gives women a more positive outlook on their ability to lead and their overall identity as a businesswoman. Women anticipate rejection before it actually happens. This causes them to be less motivated to strive for opportunities, because they do not want to fail and further hurt their business identity. Female leaders want to be respected in the workforce without being identified as too aggressive and too intense. Maintaining a balance between the two forces makes women in the workforce much more cautious. If a woman looks at the major executives and leaders of large corporations, such as those in the Fortune 500, she will not see many examples of women who succeeded before her. Overall, increasing women's sense of power in leadership groups will improve their view of themselves and encourage them to further pursue leadership opportunities.

Women do not believe they can achieve high levels of power or success in the business world because of the lack of representation. Lisa Moehlenkamp, the chief talent officer of a public relations company called FleishmanHillard, says that "having women in leadership positions to mentor and serve as role models is one important component of creating a culture where women contribute at all levels" (Wolper 23). Since there are so few female leaders, women do not even try to pursue it because they do not have many role models or mentors to admire. The lack of female leadership makes women across all fields feel less confident and less willing to take risks to achieve leadership positions. Since women are held back so much in the

corporate business world, many decide to quit their jobs and become entrepreneurs. They take control of their future and create a leadership opportunity for themselves by starting their own product or company. This is why there are a lot more female entrepreneurs than male entrepreneurs, especially in the past decade (Elam 345).

Female business professional's sense of power influences their willingness and ability to lead. The Glass Ceiling ideology is the belief that there is a barrier to what women can achieve and the level of positions they can attain. While the Glass Ceiling has been proven wrong over the years, another harmful ideology has arisen. Known as the Glass Cliff, this idea is that that "women [are] more likely than men to be appointed to 'risky or precarious positions' in the first place" (Ryan 19). Companies view women as already being disadvantaged in the workforce, so they will hurt less by failing. Since men are thought of having more to lose, companies do not want to hurt them or their job positions, so they purposefully treat women as expendable. Additionally, when women do land a job, they rarely stay at the company as long as men. If someone in the company is going to be terminated, it is most likely going to be a woman. This will continue the detrimental cycle of making women feel suppressed and less important than their male counterparts, which discourages them to pursue leadership positions.

Although there are not many female executives, men and women are seen as having very different leadership styles. While women are considered to be "transformative" leaders who work on creating a common goal for their company and teams, men are known to be "commanding" leaders who work by creating an image of authority (Chirikova 40). Women tend to have a safer-feeling, more open environment that is filled with self-respect and support for themselves and their employees. On the other hand, men tend to be less hands-on and more disconnected from their employees. Female leaders are also known to deal with crises better than

men, due to their “spirit, innovation, ethics, creativity, and diversity” (Ryan 18). However, women are still working on proving themselves and their worth and trusting others. Regardless of the different types of leadership, men reach the top leadership positions more often than women, because of their gender.

Female business leaders have a reputation of being “too direct, combative, pushy, aggressive, abrasive, [and] bossy” (Durando 1). Being called these negative names instead of being supported for following their passions makes them second guess themselves, their abilities, and their power. Self-doubt pressures women into believing that they are unqualified for leadership positions, or, if they do attain a top position, they then question whether they deserve it at all. This self-uncertainty amplifies the divide between their work and home identities even stronger, pulling them in opposite directions.

The culmination of my research has led me to believe that women in business leadership positions feel the need to have two separate identities. They want to be able to be compassionate and caring and loving at home with their families, while not being perceived as weak at work. Similarly, they want to be able to be ambitious and hard-working and show grit in the professions without being perceived as too much. Women are being pressured from all directions, which forces them to pick and choose what parts of themselves they want to exhibit at work, and what parts they want to keep concealed at home. This separation allows women to feel as though their identity is not “all or nothing.” It makes women in business feel like they are not jeopardizing their whole identity, and it gives them piece of mind to know that by spitting their identity they can pursue both parts of their lives with a different focus.

Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s Chief Operating Officer, is one of the few powerful women at a Fortune 500 company. She recommends that women in the workforce need to do three



specific things: “sit at the table,” “make [their] partner a real partner,” and “don’t leave before [they] leave” (Sandberg). Although having a partner who will support an individual and their dreams is important, the other two are more relevant for this paper. “Sit[ting] at the table” pertains to women taking the initiative to insert themselves into the conversation and make their presence known and voice heard. If women are not present at the table, they will not be noticed or taken seriously, but instead will be just another body taking up space in the office. Women need to make sure they “don’t leave before [they] leave,” meaning they must be present in their actions and their jobs. Women cannot think too far ahead into the future, but need to focus on their current position in order to set themselves up for future success.

Unfortunately, my research has shown that few women in the workforce have the same mindset and thought process as Sandberg. Although it is good to have goals, women cannot think so far ahead that they lose sight of reality. They do not insert themselves into the conversation out of a fear of being wrong or mocked, and they mentally check out before they can even set goals for the future. Perhaps if more women in all sectors of the workforce, not only the realm of business, believed in what Sandberg did, we would see more women leaders in all professions.

I am fortunate to have strong female business leaders in my family who have been incredible role-models and mentors throughout my life. From a young age, they have ingrained into my being that I am going to have to work harder for less pay to prove myself in the field I choose to enter. That have taught me that no matter what anyone says, I deserve to have a seat at the table (Sandberg). I have also seen how they have struggled balancing their work and family lives.

When my Nana started her career in the insurance industry, she was told she would never succeed. In a very male-dominated field, she was told over and over that she would never move

above a secretarial position in any insurance company. Before she passed, my Nana used to tell me that as a young mother with three young children, she found it difficult to be everywhere at one time. She wanted to excel in her job, but she still wanted to be the best mother and wife possible. She persevered and worked her way up to become one of the top insurance agents in the Midwest, male or female, for the company she represented.

My mom has been in the insurance industry for 35 years. After working in a large company and losing out to men on promotions she deserved, she decided to create her own boutique insurance firm. My mom established a name for herself in the business world with her maiden last name before she met my dad. Although she took my dad's last name when they got married, she kept her maiden name as her professional work name. She says this is to keep a separation between her business identity and her family identity so that she never feels like she has to compromise one for the other. She wants the freedom to be a powerful, respected, and self-sufficient business leader in the insurance world, while still having her loving, attentive, and motherly side with our family.

My Nana and mom are perfect examples of how women can rise above challenges and succeed in leadership positions. Although it is difficult and they are starting at a disadvantage, women need to believe in themselves and fight for the work positions they want. Women in the workforce need to realize that they do not need to sacrifice their professional or home lives, but can instead have both. I hope to figure out how to balance being a loving and compassionate family member (and hopefully a wife and mother) with being an ambitious and focused business leader in the future. I would love to motivate the next generation of women in the workforce to fight until they have a seat at the table and to not let the door slam in their face, just as my mom and Nana have inspired me.

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