

# The Broken Ladder: How psychological and socio-cultural biases impede the ascent of high-potential executive women



Kent, Surrey and Sussex  
Leadership Collaborative



**Author Name:** Robert Livingston

**Job Title:** Director Centre for Leadership, Ethics and Diversity

**Organisation:** University of Sussex

For decades, women have struggled to shatter the glass ceiling and to navigate the “labyrinth”—the convoluted, treacherous, and often dead-end path that women must traverse to reach the cheese hidden in the maze (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Despite some progress, women are still rare enough in top leadership positions to evoke a sense of wonder, amazement, and mystery. Let’s consider the numbers. In the FTSE 100, only 4 Chief Executive officers are women. The situation is essentially similar in the US with only 4.8% of CEO positions in the Fortune 500 being occupied by women. Adding insult to injury, this < 5% figure in both the FTSE 100 and Fortune 500 reflects a historical ceiling; the proportion of women in these posts has never exceeded the current percentages. In over 70 years the percentage of women as varied between 0% and 5%. To be sure, this represents some progress, but not much. The numbers look better in the public and non-profit sectors, but only slightly.

What contributes to this gross underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions? There are many factors, including perhaps the tendency for women themselves to opt-out of power. However, much if not most of the disparity can be attributed to various forms of gender bias. In a recent report, Joan Williams and colleagues classified gender bias into four discrete categories:

1) The “Prove-It-Again” trap. Due to the perception of dubious leadership ability, stellar performance by women is viewed with scepticism. Therefore, any outstanding performance will have to be repeated many times before others will believe that it is not a fluke. Outstanding performance by males is not subject to the same scrutiny or suspicion.

2) The Tightrope. This refers to the precarious balance that women, and in particular women leaders, must strike between being warm, gentle, nurturing and “lady-like” on the one hand, and being tough, assertive, competitive, and “leader-like” on the other hand. Being too sweet will lead to copious affection from others but little respect whereas being too tough will earn respect, but at the cost of being disliked. It’s the proverbial position between a rock and a hard place.

3) The Maternal Wall. This refers to the penalty that women face when they have children, or even consider the prospective of having a family in the near future. Due to the assumption that women will lose interest, commitment, and ability to work once they have children, women who are seen as candidates for motherhood are often excluded from consideration for demanding leadership roles. At the same time, society also punishes women who are seen as being too committed to work once they have children. These career-oriented mothers violate prescriptive stereotypes related to warmth and nurturing.



4) Tug of War. This is the notion that gender bias within an organisation, real or imagined, can lead to competition and conflict among women. Women may perceive that there is only room at the top for one token female, and so they compete (rather than cooperate) to determine which one of them will achieve the prize. This tendency may be enhanced among certain women and is sometimes referred to as the “Queen Bee Syndrome”. However, these conflicts are often driven by the perception that there is not being enough room at the top for all of the talented women who deserve to be there (Williams, Phillips, & Hall, 2015).



Although each one of the four types of bias could form the foundation of its own essay, I will focus further discussion on “The Tightrope”. Also referred to as “agentic backlash”, this form of bias has been broadly studied and documented.

A well-known Supreme Court Case in the United States involving an executive named Ann Hopkins, who was employed by Price Waterhouse (now Price Waterhouse Cooper), recounts the story of a promising executive leader who was denied partnership by the organisation. The question is why. What was remarkable about Ann Hopkins was her ability to make money for the company and to close any deal that was thrown her way. Nevertheless, she was denied promotion to partner based almost entirely on her “people skills”. She was seen as someone who was brash, arrogant, and offensive to fellow employees. One superior even suggested that she attend charm school.

I often provide the Ann Hopkins case (published by Harvard University) to the students and executives in my leadership classes because it cleverly illustrates the elusive nature of gender bias and the hidden challenges facing women leaders. After reading the facts of her performance and leadership I ask students to decide whether she was fairly or unfairly denied partnership at Price Waterhouse. I almost always get the same outcome. Approximately half of the students reach the verdict that she was unfairly denied partnership whereas the other half of the students believe that her denial of partnership was justifiable. And the 50/50 split almost always has equal numbers of men and women on each side. I then ask the students to list their reasons for

arriving at this verdict. Students who are pro-Hopkins tend to focus on her competence whereas students who are anti-Hopkins tend to focus on her presumed lack of people skills.

After we begin discussing the case, the students who oppose Ann’s promotion to partnership slowly begin to realise that she is being judged by a double-standard. Many of the behaviours that are perceived as rude or inappropriate when performed by Ann, are perceived as perfectly normal when they are performed by one of her male counterparts. Moreover, the males are judged based only on their competence-relevant performance, which in many cases was inferior to Ann’s performance. The US Supreme Court agreed. It was decided that Ann Hopkins was in an impossible “gender double-bind” in which she was expected to be tough and assertive to show her leadership potential in this ultra-competitive environment, while also being punished for being tough and assertive because these behaviours violated prescriptive stereotypes for women.

This basic idea of agentic backlash or a “gender double-bind” is strongly supported by a host of empirical findings in the social science literature. For example, women, even very powerful women, do not speak as much as men in meetings due to the perception that being too talkative will create negative consequences for them (Brescoll, 2011). Studies have also shown that displaying anger can be beneficial to male leaders (because it signals strength and dominance) but is highly detrimental to female leaders because it violates prescriptive gender stereotypes (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012). Similarly, men are rewarded for self-promotion—highlighting their unique skills, abilities, and talents, or nominating themselves for a pay rise or promotion, whereas women are punished being self-promoting (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). Of course women know this intuitively, so they are reluctant to negotiate or self-promote (Babcock & Laschever, 2003).

It is also worth noting that much of the work on “women” and leadership has focused almost exclusively on White women. These results often do not generalise to all categories of women. For example, work examining women of colour has shown that Black women are less susceptible to the tightrope, such that they are allowed to behave more assertively than white women (Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012). However, they are more susceptible to the “prove-it-again” trap compared with White women (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). This may also be true for other categories of women (e.g., lesbians).



Given the nature of the problem, what are some possible solutions? Below I offer four solutions to the four problems:

1) Mask Gender Categories: Gender bias is so ingrained in the culture that many people (even women themselves) often do not realize that they hold these biases. Therefore, the best way to reduce bias is to avoid the use of gender categories altogether, when possible. When symphony orchestras instituted “blind auditions” in which the person played behind a screen rather than in full view, it increased the likelihood that women would proceed to the final round by over 50% (Goldin & Rouse, 1997).

2) Use Objective Measures (Biernat & Manis, 1997). If categories cannot be avoided, then strive to use objective rather than subjective judgment criteria because subjective rating standards can lead to gender bias. For examples, If asked how tall a 5’11” woman is on a scale from 0 to 10, many people might give her a 9. If asked how tall a 6’0” man is on the same scale, they might only give him an 8. How is it possible that a man who is taller than a woman receives a lower score? The adjective “tall” is subject to interpretation. Tall for a Dutch person isn’t necessarily tall for a Portuguese person. By the same token, 5’11” *is* tall—for a woman. People adjust subjective ratings depending on the standard. Now, if you ask the question in a more objective way, what is her height in feet and inches, then bias is less likely to occur. Because, feet and inches employ the same metric for everyone, they are likely to say 5’11” for her and 6’0” for him. No bias.

Now consider the Ann Hopkins case. If you were asked to rate how rude Ann Hopkins is, it would take far fewer

behavioural transgressions to put her into this category compared with Andy Hopkins. One instance of raising her voice might get her labelled as someone with no people skills whereas Andy raising his voice might be perceived as passionate and engaged, unless he does it a dozen times.

The moral of the story. Don’t litter performance appraisals for subjective questions like: How helpful is Jenny/John? It will take a lot more helpful behaviors for Jenny to be seen as equally helpful as John (Heilman & Chen, 2005). Instead ask, how many times has Jenny/John attended a voluntary citizenship event? The latter is less open to bias/interpretation.

3) Create Neutral, Gender-Neutral Culture. In male dominated society women may assume that they have to behave like males to succeed. Cultures that allow for the emergence of the authentic self and authentic leadership can be more productive and satisfying. Moreover, cultures that allow self-promotion or dominance to affect outcomes will always be gender-biased. As Williams et al. (2015) state “a department climate that tolerates bullies and ‘screamers’ will systematically disadvantage women and people of colour.

4) Be Mindful of Sponsorship. Research has shown that women are often overmentored and undersponsored (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). A mentor is someone that provides training, advice, and social support, whereas a sponsor is someone within the organisation who is willing to put their reputation on the line to support you. Mentors help to improve professional skills and sponsors help you get promotions. Both are important, but women are much more likely to receive the former than the latter. Be proactive in securing sponsorships. Men are not necessarily foes (and women are not necessarily friends). Men can be, and often are, tireless champions of women. If there is a person at your job who believes in you, then cultivate a sponsorship with that individual.

In summary, there are many factors that contribute to the challenges faced by women with executive aspirations. It’s not that women aren’t climbing; it’s that the ladder is often systematically broken. Hopefully the 21st century will witness a new ladder. A greater awareness of the nature of these biases and ways in which they can be overcome is a first step toward moving women from 5% to 50%.



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