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Review

Psychological drivers of gender disparities in leadership paths

Laura J. Kray ^{1,*}, Sonya Mishra ^{2,5}, Charlotte H. Townsend ^{3,5}, and Jessica A. Kennedy ⁴

Despite decades of progress, gender inequalities in workplace authority and compensation persist. This review reveals recent advances in understanding how gendered careers emerge through three psychological mechanisms prevalent in organizations: (i) intrapersonal gender biases, (ii) interpersonal power dynamics, and (iii) intergroup gender relations. Because power is perceived as masculine, women in authority face systematic backlash. While status offers women an alternative leadership route, it proves less valuable than power – lacking resource control and requiring constant social validation rather than conferring formal authority. We suggest that mindsets about human malleability moderate these dynamics: fixed mindsets amplify stereotyping and power-based challenges for women leaders, while growth mindsets attenuate barriers. Our framework aims to illuminate gender disparities and to suggest promising intervention pathways.

A persistent gender gap in advancement to leadership positions

Despite achieving educational parity [1], women's advancement has stagnated since 1990 in terms of workforce participation, occupational integration, and pay equity [2]. Leadership disparities persist, with women remaining under-represented among elected officials and corporate executives [1]. These disparities do not reflect performance differences; evidence reveals gender gaps in pay and promotions that are 14 times larger than performance gaps [3] and, controlling for actual productivity, female job candidates are rated as 18% less productive than comparable male candidates [4]. Even in the absence of overt discrimination, women are disadvantaged by organizations that have historically been designed by men and for men [5,6]. These realities underscore the critical importance of identifying solutions to mitigate the unique challenges women continue to face in leadership advancement.

Given extensive evidence of **gender bias** (see Glossary) in women's careersⁱ, understanding how gendered career paths emerge and persist despite sustained elimination efforts (e.g., policy interventions, diversity programs) is essential. This review is structured into four sections. First, we examine how **gender stereotypes** create concrete organizational barriers, contributing to gender disparities in responsibility and compensation. Second, we introduce a gendered model of leadership pathways that maps how different routes to **influence** (**power** vs. **status**) and the strategies used to attain them (**dominance** vs. **prestige**) are differentially accessible to men and women. For example, in organizational settings, managers who use intimidation may rise through dominance into positions of formal power. By contrast, those who demonstrate expertise may advance through prestige into status, though the efficacy of each strategy and route differs for women relative to men. This model represents the first systematic mapping of how different influence strategies are gender coded. Third, we analyze resistance mechanisms, including **backlash** against powerful women and the unique role men play as gatekeepers in maintaining gender hierarchies. Fourth, we conclude by evaluating potential solutions and examining the

Highlights

Despite changing social roles, men are perceived as more agentic and dominant than women, creating closer alignment with leadership prototypes and systematic advantages.

At identical organizational ranks, male managers oversee larger teams than female counterparts, contributing to gender pay gaps through perceived differences in job difficulty.

Leadership pathways are gendered: men access power-based routes conferring authority and resources, while women pursue status-based routes emphasizing collaboration but yielding less influence.

Power is culturally coded as masculine, creating systematic backlash against women seeking authority while men act as gatekeepers viewing female advancement as threatening.

Mindsets about human malleability moderate gender bias – growth mindsets reduce stereotyping and zero-sum thinking while fixed mindsets amplify barriers for women leaders.

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limitations of conventional approaches (e.g., increasing representation or stereotype awareness) before highlighting the promising role of mindset interventions in reducing bias across individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels.

The role of gender stereotypes

In this section, we explore how gender stereotypes influence decision-makers' perceptions of women and men – crucial because career advancement often depends on social approval in hierarchical organizations. Stereotypes affect career trajectories because colleagues use them as heuristics to simplify judgments and decisions, at times even when the stereotypes are inaccurate. [Box 1](#) explores the evolution of gender stereotypes and the implications of stereotype inaccuracy.

Gender stereotypes and leadership perceptions

Gender research typically focuses on stereotype content, ubiquity, and how such stereotypes create organizational barriers for women [7,8]. Two fundamental dimensions of social perception are **agency** and **communion** [9], which align with gender stereotypes that reflect historical labor divisions of men as breadwinners and women as caretakers [10]. Stereotypes not only describe

Box 1. Gender stereotype evolution, accuracy, and consequences

Understanding gender stereotypes requires examining three critical dimensions: whether societal beliefs are changing in tandem with workforce transformations, how accurately these stereotypes reflect reality, and what consequences emerge when stereotypes diverge from actual gender differences.

Are stereotypes changing?

Gender stereotypes are evolving alongside significant workforce transformations over the past 75 years [110]. Men's workforce participation has declined from 89% to 68%, while women's participation has increased from 33% to 58%, representing a fundamental shift in traditional gender role distributions.

US public opinion polls spanning 1946–2018 reveal nuanced patterns in stereotype evolution. While perceptions of men as more agentic have remained stable, views of women as more communal have increased. Beliefs in gender competence equality have grown stronger [111], and traditional stereotypes linking men with careers and women with family roles have weakened by 13–19% [112]. However, a longitudinal study spanning 1983–2014 found remarkable stability in gender stereotypes, except that men are now seen as less likely to embody traditionally feminine traits and occupations [113].

Leadership roles themselves are now perceived as less agentic and more communal [114], suggesting greater alignment between evolving perceptions of women and leadership requirements. However, beliefs that work sacrifices are more acceptable to women than men persist [115].

Are stereotypes accurate?

Research examining stereotype accuracy reveals a complex picture. A comprehensive analysis of 673 gender difference estimates found that 85% were directionally correct, suggesting some grounding in observable patterns [116]. However, people consistently underestimated the magnitude of actual gender differences in some types of cognitive skill, occupational distributions, and academic performance, while overestimating differences in self-reported traits, behaviors, and attitudes.

Regarding negotiation skills – crucial for leadership – society systematically overestimates men's negotiation attempts and successes, while underestimating women's actual capabilities [117]. Similarly, while people accurately predicted declining hiring bias against women over decades, they overestimated its persistence and failed to anticipate emerging discrimination against men in female-dominated positions [118].

What are the consequences of stereotype inaccuracy?

Inaccurate gender stereotypes create barriers to addressing inequality. Current beliefs about gender differences in negotiation reflect outdated realities [108], with significant policy implications. By suggesting that responsibility for inequality rests with women, inaccurate stereotypes limit support for structural solutions, such as salary history bans that prevent historical discrimination against women from carrying forward. Endorsing explanations that attribute gender gaps to personal traits undermines support for diversity initiatives [119], creating a cycle where misconceptions prevent implementation of structural interventions that could reduce gender inequality.

Glossary

Abstract language: words focusing on the bigger picture and concepts that cannot be experienced with physical senses (e.g., justice, morality, vision).

Agency: a dimension of social perception associated with traits like assertiveness, independence, and competence.

Authority-ranking principles: a leadership style emphasizing clear distinctions between leaders and followers, performance evaluation based on individual contributions, and decision making concentrated at higher levels.

Backlash: negative social consequences resulting from displaying dominant behavior.

Communal sharing principles: a leadership style focused on collaboration, sharing responsibilities among team members, and decision making based on consensus.

Communion: a dimension of social perception associated with traits like warmth, compassion, and empathy.

Concrete language: words referring to something that can be experienced through senses.

Dominance: a status-attainment strategy based on the use of fear, force, or intimidation.

Fixed mindset: the belief that personal attributes are unchangeable.

Gender bias: the differential standards, treatment, and evaluation of men and women for identical behaviors and performance.

Gender stereotypes: generalized beliefs about the characteristics of men and women.

Growth mindset: the belief that personal attributes are changeable with effort.

Influence: the ability to change the actions of others.

Intersectionality: how multiple social categories (gender, race, age, etc.) combine to shape perceptions.

Masculinity contest culture: an organizational culture that endorses winner-take-all competition and encourages the demonstration of stereotypically masculine traits.

Nonuniversal mindset: believing that few people possess high leadership potential.

Pluralistic ignorance: when people act counter to their private beliefs because they incorrectly assume the group majority holds a different viewpoint.

characteristics that are typically associated with men and women, but also indicate which characteristics are **prescribed** and **proscribed** for each gender [11]. These gender stereotypes correspond with lay theories about how men and women are thought to lead and rise through social hierarchies, with important implications for gender bias in outcomes. Importantly, stereotypes of agency and masculinity align more closely with prototypical leader stereotypes than stereotypes of communality and femininity [12]. Because stereotypes function as cognitive heuristics in leadership fit judgments, women are systematically overlooked while men are correspondingly advantaged by the overlap between their stereotyped traits and leader prototypes [13].

How gender stereotypes create leadership gaps

Gender stereotypes have concrete organizational consequences, influencing how leadership opportunities, responsibilities, and rewards are distributed. Although men disproportionately occupy highly compensated senior leadership positions, recent research reveals a more subtle dynamic: even when men and women hold the same organizational rank, male managers consistently oversee larger teams than their female counterparts. This difference in **span of control** significantly contributes to the observed pay disparities, as demonstrated by real-world compensation patterns among Master of Business Administration (MBA) graduates who, despite having similar individual qualifications and job characteristics, exhibit marked gender differences in team leadership responsibilities [14].

To understand the psychology behind span of control disparities, researchers examined how gender stereotypes shape perceptions of leadership styles. Men are viewed as naturally employing **authority-ranking principles** in their management approach, while women are seen as utilizing **communal sharing principles**. Simultaneously, organizational expectations about appropriate leadership styles vary with span of control – larger teams are thought to require more authority-ranking approaches, while smaller teams are believed to benefit from communal sharing methods. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where leading larger teams carries greater perceived responsibility and higher compensation. Figure 1 illustrates how these interconnected stereotypes can generate gender disparities in leadership opportunities and rewards, even without assuming any discriminative intent among organizational decision-makers.

Modern understanding of gender stereotypes extends beyond the conventional agency-communion framework to encompass other organizationally valued traits. Men benefit from perceived advantages in creativity [15], brilliance [16], and curiosity [17] – traits associated with innovation and high potential. Given that organizations reward these traits through bonuses, raises, and promotions [15], women's weaker association with them carries significant professional consequences. Conversely, women receive more favorable perceptions regarding authentic leadership [18], but this apparent advantage comes with increased pressure to demonstrate fairness and build trust consistently [19].

Contemporary scholarship increasingly embraces an **intersectionality** framework, recognizing that multiple social categories, such as gender and race, combine to shape stereotypes [20] and leadership opportunities. This approach reveals that gender stereotypes are not uniformly applied across all social groups but vary significantly based on intersecting identities. However, research linking these dynamics to real-world outcomes remains limited. Advancing this agenda requires embedding intersectionality more fully into studies of workplace inequality, both to refine theory and to inform practical solutions. Box 2 highlights recent advances in intersectionality research.

A gendered model of hierarchical leadership pathways

While the previous section highlighted the fundamental role of gender stereotypes in shaping the social perceptions, responsibilities, and rewards of men and women, the current section highlights

Power: control over valued resources.
Precarious manhood: the pressure to repeatedly prove masculinity.
Prescribed: expectations about how people should behave.
Prestige: a status-attainment strategy based on respect through competence and prosocial behavior.
Proscribed: expectations about how people should not behave.
Social sexual behavior: a value-neutral term for sexual behaviors in the workplace that are not task-related (e.g., harassment, flirting).
Span of control: the number of employees a manager supervises.
Status: respect, prominence, and admiration in the eyes of others.
Status-leveling burden: challenges higher-status women face from lower-status colleagues.
Stereotype-congruent: alignment between characteristics and group stereotypes.
Stereotype-incongruent: misalignment between characteristics and group stereotypes.
Stereotype reactance: to contradict a negative stereotype about one's social group.
Stereotype threat: the risk of confirming a negative stereotype about one's social group.
Universal mindset: the belief that many people have high leadership potential.
Women are wonderful effect: women tend to be rated higher than men across positive attributes.

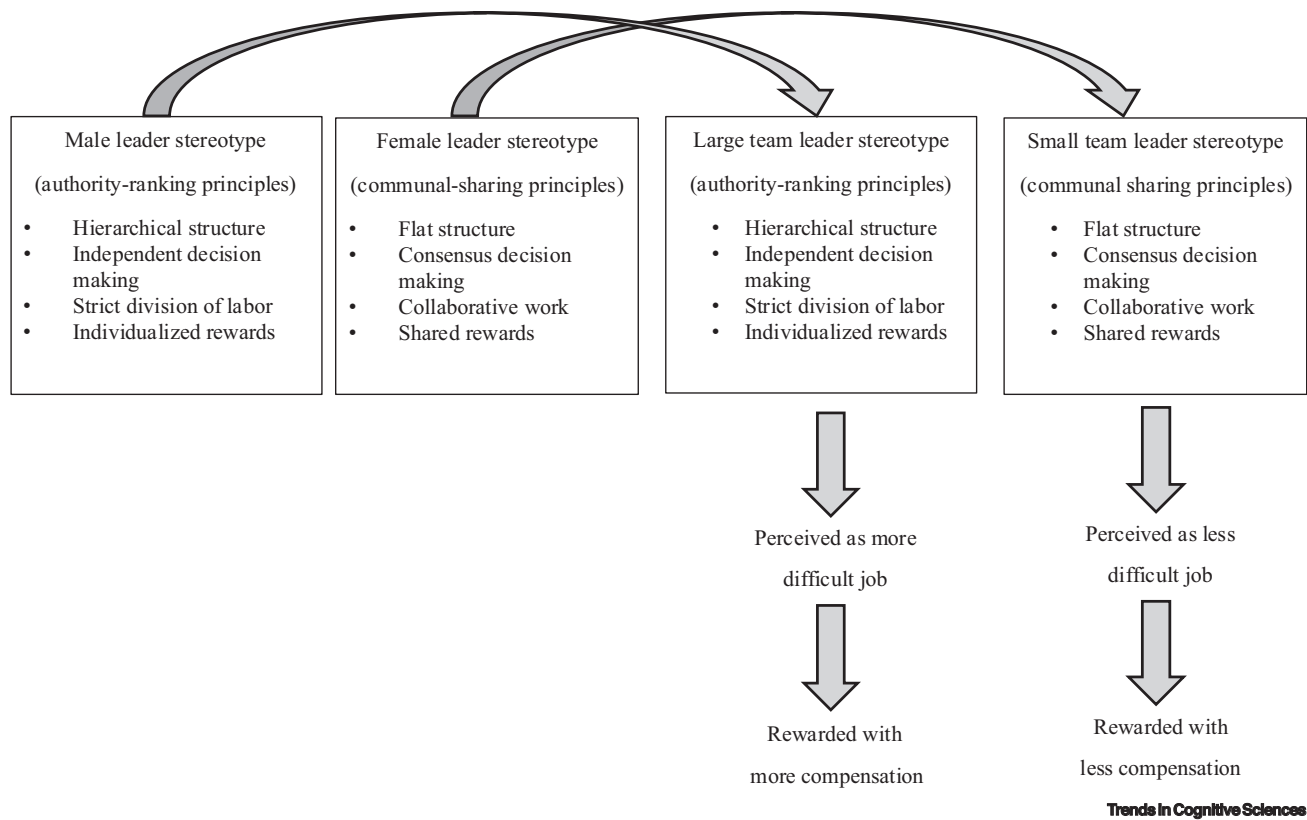


Figure 1. Overlap between gender stereotypes and team leader stereotypes and downstream consequences. Across multiple experiments [14], participants consistently associated male leaders with authority-ranking principles and female leaders with communal sharing principles. Separately, participants associated leaders of large teams with authority-ranking principles and leaders of small teams with communal sharing principles. Participants also perceive greater job difficulty in leading large teams than small teams, leading them to allocate greater compensation to leaders of large teams than to leaders of small teams. These stereotype-based patterns mirror real-world data among Master of Business Administration (MBA) alumni at a top business school, in which, even controlling for organization rank, men have larger spans of control than women, and men earn more compensation than women.

how hierarchies themselves are also viewed through a gendered lens. These gendered perceptions of hierarchy are important because they shape the pathways to influence available to men and women, often leaving women with fewer **stereotype-congruent** options for ascending in rank.

Influence is typically acquired through two primary bases of social hierarchy: power and status. Evidence suggests that power is viewed as more masculine than status [21]. Among individuals on published lists of the world's most powerful people, men are thought to rise through power, and women through status [22]. These stereotypes correspond with gendered patterns of societal recognition: when women (compared with men) occupy powerful roles (e.g., CEOs of global corporations), they are less likely to be accurately identified based on headshots and they receive less social attention both online and in traditional media. Conversely, observers are more attuned to high-status women (e.g., movie stars) than high-status men. These patterns emerge because stereotype-consistent information is easier to process and because the greater prevalence of men in high-power roles and women in high-status roles enhances cognitive accessibility. Both power and status afford influence, but they are gendered constructs.

Two widely studied strategies for ascending power and status hierarchies are dominance and prestige [23–25], which are also gendered. Dominance, especially in its coercive form, is strongly

Box 2. Intersectionality: a fine-grained analysis of stereotypes

Gender stereotypes do not operate in isolation but intersect with other social identities – including race, age, and sexual orientation – to create distinct patterns of workplace bias and leadership barriers. This intersectional analysis examines how these overlapping identities shape the specific challenges and opportunities women face in professional settings.

Race and gender intersections

An intersectional perspective reveals that women from different racial backgrounds face distinct leadership barriers. For example, Black women are stereotyped as more dominant yet less competent than Asian American women, while Asian American women are stereotyped as more competent but less dominant than Black women, introducing different forms of backlash against these distinct racial groups [120].

Reactions to women's dominance vary by racial identity. Black women are unconsciously associated with masculine traits more than White women, receiving reduced penalties for dominant behavior [121] and more favorable negotiation offers [122]. However, Black and Latina women leaders face stronger negative reactions than White women when using dominant language on social media [123], potentially due to their numerical minority status, making such behavior more conspicuous [124]. Longitudinal evidence from a professional services firm found that Black women experienced reduced promotion rates and higher turnover as their exposure to predominantly White work environments increased, demonstrating that workplace biases operate differently across intersectional identities [125].

Age and gender dynamics

Age critically influences gender perception throughout career trajectories. While both men and women are perceived as increasingly agentic from young adulthood to middle age, only women are simultaneously seen as less communal – negatively impacting workplace approval [126]. Longitudinal analysis reveals women experience a distinctive mid-career penalty that men avoid, while older men face stronger succession expectations due to perceived resource threats [127].

Sexual orientation and gender norms

Sexual orientation moderates gender effects on perception and outcomes. Lesbian women, perceived as more dominant than straight women, achieve negotiation outcomes comparable to straight men [128]. Evidence suggests normative gender stereotypes are less rigidly applied to sexually and racially minoritized individuals [129], though LGBTQ+ people face heightened risks of being perceived as unprofessional [130].

An intersectional lens illuminates why certain women experience relaxed gender norms for leadership advancement. However, practical implications remain unclear, as minoritized social groups continue to be significantly under-represented in senior leadership positions relative to dominant-group counterparts⁴. We acknowledge another limitation of the literature, and our review, is that we use gender and sex terms interchangeably, though in this manuscript, we are focused on gender.

masculine-coded and is seen as **stereotype-incongruent** when enacted by women. By contrast, prestige is relatively stereotype-congruent given its emphasis on communal attributes such as generosity, warmth, and prosocial expertise [26]. Dominance tends to benefit men more than women, especially in the short-term, while prestige offers a more viable path to influence for women [26]. This distinction clarifies the relationship between power/status (bases of hierarchy) and dominance/prestige (strategies of ascent): they represent complementary levels of analysis, with gender stereotypes constraining the routes women can credibly take.

Beyond using these strategies, individuals may ascend hierarchies by possessing particular traits. Agentic dominant traits involve being controlling, forceful, or aggressive. While these traits may help men rise, women who display agentic dominance are often penalized as stereotype-incongruent [27]. By contrast, agentic competence – traits like being skillful, diligent, and independent – are desirable in women, but not strongly expected, constituting a positive stereotype violation. Consequently, women who display agentic competence are evaluated more favorably than men who display the same traits.

We summarize this work with the gendered model of leadership pathways (Figure 2), which maps the gender-typed routes to influence. Importantly, although status (vs. power) and prestige (vs. dominance) are seen as relatively more feminine, they remain overall more aligned with

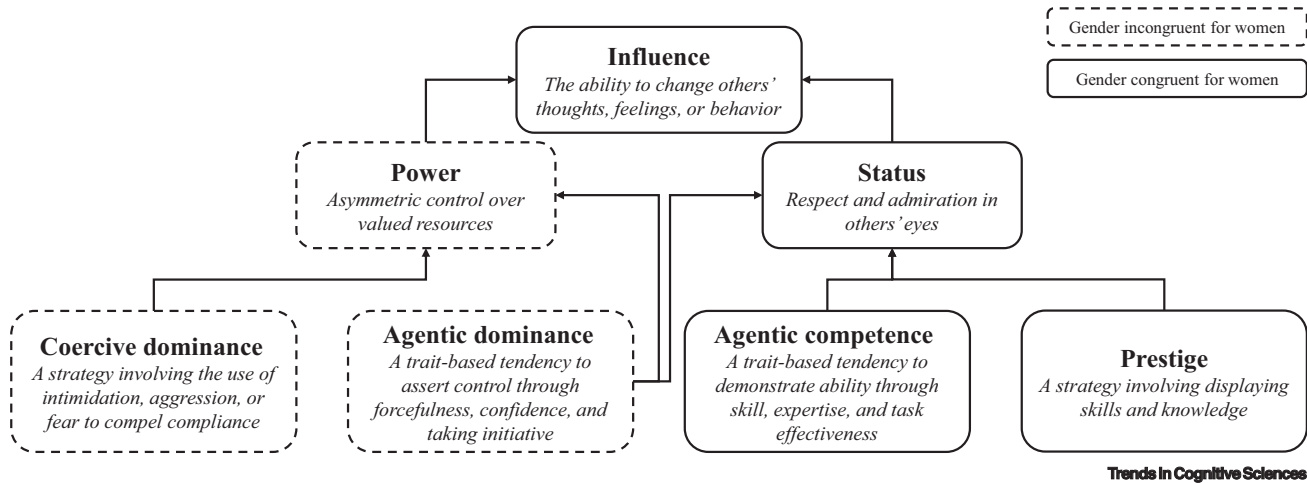


Figure 2. A gendered model of leadership pathways. This model illustrates how influence is acquired through power or status, and the strategies or traits that support each route. Power reflects control over valued resources, whereas status derives from respect and admiration. Influence emerges as an outcome of both power and status. Distinct pathways include coercive dominance (a fear-based strategy), agentic dominance (assertive traits), prestige (expertise-based strategy), and agentic competence (skills and abilities). The constructs with dashed borders denote stereotype-incongruent traits or strategies, while the constructs with solid borders denote those that are relatively congruent for women. This model integrates evidence of hierarchy structures, the differential effects of dominance versus prestige, and the association of power with men and status with women. This framework synthesizes evidence showing that while men have multiple stereotype-congruent pathways to influence, women face a narrower range of socially acceptable routes to leadership.

prescriptive masculine stereotypes [21,28]. Thus, while men have more latitude to ascend hierarchies through various stereotype-congruent means, women face a narrower pathway to leadership. Understanding these layered pathways is essential for explaining why women continue to face resistance in leadership roles: their ascent strategies (dominance/prestige) and influence types (power/status) are interpreted through the lens of gender stereotypes.

Resistance to women in leadership

Understanding which pathways are more or less stereotype-congruent for women is critical, as stereotypes can be weaponized to undermine women [29]. Men and women alike may help maintain the existing gender hierarchy by justifying social systems, viewing established norms as legitimate, and perceiving norm violations as destabilizing. These shared motives help to explain greater resistance to female than male leaders by both men and women. Men, however, have the further motive of protecting their dominant position, which can lead them to resist women's leadership through additional cognitive and institutional means.

Maintenance of the gender hierarchy through backlash

Backlash theory contends that women encounter significantly greater backlash than men when asserting power and dominance, not only because these behaviors violate gender role proscriptions, but also because they threaten the gender hierarchy by signaling a challenge to men's dominant position [30]. The most severe backlash is thus reserved for behaviors that both defy feminine norms and are interpreted as direct threats to the existing social order. This backlash intensifies when dominance is expressed overtly – through direct demands to subordinates – rather than through subtler means such as sustained eye contact, as explicit displays of dominance from women are more likely to be perceived as threatening [30]. Notably, women who display agentic competence – a weak prescription for women – may receive more favorable evaluations than equivalent men [27]. Women who display brilliance, or extreme innate intellectual ability, also incur backlash [31] as this level of competence encroaches on men's dominant position.

The constraining effects of backlash on women's agency are profound and multifaceted. Women's anticipation of potential backlash makes them significantly less likely than men to pursue leadership positions [32], diminishes their negotiation aspirations [33], and effectively silences them in professional discussions in public settings [34]. While power typically enables individuals to challenge unethical conduct, women who voice moral objections are perceived as having less self-control than their male counterparts [35]. In negotiation contexts, although power traditionally derives from having attractive alternatives to an agreement, negotiations more frequently reach an impasse when women (compared with men) possess high-power alternatives, consistent with backlash directed at powerful women [36].

Backlash manifests in additional ways that permeate even routine managerial activities, undermining women's leadership effectiveness. Female leaders experience notably lower-quality interactions with subordinates when delegating tasks, effectively discouraging them from offloading tasks that could free up managers' time for high-priority tasks and help others develop [37]. Furthermore, gendered norms surrounding power significantly influence how leaders' responses to authority challenges are perceived and evaluated. Female CEOs face more frequent challenges through shareholder activism compared with their male counterparts, and observers react more negatively when female CEOs respond uncooperatively to such challenges. This heightened criticism stems from the perception that uncooperative responses are stereotype-incongruent for women [38].

What unique role do men play in maintaining the gender hierarchy?

Understanding gendered career patterns requires examining intergroup dynamics between men and women, particularly how men defend their advantaged position within existing hierarchical structures. Given men's dominant position in the gender hierarchy, they possess a greater capacity to serve as gatekeepers, effectively blocking women's advancement to leadership positions. Men are also more likely than women to embrace hierarchy-enhancing attitudes and beliefs [39–43], which predisposes them to resist women as outgroup members seeking access to power. Recent research demonstrates that men perceive women's gains in power as harmful to men [44]. Moreover, workplaces with stronger **masculinity contest cultures** promote zero-sum thinking in men, which leads men to be less supportive of gender-fair policies [45].

Evidence suggests that low-power men may be especially prone to directing backlash at powerful women, a phenomenon attributed to **precarious manhood** [46]. For instance, when identical resumes are attributed to female applicants, low-power men rate them more negatively compared with equivalent resumes from male applicants – a bias not exhibited by men in high-power positions or under baseline conditions [47]. Male subordinates also direct more **social sexual behavior** toward female supervisors than male supervisors direct toward female subordinates, supporting the theory that men whose masculinity feels threatened deploy unwanted sexual attention as a tactic to assert their power [48]. Furthermore, men experiencing masculinity threats become more receptive to social sexual behavior initiated by attractive female coworkers [49], potentially contributing to hostile work environments that undermine women's leadership aspirations and exacerbate gender promotion disparities [50].

Recognizing the unique barriers that men present in women's career advancement, it is important to consider how to encourage men to support and advocate for women. Men's underestimation of other men's concern about sexism, a type of **pluralistic ignorance**, prevents allyship behaviors, particularly for men with higher masculinity concerns [51]. Importantly, bias against women need not stem from personal prejudice but can arise from pragmatic considerations: even

individuals who view men and women as equally capable leaders might withhold support for women candidates if they believe others will not support them [52,53]. This suggests efforts to calibrate normative beliefs may increase men's support for gender equality. Further, self-affirmation interventions in which men reflect on the importance of their personal values diminish masculinity threats, rendering men more receptive to dominant behavior in women [54].

Potential solutions offered by cognitive science and their limitations

Given entrenched gender stereotypes and power dynamics, it is important to consider how to neutralize these threats against women's leadership advancement. In this section, we consider potential solutions, including enacting stereotype congruency, increasing women's representation, promoting awareness of stereotypes, highlighting women's strengths, and finally, changing fixed to **growth mindsets**.

Does stereotype congruency neutralize backlash?

Backlash against power-seeking women diminishes when they also signal a desire for status [21], a social asset perceived as less zero-sum and more feminine than power [44]. Power increases perceived dominance while status enhances warmth regardless of power level [55]. Given prior work suggests that power and status have a mutually reinforcing relationship, such that status can lead to power and vice versa [56], this suggests that status may offer a more viable route to leadership for women than power.

Important caveats exist. Since status is socially conferred rather than resource-based, women pursuing status may leave existing power structures intact. Status hierarchies are also more fluid than power hierarchies [57], which may make women's status-based leadership more vulnerable to instability. Even though individual women are perceived as being more likely than individual men to rise in social rank through status, men as a group are still perceived as having more status than women as a group [22]. Even status conferral processes differ by gender. For example, men gain more social status than women after speaking up with group suggestions [58], further underscoring that women's potential advantages in the pursuit of status as a pathway to hierarchy are nuanced.

Does increasing women's representation address gender bias?

The gender composition of workplaces affects whether gender bias emerges, as gender-imbalanced workplaces increase stereotype transmission and memory bias [59]. Although being in the numerical minority predicts lower performance evaluations and fewer callbacks after applying for jobs for both men and women [60,61], this dynamic is especially consequential for women because they remain under-represented in most high-status, highly compensated professions. For women, minority status carries additional unique costs that directly reinforce leadership gaps: observers pay more attention to women's mistakes than to their improvements [62], women report lower leadership aspirations due to feeling less powerful [63], and high-status women in male-dominated professions face unique **status-leveling burdens** from low-status colleagues who treat them with less respect relative to high-status men [64].

Social perceptions rooted in the historical segregation of men and women into distinct social roles may gradually weaken as these roles converge. Currently, gender differences in personality and behavior correlate moderately with power differentials [65]. Research on gender differences in communication styles during entrepreneurial pitch competitions illustrates this dynamic: men tend to use more **abstract language** compared with women's more **concrete language** – a linguistic pattern associated with high- versus low-power positioning. This stylistic difference leads investors to perceive male-led ventures as having greater potential for long-term growth

and scalability [66]. If women adopt a more abstract communication style as they gain access to power, then gender gaps in opportunities may diminish.

Some research suggests that increasing women's representation does alleviate challenges inherent to numerical minority status. For example, increasing the number of women in senior leadership correlates with weakening gender stereotypes in organizational language [67], helping shift underlying norms surrounding gender and leadership. Yet this may be an imperfect solution, as increasing the number of women in a field can also lower perceptions of its rigor [68] and reduce performance expectations for entire teams [69]. Finally, as women enter top leadership positions, observers become less concerned about gender inequality in other domains, under the impression that gender inequality has been broadly addressed [70]. Even in contexts where women are well represented, discrimination can persist, especially among individuals who do not believe discrimination is problematic [71].

Two key indicators of social power in politics – experience and incumbency – effectively eliminate gender gaps in both leadership pursuit and electability [72,73]. However, the pattern proves more complex beyond the political arena. When experienced women freelancers attempt to expand into new professional domains, they face perceptions of reduced competence and commitment compared with their male counterparts [74]. These gendered evaluations underscore the bounded potential of increasing the representation of women in leadership as a panacea for gender bias.

Does increasing women's awareness of stereotypes address gender bias?

In specific contexts, explicitly acknowledging negative stereotypes can prompt targeted group members to challenge their validity through **stereotype reactance**. When women are informed that they typically face disadvantages in negotiations, this awareness leads them to secure better deals [75]. Similarly, informing women that they are less likely than men to enter competitions increases their participation in contests offering higher compensation [76]. This suggests that confronting stereotypes directly can sometimes be advantageous. However, stereotype reactance has been studied within limited contexts – specifically, single activations of negative stereotypes immediately followed by an opportunity to disprove them. The long-term effects of reminding women of their negative stereotypes remain unknown. Women's awareness of cultural beliefs about their lack of fitness for leadership can lead them to experience **stereotype threat**, which impairs executive function [77] and correlates with several negative consequences (e.g., exhaustion, higher turnover intentions, lower aspirations, and worse performance) [78,79].

Does highlighting women's strengths reduce gender bias?

Recent evidence finds that people generally prefer leaders who display communal leadership styles [80] and women consistently receive higher leadership effectiveness ratings than men from both supervisors and peers [81]. Additionally, people express a preference for women who lead through prestige over men who lead through dominance [28]. Yet in practice, women remain severely under-represented in leadership, suggesting that communal traits are valued in general more than in specific organizational contexts. In certain situations, masculine leadership qualities remain preferred. For instance, during intergroup conflict, stakeholders may perceive aggressive, male-stereotyped leadership as more effective in defeating competing groups [82]. Similarly, during times of threat, people gravitate toward dominant leaders [83]. This disconnect may be an instantiation of the **women are wonderful effect**, in which women are admired abstractly but not rewarded with power or influence [84]. Organizational resistance may stem from deeper structural dynamics. Endorsing women's leadership symbolically while undervaluing their actual contributions allows organizations to appear egalitarian while preserving the gender hierarchy –

a system in which men historically enjoy greater power, status, and privilege within society [85,86].

The promising role of mindsets

Mindset research, which examines beliefs about whether human capacities are fixed or malleable [87], offers a novel theoretical lens for designing interventions aimed at mitigating barriers facing women leaders due to psychological processes at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, and organizational levels. Beyond the content of stereotypes themselves, individuals differ in the extent to which they view stereotypes and social roles as changeable, ranging from a **fixed mindset** to a growth mindset. Relative to fixed mindsets, growth mindsets reduce stereotype activation and zero-sum power dynamics, ultimately reducing the likelihood that gender bias emerges or reducing its harm to women when it does emerge (Table 1). Importantly, people can shift between growth and fixed mindsets depending on situational cues [88], suggesting that fostering contexts that promote growth mindsets is a promising approach to reducing gender bias in organizations.

Table 1. Summary of mindset research relevant to gendered career paths

Domain	Fixed mindset	Growth mindset	Key research findings ('Relative to fixed mindsets...')	Refs
Personality traits	Personality is fixed and unchanging	People can change their personality over time	• Growth mindset individuals endorse stereotypes less strongly • Growth mindset individuals hold less traditional attitudes towards women as leaders, exhibiting less gender bias in leader evaluations • Growth mindset individuals are more willing to learn about stereotypes and bias • Growth mindset individuals are more likely to trust their counterpart following an apology • Growth mindset individuals are more likely to confront prejudice at work • Women with growth mindsets who confront prejudice at work have more positive expectations of the prejudiced individual's ability to change, increasing their workplace belonging and satisfaction • Attributing the confrontation of prejudice to a confronter's growth mindset reduces backlash against the confronter	[89,91–93,106–108]
Negotiation skills	Good negotiators are born that way	Anyone can become a better negotiator through effort and practice	• Growth mindset negotiators view negotiations as less zero-sum • Growth mindset negotiators create more mutual value • Growth mindset negotiators update impressions of individuals who deceive them after learning they were deceived • Male negotiators with growth mindsets maintain higher ethical standards	[90,94,109]
Gender roles	Men and women will always occupy different social roles	As society progresses, men and women will eventually occupy similar roles	• Growth mindset individuals perceive themselves in less gender stereotypical terms • Growth mindsets mitigate gender gaps in support for gender equality • Men with growth mindsets identify less with traditional gender roles and are more supportive of gender equality • Women with growth mindsets experience less work–family conflict and remain more committed to their jobs in the face of work–family conflict	[43,95]
Organizational culture and success	Success requires fixed attributes (e.g., talent, brilliance)	Success comes from malleable qualities (e.g., hard work, practice)	• Organizations with growth mindset cultures foster more trust, commitment, and healthy workplace norms • Fields de-emphasizing brilliance are perceived as less masculine, increasing women's sense of belonging and decreasing impostor syndrome	[96–99]

At the intrapersonal level, people with growth mindsets endorse stereotypes less strongly than those with fixed mindsets [89] and are less likely to interpret conflict in zero-sum terms [90]. Mindsets also shape women's responses to bias: women with growth (vs. fixed) mindsets report greater workplace belonging and improved relationships with colleagues who express bias [91,92].

At the interpersonal level, when observers interpret people who confront bias as evidence of a growth mindset, those who confront bias experience less backlash for their behavior [93]. When individuals hold a **universal mindset** – believing that many people have high leadership potential – they exhibit less gender bias in leader evaluations and selection decisions compared with those who maintain a **nonuniversal mindset** [94].

Additionally, mindsets influence how individuals approach conflict and negotiations. Holding the belief that good negotiators are born that way (a fixed mindset belief) leads individuals to perceive conflict in more zero-sum terms, leading these individuals, especially men, to deploy more aggressive negotiating tactics and to negotiate more win-lose deals than do individuals who believe anyone can improve their approach to handling conflict with effort and practice (a growth mindset belief) [90,95].

Mindsets also have implications for intergroup relations between men and women. Men who hold a growth (vs. fixed) mindset about gender roles in society express less support for existing gender hierarchies [43]. Similarly, women with growth (vs. fixed) mindsets experience reduced conflict between their professional and personal roles, in part because they are more willing to experiment with out-of-the-box solutions to the challenges inherent to dual-career couples [96]. As a result, high-achieving individuals who are members of dual-career couples report greater relationship and job satisfaction when they hold growth (vs. fixed) mindsets about gender roles in society.

At the organizational level, mindsets about leadership potential shape organizational cultures. Those who emphasize brilliance and innate talent signal a fixed mindset, fostering competitiveness, exclusion, and impostor syndrome, particularly among women [16,97,98]. By contrast, shifting organizational mindsets to emphasize that talent can be developed fosters trust, commitment, and healthier workplace norms [99].

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that mindsets play a critical role in determining whether gender stereotypes and power dynamics continue to disadvantage women at work, while also offering promising pathways for interventions at the individual, interpersonal, intergroup, and organizational levels. Research measuring the efficacy of mindset interventions has found beneficial effects on academic achievement and mental health [100] and has begun exploring when growth mindsets reduce prejudice by undermining beliefs about inherent differences between social groups [101]. However, testing mindset interventions in organizational contexts remains in its infancy, highlighting a promising direction for future research.

Concluding remarks

Gender disparities in leadership attainment remain remarkably entrenched despite women's strides in educational attainment and labor force participation over the last half-century. While scholarly interest in the underlying mechanisms of this phenomenon has flourished since the early 21st century [102], men continue to vastly outnumber women in senior leadership positions. Recent research has explored the relative contributions of trait-based explanations [103] versus situational explanations [104,105] in accounting for these enduring disparities. Our work contributes to this expanding field of inquiry by integrating recent advances in cognitive science research to illuminate the critical roles that stereotypes, interpersonal power dynamics, and intergroup gender relations play in creating and perpetuating the unique challenges faced by women pursuing leadership roles.

Outstanding questions

How much do actual versus perceived gender differences drive career disparities?

Do gender stereotypes reflect genuine beliefs about group differences or serve as strategic justifications for maintaining hierarchies?

How do supply-side factors (individual choices, attitudes) interact with demand-side factors (bias, structural barriers) to shape gendered career outcomes?

How do individual differences in zero-sum thinking about power contribute to gender gaps in leadership advancement?

How can women develop resilience strategies that filter harmful feedback while maintaining leadership ambition and well-being?

Does stereotype awareness benefit or harm women's career outcomes, and what factors determine when reactance versus threat responses emerge?

Which individual characteristics predict displaying gender bias and which targeted interventions help eliminate it?

How do intersecting identities moderate the effectiveness of different pathways to leadership for women?

Which organizational interventions most effectively reduce stereotype activation in evaluation processes?

Under what conditions do organizations prioritize communal leadership qualities, and how can these preferences increase women's advancement?

How can psychological mechanisms be applied to transform male-dominated workplaces into more supportive environments?

Do structured interviews, growth mindset training, and accountability mechanisms reduce gender bias over time?

How can researchers develop more ecologically valid measures of gender bias at work?

A key insight from this body of work is that pathways through organizational hierarchies are themselves gendered. Men are more often channeled into power-based trajectories – occupying roles with formal authority, leading larger teams, and benefiting from traits associated with agency and dominance. Women, by contrast, are relatively confined to status-based trajectories, where leadership is tied to collaboration, trust, and relational skill, but it often carries less formal authority, fewer resources, and lower rewards. This gendered model of leadership pathways helps explain why even highly capable women may encounter ceilings on advancement, while men continue to accumulate disproportionate power, influence, and compensation.

While linking these psychological mechanisms to gender bias in opportunities and treatment is an important first step, at least two critical questions remain. First, how can organizations design fairer processes? Future research should investigate which specific organizational practices most effectively mitigate gender bias in hiring, promotion, and performance evaluation. Second, how can women effectively navigate these realities? While understanding bias mechanisms is important, women need actionable strategies for career advancement (see [Outstanding questions](#)).

Mindset interventions offer promise given their demonstrated effectiveness in educational contexts and their potential to address bias at individual, interpersonal, intergroup, and organizational levels. Addressing these questions will require continued integration of psychological theory with practical organizational interventions, particularly those that leverage mindset research to create more equitable pathways to leadership for all genders.

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Declaration of interests

The authors have no interests to declare.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Claude.ai to polish the prose. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Resources

ⁱ<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/02/27/for-womens-history-month-a-look-at-gender-gains-and-gaps-in-the-us/>

ⁱⁱ<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>

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How can male perspectives be incorporated to develop comprehensive theories of workplace gender dynamics?

Do psychological drivers of gender bias operate similarly across different cultural contexts and organizational structures?

What longitudinal methods address how status-based advantages and disadvantages affect women leaders at different career stages?

How can artificial intelligence be leveraged to reduce gender bias?

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