

Is the 'queen bee' phenomenon a myth?

April 12 2018

Portrayals in the media and academic research suggest that females act like queen bees. When they succeed in male-dominated settings they mistreat subordinate women and stop their professional advancement—contributing to gender inequality in the work place. The latest study on the "Queen Bee" phenomenon, published in *The Leadership Quarterly*, presents a different perspective altogether.

The "Queen Bee" phenomenon is widely documented in the world's press. For example, Margaret Thatcher, the UK's first female prime minister, received the "queen bee" label for not promoting the careers of other women in her cabinet.

"Previous research on the [queen](#) bee phenomenon stems from illustrative case studies that are not representative or surveys that do not establish the true causal effects of appointing women to power," commented lead author Paulo Arvate, Professor of Economics and Strategy at the São Paulo Business School of Getulio Vargas Foundation. "These studies have reinforced the stereotype that women do not make good leaders."

The authors in this study advise that the "Queen Bee" [phenomenon](#) may be a myth. In environments where top leaders are afforded more power and discretion, female leaders act benevolently over their subordinate women. They chose more subordinate females at high managerial levels, which also reduced pay inequality relative to men in similar roles.

The researchers' study took into account 8.3 million organizations distributed over 5,600 Brazilian municipalities. From this sample men

and women who had won an election race with a very small margin of victory were compared to mimic a randomized experiment. The study took account of time, to allow for leaders to solidify their power and impose their will, and finally whether the leader was from a public or private organization based on the assumption that public leaders command more authority. The results showed that when a woman was elected leader there was in fact an increase in the number of [women](#) occupying top- and middle-management positions in public organizations.

"Our research has many methodological advantages relative to previous research and presents an entirely different picture," Dr. Arvate said.

More information: Paulo Roberto Arvate et al, The queen bee: A myth? The effect of top-level female leadership on subordinate females, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.03.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.03.002)

Provided by Elsevier

Citation: Is the 'queen bee' phenomenon a myth? (2018, April 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-04-queen-bee-phenomenon-myth.html>

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