

# Men are still more likely than women to be perceived as leaders, study finds

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Credit: University at Buffalo

Women hold just 26 percent of executive-level positions in S&P 500 companies—and sadly that is no accident, according to a new study by researchers in the University at Buffalo School of Management.

Published this month in *Personnel Psychology*, the study found that, on average, men are more likely than women to emerge as leaders.

The research team—led by doctoral student Katie Badura and Emily Grijalva, Ph.D., assistant professor of organization and human resources

in the UB School of Management—aggregated 59 years of research, encompassing more than 19,000 participants and 136 studies from lab, business and classroom settings.

They discovered that although the gender gap has narrowed in recent decades, it still persists.

"As a society, we've made progress toward gender equality, but clearly we're not quite there," Badura says. "Our results are consistent with the struggle many organizations face today to increase diversity in their [leadership](#) teams."

The researchers primarily attribute the gender gap to societal pressures that contribute to gender differences in personality traits. For example, men tend to be more assertive and dominant, whereas women tend to be more communal, cooperative and nurturing. As a result, men are more likely to participate and voice their opinions during group discussions, and be perceived by others as leaderlike.

"We found showing sensitivity and concern for others—stereotypically feminine traits—made someone less likely to be seen as a leader," Grijalva says. "However, it's those same characteristics that make leaders effective. Thus, because of this unconscious bias against communal traits, organizations may unintentionally select the wrong people for leadership roles, choosing individuals who are loud and confident but lack the ability to support their followers' development and success."

While group size and participants' ages did not affect the gender gap, the study found the length of time participants spent together was an important factor in whether men or women emerged as leaders. The longer a group spent together, the less gender influenced who emerged as the group's leader.

"The [gender gap](#) was strongest during the first 20 minutes people were together, similar to an initial job interview, but weakened after more than one interaction," Grijalva says. "During the hiring process, organizations should conduct multiple interviews to reduce [gender bias](#) and ensure they're hiring the best applicant."

For managers, the researchers suggest promoting the value of communal behaviors in performance evaluations, prompting quieter individuals to share their ideas and being mindful of any unconscious biases you or your staff may have.

"In the Obama White House, female staffers [adopted a strategy](#) of amplifying one another's comments during meetings and giving credit to the individual who said it first, to ensure that women's voices were being heard," Badura says. "Tactics like this help the most qualified individuals stand out and emerge into leadership roles—regardless of [gender](#)."

**More information:** Katie L. Badura et al. Gender and leadership emergence: A meta-analysis and explanatory model, *Personnel Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/peps.12266](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12266)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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