

# Gender gap in leadership aspirations changed little in sixty years

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Women in the United States are still less likely than men to express a desire to take on leadership or managerial roles, according to an analysis of data from leadership studies conducted over six decades.

Although the overall gap represents a small effect, it is persistent, and its impact is especially evident when carried through to upper leadership levels, as fewer women advance at each level—even without taking into account systemic discrimination. The researchers ran a simulation showing that the [gender gap](#) in leadership aspirations translated into more than two male leaders to every one female leader at the highest levels.

"What this suggests is that even if we were to drastically reduce bias and systematic gender discrimination, we still wouldn't expect to see equal representation of women in [leadership roles](#)," said Leah Sheppard, a Washington State University associate professor and co-lead author on the study published in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. "If we want to get to a more equitable 50/50 split, we need to have a conversation around leadership aspirations. We need to think about what women need to be able to see themselves in these roles."

Sheppard and co-lead author Ekaterina Netchaeva, an assistant professor at the Bocconi University in Italy, both emphasized that the findings do not contradict the existence of structural discrimination. They also do not indicate that women lack ambition—as past research has shown that women do want promotions, such as a move from junior to senior level, but not always positions that require additional supervisory duties.

For this study, the researchers accessed 174 study samples from the

1960s until 2020, representing more than 138,000 study participants. The studies all assessed leadership aspirations from a range of academic fields including economics, psychology, law and management. Many of the original studies were not specifically aimed at assessing [gender differences](#), but the researchers asked authors of those studies for additional statistics to compare the aspirations of men and women.

The current study found that the leadership [aspiration](#) gap widened when it came to individuals employed in male-dominated professions as well as politics with even fewer women wanting to seek an elected office.

The analysis could not test specific reasons why women were less inclined to want to take the helm at work or in politics, but the researchers said there are likely a range of factors, including internalized sexism.

"It may have to do with the process of 'self-stereotyping,' where individuals internalize their respective gender stereotypes and voluntarily conform to gender norms," said Netchaeva. "For women, this means internalizing a more communal stereotype, which leads them to view themselves as less similar to a leader and, consequently, to aspire to leadership positions to a lesser extent."

Men, on the other hand, Netchaeva added, may see themselves as the masculine agentic stereotype, meaning they have greater control over themselves and others, which also aligns with the stereotype many people have of leaders.

Other reasons indicated by past research include women having more negative experiences than men in the workplace, including discrimination, which can lower their future aspirations. Women may also fear the toll high-level positions would take on their family lives.

The authors found some evidence of publication bias, the nature of which suggested that the gender gap in aspirations is probably larger than what has been estimated by the research. This bias is likely due to the controversial nature of the research question, as studies showing a difference favoring men might be more difficult to get published.

The study also revealed that the aspiration gap appeared relatively early, particularly around college-age. More research is needed to understand not only when exactly this gap emerges but why exactly many women may not want to take leadership roles.

In the meantime, organizations can be pro-active, the researchers said, and aim interventions at bolstering their female employees' aspirations as well as continuing to reduce structural bias. These interventions could include establishing family-friendly policies, matching [women](#) with mentors and encouraging them to take on less formal leadership roles, for example, in the context of team projects.

"If people who are feeling somewhat ambivalent about [leadership](#) are given the chance to be immersed in the experience, then they might realize that they are cut out for it and they actually enjoy it," said Sheppard.

**More information:** Ekaterina Netchaeva et al, A meta-analytic review of the gender difference in leadership aspirations, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103744](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103744)

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