

From Canada to Europe, survey reveals the challenges facing women leaders

September 22 2022, by Louise Champoux-Paillé and Anne-Marie Croteau



Credit: Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels

Do women need to adopt male traits and behaviours to be successful in business? Are stereotypes still present and do they continue to disrupt

women's careers? How do leaders in Québec compare to those in Europe?

In early 2020, the [Women Initiative Foundation](#), in partnership with Concordia University's John Molson School of Business, the Stanford University Women's Leadership Innovation Lab, and the [CentraleSupélec of Université Paris-Saclay](#), conducted a new study about stereotypes and discrimination in the business world. The study surveyed leaders from Europe and Québec, from seven large organizations in France, Germany, Italy, and Québec, with an international reach.

Together, we, the Dean of the John Molson School of Business and an expert in the challenges faced by [women](#) in the highest echelons of leadership, are sharing the results of this study with emphasis on the results from the Québec component, all while conducting an analysis of the synergies with the situation in Europe.

Women have developed a unique style of leadership

One of the objectives of this study was to determine if women are more difficult leaders than men in their way of managing people. Are they more severe towards their female colleagues? Are women more career-minded than men? Do they need to put their [family life](#) aside to achieve all of their professional aspirations?

In other words, referring to generally well known stereotypes, [do women become more "masculinized" by adopting male traits and behaviours to succeed?](#)

The study revealed that a low number of female respondents from Québec (24%) and male respondents (17%) think that female leaders become more masculine in order to progress in their careers. Conversely,

in Europe, 46% of women and 47% of men share this belief.

This low feeling of masculinization of Québec women leaders is particularly important to point out, because it prevents certain leaders from becoming obstacles rather than [role models](#) for other women. Far from denying their femininity, the results of this study seem to indicate that women develop a [leadership style](#) that is unique to them.

The stereotypes persist

The comparison of the results on both sides of the Atlantic shows that stereotypes are still just as persistent and disturbing for the advancement of female careers.

It has been found that in both Québec and Europe, women have been stereotyped as having competencies that are typically associated with support roles (rigorous and attentive) whereas men are presumed to have traits associated with positions of power (politicians, leaders, careerists). More specifically with regards to leadership stereotypes, women are perceived as organized, leaders and rigorous whereas men are described as politicians, careerists, strategists, and leaders.

Once again, men are considered as those in the thick of the action and more focused on the advancement of their career (they are strategists and career-driven) while women are regarded as passive and less ambitious. These stereotypes largely explain [the sticky floor and the glass ceiling](#) that women have faced for many years and the near absence of female CEOs in large Canadian organizations. The sticky floor is the theory illustrating the difficulty women face when they are seeking promotions at the start of their careers, and the slow climb of the ladder. As for the [glass ceiling](#), this is the theory of the invisible barriers that stop women from being promoted into the upper levels of our organizations.

Very different perceptions of inequalities

There is a stark difference in the perception that women and men have regarding their employer's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Men do not seem as aware of the inequalities and discrimination that women can face in their work environment. As much in Québec as in Europe, men give their organizations a much higher ranking on the company's values of diversity, the fight against discrimination, and inclusion initiatives.

Two interesting responses that illustrate this difference in perception are important to highlight: only 10% of the male participants from Québec believe that they are better paid than women who have equal competency levels, while 44% of female participants in Québec think the opposite. The male respondents are also half as likely to hear about sexist comments in the office.

However, if women in Québec have a more favorable perception of an equitable culture in the workplace than those in Europe, the study showed that nevertheless about half of respondents are likely to perceive a lack of equity in internal promotions and see the difficulty in accessing leadership roles. When asked specifically about the hardships of obtaining management roles, many women mentioned that institutional discrimination is what forces them to continuously prove their worth, and leads them to self-censure and devalue themselves.

Men need to be more sensitive to inequalities

This huge disconnect in perceiving sexist discrimination in the workplace raises some concerns, given that roles in the highest echelons

of companies are more often occupied by men.

Given they are less aware of the difficulties faced by their female counterparts, these male leaders may be less inclined to put forward policies and strategies that can favour more equal access to leadership roles. It is therefore imperative that these men are made aware of the obstacles faced by women.

This study demonstrates that [stereotypes](#), systemic hurdles, and discriminatory policies and procedures persist more in European society than in Québec. Nonetheless, there is still a very long road ahead. Diversity, equity and inclusion programs implemented by our Canadian companies and integrated in their strategy and development can make a huge difference to the advancement of women's careers. [Notably, in France, this approach is evolving.](#)

There is clear merit in continuing to encourage and reinforce these initiatives, given there is proof in the benefit of them, especially when we compare ourselves here in Québec to the Europeans. Québec women leaders, as Martine Liautaud, president of the Women Initiative Foundation, [wrote in Le Monde recently](#), "are more combative than even their most determined European counterparts, they are prouder of their success, and all this without having to deny their unique traits."

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