

# Supporting feminine leadership could help create a just and kinder future

December 6 2022, by Sarah Trantum

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Women are still struggling to reach leadership positions. Though there are [more women earning college degrees](#) and a [comparable number entering the workplace](#), women are still [not reaching mid-level and top-level leadership positions at the same rate as men](#).

In Canada, [women hold only 19 percent of corporate board positions](#). Less than one percent of senior [leadership](#) and pipeline positions [are held by Black and Indigenous women, women with disabilities and LGBTQ2S+ women](#).

A model of leadership that encompasses the feminine traits within each of us can help move us towards a more just and sustaining world.

As a social innovation designer, I study complex challenges with the aim of finding common approaches needed to solve them. My goal is to frame the principles that can help us [design a more humane future](#)—where all voices are heard and valued. To understand how to get there, [I listened to stakeholders and emerging leaders engaged in the work of championing more inclusive and equitable leadership](#).

## **The enduring glass ceiling**

Terms like ["broken rung"](#) and ["sticky floor"](#) describe the difficulty [women](#) encounter moving up from entry-level roles. Metaphors like the ["glass ceiling"](#), ["glass escalator"](#) and ["glass cliff"](#) illustrate the struggles women face in attaining managerial and executive roles.

[Scholars argue that the metaphor of a labyrinth](#) better describes the complex maze of barriers that make it difficult for women to rise to the top.

During the pandemic, women have carried the brunt of the caretaking responsibilities [at home and at work](#). They are doing [more to support their teams' well-being and engage in diversity and inclusion initiatives](#).

Yet, these efforts are [rarely captured in performance evaluations that determine raises and promotions](#). By narrowly defining leadership, using [metrics that skew towards a masculine style of management](#), barriers

remain for women and gender-diverse people to break through the [glass ceiling](#).

[Deep-seeded bias](#) and ideas around "[respectable femininity](#)" still impact how women are perceived and evaluated.

[Analysis shows](#) that though the gender leadership gap is slowly narrowing, traits like being competitive and aggressive associated with men are still highly valued. While traits like being kind and understanding connected with women are still seen as detrimental in leadership roles.

## The problem with leaning in

For women to reach better leadership positions, they need to be valued and recognized for their contributions, [which may look different than those of their male colleagues](#).

Instead of being told to "[lean in](#)", [research](#) and [women's experiences](#) underscore the need for their contributions to be recognized and for workplaces, and society, to [value collective care](#).

[Critics of 'leaning in'](#) state that it puts the onus on women to change their behaviors and ignores the systemic barriers at play.

Research on women who reach senior positions in male-dominated organizations and exhibit more masculine management styles has often [focused on personality traits](#). Yet studies [show how women are shaped by sexist workplaces](#), causing them to disengage from their [gender identity](#), and from other women, to prevent experiencing discrimination.

[Workplaces are shaped by the broader culture](#). A society where women are devalued not only produces [men who devalue women but also](#)

[permeates how women value women.](#)

## **Feminine leadership is not just for women**

Research on effective leadership underscores the need for approaches that align with [feminine characteristics of empathy, support and community-building](#). These traits do not belong solely to women; [they are inherent in all of us](#).

Employees feel seen and heard [where they can learn and make mistakes](#) without fear of blame. Other values include the prioritization of care, respect and co-operation above competition and an emphasis on honesty and accountability.

Feminine leadership encompasses the aspects of ourselves that have been [pushed aside and devalued within conventionally male-dominant spaces](#). Recentring them can define a model of leadership embraced and practiced by all genders.

## **Leaders of the future**

So how do we get there?

Helping [girls find their own unique voices and ways of leading](#), without conforming to narrowly defined leadership traits often modeled by men, [can shape the next generation of leaders](#). Organizations like [Girls Inc. of York Region](#) and [Plan International Canada](#) are providing girls and young women with opportunities to explore what being a leader means for them.

It is also critical for boys to [appreciate their own inherent feminine qualities of empathy and care, helping them grow into men who value](#)

[feminine qualities](#) and who embrace following women and gender diverse leaders.

For organizations, it is not just about recruiting more women and gender diverse employees. It also means creating a workplace culture that truly embraces diversity and provides opportunities for growth.

Women are at a huge disadvantage when it comes to [accessing networking](#) and [mentorship opportunities](#). Being an ally means going beyond speaking up if you see something unfair. It is advocating for more advancement opportunities and getting directly involved in mentorship for women, especially for women of color, women with disabilities and LGBTQ2S+ women.

Organizations must recognize the [emotional work and leadership already being modeled by women](#). Evaluations and performance reviews should capture the full spectrum of what employees, especially women, bring to work and [be tied to increased pay and leadership opportunities](#).

Without a shift to fully valuing the contributions of women, workplaces will continue to be labyrinths full of barriers, and the leadership gap will never close. Without understanding and embracing the importance of feminine qualities of care, empathy and collaboration in how we live, work and lead, the status quo will continue.

The current paradigm—a patriarchal leadership model that continues to value self-interest and competition over collective benefit and co-operation—[just isn't working for most people](#).

As we face the challenges of political division, [social injustice](#), economic uncertainty and [climate change](#), now is the time to recentre the feminine within and champion a different, kinder way to lead.

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