

Gender and Leadership: Evolutionary?  
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Abstract

The current executive picture shows a heavily male dominated field. Are women less fit to be in leadership positions than men? Do men have some inherent trait that makes them better suited for these positions? Why is it the case that we elect men to lead more often, creating an imbalanced representation between genders in power positions? This paper aims to answer those questions from an evolutionary perspective by providing theories developed by psychologists and comparing them to the modern day executive landscape.

Throughout history there have been many strong leaders, both good and bad. From Genghis Khan ruling the Mongol Empire, or Henry Ford and his advancements in mass production, the world has had some powerful people. One can't help but notice, however, that the vast majority of people in leadership positions have been male. This begs the question as to "why?"

It is false that men are inherently better suited for leadership positions than women are. If we turn our attention to a study published by the Harvard Business Review, we see that women are actually rated as the superior leaders over their male counterparts (Zenger, Folkman, 2012). In fact, out of 16 different "competencies," women are rated higher by their peers in 15 of them. Despite these findings, we still see an imbalance between men and women in leadership positions in the professional world. A look back through history, along with some other things such as gender roles and societal norms may shed some light on this phenomenon.

Perhaps we can look at this problem from an evolutionary standpoint. According to psychology professors Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja, our earliest ancestors chose "tall, physically fit males as leaders" (Bailey, 2017). When we think of life back in the prehistoric era, we envision a hostile environment where there are animals trying, and sometimes succeeding, in killing humans for food just as much as humans killing animals. Life was brutal, and it truly was a case of survival of the fittest. The previous statement made by van Vugt and Ahuja makes sense when we look at life through this lens. It only makes sense to have the strongest and biggest lead. But times have changed. No longer are we forced to take down a woolly mammoth so our tribe can have food and shelter. But still, we see much of the same in leadership despite the changing landscape. We can choose to at any of the ancient civilizations, but we will still see a vastly dominant male presence in power positions. Again, we can look at each one of these civilizations and recognize that life in these eras was much more violent, and the need for a larger, stronger, more physically imposing leader was paramount. Since men have typically been larger and stronger (this doesn't mean better) throughout history, it necessarily follows that men were chosen 99% of the time to lead.

An article by Gregg Murray, published at Psychology Today, tests the theory that humans tend to prefer male leaders when there is some sort of "external threat." It's obvious what the external threat would be in our previous examples of early civilizations, but what about today?

Murray conducted three separate experiments aimed at proving the external threat theory under the circumstances of the modern day. In one scenario, Murray created a hypothetical female candidate and a male candidate who were running for Senate. The external threat in this scenario was the economy. When the economy was in a weakened state, the public support was greater for the male candidate.

Next, Murray created a hypothetical business and used the "health of the business" as the external threat. Much like in the first experiment, when the business was facing trying times financially, people preferred a male CEO over a female CEO.

Lastly, a hypothetical run for presidency was under experimentation. Given the choice between a male or female president, the people's opinion changed depending on the current state of affairs within the country. In this case, "times of war" was labeled as the external threat. If the country in question was currently experiencing conflict with other nations, people preferred a male leader as opposed to a female leader. In all three instances the percentage of people who preferred a male leader increased in relation to increased threat (When Do We Prefer Male Over Female Leaders, 2012).

Without going too far into politics here, we could turn our attention to the 2016

presidential election and, based off of Murray's findings, conclude that perhaps one of the factors working against Hillary Clinton was the fact that America had been engaged in war with the Middle East for over a decade. Couple that with what some would call a lackluster economy in the times leading up to the election, you can see how, according to Murray, the cards were stacked against Hillary. Around the same time of the Trump/Clinton battle, we saw a similar story unfold across the pond when Marie Le Pen was ousted by her opponent Emmanuel Macron in France's presidential election (Rubin, 2017). This came at a time of unrest in France regarding their positioning in the European Union, and also some economic issues the country was facing. Again, we see the existence of external threat in the France example.

So far we have discussed ancient civilizations, along with more modern day societies, and how we have typically chosen men over women as our leaders because we subconsciously desire a male presence in positions when there is an external threat and a female presence when we are in more peaceful or neutral times. There have been other explanations, however, as to why it is the case we see far fewer female leaders.

According to one article, "career interruptions" were cited as one possible explanation to this phenomenon (Women's Leadership: Challenging Our Social Norms, 2016). On its surface this may make a little sense. Women often times have to undergo certain experiences that men are free of, such as child birth. Typically, when a woman gives birth, she will be forced to take time off work to not only have the baby, but care for the baby for the next several months. This could potentially put her behind in her climb to the top of the company. But is this really the reason why women are underrepresented? The same article makes reference to a study called "*Women in the Workplace*" which finds less and less desire by women compared to men to move-up into higher level positions the higher up they become in the company. A possible explanation for this could be what is referred to as the three S's.

Previously, we talked about two psychology professors Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja. Van Vugt and Anjana give a rather straight-forward explanation to why men are more prone to pursue executive positions in what they call the "three S's". The three S's work in circular fashion. That is, each "s" leads into the next. For the three S's to work we need to understand our most basic desire from an evolutionary standpoint. Reproduction, or sex. In order to attract a mate for reproductive purpose you need to have status. And we must also understand what it is that gives us status in today's day. Money, or a nice salary. Thus we have our three S's. Salary, which leads to status, which in turn leads to sex, or reproduction (Bailey, 2017.). It is important to note that this is only a possible explanation and not a definitive answer, however, it does make sense from an evolutionary standpoint.

To simplify the paragraph above, evolution has given men certain traits that make them crave status and power more than their female counterparts. This isn't to say that there are no women out there who break this mold and are status obsessed or super competitive, or that some people obtain high levels of leadership due to factors other than ones we have mentioned. It just states that typically, men are more prone to strive for these positions due to factors beyond human control.

One last thing to consider are the gender roles that we have created as a society. Though they are ever-changing, the dominant beliefs in American society have traditionally been that men are the breadwinners and women are the nurturing spirits in the house, taking care of any children that resulted from that third S, in addition to the man when he came home from a hard day's work. Men are perceived as the stronger, rougher sex, while women are typically seen as more delicate and emotional. Obviously things aren't this black and white and we see a mixture

of personalities across both male and females. Nonetheless, these beliefs still exist, albeit less today than in previous times, and make the path to the top that much harder for a woman to traverse. However, as we progress as a society, we will continue to see strides being made in equality between genders and a more egalitarian executive landscape.

One thing is for certain, we have come a long way from times not very long ago when women were held to secretarial positions, or Susie Homemaker stereotypes. It is quite likely that will continue to see things move in that direction. Women are clearly not any less suited than men to lead in today's world, and studies have shown that women are actually rated higher than men in many important leadership qualities. We need to let go of our biases when it comes to gender and leadership so that we may anyone attain high-level positions based on competency rather than letting gender sway our decisions.

## References

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