

# LEADERSHIP FICTIONS: Gender, Leadership and the Media

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*A report analyzing popular media's impact on perceptions of gender and leadership.*

## GENDER AND LEADERSHIP TODAY

Women are half the population, earn nearly 60% of college degrees, are 47% of the workforce and represent 53% of voters.<sup>[1-3]</sup> Although women have broken almost every glass ceiling at least once, women still occupy only 18% of the top leadership positions across all sectors.<sup>[4]</sup> While the representation of women in the highest ranks of political and business leadership has improved in some cases – for example, our record-breaking 20 women in the U.S. Senate (yet only 18% in Congress overall) – overwhelmingly, it is still male. The U.S. ranks 80<sup>th</sup> in terms of female representation in the legislature, behind most of the developed world as well as nations that are openly criticized for their treatment of women, such as Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>[5]</sup> In 2012, Catalyst found that only 4.2% of CEO positions and less than 17% of board seats are held by women among Fortune 500 companies.<sup>[6, 7]</sup>

***The status of the world's women is not only a matter of morality and justice. It is also a political, economic, and social imperative. The evidence is irrefutable: when women are free to develop their talents and contribute fully to their societies, everyone benefits.***

*– Hillary Clinton, 5/12/2010*

Compelling evidence across sectors demonstrates that having more women in senior leadership positions leads to excellence in performance. Research shows that companies with more women in upper management and on the board of directors are more profitable and have higher returns on equity.<sup>[8]</sup> More women in political office results in better decisions and policy-making.<sup>[9]</sup> Highly-educated women and those who have the greatest capacity to become leaders represent a valuable economic, political and social resource that is wasted when systemic barriers exist that prevent them from being able to contribute their skills in senior leadership positions. Nevertheless, at a systemic and institutional level, much of the power remains largely controlled by men.

Although women have been repeatedly shown to be highly effective leaders, the growth of women in leadership positions in both government and business seems to have stalled at well under 20%. This raises the obvious question – why?

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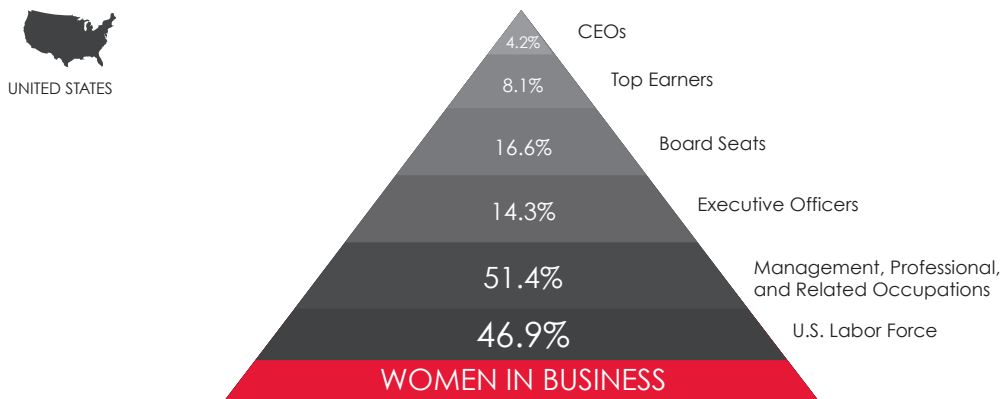
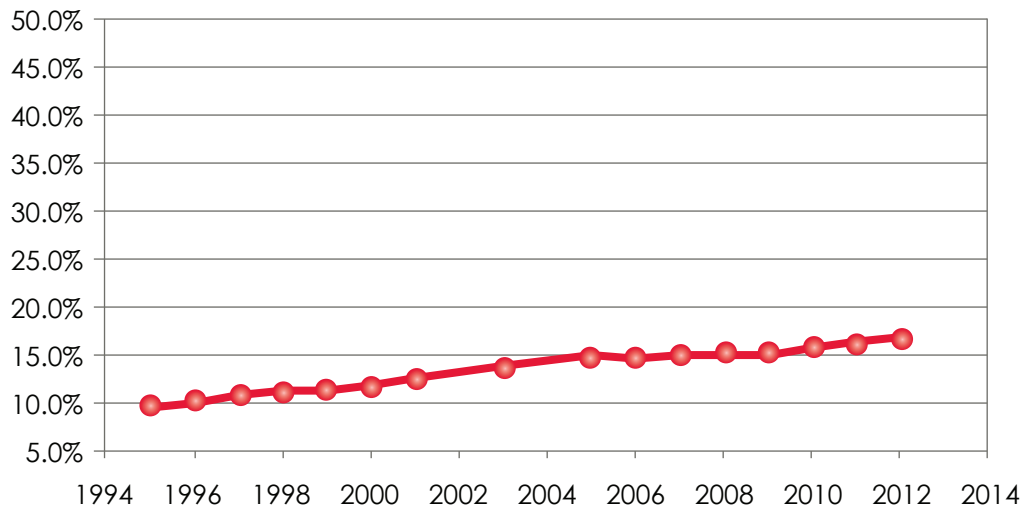
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## % Women with Board Seats at Fortune 500 Companies



### SOURCES

Catalyst Research (2013).  
 Catalyst, 2012 Catalyst Census: Fortune 500 Women Board Directors (2012).  
 Catalyst, 2012 Catalyst Census: Fortune 500 Women Executive Offices and Top Earners (2012).  
 Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011 Current Population Survey, "Table 11 Employed Persons by Detailed Occupation, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity" (2012)  
 Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011 Current Population Survey, "Table 18 Employed Status of the Civilian Noninstitutional Population by Age, Sex, and Race" (2012).

- 1. Institutional barriers** – the rules and structure of leadership positions explicitly or implicitly select for men. The most commonly cited institutional barrier is the lack of adequate, affordable childcare. However, these barriers can extend to more amorphous issues such as workplace cultures that emphasize "face-time" over productivity.
- 2. Social barriers** – Women choose to opt out, or are pushed off of leadership tracks because of biases in how leadership is perceived. Women are less likely to push for leadership positions, and are less likely to be singled out for these positions because people's perceptions of leadership are inherently masculine.

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While the leadership gap is well known and discussed in the media today, the framing of the conversation and much of the messaging persists in perpetuating outdated and often harmful stereotypes about leadership. These stereotypes often portray leadership as inherently masculine and emphasize leadership as the ability to control others, rather than the ability to facilitate and manage a group working toward a goal. This is most apparent in the way that leaders on television are shown in aggressive situations, as skilled fighters. Even pacifist captains of Star Trek end up in a show of physical prowess.

Media plays a role in shaping perceptions, often perpetuating outdated views on what qualities make a successful leader - even in the innovation age. However, there is an opportunity for media to play a more positive role, helping to break these stereotypes, both by showing more women in leadership positions, and by emphasizing some of the more collaborative skills that are increasingly important for modern leadership.

*I want to see more women compete for the highest positions in their countries ... we have to break down these attitudes that pigeon-hole and stereotype people, like, what does a leader look like... well a leader looks like somebody who's a man. – Hillary Clinton, 1/29/2013*

## WHY MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IS A PRESSING ISSUE TODAY

FEM Inc. is an organization whose mission is to promote positive, diverse, empowering female portrayals in popular entertainment. Take the Lead is a new initiative to foster leadership skills in women to bring women to leadership parity across all sectors by 2025. Based on research of co-author Gloria Feldt's book: No Excuses; 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power,<sup>[10]</sup> Take The Lead has identified major barriers preventing women from taking their equal place as leaders in society. **Many barriers are intimately linked with how people perceive women, how people perceive leaders, and how women perceive themselves. Most importantly, these barriers often have to do with women's own relationship to power.**

Women's discomfort with power and their reluctance to advocate for themselves are closely linked to culturally accepted "female" roles. These stereotypical female roles have a significant influence on how women perceive themselves, as well as how they tend to view the risks and benefits of taking leadership. **Traditional definitions of power are rooted in the concept of having power over others.<sup>[11]</sup> Since women have borne**

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**the brunt of those negative aspects of power for millennia, it's no wonder that many women perceive leaders and leadership roles in conflict with their conceptions of themselves, how they want to live their lives and the relationships they form with others.**

In addition, women are judged more harshly than men when they put themselves forward for powerful leadership roles.<sup>[12, 13]</sup> This can be a significant deterrent to women seeking out these roles. **However, when leadership is reframed in the context of purpose and possibility – the power to achieve an end that makes life better for themselves, their children, company, community, and/or the world – women will embrace their power and take on leadership roles.**<sup>[10]</sup>

**While it is easy to focus on leadership as a goal in and of itself – the self-reinforcing will to power, or “power over” – it may be more constructive to talk about leadership as a means to an end, the “power to” accomplish goals. This second form of leadership actually leans heavily on attributes traditionally defined as “feminine.”** The ability to coordinate, collaborate and negotiate between various stakeholders to come to useful agreement requires empathy: the ability to listen, to understand, and to put oneself in another person's position. These are all features that are key to real strategic thinking, and are often more associated with women.<sup>[14, 15]</sup> Because current business research finds that having a critical mass of women in leadership roles creates more profitable companies<sup>[8]</sup> and better governance,<sup>[9]</sup> it is important that media and entertainment represent our collective reality of who is leading and what leadership means in the future.

*I do not wish them to have power over men, but over themselves.*  
- Mary Wollstonecraft

## **MEDIA FORMS US AND INFORMS US ABOUT GENDER ROLES AND LEADERSHIP**

**In order to understand the impact of media on women's pursuit of leadership roles and the opportunities available to them, we must consider how our culture views women and how our culture views leadership itself.** One major roadblock to female leadership is the fact that female leaders are consistently implicitly perceived as less effective than their male counterparts. Psychologists have studied this phenomenon extensively, with the conclusion that this is largely due to the incongruities between the female gender stereotype and our perceptions of traditional leadership.<sup>[12, 16, 17]</sup> Both of these concepts - femininity, and leadership - are constantly

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evolving. A recent meta-analysis of 30 years of studies on the perceived masculinity (or femininity) of leadership found that our concept of leadership, while still overwhelmingly masculine, has become more androgynous over time.<sup>[15]</sup> One of the paradigms analyzed in this study was the “think manage-think male” paradigm in which separate groups of people were asked to rate the importance of a long list of attributes to either being a manager, being a woman, or being a man. This paradigm allows researchers to see which attributes people think of as masculine or feminine, and which attributes are considered important to leadership. In these experiments, researchers look at how similar the attributes associated with leadership are to those associated with being either male or female. This analysis suggests that the increased association of leadership with femininity is due to a change in the way we see leaders, rather than changes in our conceptions of masculinity or femininity, with more feminine, relational, traits such as collaboration becoming more important to leadership. A recent study, detailed in the forthcoming book “the Athena Doctrine: how Women (and the Men who Think Like Them) Will Rule the Future,” applied an expanded version of this paradigm on a global scale, interviewing over 64,000 people from countries around the world. Their results confirmed this overall trend, finding that traditionally “feminine” attributes are becoming increasingly valued in leaders, while “masculine” attributes are on the decline.<sup>[14]</sup>

The fact that these “feminine” qualities are advantageous, and that women can be extremely effective leaders, is well known. Many business publications, such as *Fast Company* and *Business Week* have discussed the superior leadership skills of women over the last decade.<sup>[18, 19]</sup> **Recent scientific evidence confirms these insights, showing that the proportion of women in a group is a significant predictor of its “collective intelligence,” largely due to women’s higher average sensitivity to social signals.**<sup>[20]</sup>

## HOW WOMEN ARE PORTRAYED IN TELEVISION AND FILM

A recent study by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media showed that women are underrepresented in media across the board. The study reports that male characters outnumbered female characters in management roles by more than 3.5 to 1 in prime time shows and over 6 to 1 in family films. In addition, women are systematically underrepresented in all major leadership positions across occupations. At the highest levels of business leadership (Presidents, Vice Presidents and C-suite executives) only seven out of 50 in prime time shows, and two out of 58 in family films were female.<sup>[21]</sup> Political leadership was similarly skewed: only 28% and 4.5% of these characters were female in prime time shows and family films respectively. Prime time television has better female representation than

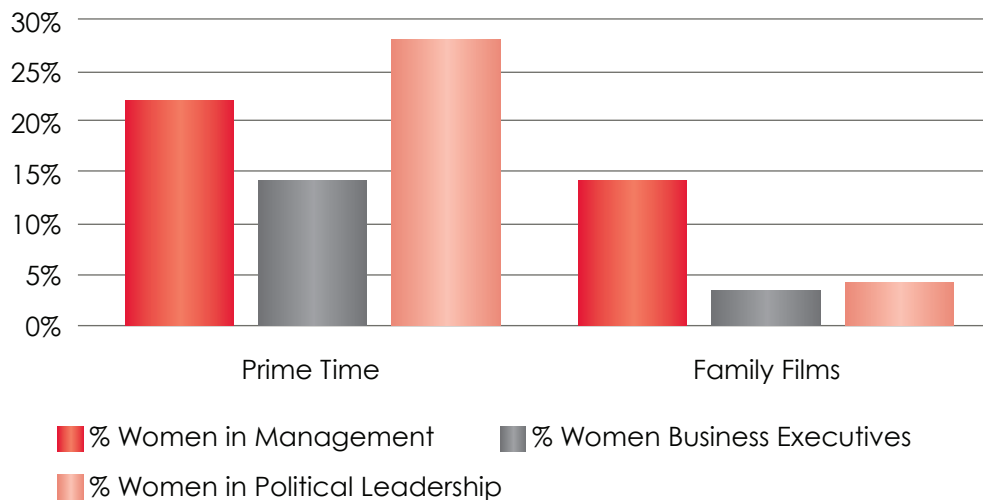
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family films across the board. However, even these shows exaggerate the gender gap in some sectors: while the proportion of business executives in these shows is close to reality, the percentage of female managers on prime time television is 22%, less than half of the 51.4% seen in reality. Due in part to these persistent, imbedded social stereotypes, there is a tremendous opportunity for the media to portray equality in leadership. In this way media could help lead the way to greater equality instead of lagging behind the new reality by continuing to reinforce and exaggerate traditional views of leadership.

### Percentage of Leadership Positions Occupied by Women in Prime Time Television Shows and Family Films

[source: Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media]



**One concern in particular is the fact that all of these ratios are far worse in family films than they are in either prime time television or in the real world.** These images, when seen by children who are forming their beliefs about gender roles, affect their perceptions of their own abilities. The lack of female leaders in these “family friendly” films has the capacity to be particularly harmful during these formative years, especially for girls, who are particularly susceptible to social signals and such messages about “appropriateness” of social and professional roles.<sup>[22, 23]</sup>

Even when women are portrayed in positions of institutional power, they are often shown as incidental, or even absent characters. Of the three female characters shown to be powerful politicians in the family films analyzed by the Geena Davis institute, two were simply named and had no lines and the third was a minor inconsequential character.<sup>[21]</sup> And in one of the few shows where a woman is not only a political leader, but also a main character - HBO’s sitcom *Veep* - Julia Louis-Dreyfus portrays a hapless Vice President with no actual power.

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Beyond portraying leadership roles, entertainment also reinforces other gender stereotypes. Studies of portrayals of women and men in advertisements show significant disparities in how they are portrayed. Specifically, women are far more likely to be shown as product users or “consumers,” rather than “product experts,” and portrayed in more dependent roles.<sup>[24, 25]</sup> In addition women are far more likely to be shown engaging in domestic chores and childcare.<sup>[26]</sup> Reinforcing the perception that household chores and childcare are solely the responsibilities of women makes women’s full participation in the workplace extremely difficult and, in many important ways, devalues the importance of fatherhood. Women are already half of the U.S. labor force. To take their equal place in the leadership hierarchy, these domestic duties need to be shared more equally, giving fathers the opportunity to play a full and meaningful role in their children’s lives.

### **Portrayals in political campaigns:**

Studies of how women are portrayed during political campaigns show significant progress has been made. Studies of news coverage of female candidates during the 1980’s showed that women received less coverage, that coverage was more likely to be negative, and that coverage of female candidates was more likely to focus on candidate viability.<sup>[27, 28]</sup> Subsequent studies have shown significant improvement in the media coverage of female candidates over the past 20 years, with female candidates getting equal or more news coverage than male candidates.<sup>[29, 30]</sup> However, news coverage of female candidates continues to be much more likely to mention gender, children, and marital status, subtly enforcing gender stereotypes classifying women as primarily wives and mothers.<sup>[30, 31]</sup>

This tendency to enforce gender stereotypes by referring to female candidate’s status as wives and mothers is only important because people’s perceptions of leadership are still overwhelmingly masculine, and allusions to their feminine attributes can make them seem less effective in the eyes of voters and constituents. This is particularly true when dealing with traditionally masculine issues. For example, women are perceived as less effective at dealing with crime.<sup>[32]</sup>

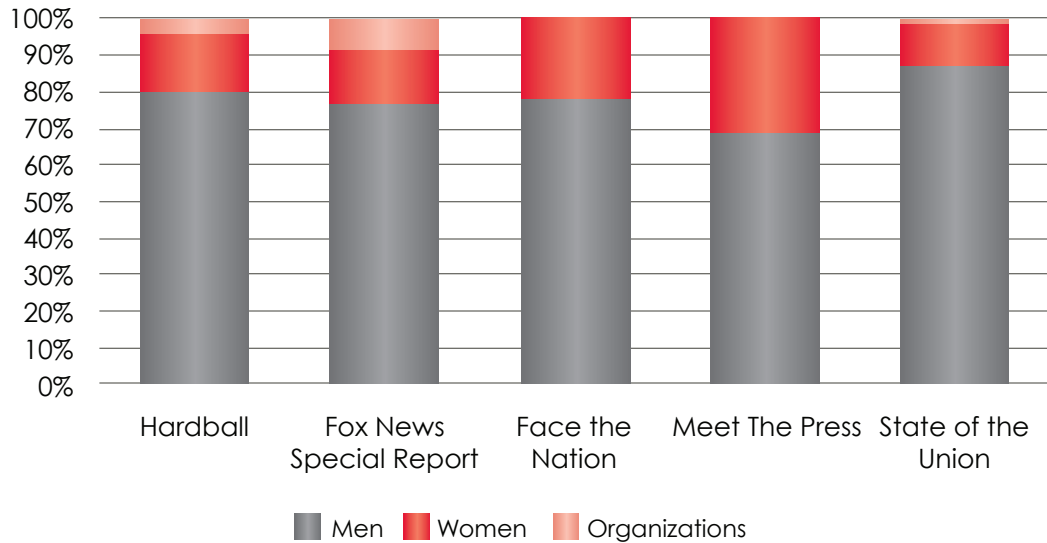
When women are in control of how they portray themselves when running for political office, they often work to de-emphasize their gender. For example, in advertisements for female candidates generated by their own campaigns, women are significantly less likely to show images of their spouse or family than male candidates.<sup>[33-35]</sup> Along similar lines they are more likely to portray themselves as “tough” or a “fighter”, especially in competitive races.<sup>[33]</sup> These biases extend beyond the candidates themselves. The Fourth Estate analyzed the election coverage in the first half of 2012 on five of the top television news shows. They found that men were quoted over four times as often as women.<sup>[36]</sup> In an election where women’s votes were the decisive factor, women’s voices were scarcely heard on television news.

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**Percentage of Quotes from Men, Women and Organizations on Top Television News Shows during the 2012 Election**

[source: the 4th Estate <http://www.4thestate.net/>]



**EXPOSURE TO GENDER AND LEADERSHIP STEREOTYPES AFFECTS BELIEFS ABOUT ONE'S OWN LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL**

Exposure to stereotypic images of women can damage a woman's sense of "self-efficacy" and their belief in their own agency and ability to make changes in the world around them. This phenomenon is often referred to as "stereotype threat." When women are exposed to stereotypical images of women, such as those often shown in television commercials, their self-reported beliefs about their own leadership ability and their leadership aspirations often suffers.<sup>[37, 38]</sup> However, these effects can be countered. When women were told that research shows no gender differences in leadership ability, it neutralized the stereotype threat effect on their leadership aspirations.<sup>[38]</sup> In addition, women who were already very confident in their leadership skills actually reacted against the implication that women are worse leaders by improving their actual leadership performance.<sup>[39]</sup> **This last result is promising, suggesting that - when it comes to leadership - we can "vaccinate" against the effects of stereotype threat by helping women become more confident in their own leadership capacity and self-identify as leaders.**

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As mentioned above, when thinking about leadership it is important to consider both traditional gender stereotypes, and how leadership itself is framed. In one study, researchers described entrepreneurs using either gendered traits, like aggression and risk-taking, or more gender-neutral traits, like creativity and being well-informed. Women who were exposed to the gender neutral description of entrepreneurs showed significantly higher entrepreneurial intentions.<sup>[40]</sup> Another similar study showed that when job descriptions employed more stereotypically “masculine” words, including “leader”, these roles were less appealing to women, regardless of the actual job.<sup>[41]</sup> These studies highlight the importance of reframing the way society thinks and talks about leadership.

### **EXPOSURE TO FEMALE LEADERS DECREASES BIAS:**

A number of studies have shown that exposure to real female leaders can have a significant impact on how both women and men view leadership in general, and how they evaluate the effectiveness of female leaders. In one particularly interesting study, researchers found that in villages where people were exposed to a female leader through a quota system, men were more likely to accept female leadership, and subsequent female candidates were more likely to get elected in the absence of a quota.<sup>[42]</sup> This decrease in bias extends to internalized, implicit beliefs about gender and leadership. One study showed that women who were exposed to more female leaders, either through text descriptions, or in real life, were less likely to show less implicit association between men and leadership.<sup>[43]</sup> The same study showed that women who were frequently exposed to female faculty by being at a women’s college showed a decreasing association between men and leadership as they progressed through college. On the other hand, women at a co-educational college showed an increase in their association between men and leadership as they progressed through college.<sup>[43]</sup> This research coincides with the phenomenon that despite the fact that only 2% of college-educated women go to women’s colleges, 13 out of the 95 women in the 112th congress attended women’s colleges. This supports the assertion that women who have greater exposure to female leadership are more likely to feel comfortable with power and become leaders themselves. In addition, women at women’s colleges have more opportunities to exert their own leadership abilities and have leadership expected of them. When there are no men to take student leadership roles, women are able to develop their own identities as leaders.

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***“When I dare to be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”***  
– Audre Lorde

## DEPICTIONS OF LEADERSHIP – AUTHORITY VS. WORKING TOWARD A GOAL

The qualities of a good leader are not necessarily masculine. In fact, a recent study by Zenger Folkman highlighted in the Harvard Business Review found that women were rated more favorably than men in 12 out of the 16 most important competencies for business leadership. These included several traditionally feminine traits including “Develops Others,” “Builds Relationships,” and “Collaboration and Teamwork” as well as more traditionally masculine traits such as “Takes Initiative” and “Drives for Results”.<sup>[44]</sup> Tellingly, none of these 16 competencies emphasize the ability to control others or exert authority.

Cultural perceptions and biases might emphasize the importance of authority and power for leadership. People subconsciously still associate the trappings of physical prowess with leadership ability, as evidenced by voters’ tendency to view tall men as better suited for leadership positions.<sup>[45, 46]</sup> However, the reality of modern leadership positions require people who are able to effectively lead a group of people toward a goal and make optimal use of their varying abilities. This task actually lends itself to more traditionally feminine competencies of collaboration and communication. Bringing cultural perceptions of leadership into better alignment with this new reality should help attract more women to leadership roles.

The media images society creates and consumes have the ability to change some of these cultural perceptions. Consider two different models of leadership in popular television – Gregory House from *House*, and Temperance Brennan from *Bones*. Both are considered brilliant leaders in their fields. Both characters lead highly qualified teams, and are supposed to be educators as well. However, they lead in completely different ways. House is essentially authoritarian. His subordinates may learn from him, but they are mainly there to do his bidding. He rarely if ever takes any real input from his team, despite their talents. When they do come up with ideas, it is generally after he has prompted them in some way, showing that House is always two steps ahead of everyone else, the “hero” (and in some ways the “villain” of the show). Brennan, on the other hand, allows the members of her team to work with relative autonomy within their respective specialties. Their findings along with her insights come together to form a complete picture in each episode. While she is clearly the leader of the group, she respects each of her team members’ unique talents and her team is better than the sum of its parts. By showing more collaborative models, like the one in *Bones*, we can help shift cultural perceptions about what makes a good leader, particularly in complex, knowledge-based fields that require strong teams.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

### Recommendations for Media

- ▶ Show more women in leadership positions. Exposure to female leaders increases the likelihood that girls will view leadership as natural and become leaders themselves. It also increases the likelihood that others will accept them as leaders. There's truth to the adage, "you can't be what you can't see."
- ▶ Drive for **equal** representation of women in leadership positions, especially in content aimed at children. By pro-actively showing more women in leadership positions, media can play a positive role in moving towards greater gender parity and broader participation.
- ▶ Change the dialogue around leadership – frame leaders as people acting toward a goal rather than people who aspire to power for its own sake.
- ▶ Show a more collaborative model of leadership: superiors taking input and advice from subordinates in order to create solutions.
- ▶ Show more men working in the household – everything from cleaning the house, changing diapers to leaving work early or staying home when the kids are sick. To achieve occupational equality and balanced families, it is essential that the portrayal of men's roles also evolves to reflect our new reality.
- ▶ Proactively use resources currently available to media bookers and content producers to help them identify well-qualified female commentators. SheSource and the Op Ed Project stand ready to help.
- ▶ Become informed by resources and research documented by the Women's Media Center / She Should Run collaborative project, "Name It. Change It." Their media guide, ***The Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women Candidates + Politicians***, shows members of the media (and everyone) how to avoid injecting sexism into their own stories and how to spot sexism in others' coverage. This guide was created to show journalists and other media professionals how the use of even subtly sexist language affects a female candidates' success in the political arena. With the release of this guide, the "Name It. Change It." project hopes to make the use of all sexist language both recognizable and unacceptable in politics. ***The Women's Media Center's Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women Candidates + Politicians*** features groundbreaking research by Celinda Lake on the effect of media sexism on women candidates.

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- ▶ The Barbara Lee Family Foundation has researched and developed communications practices women political candidates can employ to become more successful at defining themselves in the media.<sup>[47]</sup> Media decision makers can also benefit from familiarizing themselves with this research and using it to be more balanced in their reporting.
- ▶ Emphasize female agency in television and film. As described so well in the documentary *Miss Representation* women are often objectified and robbed of their agency on television and in film.<sup>[48]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We need more women in leadership. Not simply because gender equality is a valid goal in itself, but because our organizations are stronger when women are adequately represented in leadership. To achieve this goal, we must start early. Current media and entertainment portrayals often exaggerate the gender gap in leadership, showing far fewer women in power than actually exist in the real world. Young girls need to be able to see themselves as leaders and the messages they are exposed to in the media have a direct and significant effect on their self-perception. Their ability to identify with the leadership models that are celebrated in our culture influences how they perceive leadership, specifically, how desirable, attainable and appropriate it is for them personally. We have the opportunity to support girls' in developing their own authentic leadership capabilities by encouraging them to utilize their individual strengths and advantages, rather than having to fit the mold of the traditional, masculine leadership model. As demonstrated in many of the recent studies reviewed, "feminine" traits result in greater collaboration, team cohesion, balanced risk-taking and overall performance excellence.

Media and entertainment are powerful forces that can positively reframe the definition of what makes a good leader - especially at a time when new leadership models are emerging that are more relevant and effective for an innovation society. By emphasizing how leadership and power serve a larger goal rather than framing power as "authority and control", as the "power to" rather than "power over," we have the opportunity to make leadership more attractive to young women. In doing so, we also promote a concept of leadership that is more aligned with skills and capabilities required of future leaders, driving a more effective and successful model for how to lead at all levels in society, with better outcomes for all.

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For more information, updates, or to learn how to support our work, please contact FEM Inc. ([www.fem-inc.com](http://www.fem-inc.com)) or Take The Lead ([www.taketheleadwomen.com](http://www.taketheleadwomen.com)).

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