

Factors Leading to Underestimation and Devaluation of Female Leaderships

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Abstract. In contemporary society, the underestimation of female leaderships within organizations and the concerning gender inequality gap in workplaces remain as significant issues. This study delves into the intricate web of factors leading to the underestimation of female leadership, examining both external factors, including the Role Congruity Theory, the Glass Cliff phenomenon and the “Think crisis – Think Female” Model, and internal factors including internalization of gender stereotypes by females. The research methodology used is primarily analyzing existing articles and literature. This study offers valuable suggestions for addressing these challenges, suggesting actions by multiple stakeholders including companies, women workers, and society as a whole. In conclusion, the research has illuminated that there are three crucial theoretical factors interplaying and ultimately contributing to the underestimation of female leadership, including external influences like the Role Congruity Theory, the Glass Cliff phenomenon and the “Think crisis – Think Female” Model, as well as internal factors such as gender stereotype internalization.

Keywords: Female leaderships; Gender stereotypes.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary contexts of organizations and workplaces, the underestimation of female leadership remains a persisting issue. Despite remarkable advancements in promoting gender equality and diversity, there exists an undermining bias that often diminishes the recognition, value, and potential of women in leadership roles. In recent years, with a growing awareness of the need to address gender disparities in leadership positions, significant improvements have been made towards gender equality in various aspects of society. However, when it comes to leadership roles within organizations, a concerning gap of gender inequality persists. Women remain vastly underrepresented in leadership positions, while women comprise nearly half of the global workforce. This underrepresentation represents more than a matter of statistics; it reflects a broader challenge of how female leadership is perceived, evaluated, and ultimately underestimated within organizational contexts. This study analyzes the multiple significant factors that lead to underestimation of female leadership, exploring both external and internal elements that result in this bias and underestimation towards female leaderships. The central focus of this study is to research on multiple theoretical factors that interplay to contribute to the underestimation of female leaderships. By examining these factors from both external and internal perspectives, this study aims to shed light on the underlying dynamics that hinder the advancement of woman in leadership positions. The significance of conducting research on the underestimation of female leadership is to support the society and organizations in effectively identifying the causes of underestimation and underrepresentation of female leaderships, and promoting better representation of female leaderships in the globalized and interconnected world where requires diverse perspectives, skills, and experiences to the decision-making levels. This study also aims to address specific forms of gender inequality in workplaces and promote social equality, fairness and sustainability of organizations in the 21st century. Role congruity theory was introduced in 2002 by Eagly and Karau as a framework for explaining the persistence of bias against women in leadership roles [1]. This theory is rooted in the idea that individuals collectively possess certain expectations regarding the characteristics linked to social roles that are defined by demographic categories, like gender. It suggests that negative judgments can arise when there is a mismatch between expectations concerning two social roles possessed by an

individual [1]. Over the last two decades, there has been a substantial increase in the application of role congruity theory in the management domain. Numerous empirical studies have leveraged this theory to examine a wide range of management issues, with a primary emphasis on gender roles in the workplace [2-4]. These studies have explored various aspects of workplace dynamics influenced by role congruity theory, encompassing issues like wage disparities, obstacles to career advancement, and a lack of leadership effectiveness among both employees and executives [2, 3]. Furthermore, some studies have extended the use of role congruity theory by employing it to analyze effects within the realm of organizations, including domains such as the development of social enterprises, assessments of initial public offerings (IPOs), and the strategic alignment of corporations [5-7]. This study focuses on analyzing existing literature and articles to delve into the factors behind the underestimation of female organizations and provide potential suggestions to address this problem.

2. Theoretical Factors for Analysis

2.1. External Factor: Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice towards Female Leaders

The Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice is an important psychological model for comprehending how societal stereotypes and gender roles lead to the underestimation and devaluation of female leadership as external societal factors. This theory, developed by Eagly and Karau, illuminates the complex interplay between gender stereotypes, societal role anticipations, and the evaluation of women holding leadership positions [1].

At its core, the Role Congruity Theory (RCT) posits that people hold specific cognitive associations between gender and leadership traits. In many societies, leadership roles have been historically associated with attributes such as assertiveness, decisiveness, independence, and competitiveness, which align with stereotypical male characteristics [8]. On the other hand, female traits are stereotypically related to qualities including empathy, nurturance, and communal orientation. The Role Congruity Theory suggests that when a woman takes leadership roles, she faces a fundamental challenge: her behavior and attributes do not align with typical societal expectations of what a leader should be [8, 9].

The Role Congruity Theory focuses on role incongruity, referring to the misalignment or incongruence between an individual's gender and the perceived traits or behaviors required for a particular role [8]. This implies that women often encounter more challenges for receiving social recognition and fair evaluation because their gender does not align with traditional stereotypes of leadership. As a result, this incongruity leads to cognitive dissonance, which is a state of psychological discomfort that arises when people encounter conflicting beliefs or expectations, leading to biased evaluation against female leaders [10].

Other members in the society would question whether she is genuinely fit for the role, given the incongruence between their gender expectations and her leadership behavior, as results from a perceived discrepancy between an individual's pre-existing beliefs (gender stereotypes about leadership) and their current observations (a woman in a leadership role). This psychological discomfort motivates people to reduce the dissonance by either reevaluating their beliefs or discounting the abilities and qualifications of the female leader. Studies have shown that this devaluation process can manifest in several ways illustrated below.

2.1.1 Competence and Likability Trade-Off

Research has shown that female leaders often face a trade-off between competence and likability. If they display stereotypically masculine leadership traits such as assertiveness, they may be seen as competent but less likable [11]. Conversely, if they exhibit stereotypically feminine traits including empathy and nurturing qualities, they may be viewed as likable but less competent. In scientific terms, this trade-off highlights how evaluations of competence and likability are affected by the misalignment between societal perceptions of gender norms and the expectations associated with leadership positions [11].

2.1.2 Attribution Bias for Positive Outcomes

The Role Congruity Theory explains attribution biases that affect the evaluation of female leaders. For example, when a woman succeeds in a leadership role, her achievements might be ascribed to external circumstances or fortunate events rather than her competencies. However, if she fails, her failure is more likely to be ascribed to her personal deficiencies. This attribution bias is rooted in societal expectations and can have significant consequences for women's career advancement.

2.1.3 Evaluative Biases

In scientific research, it is evident that female leaders often face more stringent evaluations compared to their male counterparts [8]. Their actions and decisions may be subjected to greater scrutiny, with any mistakes or failures receiving amplified attention. This heightened evaluation process reinforces the notion that women must prove themselves more than men in leadership roles. There are also research showing that male subordinates tend to view their female leaders as ineffective and lack adequate leadership traits than their male counterparts [12].

2.2. External Factor: The Glass Cliff and “Think Crisis - Think Female” Model

The Glass Cliff and “Think Crisis - Think Female” Model are other significant external factors that could lead to underestimation of female leadership. The Glass Cliff is a phenomenon in organizational psychology and leadership studies that describes a situation where women and minority groups have a higher tendency of being assigned or elected as leaders during periods of organizational crisis, challenge, or instability, introduced by researchers Michelle K. Ryan and Alex Haslam [13]. These two researchers introduced the glass cliff phenomenon and provided empirical evidence supporting the idea, and explored the tendency to appoint women to leadership roles when organizations are facing difficulties [13]. Follow-up research delves deeper into the effects of the glass cliff on organizational policies and practices, highlighting how the phenomenon affects women's leadership experiences [14]. The glass cliff phenomenon evidences that women have a higher chance of being appointed or elected as leaders during periods of organizational crisis when there is a higher likelihood of failure, which potentially lead to an underestimation of female leaderships as female leaders tend to face more challenges and encounter higher chance of failure unfairly because they are more likely assigned to leadership roles that come with higher levels of risk and uncertainty compared to their male counterparts [15].

When women assume leadership roles during crisis situations or in precarious conditions, they may face unique challenges that are often beyond their control, such as limited resources, a turbulent organizational environment, or pre-existing problems [16]. With these challenges, female leadership is frequently evaluated mainly based on the outcomes. Recent research indicates that in challenging situations, there is a higher probability that negative outcomes will be attributed to the female leader's abilities or decisions rather than external factors, known as Fundamental Attribution Bias [17]. Studies have shown that certain leadership styles, specifically female leadership, are even more prone to these specific types of bias, making female leaders more prone to unfair evaluation and underestimation in a working environment [17].

In addition, the “Think Crisis - Think Female” model is another related concept that complement how societal perceptions of gender roles influence the evaluation of female leaders, particularly during challenging situations. This model implies that stereotypical traits such as empathy and nurturing qualities often lead to the perception of women as competent and well-suited for leadership roles during crisis scenarios. However, this perception often doesn't extend to routine leadership situations, where stereotypically masculine traits like assertiveness and strategic thinking may be more highly valued. In addition, this model also suggests a paradoxical consequence: female leaders easily face underestimation, especially when it comes to attributing failures or difficulties in those roles. Recent studies indicate that during crises or challenging situations, failures or difficulties are more likely to be attributed to the leader, especially if she is a woman [17]. This attribution bias may

occur because individuals expect female leaders to excel in crisis management due to gender stereotypes, so any perceived shortcomings can be seen as a deviation from these expectations [18].

In summary, the Glass Cliff and the Think Crisis - Think Female model both shed light on gender-related challenges in female leadership as external factors for underestimation of female leaderships. The Glass Cliff phenomenon describes the tendency to appoint women to leadership positions during periods of crisis, while the Think Crisis - Think Female model explains how gender stereotypes influence perceptions of female leaders' competence in challenging situations. Together, these concepts help understand why female leaders may be underestimated, and their competencies in crisis management may not always be recognized or valued in routine leadership contexts.

2.3. Internal Factors: Internalization of Gender Stereotypes by Females

Gender stereotype internalization is a psychological process through which individuals adopt and internalize societal gender norms, roles, and stereotypes. These stereotypes can encompass perceptions of gender-related behaviors, traits, and capabilities. When people internalize these stereotypes, they tend to incorporate them into their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, which can impact how they perceive and interact with others, including female leaders [19]. Influenced by this phenomenon, women subconsciously attribute leadership traits and competencies differently based on their gender. For example, women may associate qualities like assertiveness, decisiveness, and authority more with men than women, leading to a bias in favor of male leaders rather than themselves in leadership positions. This leads to underrepresentation of female leaders in leadership positions, as females subconsciously reduce and restrain their motivation and assertiveness to compete and put themselves in leadership positions due to lack of self-confidence, despite possessing adequate qualified traits to work as leaders in teamwork. Moreover, gender stereotype internalization can result in the application of double standards when evaluating leadership performance of themselves. Female leaders may face more scrutiny from both their colleagues and themselves than their male counterparts, making it easier to perceive their efforts as falling short, even if their performance is objectively equal. Most importantly, Internalized stereotypes can affect a woman's own perception of her leadership identity. If a female leader internalizes the belief that she possesses fewer leadership qualities due to her gender, she may exhibit less self-confidence and assertiveness, which can be perceived as a lack of leadership potential by others [19].

The process of internalizing gender stereotypes, which leads to reduced self-confidence, diminished leadership performance, and the avoidance of leadership opportunities and constraining career options, serves to perpetuate and strengthen gender biases and stereotypes in organizations. This, in turn, reinforces external barriers that hinder women's pursuit of leadership positions, as illustrated by the reinforcing feedback loop in Figure 1.

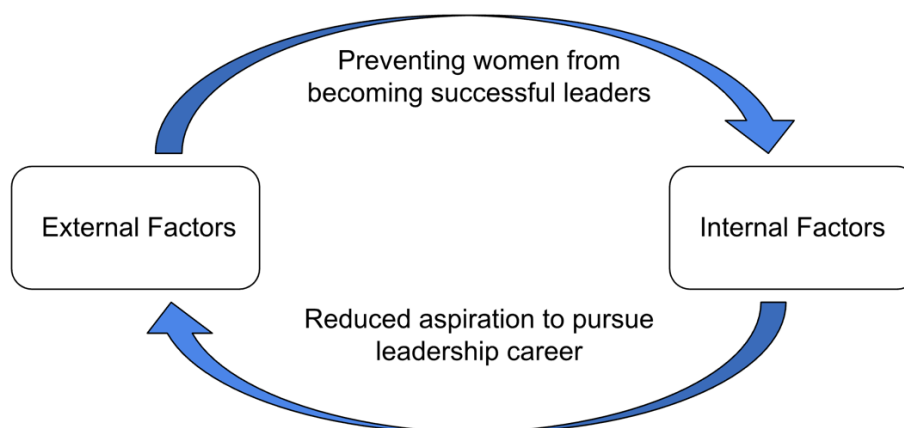


Figure 1: Reinforcing feedback loop of external and internal factors (Modified from [19])

With reference to Figure 1, the recurrence of this detrimental cycle imposes limitations on women's opportunities for leadership appointments and hampers their professional advancement, leading to even more exacerbated ignorance of underestimation towards female leadership resulting from the feedback loop.

3. Suggestions

There are a few approaches and strategies to address the specific problem of undervaluation of female leadership in large organizations, involving actions of multiple stakeholders: companies, society as a whole and women workers themselves.

3.1. Companies

Companies should establish formal diversity and inclusion programs aimed at increasing the representation of women holding leadership positions, which involve establishing explicit objectives for diversity, monitoring progress, and ensuring that leaders are responsible for achieving gender equality. Companies are also anticipated to establish mentorship and sponsorship initiatives that match female employees with seasoned mentors capable of offering guidance, support, and representation. These initiatives assist women in honing their leadership abilities and successfully managing their career paths. Companies could consider investing in leadership development programs specifically designed for women that focus on developing leadership competencies, self-confidence, and negotiation skills [9]. Furthermore, companies should carry the responsibility to ensure equal pay for equal work as a fundamental principle for the organization. When advertising leadership positions, companies need to have awareness of employing language in job descriptions that is inclusive and does not favor any particular gender to attract a wide range of candidates, and avoiding language that may perpetuate gender stereotypes. On top of that, companies are anticipated to implement transparent promotion and succession planning processes in order to prevent gender prejudice in career advancement and support the careers of more female leaders.

3.2. Women workers

To address the problem of undervaluation of female leadership, women workers are anticipated to work on building their self-confidence and self-efficacy. They should recognize their own capabilities and leadership qualities, challenge internalized stereotypes, and believe in their potential as leaders. Women should actively seek leadership opportunities and advocate for themselves, stand up to win their recognition by expressing their interest in leadership roles, highlighting their achievements, and negotiating for career advancement. Furthermore, female workers should seek out mentorship and networking opportunities. Connecting with successful female leaders can provide guidance, support, and valuable insights into overcoming challenges in leadership roles.

3.3. Society as a whole

Institutions should invest in educational initiatives that challenge gender stereotypes from a young age. Schools and educational institutions can contribute to the advancement of gender equality through teaching children about leadership regardless of gender. Medias are encouraged to portray diverse and positive female leadership roles, which have a significant influence on shaping societal perceptions, and promoting more realistic and empowering portrayals of women in leadership which can help combat stereotypes. Legal institutions and the government should design and enforce legislation and policies that promote gender equality in the workplace, as legal frameworks can effectively regulate and impose fines on organizations that do not uphold gender equality to promote workplace gender equality.

4. Summary

In conclusion, this study has delved into the multifaceted factors that contribute to the ignorance and underestimation of female leadership, and examined both external and internal elements in the process. External factors, such as the Role Congruity Theory and the Glass Cliff phenomenon, illuminate how societal stereotypes and biases intersect with leadership contexts, often to the detriment of female leaders. Additionally, the internal factor of gender stereotype internalization by females underscores how individuals themselves may unknowingly perpetuate these biases, leading to self-confidence issues and limiting their pursuit of leadership roles. The study has provided valuable suggestions for addressing these challenges, encompassing actions for various stakeholders involving companies, women workers, and society as a whole.

The study offers a comprehensive qualitative analysis, but has certain limitations. First, the study can be improved by incorporating quantitative data and statistical analysis, providing more empirical evidence. The potential areas for improvement include incorporating surveys, experiments, or data analysis to quantify the extent of the issues discussed. Secondly, when studying on this topic, it would be better to incorporate the perspectives of various stakeholders, including male colleagues, subordinates, and organizational leaders, which could potentially result in a more holistic view of the issue. Understanding how different groups perceive and contribute to these dynamics is essential for understanding the topic and provides more deep insights.

Future research can focus on several areas for enhancement, such as integrating quantitative data and statistical analysis as empirical evidence, enabling a deeper understanding of the extent and prevalence of the issues discussed. It is important to acknowledge that the impact of gender stereotypes and leadership varies across cultures while this study tends to generalize findings across societies and contexts. Future research could explore how these factors manifest differently in diverse cultural settings. Finally, future studies should consider exploring the intersectionality of variables including gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, which can offer more comprehensive insights of how these issues manifest across diverse contexts. By conducting these researches, future research can further enhance our comprehension of the complexities surrounding female leadership, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and equitable leadership landscapes.

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