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Overcoming Barriers to Women's Leadership and Unlocking the Power of Diversity

By Sophia Zhao

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Introduction

Many women are successful in their professions and as leaders across levels and industries. Yet, as they grow, hone their skills, and pursue their goals, they face a range of challenges or roadblocks to leadership success.

Clearly it is not enough for women to just "lean in." Antiquated policies, practices, and perceptions continue to undermine the advancement of women and contribute to a persistent glass ceiling in the workplace. The World Economic Forum predicts that it will take 70 to 107 years to close the gender gaps in Asia.[1]

Studies consistently show that female leaders benefit business. In addition to doubling a company's talent pool, recruiting women increases financial performance. Fortune 500 companies with the highest representation of women on boards financially outperform those with the fewest female board members.[2] Strong women leaders bring in a higher return on equity;[3] organizations with larger shares of women directors had higher capital buffers, a lower proportion of nonperforming loans, and greater resistance to stress.[4] Organizations with higher levels of diversity reported higher innovation revenue.[5] Having more female employees makes an organization a better place to work,[6] and both men and women have higher job satisfaction at women-led companies relative to male-led companies.[7]

Despite all the organizational benefits of boosting the presence and power of women, women still face difficulty getting to executive leadership positions. 2019's Fortune 500 list saw the highest number of female CEOs – yet it's excruciatingly far from being on par with the number of male CEOs. Only 33 out of 500 CEOs, a mere 6.6%, are female.[8]

It's tempting to assume that given time, women will steadily gain greater access to leadership roles, including the most powerful positions. However, social change is not a continuous march without struggle and conflict. Deliberate effort is still needed to build awareness and support women's development.

How can women advance their careers, and how can organizations be sure they're making the most of *all* their talent?

To deepen our understanding of women's leadership, we surveyed 319 women and men living and working in the Asia Pacific region. We then conducted 46 interviews.

We also put the conversation about women's leadership into the broader context of equity, diversity, & inclusion (EDI) – which is increasingly a priority for many organizations. We sought to better understand how men and women see the future of diversity and what they think is needed to build, sustain, and harness EDI.

In this paper, we describe our findings and share suggestions for overcoming barriers to women's leadership. We also consider opportunities to fast-track progress as organizations seek to address diversity more broadly.
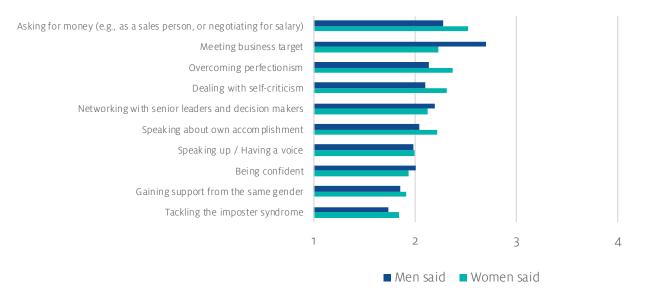
Challenges to Women's Leadership:
Push & Pull = Fewer Opportunities

Our research suggests 2 types of factors combine in subtle ways to create roadblocks for women leaders: pull factors and push factors.

Pull factors are internally driven – the limitations women place on themselves, pulling them away from leadership roles or actions. *Push* factors are externally driven – the limitations placed on women by others in their network, their organization, and the society or culture. And the 2 are intertwined, as women respond to and shape their context.

In our survey, the top 3 challenges reported by women were: *Asking for money* (e.g., in a sales role, or negotiating for salary), *Overcoming perfectionism, and Dealing with self-criticism* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 To what extent have you faced these challenges?

Survey respondents were asked to describe the extent they experienced a list of challenges in their careers. The lowest score "1" represents "Not at all" and the highest score "4" represents "To a great extent." From top to bottom, the list is in the sequence of overall score high to low.

The *push* and *pull* that underlie the challenges can be seen clearly in the example of *Asking for money*. To follow up, we asked what held women and men back from negotiating for more compensation. We learned it was not due to lack of interest in increased compensation – in fact, women reported wanting an increase more than men.

But, compared to men, women were more likely to have **self-limiting thoughts** (the *pull*), such as: "I am not good at negotiation" or "I did not think I would get what I wanted" or "I don't like negotiation." These beliefs align with the other challenges they reported, such as dealing with perfectionism, self-criticism, and imposter syndrome, or speaking about their own accomplishments.

At the same time, women were also more attuned to a **social penalty of negotiating** (the *push*). More than the men, they "didn't want to be seen as difficult or ungrateful," and many believed that "the negative social consequences of negotiation outweigh the positives of increased compensation." This negative social consequence is substantiated by research showing that women who negotiate are more likely to be perceived as demanding and not nice. [9]

> *I saw more men apply than women, I reached out and asked (women): 'why aren't you applying?' and they would reply: 'I don't think I'm good enough.' Women have a higher standard before they put their hat in the game.*
> - A male leader

We asked both women and men what hinders women in achieving their career and leadership goals (see Figure 2). Again, we saw the *pull* and the *push* at play.

> *When a woman says she needs to go for parent-teacher meetings, you can almost feel the body language that says: 'Oh my god, she needs to go again and it's something to do with her kids.' But if a man were to ask for leave to attend parent-teacher meetings, it becomes: 'Oh my gosh, it's so sweet that he's going for this!'*
> - A female leader

> *Many young women come to me saying they don't have the confidence. Even though they've got the right skills, the right experience, and are capable. And yet, the one thing that's hindering them or stopping them is their lack of confidence.*
> - A female leader

It was clear that **gender role expectations are strong drivers,** with 70% of women and 48% of men agreeing that society expects women to behave in certain ways that hinder them from becoming senior leaders.

Gender role expectations seem particularly strong around **family responsibilities.** When it comes to career and family, our study reflected a cultural expectation that if something happens at home, the woman must take off from work. At the same time, it is also expected that men must have a career, whereas women may stay at home or opt for a less-demanding job. The bias affects both men and women.

> *Like it or not, being in Asia, there is still a stronger emphasis that women have to play a more active role at home...*
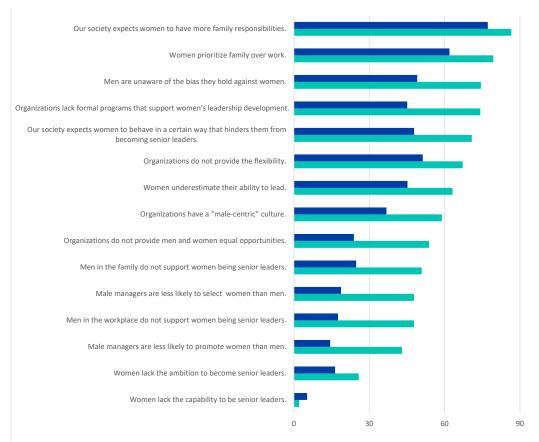> - A male leader

Figure 2 Hindrance factors for women

Numbers represent the percentage of participants who chose "agree" or "strongly agree." From top to bottom, the sequence shows the overall rating from high to low.

Pull factors

- "I'm not good at it."
- "My voice will not be heard."
- "I have family responsibilities."
- "I made mistakes."
- "I may fail."
- "I don't want to be seen as bossy / aggressive / unfriendly / demanding."
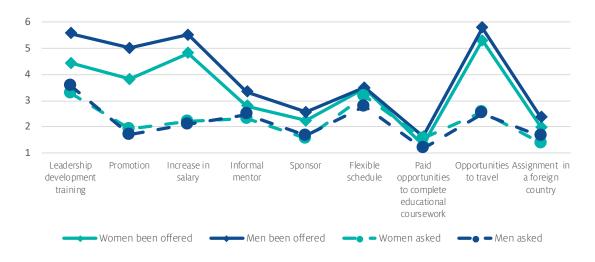
Push factors

- "Women are emotional / weak / not ambitious."
- "Women prioritize family."
- "Society expects women to behave in a certain way."
- "Organizations do not support women's leadership development."
- "The organizational culture is male-centric."

The *push* and *pull* factors result in fewer career opportunities for women leaders.

Our study showed clear gaps between men and women in terms of the developmental opportunities they receive (see Figure 3). When asked to rank the most important career-progressing opportunities, women and men agreed on the top 3: *Leadership development training, Promotion,* and *Salary increase.*

We then asked how often they asked for and how often they received these opportunities. Although men and women were similar in terms how often they requested top 3 opportunities, women received fewer of them. Notably, men asked for promotions less often – and received them more.

Figure 3 How many times have you asked for (been offered) the following opportunities?

Women been offered   Men been offered   Women asked   Men asked

The number of times women and men had asked for or been offered career-progressing opportunities. From left to right, the items are in the sequence of importance level from high to low.

Crucially, women experienced fewer challenging assignments.

With the dynamic of both *push* and *pull*, women receive fewer stretch assignments, the most critical experience to accelerate leadership development.

There is the assumption – sometimes out of good intention – that women cannot take up challenging assignments because they cannot travel, they are emotional, or they have family responsibilities. Compared to men, women in our study were less likely to receive a challenging leadership role – 77% of men and 58% of women. But when offered such opportunities, women turned them down more often than men – 11% vs. 2%.

We heard about women hesitating to go after challenging assignments, doubting their abilities, or being concerned about seeming overly ambitious (*pull*). In our study, men and women agreed that ambition is key to success. However, women seem unsure how ambitious to be – or to appear. While men consider ambition a necessary part of their lives, women seem to hate the word and associated it with egotism, selfishness, self-aggrandizement, or the manipulative use of others for own ends.[10]

As a result of both *push* and *pull* challenges, women miss out on valuable opportunities to strengthen their leadership muscles and accelerate their careers. Over time, the cumulative effect of the *push* and *pull* hinders women's career advancement.

Perception of Gender Issues:

Experiences Count

Our study also showed a clear gap in the way men and women perceive the barriers to women's leadership and the experiences of women at work.

We asked women and men whether they agree with statements about the experiences of women in the workplace.

Among our survey responses, 59% of men and only 37% of women reported that men and women have **equal opportunity** in the workplace – a 22% gap. This is in line with one U.S. study that found men were more likely than women to say equal opportunity exists at work – 29% gap overall and twice as likely in the tech sector.[11]

The perception gap extends **gender pay disparity.** Only 44% of men we surveyed agreed there is a pay gap in most workplaces, compared with 72% of women – a 28% gap. The statistics on this matter, however, are clear: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported an average of 14% pay gap across 43 countries. Korn Ferry Gender Pay Index shows that in the Asia Pacific region women make on average 15% less than men.

A similar perception gap by gender showed up in our survey regarding sexual harassment in the workplace. 57% of women and 32% of men agreed that in most workplaces, women are hit on or harassed related to their gender – a 25% gap.

Also, men are less aware of the challenges faced by women. In Figure 2, the percentage of women who agreed on the career barriers were consistently higher than that of men, and the 5 items with the biggest gaps are:

- Organizations lack formal programs that support women's leadership development. (29% gap)

- Organizations do not provide men and women equal opportunities. (30% gap)

- Male managers are less likely to select women than men. (29% gap)

- Men in the workplace do not support women being senior leaders. (30% gap)

- Male managers are less likely to promote women than men. (29% gap)

The gap contributes to women's experience of lack of support, systemic challenges, and a sense of powerlessness.

> "
>
> *"Men often don't realize how serious the issue is. A lot of men in a lot of workplaces – however good their intentions are, whatever their family background is – do not seem to recognize [gender inequality] as a problem."*
> - A female leader
>
> "

5 Types of Experiences That Lead to Valuing Diversity

The good news is that experiences also change perceptions.

For both men and women, perceptions about gender and diversity issues can change. The interviewees shared 5 types of experiences that triggered their awareness of the experiences of women, the impact of inequity, and their own biases and assumptions about gender. These experiences often pointed the way to appreciating diversity more broadly, and valuing equity and inclusion of all.

1

Being a minority

For many women, their own experience as a minority in a male-dominated workplace created awareness of gender issues and limitations placed on women's leadership. Similarly, men shared that their own minority identities (culture, religion, race, ethnicity, etc.) helped them recognize the experience of women and see the importance of prioritizing EDI.

2

Inspired by respected leaders

One male leader said his commitment to diversity was deeply influenced by the senior leaders who are "extremely people-oriented, extremely aware of the environment, especially sensitive to people as a whole, attentive listeners, attentive team leaders, and extremely scrupulous at choosing their team members."

3

Working with other social groups

People gravitate to people "like me," which fosters poor understanding of "different" social groups and unconscious bias. This pattern can potentially be mitigated by direct interaction and communication with "others" over time. Many interviewees shared with us that their experience working across countries, and/or with people with diverse backgrounds changed their views.

4

Witnessing the organizational benefits of diversity

The positive impact of a concerted, organizational effort to support, develop, and promote women is the experience that opens minds and shifts perceptions. Some interviewees described the changes they witnessed as their organizations pursued equity, embraced diversity, and fostered inclusion.

5

Becoming a parent

Research shows that CEOs with daughters are more likely to hire new female directors;[12] and that male chief executives with daughters are more likely to champion gender diversity.[13] The "daughter effect" applies to both male and female leaders.

Taking Action:
Address the *Pull*, the *Push*, and the System

Our study suggests that aligning awareness and education with targeted action by women, men, and organizations can change established patterns that get in the way of women achieving their career and leadership goals.

The men and women in our study suggested a range of practices or changes required to advance women in leadership. We must coach and support women to minimize the *pull* factors. We must engage men and

other female leaders to tackle the *push* factors. And we must refine our organizational systems to provide more opportunities and fast-forward progress.

We asked what needs to be done to achieve gender diversity in leadership roles (see Figure 4). Creating a **culture that embraces diversity** was the top recommendation, followed by actions for women, men, and organizations – suggesting any effort that over-relies on one group or strategy will fall short.
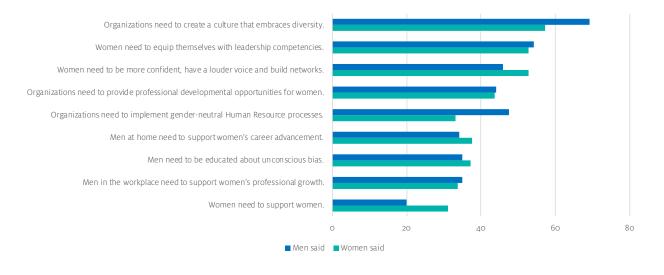
Figure 4 What needs to be done to achieve gender diversity?

The chart represents the percentage of men and women who picked the specific action items that can help achieve gender diversity in the future. From top to bottom, the items are in the sequence of overall score high to low.

Interestingly, the men placed greater emphasis than women on organizational-level change (creating a **culture of diversity** and implementing **gender-neutral HR processes**) and the women gave more weight to needing to **be more confident, having a louder voice, building networks,** and **having women supporting other women.**

Beyond Gender:

Unlocking the Power of Diversity

Our study reflected the growing trend to address diversity broadly and holistically – not only as an issue of gender.

Fortunately, more and more leaders are re-examining company policies for inherent biases and are deliberately adopting new practices to improve women's opportunities and experiences in the workplace. And many leaders have recognized that gender is only one aspect of identity and are addressing diversity in a more holistic way.

> *It's not just about hitting a diversity target, but making sure the environment is inclusive. That's what a lot of organizations are failing to do: When it comes to D&I, too many people focus on the 'D', but no one really does a good job at the 'I'.*
> - A male leader

Our research, too, began with a focus on women and expanded to consider diversity more broadly. Many of the comments and insights from our study reinforced the importance of recognizing and supporting a full spectrum of diversity, such as race, religion, socio-economic background, age, nationality, sexuality, and neurodiversity in organizational conversations and leadership development efforts.

> *You can get diversity by having the right members, but you won't get the value out of diversity unless you have the inclusive culture...In order to achieve diversity, it's more important to get the inclusion right, then diversity will come.*
> - A female leader

Studies have repeatedly shown that diverse teams drive better business performance, and companies with more diversity become **more innovative and resilient,** and better able to **respond to complex challenges.**[14]

However, simply hiring a demographically diverse group of people is insufficient. Only with the existence of **equity** and **inclusion** do organizations benefit from **diversity**. As one senior leader said, "Diversity is only good when you can harness it."

Drawing on the comments from our interviewees, and CCL's long-time and ever-evolving work with diverse leaders and global organizations, we've articulated key elements needed to establish a robust diversity effort – not a one-off program.

1 Culture
(Inclusion)

2 Mechanisms
(Top-down and Bottom-up)

3 Pillars
(Strategy, Policy, and Training)

4 Stakeholders
(Senior Leaders, HR & EDI Leaders, Business
Leaders, and All Employees)

Key Elements Needed to Unlock the Power of Diversity

1 Culture: Inclusion

The culture is the foundation for creating an equitable, diverse, and inclusive organization.

"Inclusion is ultimately a sense of belonging." In an inclusive culture, employees feel that they're respected and valued; and that their voices are heard. An inclusive culture boosts employees' psychological safety, which is critical for team performance.[15]

Equity, too, is essential. People enter the world of work and advance through their careers with unevenness of advantage, opportunity, privilege, and power. Leaders need to create a culture where people feel empowered and use that power to support diversity and inclusion.

Inclusion fosters diversity, and only with the existence of equity and inclusion, can organizations benefit from diversity.

2 Mechanisms: Top-down and Bottom-up

There are 2 mechanisms, bottom-up and top-down, which are both important to ensure a sustainable and organization-wide culture of EDI.

Many organizations' EDI initiative starts from minority groups' voluntary initiatives: they form networks, share experience, exchange ideas, and provide support. However, if there is only bottom-up mechanism, these informal networks may not last and will not scale.

Top-down mechanisms – such as executive-level support, appointing a Chief Diversity Officer, and representation among regional or functional groups – send a strong signal to all employees that the organization and senior leaders value diversity. However, if there are only top-down mechanisms, the EDI initiative will lose vitality and sustainability.

3 Pillars: Strategy, Policy, and Training

Strategy, policy, and training are 3 pillars to support and sustain the EDI culture – and they all require thoughtful "discovery" to identify what's most important within the organization.

- **Strategy sets the direction.**
  To have an effective EDI strategy, some critical questions should be considered and discussed: Why do we need diversity and inclusion in the organization? What is the vision of this strategy? What are the goals we aim to achieve? How do we define and measure success?

- **Policy ensures alignment.**
  EDI policies align practices across organizations and ensure the implementation of the strategy. Each organization should determine the best course of action according to its specific culture.[16] The most effective diversity programs spark engagement, increase contact among different groups, and draw on people's strong desire to do good to others.[17]

- **Training evokes commitment.**
  3 types of training are important. The first type helps employees be more aware of the importance of EDI, and the biases they have. The second type provides employees skills to leverage diversity and work across boundaries. And the third type is tailored for minority groups to accelerate their development.

4 Stakeholders: Senior Leaders, HR & EDI Leaders, Business Leaders, and All Employees

There are 4 key stakeholders responsible for building and sustaining diversity and inclusion.

- **Senior leaders** are critical advocates and champions. CCL research has found that organizations with a diverse senior leadership team are more likely to have a diverse workforce at multiple levels.[18]

- **HR and EDI leaders** play the role of catalyst. They're responsible for executing the EDI strategy, designing policies and processes, aligning resources, and engaging all stakeholders to follow the process.

- **Business leaders** are critical in the recruiting-assessing-rewarding-promoting cycle; they're also responsible for a sustainable and diverse talent pipeline.

- **All employees** are responsible for their own development and career path. Everyone needs to gain awareness of their own biases and assumptions and become informed and open to the challenges, perspectives, and needs of others.

Conclusion

The future of diversity is now. Our survey participants agreed that successful leaders – regardless of their gender – need to have both masculine and feminine qualities. As gender norms continue to evolve and younger generations join the workforce, workplaces must adjust and evolve as well.

Women leaders are critical for **organizational success** and companies that intentionally prioritize and plan for women's leadership development gain **significant advantages.**

Diverse teams drive better business performance, and companies with more diversity become **more innovative, resilient**, and better able to **respond to complex challenges.**

When organizations fully see, appreciate, and engage all their talent, they gain **insight, perspective, and knowledge** that would otherwise be missed.

The way forward is different for each organization, but we can learn from the experiences and perspectives of women and our colleagues with unique and diverse identities.

> "
> *Diversity and Inclusion requires deliberate effort.*
> - A male leader
> "

With a tailored approach that aligns awareness with action, addresses organizational culture and systems, and engages leaders, your company can fast-track efforts and earn the benefits that come from women in leadership roles and a diverse and inclusive workforce.

READY TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP?

We can partner with you to create leadership solutions to shift mindsets, behaviors, and practices towards more equitable, diverse, and inclusive teams and organizations.

Learn more about our customized EDI solutions at ccl.org/edi.

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About the Research

- **Total participants:** 319
- **Gender:** 62% female, 38% male
- **Age:** min 22, max 70, average 45.6
- **Marital status:** 74% married, 69% have children
- **Education level:** 35% have college / bachelor's degree, and 33% have master's degree
- **Organizational level:**
  - Individual contributor: 13%
  - Manager of individual contributors: 19%
  - Manager of managers/function(s): 36%
  - C-level: 23%
  - Other: 10%

- **Country of origin:**
  - Malaysia: 119
  - Philippines: 97
  - India: 19
  - Vietnam: 18
  - Singapore: 9
  - Thailand: 7
  - China: 6
  - Australia: 3
  - South Korea: 4
  - Hong Kong (S.A.R.): 2
  - Indonesia: 2
  - Brunei Darussalam: 1
  - Maldives: 1
  - New Zealand: 1
  - Pakistan:
  - Russian Federation: 1
  - Sri Lanka: 1
  - Others: 27

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About the Research Team

SOPHIA ZHAO, PhD. (paper's author) is a senior research faculty at the Center for Creative Leadership. Based in CCL's APAC office in Singapore, she serves as a researcher, coach, facilitator, and trainer. Sophia has more than 10 years' experience in researching organizational behavior, human resources, and leadership. She has published more than 20 academic journal papers, research reports, white papers, and media articles. A key area Sophia is working on is to further the understanding of Asian leadership and developing global Asian leadership. Sophia is also a key member of the CCL APAC Equity, Diversity & Inclusion team, with keen interest in women's and girls' leadership development. Sophia holds a Ph.D. from the National University of Singapore and a B.A. in economics from Fudan University.

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