

Empowering the Next Generation of Women

Women enter universities with lower leadership aspirations than men—a disparity that compounds over time in higher education and workplace outcomes. Programs designed to foster women’s leadership identities and skills early in life can help address this gap.

GENDER DISPARITIES IN LEADERSHIP REMAIN PERVASIVE AND PERSISTENT

If women’s representation in the workforce moves at its current pace, the world will not achieve gender parity for another 131 years. Gender gaps persist across public and private industries, and women continue to be outnumbered by men in managerial or leadership positions worldwide. Among Global 500 CEOs, for example, only 4 percent are women, and within universities, women only comprise about 22 percent of elite university presidents. Women’s empowerment in education and leadership is critical to achieving gender equality, but discrimination, underrepresentation and the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on women in the workforce threaten to stall what progress has been made in reducing the global gender gap in leadership.

In the U.S., women are enrolling in college at higher rates than ever. Female students made up 58 percent of total undergraduate enrollment as of 2022 and have regularly outpaced men in college completion every year since 1981. Women also routinely outperform their male counterparts across higher education metrics and now outnumber men in the U.S. college-educated workforce. Still, the male-female wage gap persists four decades after women began outnumbering men in college—showing that college alone may not be enough to close this opportunity divide.

The World Economic Forum’s 2023 Global Gender Gap Report found that women’s representation in

senior leadership positions sits at 25 percent on average. Research shows men tend to have a significantly higher chance of being promoted into leadership roles than their female colleagues—signaling the systemic challenges women face toward full and equal participation in the labor market. Within the 130 universities in the U.S. that earned the highest ranking from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education at the time of the study, women composed only 22 percent of presidents despite representing 55 percent of Ph.D. earners.

BUILDING A PIPELINE OF GLOBAL WOMEN LEADERS

Research is needed to understand practical and effective ways to bridge the leadership gap. A first-of-its-kind partnership is examining the disconnect between women’s educational performance and representation in top-level management.

The Empowering the Next Generation of Women Global Working Group—established through a unique Idea Incubation Process led by Northwestern University’s Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Affairs—aims to build a global pipeline of women leaders by developing empirically supported interventions in university settings. Leveraging expertise from psychologists, engineers, education specialists and entrepreneurs, these researchers are working alongside nonprofit and industry partners to address disparities in leadership aspirations among college-educated

women and men in the U.S. and around the world.

The group aims to create a leadership training model for universities that can foster long-term gains for female students. One of their initial priorities will be addressing disparities in college-educated women's leadership aspirations. Two group members, Jennifer Tackett of Northwestern University and Gregory Wolniak of the University of Georgia, were among the authors of new [research](#) published in 2023 that found female students enter college with leadership aspirations already substantially lower than their male counterparts and their leadership learning experiences did not mitigate this disparity. The authors suggest that girls are less likely to envision themselves as leaders during identity development. Considering this, the group is working to build a network of successful women leaders who can shed light on the defining points in their college experiences that may have influenced their professional trajectories. This will in turn inform the development of a pilot leadership development program for young women in university settings.

The need for programs that can foster long-term gains for female leadership is particularly acute in countries where women and girls' access to education remains limited. The group has therefore established a partnership with the [Milaan Foundation](#), which promotes secondary education for adolescent girls in India, to understand how the leadership development programs they design could be effectively implemented across cultures.

The group is also collaborating with industry partners like [Hogan Assessments](#) to identify how current leadership assessment tools may reflect traditional conceptions of leadership that discount or overlook women's leadership styles and strengths. In doing so, they hope to contribute to a more nuanced definition of leadership and inform leadership development efforts for female college students, particularly those from under-represented racial or ethnic groups.

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

The Empowering the Next Generation of Women Leaders group will conduct a global audit of

leadership development programs to understand what is working for women's leadership development worldwide and in university settings, in particular.

There are also signs of momentum behind leadership development programs for girls in K–12 education settings. The research that Tackett and Wolniak co-authored illustrated how gender gaps in leadership aspirations emerge before college and how, once in college, students' experiences and institutional environments did not compensate for these disparities. Their findings suggest young women could benefit from interventions to address gender disparities in leadership aspirations earlier in life.

Among those leading the charge on this front are Sheryl Sandberg, who served as Chief Operating Officer at Meta for 14 years, and renowned computer scientist Rachel Thomas. Their nonprofit organization [Lean In](#) launched a [leadership program and curriculum](#) in the summer of 2023 that aims to help early adolescent girls develop their self-conception and skills as leaders. Based on ethnographic and social science research, the [Lean In Girls curriculum](#) was developed with an interdisciplinary brain trust of experts in gender studies, leadership, childhood development and diversity, equity and inclusion.

Targeting the gender gap in leadership can advance gender equality and global economic prosperity. A best-case scenario where the world achieves gender parity in the workforce—that is, if women participate in the labor force at the same rate as men, work the same number of hours as men and are employed at the same levels as men across sectors—could add [26 percent](#) to the world's GDP. In the coming years, expect to see an increasing number of leadership development programs designed to foster the leadership aspirations and potential of women and girls in the context of formative educational environments like middle and high school, college and beyond.