

*Foreword by*

JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR (*Ret.*)

# WOMEN & LEADERSHIP

THE STATE OF PLAY  
AND STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

BARBARA KELLERMAN  
DEBORAH RHODE

*Editors*

A *Wann Bennis* BOOK

**JOSSEY-BASS**

# Women and Leadership

**The State of Play and  
Strategies for Change**

Barbara Kellerman

Deborah L. Rhode

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# Women and Leadership

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*For Elizabeth Cavanagh and Ellen Kellerman*



## Foreword

Over the last century, the world of women and the landscape of leadership have been fundamentally transformed. In the United States, where it was once considered unseemly for women to vote, or even to assert their right to vote, women now constitute over half of the electorate and occupy many of the nation's highest elective offices. When I graduated from law school a half century ago, women accounted for less than 3 percent of the legal profession. Although I was in the top of my class, the only job offer that I received from a law firm was for that of legal secretary. Three decades later, I became the first woman to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court. Today, women constitute about half of all law students, and they occupy positions of influence in all areas of legal practice.

Yet as this book's research makes all too clear, women's leadership opportunities are still not equal. The statistics are sobering. Women account for less than a fifth of law firm partners, federal judges, college presidents, and congressional representatives; they are only 2 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs and hold only 8 percent of corporate leadership positions. Globally, the situation is no better. Despite striking gains over the last quarter century, including the election of female leaders in some of the world's most powerful nations, only about 6 percent of heads of state are women.

This book provides the most comprehensive account to date of women's persistent underrepresentation in leadership roles, why it matters, and what can be done to change it. Experts from a wide range of disciplines document the traditional stereotypes, exclusion

from support networks, and work-family conflicts that restrict women's access to positions of greatest influence.

My own profession illustrates the obstacles. The traditional assumption was that the law was unfit for women and women were unfit for the law. Their "nature" was to nurture, and they were unsuited to "all the nastiness of the world which finds its way into courts of justice."<sup>1</sup> Clarence Darrow was convinced that women could not be "shining lights" at the bar "because you are too kind. You can never be corporate lawyers because you are not cold blooded. You have not a high grade of intellect. I doubt you can ever make a living."<sup>2</sup> Part of what hindered women in proving that wrong was exclusion from informal networks of support and influence that advantaged men.

A fundamental barrier has been women's disproportionate responsibilities in the home, which have often limited their opportunities in the world outside. I gave up my law firm practice for five years until my children were in school. It never occurred to my husband or to me that he should assume a major child-rearing role. Of course, as my husband was also fond of pointing out, things did turn out all right for me in the end. And assumptions about the appropriate gender division of family responsibilities are gradually changing. As the research in this volume demonstrates, however, the home is still not and perhaps will never be an equal opportunity employer.

Women still face barriers on the path to leadership. And just as clearly, this matters for the society we want to create. We will all be better off if women's life experiences, needs, and values are fully reflected in decision-making positions. The presence of women in those positions is also essential to encourage aspirations among the next generation, and to counter reservations about women's capacity for leadership roles. In an increasingly competitive global environment, no society can afford to hobble half its talent pool.

This is not to suggest that women have some distinctively feminine style of leadership. I have often been asked whether women have a unique judicial style. My answer, which is consistent with

the research in this volume, is that individuals bring to decision-making roles the totality of their life experiences, not simply gender. As my colleague Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg put it, "I have detected no reliable indicator of distinctively male or surely female thinking, or even penmanship."<sup>3</sup> We should be wary of invoking a "woman's point of view" that rests on traditional gender stereotypes, for these distort as well as confine human experience. At the end of the day, as former Oklahoma Supreme Court Justice Jeanne Coyne noted, "A wise old man and a wise old woman reach the same conclusion."<sup>4</sup>

It is, however, also the case that gender is part of what informs female leaders' values and priorities. In my own career, I have often felt a special responsibility to represent concerns that would otherwise have gone unaddressed in decision-making bodies dominated primarily by men. For example, as a state legislator, I worked to change family and protective labor laws that drew sex-based distinctions. And as a Justice, I helped to ensure that the Federal Rules of Civil and Criminal Procedure dropped gender-based language, and that the Supreme Court altered its practice of listing female attorneys who argued cases as Miss or Mrs., and male attorneys simply by name. The National Association of Women Judges, of which I am a member, has also played a major role in combating gender bias in the legal system.

The chapters in this pathbreaking volume include countless examples of how women's different backgrounds and commitments have made a fundamental difference in leadership positions. The issues women have championed are not simply women's issues; they implicate fundamental questions of justice and welfare in which both sexes have a stake. Our society has made enormous progress over the past few decades in expanding opportunities for women's leadership. But considerable progress remains to be made. This book is an invaluable resource in that effort. It charts paths yet to be traveled and makes clear why the journey is so important.

—Justice Sandra Day O'Connor (Ret.)

## Endnotes

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2. Karen Berger Morrello, "Bar Admission Was Rough for Nineteenth Century Women," *New York Law Journal* 189 (May 13, 1983): 19.
3. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Remarks to California Women Lawyers, *Pepperdine Law Review* 22 (1994): 4-5.
4. David Margolick, "Women's Milestone Majority on the Minnesota Supreme Court," *New York Times*, February 22, 1991, B16.

# Women and Leadership

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# **Women and Leadership**

## **The State of Play**

Deborah L. Rhode, Barbara Kellerman

Some four decades ago, Betty Friedan helped launch the contemporary women's movement with her publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. The book famously identified a "problem that has no name": American women's confinement to a separate and unequal domestic sphere. One factor contributing to women's unequal status was their absence from leadership positions. Another aspect of the problem was the lack of cultural consensus that this absence was itself part of the problem and a matter of social concern.

Over the last several decades, we have named that leadership problem and created a cottage industry to address it. Women's underrepresentation in positions of power generates an increasing array of committees, commissions, consultants, centers, conferences, and commentary such as the chapters that follow. Yet while we have made considerable progress in understanding the problem, we remain a dispiriting distance from solving it.

### **The Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Roles**

The facts are frustratingly familiar. Despite almost a half century of equal opportunity legislation, women's opportunities for leadership are anything but equal. To be sure, the situation has improved significantly over this period, particularly if leadership is broadly defined to include informal as well as formal exercises of authority.<sup>1</sup>

By that definition, the percentage of women in leadership roles is substantial and is increasing dramatically. That is particularly true in management and the professions, where women now occupy roughly half of all jobs.<sup>2</sup> Women also hold positions of power in a wide range of government, nonprofit, and religious contexts.<sup>3</sup> But they are still grossly underrepresented at the top and overrepresented at the bottom of the most influential leadership hierarchies.

In the United States, women are a majority of the electorate but hold only a quarter of upper-level state government positions and 16 percent of congressional seats.<sup>4</sup> Over half of college graduates but less than a quarter of full professors and a fifth of college presidents are female.<sup>5</sup> In management, women account for about a third of MBA classes, but only 2 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs, 6 percent of top earners, 8 percent of top leadership positions, and 16 percent of board directors and corporate officers.<sup>6</sup> In law, women constitute about half of new entrants to the profession but less than a fifth of law firm partners, federal judges, law school deans, and Fortune 500 general counsels.<sup>7</sup> Half the students in divinity school are women, but women are only 3 percent of the pastors of large congregations in protestant churches that have been ordaining women for decades.<sup>8</sup> The gap widens for women of color, who account for only about 4 percent of congressional legislators, 3 percent of full professors, and 1–2 percent of corporate officers, top earners, law firm partners, and general counsels.<sup>9</sup>

From an international perspective, the United States is by no means atypical. However, as subsequent discussion makes clear, neither is it a world leader, at least in the number of women political leaders. At this writing, the United States ranks sixty-ninth in female legislative representation, behind Cape Verde, Singapore, Turkmenistan, Zimbabwe, and the Philippines.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the percentage of women in elective office has grown substantially over the last quarter century, but as several commentators in Part Two of this volume note, progress remains sluggish. Women hold about 16 percent of the seats in parliamentary bodies and about 11 percent of the presiding officer positions. At current rates of change, it would