



## Women and the Leadership Gap

**It's been almost a half-century since the modern women's movement began. So why aren't more women in positions of power? Leslie Bennetts reports.**

by [Leslie Bennetts](/contributors/leslie-bennetts.html) | March 5, 2012 12:00 AM EST

When a Congressional committee hearing presented an all-male panel of witnesses to discuss female contraception last month, [Rep Carolyn Maloney made news](http://video.msnbc.msn.com/msnbc-tv/46431233/) by demanding, "Where are the women?"

Her question was surprising only because it so rarely commands public attention these days. Far less unexpected was the relative absence of women among those making decisions about their welfare. Throughout American society, the dramatic underrepresentation of women at the top remains the norm, despite widespread misconceptions to the contrary.

Nearly 50 years after the modern women's movement began, many people assume the battle for equality is largely over. "Perfectly nice guys will say to me, 'You must be so happy you've won!'" reports [Gloria Steinem](/newsweek/2011/08/07/gloria-steinem-the-future-of-the-fight-for-women-s-rights.html). "I say, 'But are you working for a woman?' And they look appalled."

The truth is that men continue to run most major institutions and make most of the important political, executive, policy and other decisions in the United States. And as demonstrated by the current battle over contraceptive coverage in health insurance, the dearth of women decision-makers often results in policies that fail to serve women's needs, let alone the larger goal of equality.



ERA march in Pittsburgh in 1976., Barbara Freeman / Getty Images

"Women remain hugely underrepresented at positions of power in every single sector across this country," said [Barnard College president Debora Spar](/cheats/2012/03/03/obama-to-speak-at-barnard-commencement.html) at a White House conference on urban economic development last month.

“We have fallen into what I call the 16 percent ghetto, which is that if you look at any sector, be it aerospace engineering, Hollywood films, higher education, or Fortune 500 leading positions, women max out at roughly 16 percent,” Spar said. “That is a crime, and it is a waste of incredible talent.”

Seventeen percent of United States Senators are women, and only 16.8 percent of the House of Representatives. The Supreme Court has three women justices out of nine, and six women governors out of 50, or 12 percent. In state legislatures, 23.6 percent of elected representatives are female, and only nine percent of mayors are women in the 100 largest cities.

Such figures belie America’s self-image as a world leader with enlightened values; the nation actually ranks 71st in female legislative representation, behind Bangladesh, Sudan and United Arab Emirates.

From politics and business to academia, law and religion, the allocation of power remains stunningly lopsided. “Over half of college graduates but less than a quarter of full professors and a fifth of college presidents are female,” reported Deborah Rhode and Barbara Kellerman in their book *Women and Leadership* (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0787988332/thedaibea-20/>). “In management, women account for about a third of M.B.A. 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. 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. Half the students in divinity school are women, but they account for only 3 percent of the pastors of large congregations in protestant churches that have been ordaining women for decades.”

Nor are such imbalances improving; in most areas, women’s advancement has flatlined in recent years. “I think we are stuck in the muck,” says Kathryn Kolbert, director of the Athena Center for Leadership Studies at Barnard. “We made great progress on the rights front in the 1970’s, and life has changed significantly, but progress for women has plateaued in rights, in leadership, and in the ability to contribute equally in social and cultural affairs.”

The recession further undermined many efforts to develop women’s leadership, particularly in the corporate world, where diversity initiatives were often seen as an optional luxury whose budgets were the first to be slashed when financial cutbacks were imposed. “With the economic downturn, it has become okay not to focus on practices and invest in programs that support women,” says Linda Basch, president of the [National Council for Research on Women](http://www.ncrw.org/events) (<http://www.ncrw.org/events>).

Despite such setbacks, many people assume that women are flourishing. Much attention has been given to the fact that younger women now outnumber men in earning college and graduate school degrees, but for most, such advantages prove short-lived. “Women enter the work force with relatively better credentials than men, which is especially true for women of color, and yet you’re not seeing comparable progress as they move forward in their careers,” says Rhode, director of the Stanford Center on the Legal Profession.

Women’s ongoing failure to attain leadership positions can no longer be blamed on a lack of qualified candidates in the professional pipeline that ultimately limits the executive talent pool; even when women are abundantly represented in a given field, they rarely manage to reach the top levels of management. “In the financial services industry, 57 percent of the workers are women—but only 1.5 percent of the CEO’s are female,” says Mary Quist-Newins, an assistant professor at The American College, the nation’s largest non-profit educational institution for financial services.

Frustrated by the obstacles to advancing at a rate commensurate with their abilities, women leave the corporate world in disproportionate numbers, and many go on to create alternative opportunities elsewhere. “Women start businesses at two times the rate that men do,” says Quist-Newins, the author of a new study on women business owners.

Within established institutions, however, the stubborn persistence of striking gender gaps has discouraged longtime activists, many of whom find it a growing struggle to remain hopeful. “What I said for many years was ‘incremental change, slow and steady,’” says Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute for Politics at Rutgers University. “There is a vast change in the way men and women think of themselves and each other and in the way we think of leadership, and that does not happen overnight. People who occupy places of power don’t just stand aside because another group wants power.”

But even resolute optimists like Mandel were alarmed by recent signs that women’s failure to progress might have shifted into reverse; after years of agonizingly slow progress, the number of women in office declined slightly in the last election, sparking fears that women have actually begun going backward.

The erosion of previous gains extends far beyond politics. “Last year 95 percent of the top-grossing films were directed by men; the number directed by women has decreased since 1998,” says Melissa Silverstein, founder of the blog Women and Hollywood, which tracks women’s participation in the industry. “Only four women have been nominated for best director in 84 years of [Academy Awards](http://www.fox.com/academy-awards) ([/articles/2012/02/27/hollywood-and-the-oscars-surprise-with-celebration-of-traditional-values.html](http://www.fox.com/academy-awards)), and only one has won. Film is such an important piece of the culture, but Hollywood is very boy-centric, and this means that our world is seen through a white man’s

perspective. Most of the movies being green-lit are action-adventure, sci-fi or superhero movies—and the men want to hire their friends. There’s a perception that things are great for women—[Angelina Jolie directs a film! \(/newsweek/2011/12/04/angelina-jolie-directs-a-film-about-the-bosnian-war.html\)](http://www.newsweek.com/2011/12/04/angelina-jolie-directs-a-film-about-the-bosnian-war.html)—but the reality is that we haven’t improved at all; the numbers are stagnating or decreasing.”

Among this year’s Academy Award nominations, 98 percent were given to movies directed by men, 84 percent went to movies written by men, and 70 percent to movies starring men. In the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, as elsewhere in American society, the important decisions continue to be made by men: 77 percent of Oscar voters are male.

Whatever the arena, analysts cite various reasons why women’s progress has stalled in recent years, starting with a backlash to the previous period of rapid social evolution. “Classically speaking, resistance to change comes at two points,” Gloria Steinem explains. “The first is right in the beginning, when you break the rules and people say, ‘No, women can’t do that!’ And the second comes when you reach a critical mass, because then the dominant group thinks, ‘Wait a minute!’ Up until then, it hasn’t seemed as if the other group might have great influence or, in the case of women, might actually outnumber them. We’re now at the second stage of resistance.”

From Wall Street and corporate boardrooms to Capitol Hill and the entertainment industry, men in positions of authority have proved noticeably disinclined to make a priority of power-sharing. “It’s partly that they worry about what happens if we get to critical mass or even a majority: ‘Suppose they do to us what we’ve done to them?’” Steinem says. “In a normal male-female relationship, fifty-fifty is very scary, because masculinity has been defined as being in control.”

Social scientists studying the barriers to women’s advancement have identified several major problem areas. “The reasons have to do with unconscious bias, the persistence of exclusionary networks and opportunities, and work-family barriers,” says Rhode. “While we’ve made enormous progress in encouraging women to assume traditional men’s roles, we haven’t made comparable progress in encouraging men to take on traditional women’s roles. You still find men much less likely to take time out of the work force to assume primary responsibility for child care, elder care and dealing with emergencies. Even high-achieving women are still assuming the major responsibility in the home for family, and that limits their progress in the world outside the family.”

The result is a vicious circle in which women are prevented from full participation in the larger world by the absence of policies that would support their participation, and those policies are not enacted because men in power don’t give them priority and there aren’t enough women in leadership roles to effect real change.

“We have less parental leave, less sick leave, and less child care than Europe; we’re much worse off than any modern democracy,” Steinem points out. “American exceptionalism turns out to mean that we’re the only advanced democracy without a work pattern that accommodates parents in the work force. What women are saying is, ‘I can’t do it all. It’s impossible, because the culture hasn’t changed enough.’”

Other barriers include the unequal ways that women are socialized and that gender roles are enforced. Even women with stellar credentials often lack the confidence to put themselves forward, while men with far inferior qualifications show no such hesitation, according to research across a broad range of fields, including politics. Polling data and social science research have also documented a pervasive double standard that consistently penalizes women for traits that are rewarded in men, as when assertive women are judged as bitchy or shrill while assertive men are admired for their strength as leaders.

But an increased understanding of such challenges has also led to a proliferating array of efforts to overcome them. “There is absolutely nothing divinely ordained about someone who is a leader; any woman can learn to lead,” says Charlotte Beers, a former advertising CEO and former Undersecretary of State under Colin Powell. The author of *I’d Rather Be in Charge* (<http://charlottebeers.com/>), a new book about women’s leadership, Beers also teaches leadership skills to executive women from the United States and Europe.

“I’m convinced that there are more women ready and able than we’ve ever seen, and they’re right at the threshold of becoming major partners in every kind of leadership,” Beers says. “It’s just a matter of preparing them. The environment is ruthless, competitive, and can be very mean-spirited, and women are blindsided by it; it’s very different than anything anyone has prepared them for. Men have been combating and winning all their lives, in sports and in roughhousing. The whole concept of winning is very comfortable for men -- but for women, it means somebody’s being left out. Just yesterday, you were being rewarded for being a collaborative team leader, and now you’re expected to step out and fight alone and combat personal attacks. Women are on the cusp, but it will take a different kind of training to cross that threshold than you got in university or than you get when you’re working.”

Such preparation can make a decisive difference. [Katie Hobbs \(http://tucsoncitizen.com/arizona-news/2012/02/14/arizona-bill-takes-aim-at-airbrushed-women-in-ads/\)](http://tucsoncitizen.com/arizona-news/2012/02/14/arizona-bill-takes-aim-at-airbrushed-women-in-ads/), a 42-year-old social worker and mother of two who lives in Phoenix, was lobbying on domestic violence issues at the Arizona state capital when she got “frustrated by how the process worked,” she says. “I’d think, ‘Those lawmakers don’t know what they’re doing—they don’t understand how this affects real people’s lives!’”

And yet she demurred when a colleague suggested she apply to Emerge America, a national program that trains Democratic women to

run for office. "I thought, 'Oh, I can't run!'" Hobbs recalls. "I felt like I didn't have the right connections or knowledge."

But she eventually took the training, ran for state representative and won -- an outcome she credits to Emerge. "For women, deciding to run for office is really different than it is for men," Hobbs says. "Men wake up and think, 'I'll run for office!' Women think, 'How can I find somebody good?' and never think of themselves. I think it's just because of what we see; so much of what we see in political leadership is men. Emerge really helped to build confidence in me that I could do it and win."

Given the overwhelming dominance of men in decision-making roles, activists say that many women will have to make comparable choices in order to redress the leadership gap. "I think women are frustrated by the political system and feel like they can't solve problems by being in office," says Karen Middleton, a former Colorado state legislator who is now president of Emerge America. "Often we create organizations or do other things to solve problems. I don't blame women for that, but my message is: If you don't step up, other people are making decisions for you. If you really want to see things change, I think you need to run and serve and change policy in the legislative bodies."

Optimists are hoping that such efforts will jumpstart the flat-lined trends for women's progress. "We have massive networks now, and I feel like women are very interested in helping other women," says Reshma Saujani, deputy advocate in the New York City Public Advocate's office. "Mentorship is the new feminism."

Since women have cast between four and seven million more votes in recent elections than men have, female voters clearly possess the power to overturn the status quo—if they decide to use it. But in recent years, the majority of women have accepted significant inequities with passive acquiescence rather than challenging them with an active commitment to change. In an era when health insurance plans reimburse men for Viagra while denying women coverage for birth control, it's anyone's guess when women will finally decide to mobilize their numbers and their networks to demand an equal voice, instead of continuing to tolerate their relative disenfranchisement.

"The question of whether we're stalled or not depends on what we all do," says Gloria Steinem. "Even if we're stalled, we can start again."

As Debora Spar told a packed auditorium full of women entrepreneurs at the White House conference on economic development, "Our job is to fix the situation so that we can help generate the female leadership that the country so desperately needs."

## Smashing Ceilings



Charlotte Beers, Squire Fox

Research shows that even women with stellar credentials often lack the confidence to put themselves forward, while men with far inferior qualifications show no such hesitation. "Any woman can learn to lead," says Charlotte Beers, undersecretary of state under Colin Powell and author of *I'd Rather Be in Charge*. "It's just a matter of preparing them." One national program, Emerge America, trains Democratic women like Katie Hobbs to run for office. The Phoenix social worker had lobbied on domestic-violence issues at the state capital, but assumed she "didn't have the right connections or knowledge" to run. But she took the training, ran for state representative—and won. "Emerge really helped to build confidence in me that I could do it and win," Hobbs says.

**THIS WEEK March 5:** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits White House. **March 6:** Ten states hold GOP primaries. **March 7:** Apple expected to unveil new iPad. **March 8:** International Women's Day. **March 9:** South by Southwest music and film festival begins.

### **Halls of Power**

Maine Sen. Olympia Snowe's retirement announcement is more than just a potential loss for the GOP. It's another reminder of how few women reach positions of leadership in American government.