Making the Invisible Visible: A Cross-Sector Analysis of Gender-Based Leadership Barriers

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Despite an abundance of educated, qualified women in the workforce, they continue to be underrepresented at the top of institutional leadership hierarchies. Theories of gendered organizations explain that work processes reproduce gendered structures of society in the workplace. These processes advantage men while forming barriers to women's success. This paper extends critical human resource development (HRD) theory by applying the concept of sexism hidden in the workplace to leadership and by outlining both social and organizational practices that create gender inequities in leadership. Our cross-sector analysis of women leaders in religion and higher education revealed twenty-seven gender-based leadership barriers which operate at the macro, meso, and micro levels of society. We argue that most current efforts to promote women into leadership focus one by one on only a few barriers, primarily those within organizations, while failing to take into account the wide variety of barriers and their prevalence across all societal levels. We offer strategies to address barriers across all three levels to help organizations create gender-equitable leadership environments.

Key Words: Critical HRD, Leadership, Organizational Change and Development, HRD Theory, leadership barriers, women leaders, higher education, religion, evangelical mission organizations, gendered organizations

Introduction

Despite the fact that women are earning more educational degrees than men, they continue to be underrepresented at the top of institutional leadership hierarchies. In the 1980s, women caught up with men in attainment of

bachelor's and master's degrees and have since surpassed men in attainment of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), although they continue to be underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Women are also present in the workforce, representing 51% of managerial and professional workers (Lennon, 2013). However, across 10 sectors examined by the White House Project (2009), women make up an average of only 18% of top leadership positions. Lennon's (2013) more recent study of 14 sectors found similar results: Women make up only 24.5% of positional leaders in academia, while only 10% of U.S. religious organizations employ a female senior pastor. Although there is a pipeline of educated and experienced women in the U.S. workforce, something is limiting their ability to ascend to top leadership.

Organizations have been making efforts to incorporate more women into leadership for decades. From the Equal Pay Act of 1963 to flextime and family leave policies, to recent conversations about mentoring and sponsoring women, there have been a variety of attempts to assist women into the professional workforce and, once in, help them move into leadership. Even with all this effort, women are still not entering executive suites in significant numbers. In this article, we argue that efforts to date have tended to focus on overcoming gender barriers within organizations, one barrier at a time. Yet our research shows that women encounter numerous barriers to leadership, which occur in the broader society as well as at a personal level. Existing literature focuses almost exclusively on a handful of barriers, primarily those found within organizations. Despite recommendations to consider the effects of social structures on women in the workplace (Callahan, 2007) little research has moved beyond the organization to take into account the broader social context in which women live and work. Yet barriers that occur at the societal and personal levels also have a profound impact on women's ability to advance into executive leadership. Based on our cross-sector analysis of women leaders, we address this gap by presenting a systematic description of the vast number of barriers women face, showing the level of society in which they tend to operate most strongly, and making a case for organizations to take a broader perspective when supporting women in leadership.

Literature Review

Blatant forms of gender discrimination are increasingly rare due to laws and organizational awareness of the consequences of keeping women out of leadership positions (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2003). However, this does not mean that gender discrimination has been eliminated; instead there is evidence to suggest that "it has just gone underground" (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2003, p. 231). Critical human resource development (HRD) theories seek to draw attention to the hidden nature of sexism in the workplace. The starting point of these

theories is the idea that organizations, built in patriarchal societies, represent and promote patriarchal values (Bierema, 2009; Riehl & Lee, 1996; Stead & Elliott, 2009). According to this line of thinking, organizations not only reflect patriarchal society; they also actively participate in creating and reproducing gender in conformity with patriarchal images (Acker, 1990). These images conform to stereotyped ideas of masculinity and femininity, which place men in roles of power and women in support roles (Andersen & Hysock, 2009). Since men have historically founded and dominated institutions related to law, politics, religion, the academy, the state, and the economy, the subordination and exclusion of women has become part of ordinary institutional functioning (Acker, 1992). At the same time, organizations often claim to be neutral when it comes to gender issues. However, this supposed neutrality assumes that males are the standard, rendering gender issues invisible (Sheppard, 1992).

Researchers are now focusing on the concept of second-generation forms of gender bias involving barriers arising "from cultural beliefs about gender as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favor men" (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011, p. 475). These barriers consist of nonreflective acts of bias and exclusion, are subtle and often unintentional, and are supported by gender norms and practices entrenched within the institution (Bird, 2011). Because these impediments are built into ordinary institutional functioning, they are often invisible to men and women alike. When these barriers accumulate, they can inhibit women's ability to see themselves as leaders and the ability of others to see them as leaders (Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013).

Researchers have studied challenges facing women in professional careers. For example, recent work has drawn attention to the problems of working and parenting, resulting in a number of publications addressing challenges of caretaking while working (e.g., Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009; Perrakis & Martinez, 2012; Poduval & Poduval, 2009; Williams, 2001). Others have extensively studied the role of gender stereotypes on women's leadership (e.g., Carli & Eagly, 2011; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Vinkenburg, van Engen, Eagly, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011). The lack of mentoring and the lack of sponsorship women typically encounter have also been well documented in the literature (e.g., Catalyst, 2004b; Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2010; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; Tolar, 2012). In addition, women's supposed lack of confidence and lack of negotiating skills have been studied (e.g., Babcock & Laschever, 2008; Bowles & Flynn, 2010; Devillard, Sancier, Werner, Maller, & Kossoff, 2013; Lafreniere & Longman, 2008).

However, the result of all these studies is a piecemeal approach to understanding women's absence in organizational leadership—for example, studies showing the lack of mentoring may lead organizations to establish mentoring programs for women; studies showing the challenges of caretaking may lead to offers of flextime; studies showing women's supposed deficits in confidence

and negotiation may lead to workshops on building confidence and negotiation skills. And still women remain scarce in upper levels of leadership.

The limitation of these current theoretical approaches is their singular focus; each one leads to a targeted effort to address one issue. Even the broader concept of second-generation gender bias focuses exclusively on the organization, without taking into account how gendered structures are produced and reproduced in both society as a whole and in the personal lives of women employees.

Current Investigation

The purpose of the current investigation is to advance Bierema and Cseh's (2003) HRD research agenda, which focuses on research for women and "creates public awareness of hidden phenomena by identifying and naming them" (p. 12). We analyze two studies on women leaders from differing sectors to identify and compare gender-based leadership barriers, which are barriers that prevent women from succeeding or advancing in leadership positions (Diehl, 2013). Many authors (e.g., Coronel, Moreno, & Carrasco, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013; Pew Research Center, 2015) have described impediments to women's advancement in leadership; however, to date, we know of no published articles that attempt to comprehensively identify the barriers that contribute to women's low numbers in executive leadership. Furthermore, some of these barriers have been conceived of only as hindrances to women's work, without considering them as hindrances to women's leadership. However, we argue that these barriers impact women's ability to succeed as leaders, not just as employees. This article extends critical HRD theory by applying the concept of sexism hidden in the workplace to leadership and by outlining the practices that create gender inequities in leadership. Additionally, going beyond the organizational sphere, we address societal and personal challenges that women face when trying to lead. Our goal is to make visible the processes that reproduce the underlying gender structure of leadership in organizations and to show the three levels at which these processes operate. Once the barriers are identified, we offer strategies and approaches for organizational change that cover all three societal levels. The research questions guiding our analysis are:

1. What macro-, meso-, and micro-level gender-based leadership barriers did women in the academy and religious organizations experience?
2. To what degree do the barriers differ in the two sectors?

Methods

This investigation is a cross-sector analysis of two qualitative research studies of women leaders from higher education and religion. In one study, Diehl

(2013) conducted face-to-face interviews with 26 women presidents, provosts, and vice presidents in colleges and universities located in the mid-Atlantic. She sought to understand the types of adversity women in leadership positions in the academy faced and the meaning they made of those experiences. In the second study, Dzubinski (2013) interviewed 12 women at executive levels of leadership in mission organizations, asking how they achieved positions of leadership and how they learned to lead. These organizations are religious nonprofit institutions based on evangelicalism, a conservative branch of protestant Christianity whose beliefs include the authority of the Bible, the centrality of Jesus, a need for personal conversion, and a desire to share the faith with others (Bendroth, 2001; Emerson & Smith, 2000). Since participants worked internationally, two interviews were face-to-face, and the rest were conducted via the Internet.

There are six important similarities in the methodologies of the two studies and one difference. First, study participants were women who lead in realms historically and currently dominated by male leadership, and yet where typically over half of the constituents are female (White House Project, 2009). Second, both studies were based on social constructivist epistemology, which assumes that individuals seek to understand their world by developing multiple, subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2009). Third, since our research relied on our participants' views, we both used semistructured interview guides with open-ended questions to allow participants to construct the meanings of their situations. Fourth, we both recorded our interviews and personally transcribed our voice recordings. Fifth, we each used Patton's (2002) content analysis methodology to analyze our data. Finally, to ensure accuracy and transparency throughout the process of data analysis, we engaged in member checks with our participants and incorporated their feedback into our analysis. The one main methodological difference in the studies was sampling strategy. Diehl had a sufficient pool of potential participants and used maximum variation sampling, whereas Dzubinski had a very small pool and therefore used a comprehensive sample in which she interviewed all potential participants that she could locate.

In qualitative research, researcher position and perspective is an important consideration. Working within the social constructivist paradigm, as researchers we recognize that our own backgrounds shape our interpretation (Creswell, 2009). We are both indigenous outsiders to our respective studies (Acker, 2001). Diehl has spent 20 years as a female leader of information technology in higher education, while Dzubinski spent 20 years working overseas in an evangelical mission organization. Yet we also brought our outsider, academic perspectives to the study of our environments (Acker, 2001). Additionally, we consider ourselves to be equalists; that is, we believe that all human beings, regardless of any socially defined identity category, are of equal value and deserve equal access, treatment, rights, opportunity, and freedom in all realms of society. In addition, like Fletcher and Ely (2003), we do not "see gender as

primarily a women's issue and instead see gender as a central organizing feature of social life, with implications for men, women, and how we get work done" (p. 3). Qualitative research gave us the framework to understand ourselves as the research instrument and to recognize and value the knowledge that was co-constructed between us and our participants (Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative methodology also gave us the framework to combine and re-examine our data. What started as conference small talk as we discussed our respective studies quickly turned to theoretical comparison, and we began to note striking similarities in our findings. We expected that our studies would differ significantly given the substantial differences in the types of organizations: Higher education is generally considered to be progressive and liberal while evangelical religion is quite conservative. Nevertheless, the women from both realms reported strikingly similar leadership experiences. Recognition of this overlap led us into a process of comparing executive-level leaders from these two different sectors. This process allowed us to examine the similarities of challenges that women encounter, precisely *because* they lead at the executive level, regardless of the type of organization.

Data Analysis

Diehl (2013) first identified 12 barriers through a literature review conducted prior to her interviews. In her study, she asked open-ended questions about professional barriers and obstacles the higher education executives had faced. The subsequent analysis of interview data revealed examples of all 12 barriers, plus one more (Diehl, 2013). In revisiting the literature, Diehl (2014) then identified one additional barrier and confirmed its existence in her interviews.

Using Diehl's (2013) gender-based leadership barriers as the starting framework, we employed Patton's (2002) content analysis methodology to examine Dzubinski's (2013) data. Using an inductive approach, we created a classification system consisting of labels that corresponded to the *a priori* identified gender-based leadership barriers and to new barriers not previously identified. After extracting the data that corresponded to potential new barriers, we discussed each one by one. Subsequently, some were recategorized into the first 14 barriers, while others reflected themes that emerged from the data. We then developed names and definitions for the new barriers. Finally, we reexamined the complete list of barriers for internal consistency and to ensure that they did not overlap (Patton, 2002).
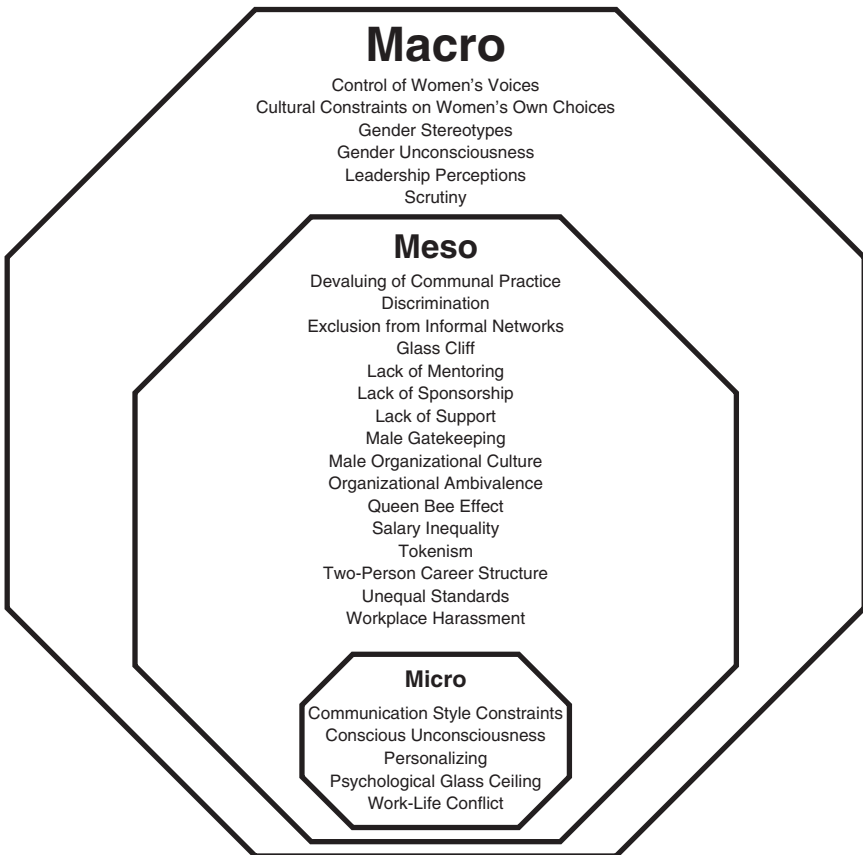
Not only did we find examples of the initial 14 barriers in the religion study, but we also found 12 more. Diehl then examined her interview data for the additional 12 barriers and found examples of all of them. Finally, one additional barrier was discovered in the literature and its presence confirmed in both studies. Neither study asked leading questions about barriers or obstacles specifically related to gender, yet these barriers were woven into the women leaders' descriptions of their experience at work, supporting the idea that barriers are embedded into society and the workplace. Our process

of uncovering gender barriers in our interview data demonstrates their often invisible nature and the importance of identifying and naming them.

Findings

From the studies of women leaders in the higher education and religion sectors, 27 gender-based leadership barriers were identified. These 27 barriers can be organized according to three levels of society in which they generally operate: macro (societal), meso (group or organizational), and micro (individual). Clearly, gender-based leadership barriers cross these levels. For example, a macro-level gender stereotype may also appear in meso- and micro-level interactions. However, for the purposes of developing a conceptual framework, these barriers are organized by the social level in which the barrier generally operates, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Gender-Based Leadership Barriers by Level of Society

Macro
Control of Women's Voices
Cultural Constraints on Women's Own Choices
Gender Stereotypes
Gender Unconsciousness
Leadership Perceptions
Scrutiny

Meso
Devaluing of Communal Practice
Discrimination
Exclusion from Informal Networks
Glass Cliff
Lack of Mentoring
Lack of Sponsorship
Lack of Support
Male Gatekeeping
Male Organizational Culture
Organizational Ambivalence
Queen Bee Effect
Salary Inequality
Tokenism
Two-Person Career Structure
Unequal Standards
Workplace Harassment

Micro
Communication Style Constraints
Conscious Unconsciousness
Personalizing
Psychological Glass Ceiling
Work-Life Conflict

In the following sections we will name, define, and present examples of macro-, meso-, and micro-level barriers identified in the two studies. Many examples of all 27 barriers were found in both studies. In Tables 1, 2, and 3, we display a single representative quotation that best illustrates each barrier.

Macro Barriers

Barriers operating in society as a whole prevent women from advancing or succeeding in leadership. These barriers make it challenging for women leaders to contribute their leadership expertise and for both women and men to take women leaders seriously. Table 1 shows the six macro-level barriers.

Table 1. Macro Level Gender-Based Leadership Barriers

Type	Definition	Example
Control of Women's Voices	Restrictions on when and how women contribute to the conversation	"I want it to be more of a conversation, [but the men] have commented more than once that it feels to them like I'm interrupting them, and I should wait until they're finished and then I can talk." (Mission Executive)
Cultural Constraints on Women's Own Choices	Societal constraints on women's educational and career choices	"I grew up thinking I would never do anything but be a teacher. At my age, most girls went to school for nursing or education." (Higher Ed Executive)
Gender Stereotypes	Relatively fixed and oversimplified generalizations about women	"When I got pregnant, … one of the board members said, 'Well, I guess *now* you'll finally stay home and take care of the kids, stop working.'" (Higher Ed Executive)
Gender Unconsciousness	Lack of knowledge or awareness of the role gender plays in the workplace	"I don't really believe in a glass ceiling, and I don't really believe in a gender gap. I fundamentally believe that women or men are successful as they set out to be. Too often women use the glass ceiling as an excuse." (Higher Ed Executive)
Leadership Perceptions	Associating leadership with masculinity	"If you are there with your husband, it's a natural thing…that he is seen as the leader. … There is an indication of a natural leaning towards asking the man, and the men are the ones who are naturally seen as leading the business sessions, leading a strategy session." (Mission Executive)
Scrutiny	Intense or hypercritical examination of women	"I'm a woman in leadership, and whether it's intentional or not they're looking to see how I'm going to handle myself, which is intimidating, because men don't get that." (Mission Executive)

Table 2. Meso-Level Gender-Based Leadership Barriers

Type	Definition	Example
Devaluing of Communal Practice	Lack of acknowledgment, support, and respect for communal activities in organizations	"[My male colleague] didn't like my management style because he thought that I was not forceful and demanding enough. … My style [is] one of collaboration and really trying to come from a position of understanding a situation before I make a decision." (Higher Ed Executive)
Discrimination	Subtle or overt discrimination or discouragement due to gender	"My boss left, and … they made me the interim director. I was 24 years old, running a pretty big department, and it worked. We did a search, and the good old guy down the hall … got the job. [My boss] said, "You've done a great job for the last three months, and you're going to be the support system that keeps this office going. But we just really felt that you were … too young and a female."" (Higher Ed Executive)
Exclusion from Informal Networks	Exclusion from unofficial social events	"There are social gatherings, non-university-related, that I'm not invited to. Yeah, you just deal with the exclusion." (Higher Ed Executive)
Glass Cliff	Placing a woman in a high-risk role with a likelihood of failure	"Women sometimes get handed risky roles because if they fail or get sabotaged, they can be blamed. That camp I was in was risky because of high levels of tension in the board and among the staff. Later they told me they gave it to me because they figured it was ready to die, and since I was young and inexperienced, then they could blame me." (Mission Executive)
Lack of Mentoring	Lack of a significant mentoring relationship	"I didn't have mentors. … I would have been very well served by having a mentor or boss [who could say], 'give it a little bit of thought to how you just handled that.'" (Higher Ed Executive)
Lack of Sponsorship	Lack of a sponsor who recognizes a woman's capacity and recommends her for a leadership position	"When you're a woman and in your last ten years of your career, and, [they say] 'Oh, she doesn't want to do anything more.' Well, if I didn't work here, I would have other options, it's just here you guys don't want to look at me that way." (Higher Ed Executive)
Lack of Support	Decisions overturned or not supported	"There were a couple of situations where somebody higher up would reverse something, which makes it very hard if your compatriots know the person higher up can and might reverse whatever you said; that's pretty bad." (Mission Executive)

(*Continued*)

Type	Definition	Example
Male Gatekeeping	Controlling which women have access to leadership positions and the boundaries of their leadership	"When [the president] wanted me to take the regional director role, he first went to my husband and talked it over with him, to find out what he thought." (Mission Executive)
Male Organizational Culture	Overwhelmingly male organizational culture and norms	"What's astounding to me is that at the highest levels there's what I call the locker room mentality of old boys club, slap each other on the ass, and make lewd jokes. And I've been told, if you can't put up with it, then you don't need to be here." (Higher Ed Executive)
Organizational Ambivalence	Lack of full recognition or support for a woman's leadership	"When they said I had to be the interim for a year, I didn't like that. I thought, if you believe in me, or if you think I'm qualified for this job, hire me! But they were feeling not real ready to take the big leap, and they didn't know how people would react to a female at this level." (Mission Executive)
Queen Bee Effect	Women at the top failing to help other women or actively preventing their promotion	"One of the women I ended up working with there had a real problem with me. She called me in to talk and said, 'I have trouble with this. Why does everyone like you? I don't really like you.' I found myself being somewhat controlled again. I facilitated a study, and it went well, and this woman didn't like it, so she blocked the next thing they asked me to do." (Mission Executive)
Salary Inequality	Being underpaid	"It came time to hire another pastor and they hired a guy who did not have the credentials I had, did not have the education I had, and they hired him full-time earning $25,000 a year more than I was making." (Mission Executive)
Tokenism	Being in the minority (<15 percent) gender or race of a proportionally skewed workgroup	"Being the only, and *first* and only, female at a senior level sitting in cabinet brought with it challenges, inherent challenges as to having your voice heard, being for sure seen as—I'm there because I'm one of you, not because if somebody needs something I'll run and get it." (Higher Ed Executive)
Two-Person Career Structure	Formal and informal institutional demands placed on husband and wife, but only one is employed by the organization	"The president is interesting because his wife…works full time…and so, she has conflicts. She can't always to come to things. And people get offended: … 'What do you mean your wife isn't there?'" (Higher Ed Executive)

Type	Definition	Example
Unequal Standards	Holding women to higher performance standards than male counterparts	"If I'm going to get any recognition, I'm going to have to work harder, and I've noticed that the men don't work as hard as I do. And yet they seem to get respect and whatever it is they're doing, they're thought highly of." (Mission Executive)
Workplace Harassment	Repeated behaviors that provoke, frighten, intimidate, or bring discomfort to the recipient	"[My male supervisor] was verbally abusive to me … because I wouldn't kowtow to him." (Higher Ed Executive)

Meso Barriers

Sixteen of the identified gender-based leadership barriers operate at the level of groups and organizations. These barriers represent ways of discounting women's leadership contributions and limiting their organizational effectiveness. Given that leadership takes place within groups and organizations, it perhaps makes sense that many barriers occur at this level. Table 2 shows the meso-level barriers.

Micro Barriers

Finally, five of the gender-based leadership barriers operate at the level of the individual and include the individual's daily interactions. These barriers primarily involve the woman herself, placing an extra burden of responsibility on her shoulders beyond that normally required of male leaders. Table 3 shows the micro-level barriers.

These findings show that women experience barriers that discourage and prevent their success as leaders on all fronts: their general society, their organizations, and within themselves. In the next section, we compare these barriers between the two sectors.

Discussion

As stated, all 27 barriers were found in the interview data from both studies. In fact, the level of similarity of experiences of the women leaders is striking, given that higher education has more women in top leadership positions than religious organizations (Lennon, 2013). One of the most salient features overall is the hidden and unconscious nature of these barriers, as Ely et al. (2011) and Meyerson and Fletcher (2003) have asserted in their work. For women in both studies, the barriers were present and often tacitly accepted as par for the course. The main difference appeared in terms of barrier strength, in that seven barriers appeared more salient in the religious organization study, while only one appeared more salient in the higher education study. We determined the

Table 3. Micro-Level Gender-Based Leadership Barriers

Type	Definition	Example
Communication Style Constraints	Constraints on communication style used to express leadership	"If I speak with a gentle tone, if I've pre-thought out things and share it logically and clearly, my same passion can come through and be respected and appreciated. … I have to more carefully choose my words and choose my tone of voice, more so than a man might have to do." (Mission Executive)
Conscious Unconsciousness	Deliberate choice not to notice, be affected by, or challenge the role gender plays in the workplace	"We have an organization within the denomination, I don't even know what they're called, but I choose not to be a part of them. … I can't even imagine going to one of their retreats, or one of their sessions, or whatever, because I know their agenda and I just don't want to even be associated with it. … To stand for women in leadership based on gifting and strength, yes, I'm glad to do that. To stand for women's rights in leadership particularly in a Christian organization, I just probably wouldn't do it." (Mission Executive)
Personalizing	Assuming personal responsibility for system or organizational problems	"I personalize and feel responsible for [my team]. Some of the permanent damage that they suffered [from the audit investigation] I can see in them as professionals. That bothers me the most." (Higher Ed Executive)
Psychological Glass Ceiling	Unwillingness to appear assertive; undervaluation of one's own abilities	"I was completely unprepared for [the board's request that I become CEO]. I started telling them all the reasons why they were wrong, and how I was certainly not the right person for that role, and all the reasons why I wasn't interested in taking it." (Mission Executive)
Work-Life Conflict	Challenges balancing professional responsibilities with personal or family responsibilities	"It's a real challenge to try to balance the home and family life. … There are some things that just mom can do, and so I feel the weight of that. … Am I in some way neglecting my other role as a mother and as a wife, because I'm in this role? I don't think that's a question that most men ever ask." (Mission Executive)

relative strength of each barrier based on both the number of participants who mentioned it and the extent to which it played a role in their leadership stories.

Similarities

Given the inherent differences in the higher education and religion sectors, there were many unexpected similarities in the barriers experienced by

women in both studies. For example, women in both studies reported working with *queen bees*, professional women who, according to women in the higher education study, are "more cut-throat," "less empathetic," and "insecure," and who even exhibit behaviors of a "bully," as one mission executive explained. Both studies also had women who expressed *conscious unconsciousness,* in that they did not notice or challenge the role that gender plays in the workplace. As one mission executive stated, "I don't say, 'I have rights,' or 'I know I have to work three times as hard to get the same recognition.' It's all true, but I do not wave that flag ever. I never play the female card." The reason may be for self-preservation, according to one vice president in the higher education study: "Not all of us back each other up because … I think there [is] some fear about being labeled."

Although it may seem like *control of women's voices* would not be as prevalent in higher education, we found that it occurred in both environments. For example, one higher education executive stated, "The women are … consistently criticized for expressing any disagreement or dissent to what's been decided or what's been done … at all levels, not just senior level." Similarly, there were women in the religious organizations who felt excluded from conversations, as one mission executive expressed, "I found it hard to even be heard in this room full of strong guys." Another mission executive explained that being heard required careful presentation: "I have learned, over the years, to influence men pretty carefully. You can't come across with too much feeling or take too long to say something or fail to use hard facts when stating a case."

There were also similarities with the *lack of sponsorship* barrier. Women in both studies perceived that men tend to be groomed and sponsored for leadership at earlier ages than women, while women spend "many more years sitting in limbo," as a mission executive noted. Similarly, in the higher education study, one provost stated: "When I went to the presidential training workshop, there were a lot of older women, a lot of younger guys." A number of women in both studies did have sponsors, which would make sense given that study participants had ascended to executive leadership. Strikingly, most often the sponsors were male. For example, in the mission study, all the participants who reported sponsors named males. A president in the higher education study commented, "The primary promoters, the people who nominated me again and again for positions were all men." This president broke the glass ceiling as the first female provost and president within her state system, so there were likely no female leaders available to act as her sponsor. Trying to be a sponsor was also problematic. One executive in the mission study explained, "I found that it takes men to sponsor women and when I have sponsored both men and women, more often the men I sponsor are more easily received than the women I recommended."

Male organizational culture stories abounded in both studies. One mission executive analyzed this aspect of the organization:

> There are stylistic culture things that happen which are much more male-oriented that make it difficult for women to stay in leadership roles because they get tired of the organizational culture. … A lot of men in leadership are not aware of how much that impacts women.

A story from one university president exemplifies the lack of awareness of this barrier. This president attended a televised ceremony to accept the donation of a small airplane. During the ceremony, the pilot requested that the president board the plane. However, the president was unable to do so because she was wearing a skirt. As she recollected, "There was nobody prepared for the fact that a woman might have to climb those steps. … Those are the oddities that you have to face and nobody else is thinking about that except you." Working in an environment where the male experience is considered to be the norm, this president had no other language to describe her dilemma with the airplane except for "oddities."

Differences in Strength

While every barrier named in this study was present in both the higher education and mission organizations, the strength of some barriers differed. This finding supports what Ely (1995) found in her study of organizational context 20 years ago: the more male-dominated the culture, in terms of few women present in high-level leadership positions, the more likely women leaders were to exhibit behaviors that align with gender-role stereotypes. In this study, mission organizations are significantly more male dominated (in Ely's terms) than higher education. Seven barriers were more salient in the religious organization study, while only one seemed more salient in the higher education study.

First, the barrier of *cultural constraints on women's own choices* was more salient in the religious organization study. Although a few women in the higher education study found that their choice of college field of study had been affected by societal expectations, these women did not face the expectation of staying home to raise children. However, the married mission executives reported that before moving into leadership, they had spent significant time on "home assignment … [not] involved in the workplace," as one executive described. These women may have been constrained to the primary caregiver role due to the combination of gender-role prescriptions from both society and their religious faith. In fact, *cultural constraints on women's own choices* appeared to be a central organizing principle of the mission executives' experiences. The combination of cultural constraints from society plus evangelical subculture constraints was an overwhelmingly powerful force that the women could not successfully resist or even articulate. Because these constraints are embedded in the entire culture, they are truly invisible.

Second, *gender unconsciousness* was also more salient in the religious organization study. Many voices of authority in the evangelical faith tend to be

suspicious of and even reject feminist thought, teaching women that their place is supporting, not challenging, male authority (Dzubinski, 2015). This may be why women executives in the mission organizations were unaware of the role gender plays in the workplace. As one executive stated, "We don't have someone who is working on this—women's ministry, empowering women—because there's not a felt need for it." Most of the higher education executives, on the other hand, were aware that gender plays a role in the workplace.

Third, the barrier of *personalizing*, or blaming themselves for organizational problems, was particularly strong for the women in mission organizations. This finding is similar to Ely's (1995) category of self-blamers, who were unable to conform to or resist organizational prescriptive norms for women and instead internalized and blamed themselves for the discrepancy. For example, a mission executive commented on how she blamed herself for the lack of recognition for her work:

> Some of my background, even from high school experiences I had, [was] just meekly doing all the work without the recognition because they wanted a man to have the title. … I've just learned these behaviors and so, on the one hand I think, well, I have to expect it. On the other hand, I'm thinking, that's not right.

Another mission executive felt she was at fault when a male colleague refused to work with her: "I just kept trying to please him and blaming myself for the situation." While women in the higher education study also reported this problem, it was not as overwhelmingly present the way it was in the religious organization study. This may be due to gendered organizational structures (Acker, 1992; Ely, Foldy, & Scully, 2003) and essentialist views of gender embedded in the evangelical faith (Bendroth, 1993). The combination of organizational and religious pressure to comply with gender stereotypes may lead women to hold themselves personally responsible for organizational problems (Dzubinski, 2013; Scholz, 2010).

Fourth, the negative aspects of a *two-person career structure* were more frequently discussed in the religious organization study, as several participants began as the unpaid member of a two-person career. In the mission organizations, the women leaders were expected to first support their husband's career and only later, once he was established, could they enter leadership. One woman explained, "While [my husband] was traveling … I didn't even think about taking on any [leadership] responsibilities. I wouldn't do [that] until our kids were gone and our lifestyle changed." Conversely, in the higher education study, several participants had husbands who served as the unpaid member of the two-person career. Although the husbands of women presidents did participate in the presidential interview process and attend university events, the women presidents did not describe expectations on their husbands to

plan events or serve on university committees. In fact, two husbands did not even live in the official residences. One husband kept his job on the other side of the state, joining his wife only on the weekends, while another president's husband lived in a retirement community.

Fifth, while there was some control of the bounds of women's leadership in the higher education study, the *male gatekeeping* barrier was noticeably stronger in the religious organization study. One vice president in the higher education study explained how her board ensured that males were hired for key positions in her division: "When I was hiring a controller, who sits directly beneath me, I had board members tell me directly that I should be seeking an older man to complement me." However, male control of women's leadership was more entrenched in the mission organizations. Mission executives described examples of men choosing certain women to fill leadership roles. One woman explained that she was selected for her position because the men "thought they could work with me … and they needed a female." Male gatekeeping was even extended through family relationships, as some male mission organization leaders would first gain permission from a woman's husband prior to approaching the woman they were considering for a leadership position. In fact, some women mission executives, being confined by gender-role requirements, espoused the husband-over-wife authority structure. For example, one participant accepted a leadership role with her husband's approval, but only after ensuring that her position was not higher than her husband's, lest she upset the gender hierarchy.

Finally, two other barriers noticeably stronger in the mission organizations were *exclusion from social networks* and *lack of mentoring*. In both cases, the difference seems attributable to the lack of women leaders and to women's conformity to stereotypes. The evangelical mission industry has such low levels of executive women (less than 5%; W. Wilson, personal communication, September 12, 2012) that women who do lead are hard-pressed to find women mentors. Outside their own organizations, there is little in the way of networking, mentoring, and other types of support; within their own organizations, they are typically the only woman (Dzubinski, 2013). In addition, the religious requirements of moral purity make it easy, even acceptable, to keep women and men strictly segregated (Dzubinski, 2013). Women in the mission study conformed to gender roles by taking responsibility for removal of any behavior that could be construed as sexual, even to the point of exclusion from leadership events. As such, the single women in the mission study described how they were careful to make friends with their male colleagues' wives and to maintain distance from the men.

Only *workplace harassment* seemed more salient in the higher education study. Several higher education participants described experiences of "sabotage," "verbal abuse," "intimidation," "bullying," and even "sexual harassment." Only one mission executive reported experiencing harassment, which included "sabotage," "bullying," and "control." However, the pressure of

gender role stereotypes may make it difficult for the mission executives to recognize harassment, since evangelical women are socialized to accept male authority as beneficent.

Thus, our findings suggest that although all the barriers affect women leaders in both conservative-leaning religious organizations and liberal-leaning higher education institutions, certain barriers are more salient in the religion sector. Women in the highly male-dominated world of evangelical mission organizations were more strongly impacted by barriers requiring conformity to gender-role stereotypes, while these barriers seemed somewhat weaker but never totally absent for women in the higher education study.

Organizational Implications

As we have shown, many often invisible practices across all three societal levels contribute to gender bias within organizations. Earlier, we described ourselves as equalists, believing that all human beings regardless of any socially defined identity category are of equal value and deserve equal access, treatment, rights, opportunity, and freedom in all realms of society. We also expressed our conviction that gender is not primarily a women's issue; in fact, it impacts men, women, and organizations. Research shows that organizations with gender diverse leadership teams outperform organizations with homogeneous leaders (Catalyst, 2004a; Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Baumgarten, 2007; Welbourne, Cycyota, & Ferrante, 2007). Therefore, understanding and working to eliminate these embedded gender-based leadership barriers is of great practical interest because of the promise it holds for improved organizational performance.

We recognize that a variety of organizational interventions have been conceived to create pathways for women in leadership. In particular, mentoring, sponsorship, flextime, and family leave have garnered a great deal of attention (e.g., Appelbaum & Milkman, 2009; Hewlett et al., 2010; Kolb, Fletcher, Meyerson, Merrill-Sands, & Ely, 2003; Teasdale, 2013; Tolar, 2012). Some attention has also been given to organizational policies such as affirmative action and harassment (Berryman-Fink, 2000; Kolb et al., 2003; Kurtulus, 2012). More recently, increasing the gender diversity in the composition of boards (Cook & Glass, 2014) has been considered as another possible way to move toward gender-diverse leadership within organizations. Yet despite all of these efforts, there has not been a broad, corresponding increase in the numbers of women executives. We believe that part of the reason is the wide variety of persistent yet invisible barriers that we have described, which serve to reinforce gendered workplaces and gendered norms for human behavior. Furthermore, most organizational approaches intended to support women focus on only the meso-level barriers. Yet focusing only on those barriers will not be truly transformational, because the micro- and macro-level barriers remain. Given that women in both studies experienced barriers at all

three levels, organizations must become aware of and address the societal and individual pressures women face. Our suggestions show how organizational practices can impact barriers at all three levels, in the process improving the workplace and reducing the reproduction of gendered norms.

In framing our recommendations, we agree with Swanson and Holton's (2009) argument that "organization development is a process of systematically unleashing expertise for the purpose of improving performance" (p. 288). If organizations truly wish to unleash the expertise of their women and their men, then eliminating gender barriers is a good place to start. Further, given the invisible nature of these barriers, we suggest that both technical and social changes are needed, as described in sociotechnical systems change theory (Swanson & Holton, 2009). According to this theory, in order for change to succeed, the technical aspects of work as well as the social system that connects employees need to change.

Kolb et al.'s (2003) four-part framework for organizational change fits neatly within the sociotechnical perspective and may provide a structure for the solutions required to reduce gender bias. They argue that many theories for women's leadership fall into three categories: "fix the women," "create equal opportunity," and "celebrate differences" (Kolb et al., 2003, p. 5). They believe that their final category, "revise organizational culture" (Kolb et al., 2003, p. 5) holds greater promise for successful change. *Fix the women* and *create equal opportunity* can be viewed as technical solutions and *celebrate differences* as a social solution. *Revise work culture* has the potential for both technical and social change, thus increasing its likelihood of success.

Most current organizational approaches to supporting women fall into the technical category. *Fix the women* encourages women to assimilate, adopt masculine behaviors, and get training in assertive leadership and decision making. These strategies are seen in mentorship efforts designed to help women learn to fit workplace norms; they are also seen in training designed to teach women how to negotiate and boost their confidence. *Create equal opportunity* emphasizes the use of organizational policies to counteract structures that favor men (Kolb et al., 2003), such as policies for equal pay, flextime, and family leave.

Kolb et al. (2003) discuss another approach, *celebrate differences*, which aims to create more tolerant workplaces by acknowledging differences between male and female work styles and by valuing those associated with the feminine. These efforts fall into the "social" category and are perhaps less common than they were in the past under affirmative action and the era of diversity training workshops.

The last approach, *revise work culture* (Kolb et al., 2003), could be considered a sociotechnical approach. It starts with the premise that organizations are gendered and reflect masculine experiences, values, and life situations (Acker, 1992). The strategies in this approach attempt to revise work

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Table 4. Common Organizational Strategies

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Solution Type	Strategy	Level	Barrier
Technical: Fix the women	Mentoring programs Professional growth opportunities	Meso	Lack of mentoring Lack of sponsorship
	Assertiveness training for women	Micro	Psychological glass ceiling Personalizing
Technical: Create equal opportunity	Organizational policies • Affirmative action • Recruitment and promotion • Equal pay • Anti-harassment • Family responsibility accommodation (e.g., flextime and family leave)	Meso Micro	Discrimination Salary inequality Workplace harassment Work-life conflict
Social: Celebrate differences	Diversity training	Meso	Devaluing of communal practice
Sociotechnical: Revise work culture	Diverse boards and search committees	Meso	Male gatekeeping Queen-bee effect

practices, processes, and norms "in ways that are less gendered and more effective" (Kolb et al., 2003, p. 13). The creation of diverse organizational governing boards, a current approach, may fit in this category. Using board diversity as a pathway to bring more women into executive leadership may have social and technical effects, though more time is needed to see the full results of these efforts.

Each of the approaches we have discussed addresses only a few barriers, primarily at the meso and occasionally the micro levels. None of them extends across all three levels. Table 4 shows a summary of common organizational strategies, along with the targeted barrier and its level.

Crossing Levels and Boundaries

In order for organizations to create lasting improvement for women's leadership, the first step is to recognize that women encounter barriers at all three levels, and that macro and micro barriers impact women's ability to see themselves as leaders, as well as others' ability to consider them for leadership roles. Organizations therefore need to develop strategies that extend beyond the walls of the workplace to impact societal and personal perspectives on women. Strategies that take all these levels into account fit into Kolb et al.'s (2003) *revise work culture* category and Swanson and Holton's (2009) sociotechnical change approach. We suggest four organizational change approaches with broad-level impact, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Multi-Level Solutions

Solution Type	Strategy	Level	Barrier
Socio-technical: Revise work culture	Gender-equity workshops	Macro	Gender stereotypes Gender unconsciousness Leadership perceptions Scrutiny
		Meso	Glass cliff Male organizational culture Tokenism
		Micro	Communication style constraints Conscious unconsciousness
	New norms	Macro	Control of women's voices
		Meso	Devaluing of communal practice Lack of support
		Micro	Work-life conflict
	Community group partnerships	Macro	Cultural constraints on women's own choices Gender stereotypes
		Micro	Psychological glass ceiling
	Recognition of spousal contributions	Macro	Gender stereotypes
		Meso	Two-person career structure

Gender-Equity Workshops. First, organizations can hold gender-equity workshops to help leaders and employees understand how organizations are gendered and the resulting barriers for women. Important components are to make gender-based leadership barriers visible to participants by naming and describing them and to provide a safe space for discussion of how the organization can move toward equalism with specific action steps as outcomes. Objectives are to help organizational leaders reduce gendered leadership beliefs within their own ranks and ensure that appointments to leadership positions are based on candidate skills and qualifications instead of gendered associations, such as "think manager–think male and think crisis–think female" (Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink, & Haslam, 2014, p. 223). Such workshops would be useful in combatting gender-based leadership barriers at all three levels: macro: *gender stereotypes, gender unconsciousness*, *leadership perceptions*, and *scrutiny;* meso: *glass cliff*, *male organizational culture*, and *tokenism*; micro: *communication style constraints* and *conscious unconsciousness.*

New Norms. A second way organizations can revise work culture is to establish and communicate new workplace norms. For example, performance expectations can be tied to goals instead of time spent at work. Workplace norms around decision making and levels of authority should be made transparent and adhered to consistently. In addition, employees can be

encouraged and even required to take compensatory time off when they must work on projects outside of normal working hours. Norms can also be established to name, recognize, and reward communal practices for both men and women. Similarly, norms to name, recognize, and stop attempts to silence or control women can be established. Such new norms could also affect barriers at all three levels: macro: *control of women's voices;* meso: *devaluing of communal practice* and *lack of support;* micro: *work-life conflict.*

Community Group Partnerships. A third approach is to form partnerships with community groups that seek to eliminate gender barriers for girls and women. Women are particularly underrepresented in certain fields of study, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). More often than not, women are choosing gender-equitable and female-dominated majors as young adults in college. By the time these women graduate it is typically too late to get them into male-dominated career paths. Although the gender gap in leadership is much more than just a pipeline problem, in the case of STEM and other male-dominated fields, it begins with the pipeline. Until more women choose to study and work in these fields, men will likely continue to dominate future leadership opportunities in these industries. To combat this issue, organizations need to take a long-range view and work toward systemic solutions such as supporting community-based groups that seek to introduce and encourage girls to pursue careers in fields currently dominated by men. An example is the Girls Who Code nonprofit organization which works "to inspire, educate, and equip girls with computing skills to pursue 21st century opportunities" (Girls Who Code, 2014, para 1). Partnering with organizations that promote educational choices for girls is one way for organizations to communicate that they are serious about eliminating the gender gap in leadership. This would address three barriers: macro: *cultural constraints on women's own choices* and *gender stereotypes*; and micro: *psychological glass ceiling.*

Recognition of Spousal Contributions. Our last approach is the recognition of spousal contributions. The leader's spouse may be handling duties that could be delegated to others, such as event planning, committee work, and running work-related errands for the employed partner (Oden, 2007). Organizations should strive to eliminate expectations for unpaid organizational work performed by the leader's spouse. Alternatively, spouses of leaders could be brought on as compensated employees to recognize the role that they play. Although the nonemployed spouse may still be seen as an ambassador for the institution (Oden, 2007), compensating the spouse or delegating tasks to others will set an example of equalism at the top, which is a critical step toward organization culture change and will help eliminate the meso-level barrier of the *two-person career structure* and reduce the macro-level barrier of *gender stereotypes.*

Potential Outcomes

Taken together, the combination of technical, social, and sociotechnical approaches to degendering work culture holds great promise. As organizations

become aware of the multiple levels at which gender barriers operate, they can develop interventions to address the issues on all three levels within their own organizations. In addition, as individuals begin to produce and reproduce new norms within organizations, they likely will carry these new norms into the home and society. Because organizational performance depends on engaging the full expertise of all leaders (Swanson & Holton, 2009), not just males, making these invisible barriers visible and working to overcome them holds great promise for creating organizational environments in which both men and women can thrive. Improved organizational environments may lead to improvements in society as well.

Limitations and Future Research

There are four primary limitations to this study. First, as we have shown, women experience gender-based leadership barriers within both higher education and evangelical religious organizations. Since this study was focused on only those two contexts, future research should seek to examine gender-based leadership barriers sectors such as business, the military, law, politics, and entertainment. Future studies may also explore barriers in religious contexts beyond evangelicalism.

Second, the barriers named in this study were surfaced in the context of women describing general challenges in their personal and professional lives. Women may have experienced more of the barriers we named in this article, but lacked the framework to acknowledge or discuss their existence. Qualitative research in which the researcher presents gender-based leadership barriers to participants may examine the extent to which women leaders have had experience with all the barriers. Such research may even surface barriers not previously identified. Additionally, survey-based quantitative studies could examine the prevalence of gender-based leadership barriers across a large sample of women leaders and include results by demographic factors, such as age, race, ethnicity, region, and sector.

Third, because organizational change is notoriously difficult to achieve, more research is needed to address change at multiple levels simultaneously. We believe that organizational change can have a positive impact on society and that change must happen at home for change to happen in the organization and society.

Finally, thus far this research has been conducted with women leaders only. Future research should be undertaken with male leaders to discover how barriers impact men and to compare experiences of male and female leaders.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to present the results of a cross-sector analysis of leadership barriers encountered by women in executive leadership in

higher education and religious organizations. The divergent nature of the two sectors combined with the striking similarity of leadership barriers the women discussed led us to examine the likelihood that the barriers are traceable to being a woman in executive leadership, regardless of the type of organization. Furthermore, extending critical HRD theory, we have developed and presented a comprehensive framework that shows how these barriers operate at the macro, meso, and micro levels of society. In analyzing these barriers, we have argued that these barriers are deeply embedded in organizational structures and functions, rendering them at times virtually invisible. Our analysis of the barriers shows that most organizational efforts to support women in leadership focus on a few barriers, typically at the meso level. We have recommended broader strategies that will address barriers across all three levels in order to make them visible, eliminate them, and fully incorporate the potential leadership capacity of both men and women.

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