



Lack of Women in Leadership Positions due to Gender Inequality

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Abstract

Background: Women are not achieving leadership positions in the United States as gender inequality still permeates society. **Objectives:** This article attempts to identify and analyse the main issues and hurdles that are preventing women from achieving significant leadership positions. **Methods/Approach:** Many different contexts and theories such as sticky floors, broken rung, leaky pipeline, glass treadmill, glass escalator, glass funnel, glass labyrinth, firewalls, glass ceiling, and glass cliff reflect the mechanisms by which women are obstructed from achieving leadership positions. Additionally, there are debated obstacles and constructs such as barriers and biases, microaggressions, disparate compensation, mentorship, the Great Breakup, denial, and lack of awareness which are also contributing to women being unable to reach leadership positions. **Results:** Gender inequality must be overcome for women to achieve leadership positions as it is a fundamental right of fairness and it benefits businesses for women to lead. **Conclusions:** The way to achieve gender equality and allow for women to lead is through the implementation of the Equal Rights Amendment. In addition, there must be expanded protections for equal rights through 1) expanding the scope and operation of the Gender Policy Council, 2) establishing a Secretary of Equality, and 3) implementation of Federal Regulations for equality with specific benchmarks to achieve.

Keywords: gender inequality, women, leadership, Equal Rights Amendment

Paper type: Research article

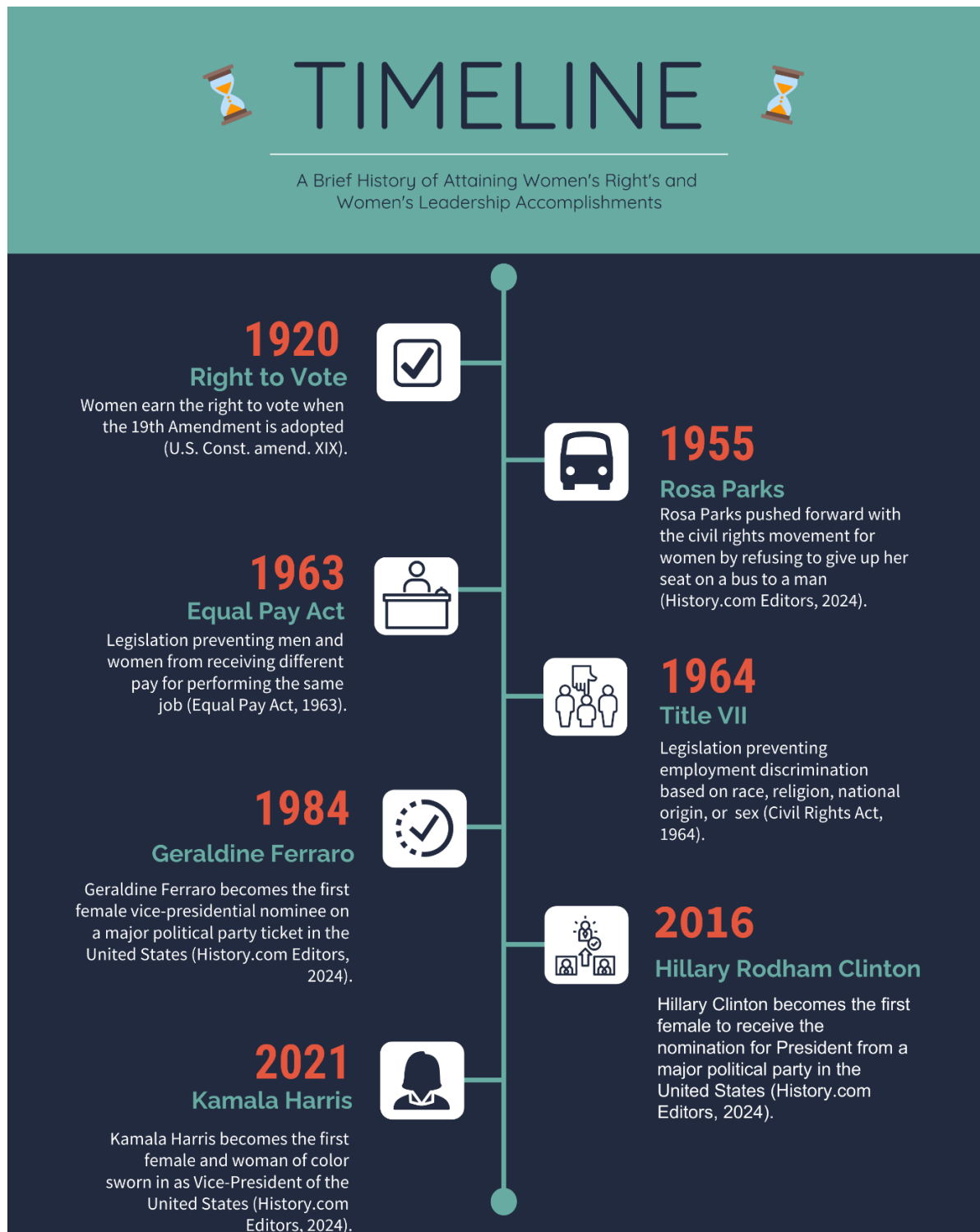
Introduction

Women are an essential part of society. They are the mothers who give birth to children, the sisters who support one another, and the matriarchs of families. Even with the inherent importance of women in society, they have not had an easy road. Time and again women have been forced to stand up and fight for their equality, their rights, and their voices. Women, though, are survivors and fighters who will continue to forge a path forward in their endeavours.

It has taken several years and multiple movements to get women to the position they are in today. Women did not earn the right to vote until the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed on June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920 (U.S. Const. amend. XIX). During the 1950s women still had considerably fewer rights than men. It was during this era in 1955 that Rosa Parks stirred the embers of the civil rights movement by refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a man (History.com Editors, 2024). This small act of defiance, based on the inequities of men and women in society, was the beginning of unrest and protest in the United States. This movement would continue to build momentum over the next several years until the culmination in the 1960s. In 1963, the Equal Pay Act was signed into law (Equal Pay Act, 1963). This monumental law prohibits sex-based wage discrimination in the workplace for men and women performing the same job (Equal Pay Act, 1963). In 1964 the Civil Rights Act was signed into law (Civil Rights Act, 1964). This law, also known as Title VII, bans employment discrimination based on race, religion, national origin, or sex (Civil Rights Act, 1964). See Figure 1 for timeline of these notable events.

Figure 1

A Timeline of Women's Rights Progress and Leadership Milestones in the United States



Source. Author's Illustration (2025).

Discussion

Gender inequality (men are favored more than women) still exists and causes a lack of women in leadership positions (men are given leadership opportunities more often than women). To understand gender inequality and, in turn, to address why there is a lack of women in leadership positions, it is first necessary to understand the contexts and concepts that surround the inequitable structure that has perpetuated this situation. The following review will assess and evaluate these constructs to understand

how they contribute to gender inequality and the resultant dearth of women in leadership (see Table 1 for summary of relevant areas addressed herein).

Table 1

Breakdown of Concepts, Theories, and Studies of Gender Inequality

Concepts, Theories, and Studies	Definition
Sticky Floors	Women being stuck in the early parts of their careers in entry level positions (Shabsough et al., 2020).
Broken Rung	Missing or broken first steps in women's careers prevent them from ascending the ladders of success (Parmer, 2021).
Leaky Pipeline	Women enter the workforce in significantly higher numbers than end up in higher level positions as they are forced out along the way due to biases and barriers which force them out along the way (Stadler et al., 2021).
Glass Treadmill	Women are given trivial tasks and busy work to give the illusion that they are important and kept busy, yet they never make any progress in their career (Arendt & Nuru, 2023).
Glass Escalator	Men get fast tracked to higher positions, usually in women dominated professions (Iantosca & Lemke, 2022).
Glass Funnel	Takes into account that men and women exist together in the journey to leadership, but it shows how women can be flushed through faster due to biases and gender-based distinctions (Hedlin & Åberg, 2020).
Glass Labyrinth	Maze of challenges which are visible and invisible which women face (Ayesa et al., 2022).
Firewalls	Involves identifying the structure and triggers of discrimination along with how to address them in terms of all people (not just women) (Andersson et al., 2021).
Glass Ceiling	Invisible barriers that women encounter in their attempts to reach top career positions (Naguib & Madeeha, 2023).
Glass Cliff	Women who are finally given the opportunity at the highest career level only to encounter this at a time of crisis for the company or entity which essentially sets them up for automatic failure (Glass & Cook, 2019).

Source: Author's Illustration (2025).

Sticky Floors

One of the invisible barriers that obstructs women from advancing in their careers past entry-level positions is the 'sticky floors' (Shabsough et al., 2020). This issue arises in the early parts of women's careers and is indicative of a lack of ability to grow. While women are qualified, they are overlooked while their male counterparts are promoted over them (Shabsough et al., 2020). Women are left in "low-wage, dead-end and junior to middle-level positions" (Shabsough et al., 2020, p. 45). Thus, they are left at the ground level, stuck to the sticky floor. If women are not able to get their feet off the sticky floor, they will never be able to traverse up the 'corporate ladder.'

In their 2020 study, Shabsough et al. assessed the role of social networking through the relationship of entrepreneurial intention and sticky floor. This study looked at 294

women in the work environment (Shabsough et al., 2020). The notion was that women stuck in lower-level positions may be spurred to start their own businesses (Shabsough et al., 2020). The study found that as women's perceptions of the sticky floor phenomenon increase, so does their entrepreneurial intentions (Shabsough et al., 2020). Therefore, women who feel that they are being held back by the invisible barriers of the sticky floor are more likely to start their own business (Shabsough et al., 2020). This is showing that the women who are most feeling the sticky floor barrier are not likely to address this through their employer but by leaving their job.

Broken Rung

The broken rung is the barrier that women encounter in climbing the ladder to ascend to higher positions in companies and to attain leadership positions. This is the first step that women need to take in their journey up the preverbal ladder of success. The term 'broken rung' signifies that this early step is either broken or not there (Parmer, 2021).

This complication in the path to ascending the ladder makes not only the first step of a woman's journey difficult but it impacts the entire journey that a woman takes to upper-level positions (Parmer, 2021). As a result, women end up trapped in lower-level positions. The broken rung is the very first step up in the gender leadership gap (McFee, 2024). In terms of how the broken rung plays out in practice, for every 87 women who are promoted there are 100 men who are promoted (McFee, 2024).

Leaky Pipeline

The leaky pipeline is when women advance along the pipeline of career and leadership advancement at a slower pace than men. The reason is because along the way through the 'pipe' there are leaks which cause women to fall through the cracks and ultimately be at a disadvantage from the men who are also in the pipe (Stadler et al., 2021).

It was determined by Stadler et al. that there are unconscious biases and barriers to getting into, staying in, and progressing through the pipeline (2021). First, in entering the pipeline it was identified that there is leaking, among other things, because of work-life balance concerns, cultural contexts, and gender norms (Stadler et al., 2021). In terms of staying (working) in the pipeline there were multiple barriers identified which included perception of balance of work versus reward and caregiver responsibilities (Stadler et al., 2021). Finally, and significantly, the barrier to advancement includes lack of role models, confidence, mentorship, networking, and other issues (Stadler et al., 2021).

DeVona and Weiner also pursued study of the leaky pipeline in their 2024 study. Their results were akin to Stadler et al. but expanded. DeVona and Weiner's results suggested that the leaky pipeline continues to perpetuate because of three factors 1) representation, 2) mentorships, and 3) hiring biases (2024). Representation involves not only seeing other people like yourself who are in leadership positions but those people in leadership positions being able to see you (being seen) (DeVona & Weiner, 2024). If men are all that are seen it inhibits women's abilities to 'see' themselves in leadership positions (DeVona & Weiner, 2024). Additionally, being seen is not always afforded to all persons if they do not look like the people who are leading (DeVona & Weiner, 2024). Mentorships allow for the opportunity to learn, build relationships with influential leaders, and gain insight (DeVona & Weiner, 2024). Mentorships provide a

level of learning that is not readily available to all persons and provides a distinct advantage to mentees (DeVona & Weiner, 2024). In a situation wherein there is an inordinately high number of male leaders (lack of women leaders) it would make it increasingly more difficult for women to engage in these mentorship relationships. Finally, hiring bias is when people favor those individuals who share similarities to existing and prior leaders (DeVona & Weiner, 2024).

Glass Treadmill

The glass treadmill is when women are given tasks and kept 'busy' but not with meaningful jobs and opportunities. Therefore, women are continuously moving but not forward or upwards in their career trajectories as they remain in one place as if on a treadmill (Arendt & Nuru, 2023). The Arendt & Nuru study looks at the gender gap which exists with men and women in leadership (2023). The investigation involved interviews with 31 women which resulted in three themes contributing to the lack of advancement of women in leadership which includes: "disconnects between mentorship needed and mentorship received, disconnects between leadership opportunities and "opportunities," and disconnects between advice given and action taken" (Arendt & Nuru, 2023, p. 369). As a result, the glass treadmill was thus offered as an explanation of the lack of advancement of women (Arendt & Nuru, 2023).

Glass Escalator

The glass escalator exists when men are expedited to leadership positions in fields which women hold most positions (Iantosca & Lemke, 2022). This upward mobility advantage for males puts women at a disadvantage in areas where they have a strong presence. The resultant catapulting of men upwards to the upper leadership positions essentially places them on an escalator that moves quickly ahead of women who are left to climb up the ladder.

Iantosca & Lemke performed a study that looked through the lens of gender inequality of high school counsellors (2022). This study included in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 counsellors which determined that the role of gender in leadership expectations was evident (Iantosca & Lemke, 2022). In the instance where both men and women did not want to pursue leadership positions it was found that men encountered both internal and external pressure to take on such positions and women only received minor encouragement to pursue leadership positions (Iantosca & Lemke, 2022). These results continue to bolster the traditional gender identity roles of men and women (Iantosca & Lemke, 2022). Additionally, the study showed the glass escalator in practice.

The reason for the continued permeation of the glass escalator includes the systemic problems with power dynamics seen between men and women coupled with engrained gender stereotypes (Clerkin, 2024). This phenomenon is continually seen in leadership positions across the fields but especially in areas which are female dominated (i.e., nonprofits) (Clerkin, 2024). Even with all evidence to the contrary the gender perceptions that men are more competent than women drive the perpetuance of the glass escalator (Clerkin, 2024). Therefore, even if there are a multitude of qualified female candidates, men will be sought out and promoted thus resulting in the glass escalator (Clerkin, 2024).

Glass Funnel

The glass funnel is used to describe the problems with career advancement while considering the constructs of gender segregation and discrimination (Hedlin & Åberg, 2020). This term was coined in Hedlin & Åberg's study functions as a dynamic depiction of the issues as opposed to previous static depictions of the glass escalator and the glass ceiling (2020). The funnel is a mechanism in which both men and women exist in together. Even though women may be flushed through the funnel faster than men, the glass funnel construct accounts for men being present and adding the complexity that gender inequality does not occur in a vacuum (Hedlin & Åberg, 2020).

Glass Labyrinth

The glass labyrinth is, for women, a collection of "seen and unseen challenges to leadership engagement and progression when compared to men" (Ayesa et al., 2022, p. 155). It is a labyrinth because it is a complex and tedious journey to the other side where there is something important waiting (i.e., leadership positions for women). This journey through the labyrinth is complex and not straightforward. Women are already on a tedious journey to get to their desired leadership positions. Therefore, the addition of the seen and unseen obstacles within the labyrinth amounts to additional hindrances on an already difficult journey.

Ayesa et al. endeavored to explore the glass labyrinth in the context of gender composition in Australia and New Zealand regarding radiology leadership (2022). This study was undertaken due to a lack of gender diversity in radiology leadership (Ayesa et al., 2022). The study reviewed and assessed the composition of multiple radiology councils to determine the gender composition (Ayesa et al., 2022). What was determined was that there was a severe lack of women's representation (Ayesa et al., 2022). The reason for this is complicated and complex but it was determined that glass labyrinth is contributing to this deficit (Ayesa et al., 2022). To overcome this there must be multifaceted strategies which will take time to implement but must be addressed (Ayesa et al., 2022).

Firewalls

The term 'firewall' is a recent one which was coined so that people could see the structural character of discrimination patterns, find the triggers of discrimination, and address them (Andersson et al., 2021). This came about in response to the traditional issues in women's career trajectory problems which include glass ceiling, sticky floors, and labyrinths. These terms have a distinctly female connotation to them. Therefore, the term firewall originated to have a more neutral grounding as opposed to its predecessor terms (Andersson et al., 2021).

Andersson et al.'s study involved 13 women and five men in the Swedish trucking industry who were interviewed (2021). It was found that using the firewall metaphor was helpful in identifying different steps in processes which are problematic (Andersson et al., 2021). It also drives home the point that framing the issue and the language that is used to discuss these matters is important.

Glass Ceiling

"The term "glass ceiling" typically refers to systemic gender inequality in the public sphere, which stems from stereotypes and prejudices against women in positions of

authority” (Naguib & Madeeha, 2023, p. 2). The glass ceiling is the most well-known construct in terms of the challenges that women face in their career progressions. These unseen barriers which prevent women from reaching top positions (Naguib & Madeeha, 2023). This has been long been discussed and documented in the Western countries (including the United States), but this issue prevails in all corners of the world (Naguib & Madeeha, 2023).

Naguib & Madeeha attempted to bring this topic into view in the public sector of Qatari by conducting interviews (open-ended and semi-structured) (2023). The group was composed of 45 participants of which 67% were women and 33% were men (Naguib & Madeeha, 2023). The main thrust of the study was to provide meaningful contribution to the work on gender inequality (Naguib & Madeeha, 2023). What Naguib & Madeeha found, though, was that “concealed power dynamics, gender biases, and work-family struggles...hinder women’s access to leadership positions...” (2023, p. 8). Additionally, even with the positive attitude of the Qatari public sector regarding women gender bias is still permeating through and curtailing women’s advancement in careers (Naguib & Madeeha, 2023).

Glass Cliff

The glass cliff refers to the situation in which women are, finally, ascended into the pinnacle or upper management positions only in times of strife or great discord of the entity or company (Glass & Cook, 2019). In this situation these women leaders are left to deal with an already bad circumstance on their own. This tendency to only promote women to these positions in such treacherous times sets them up for failure.

Glass & Cook venture through the previously overlooked issue of the cost of women (and racial/ethnic minority leaders) in their career trajectories as they venture to the glass cliff (2019). It was posited that it is because of the choices, decisions, and priorities of these women that their careers lead them directly to the cliff (Glass & Cook, 2019). This trajectory, though, comes at a price. The study involved interviews and discussions with 33 leaders (Glass & Cook, 2019). It concluded that the tax which is paid by these women includes “perfection standard of performance, fear of career derailment, and performance fatigue.” (Glass & Cook, 2019, p. 649).

Key Debates and Controversies

In addition to the key concepts and theories identified above, it is also necessary to understand the key debates and controversies surrounding gender inequality and the lack of women in leadership. These are the debated constructs which people question whether they are relevant to or exist as an impediment to women. The following are a few of the main debates and controversies currently surrounding the lack of women in leadership due to gender inequality (see Table 2 for summary of relevant terms).

Table 2

Breakdown of Key Debates and Controversies

Key Debates and Controversies	Definition
Barriers and Biases	Conscious or unconscious stereotypes, perceptions of what leadership should look like (including identity and traits) along with a resultant lack of training can be barriers and biases to women in attaining leadership positions (Barkhuizen et al., 2022, p.).
Microaggressions	Small but impactful dismissive or hurtful actions of people and management which disrupt the work and advancement of women (Field et al., 2023).
Disparate Compensation	Women earning less than men in the same positions (England et al., 2020).
Mentorship	Lack of women to serve as mentors (i.e., providing guidance for personal and professional goals and needs) as there is a lack of women in upper leadership positions (Georgousakis & Vassallo, 2023).
The Great Breakup	Women leaving the workforce at higher rates (due to multiple factors such as lack of DEI training, microaggressions, compensation, and work-life balance) than they can be replaced (Corbett, 2022).
Denial	Companies believe that gender inequality exists but that it is not an issue at their place of business or with their employees (King, 2020).
Lack of Awareness	People do not see gender inequality as they are not paying attention and until they see what is truly happening around them the situation will continue to get worse (Scherpereel, 2023).

Source: Author's Illustration (2025).

Barriers and Biases

There exist multiple barriers to women from attaining leadership positions which arise from stereotypes which may lead men to believe that women are not qualified for positions. There are also barriers in the form of biases which exist as to what leadership traits *should* be exhibited by candidates. These traits are generally masculine and thus lean towards men and not women candidates. These biases (conscious or unconscious) and barriers are forms of discrimination which work to make women seem unqualified and thus thwart their opportunities for leadership positions.

Barkhuizen et al. looked at the gender imbalance in the workplace and the factors which contribute to women's inability to ascend to positions as senior business leaders (2022). This analysis was undertaken through a qualitative study of nine women who made significant strides in their professions within the South African business context (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). The goal was to find what inhibited women from career advancement. The study found six factors that impede women from advancing in their careers which include "societal perceptions and stereotypes, a lack of mentorship, masculine corporate cultures, leadership identity distortions, inadequate training and

development and poor work-life balance” (Barkhuizen et al., 2022, p. 1). This study provides practical and managerial implications for organizations to use to provide a better environment for women and their career advancement.

The first factor was that of societal expectations and stereotypes. This comes because of society’s belief as to the roles of men and women (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). For women this includes care and nurturing along with taking care of the family unit (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Additionally, gender stereotypes were found to shadow women with doubt as to their ability to perform in male associated roles (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

The factor regarding corporate culture and practices was cited as the third most constraining in Barkhuizen et al.’s study (2022). The two biggest issues which curtailed women’s advancement were hostile corporate culture and gender equity practices were not enforced (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). It was found that even if there were policies regarding gender equity practices there were no consequences for failure to follow them (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

The culture of the companies being masculine in nature led to the leadership identity distortion factor (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). This is because women felt constrained if they were to act as themselves or in a feminine manner. Thus, to break through to leadership positions they had to take on a more masculine persona which was not true to their identity but merely a means to end to achieve the position (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

The final two factors are inadequate training and development and poor work-life balance (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). The training was either not available, or it was of no effect to assist women in attaining promotions (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Work-life balance was seen as constantly at odds with both not being able to be exacted in the same sphere because of the demands of work conflicting with family life (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

McKague et al. addressed the gendered challenges faced by the community health workers with social enterprises in Africa (2021). Through individual interviews and focus group discussions of 175 total individuals (106 women and 69 men) it was determined that female community health workers faced seven gender-based constraints that were not a barrier to males which included “1) higher time burden and lack of economic empowerment; 2) risks to personal safety; 3) lack of career advancement and leadership opportunities; 4) lack of access to needed equipment, medicines and transport; 5) lack of access to capital; 6) lack of access to social support and networking opportunities; and 7) insufficient financial and non-financial incentives” (McKague et al., 2021, p. 1). As to the lack of career advancement and leadership opportunities, the reason for this was because of (a lack of) education, training, and sociocultural norms (McKague et al., 2021). Additionally, the females interviewed cited a lack of ability to connect with each other or other leaders (i.e., mentoring, coaching, and female-to-female connections) (McKague et al., 2021).

The issue of gender bias in leadership selection was addressed in Player et al.’s 2019 study. Specifically, the study differentiated between males and females using leadership potential and leadership performance (Player et al., 2019). What was found

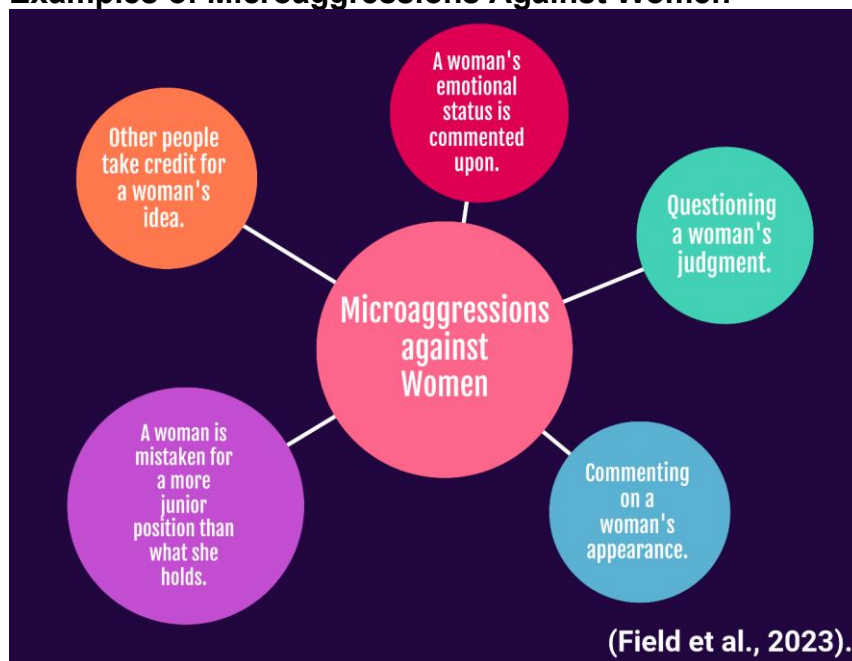
through two experiments was that male leadership potential was valued more than performance, but female candidates were preferred when they showed leadership performance (not potential) (Player et al., 2019). Therefore, women have an inherent disadvantage in organizational hiring due to the bias shown for leadership potential positions (Player et al., 2019). Given that leadership potential is a trait which is preferred by most employers' women would be automatically at a disadvantage, and thus a barrier, in all hiring processes due to the association with males having the leadership potential (Player et al., 2019).

Meng & Neill addressed the issue of inclusive leadership in relation to the realm of public relations through the means of an online survey (2021). This was an important endeavour as women in public relations hold an overwhelming number of positions (70%) but only 30% of leadership positions (Meng & Neill, 2021). Meng & Neil discuss the use of inclusive leadership into the framework of public relations for working through the gender inequality issues and to empower women (2021). Inclusive leadership is characterized by "leaders' openness, accessibility and availability within the organizational environment" (Meng & Neil, 2021, p. 152). It was found that organizations which employ inclusive leadership will get benefits at many diverse levels and thus relieve a barrier to women (Meng & Neil, 2021).

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are perceived to be trivial instances which are thought to have a small impact (Field et al., 2023). These things, though, have a macro effect on places of work and on women (Field et al., 2023). These issues cause women to not feel safe in their jobs and at work (Field et al., 2023). Additionally, these microaggressions cause 78% of women to "self-shield at work" which means that they alter their appearance or the way they act to feel safe (Field et al., 2023, p. 17). Some examples of the microaggressions that women encounter are listed in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Examples of Microaggressions Against Women



Source: Author's Illustration (2025).

These microaggressions are the cause of many adverse outcomes and staggering statistics (Field et al., 2023). Women who experience microaggressions are (1) “4.2x more likely to almost always feel burned out,” (2) “3.3x more likely to consider leaving their company,” and (3) “3.8x more likely to feel they don’t have an equal opportunity to advance” (Field et al., 2023, p. 20). These microaggressions which do not appear to be bothering companies are a million little things that taken together are causing large scale disruption and problems for companies and women.

Disparate Compensation

In looking to determine if gender inequality is still permeating society and certain industries a relevant factor to review is the gender pay gap (England et al., 2020). Over time it has been seen that, while working the same positions, women earn less than men across the board (England et al., 2020). These discrepancies and disparities are pervasive in all industries including leadership. Even though there have been some strides made over the years, this gap remains (England et al., 2020).

England and his team looked at the wages of men versus women from the 1970s through 2018 (2020). While the pay gap between men and women has reduced over time it still exists (England et al., 2020). Additionally, progress to further close the pay gap has stalled in recent years (England et al., 2020). As of 2018, women earn (at the median) 83% of what men make (England et al., 2020). This disparate compensation is not only an indicator but a symptom of the gender inequality which exists in society and must be addressed.

Mentorship

Lack of mentorship has been identified over multiple areas and articles as a factor which has held women back and led to lack of women in leadership positions. In addressing this issue, it is first necessary to identify what mentorship is and is not (Georgousakis & Vassallo, 2023). Mentorship is not supervision in which someone tells another person what to do (Georgousakis & Vassallo, 2023). Mentorship is a professional relationship in which a mentor provides a mentee with guidance based on the mentee’s personal and professional goals and needs (Georgousakis & Vassallo, 2023).

It has been asserted that inspiring women can and do serve as role models for women in the same field (Mekahli, 2021). This has been especially prevalent in science as, globally, only a third of researchers are female (Mekahli, 2021). They also sustain gender discrimination and lack access to opportunities (Mekahli, 2021). These issues, it has been posited, could have been thwarted with the recognition and visibility of mentors and role models (Mekahli, 2021). Women such as Elizabeth Blackwell (first woman doctor) and Marie Curie (Nobel prize winning physicist) opened the doors to opportunities for women (Mekahli, 2021). Without such representation and modelling for other women it is hard for up-and-coming women to see what lengths they can achieve.

The idea and promotion of mentorship was also posited in Hill, et al.’s study regarding women in superintendency positions. Since the United States Public Education system is still not a formidable place for women in upper leadership roles, including superintendents, Hill and her team performed a qualitative study of 36 women in

various points of their career and leadership track (Hill et al., 2020). The data was then analyzed using Life Course Theory. The finding was that “life circumstances precluded the existence of choice for those women who failed to pursue the superintendency” (Hill et al., 2020, p. 189). The final determination is that to tip the gender imbalance in the direction of women it will be necessary to delve into the strategies and choices made by the women who have surpassed the challenges and are thriving as superintendents (Hill et al., 2020).

The Great Breakup

Women are leaving their jobs at a rate which is faster than women can be promoted into those positions (McFee, 2024). This is what is referred to as the *Great Breakup* (Corbett, 2022). While it may appear that women are leaving the ‘workforce’ what they are really doing is breaking up with their companies due to working conditions (Corbett, 2022). Women are not getting the respect, working conditions, and other things that they need from companies and as a result women are leaving. There are several factors which have influenced the breakup including microaggressions (discussed above), lack of compensation for diversity, equity, and inclusion (“DEI”) efforts, lack of manager training, and work-life balance (Corbett, 2022).

One of the things contributing to this exodus is the additional work women are taking on which is not being compensated (Corbett, 2022). There is a big push for DEI initiatives by companies, and this is being answered by women stepping up to add in these strategies (Corbett, 2022). This work, though, is not being recognized or rewarded by companies thereby this work, which the company expects on top of the normal workload, is unpaid work for women to do (Corbett, 2022).

Another factor is belonging. Managers are essentially the gatekeepers of workplace culture and having a good manager can be the difference of staying or leaving a job (Corbett, 2022). There is a growing issue of how well managers are equipped for this position through their training (Corbett, 2022). There is a deficit in the understanding that managers have in making effective decisions and balancing needs of employees in work environments especially considering remote and hybrid work options (Corbett, 2022). All this amounts to a deficit in training which companies must address.

Finally, women under the age of 30 are not suffering the environments that women of the past have weathered. These women are likely to leave if there is no work-life balance (Corbett, 2022). Two-thirds of women under 30 would be interested in advancing in their careers so long as their leadership is reflecting work-life balance (Corbett, 2022). Additionally, 58% of these women say that moving up in their careers is important (Corbett, 2022). These women are eager to advance but they are also cognizant of what the working environment looks like, and they are not willing to sacrifice what they hold important for their careers.

Denial

King frames the lack of women in leadership matter not as a representational issue (i.e., more women and less men) as that will only deflate men and make women feel like token hires (2020). Instead, to approach and address the lack of women in leadership issue King asserts that companies should strive to “create a culture that values, rewards, and supports individual difference” (2020, p. 3). Through culture of embracing and valuing difference companies will inherently value equality which will

lead to both men and women ascending to and maintaining leadership positions (King, 2020). King asserts, though, that the reason that this is not how companies are leading and approaching the issuing because of one reason, denial (2020).

People generally acknowledge that problems exist, and that gender bias is a real issue (Kelan, 2020). Kelan sets forth that these same people, though, believe (1) 'not here' (aka these kinds of issues happen elsewhere), (2) it is all in the past (this is not a modern age issue), (3) it is a non-issue because women have benefits at jobs (past efforts to combat gender inequality make it so women can succeed), and (4) they ignore it (they see these issues occur but they explain it through things other than gender inequality) (2020). This stance on the issue adds up to denial which is holding women and companies back from making progress. Unless and until companies stop denying the existence and magnitude of these issues of gender bias, gender inequality, and gender fatigue women will continue to be held back and not succeed (Kelan, 2020).

Lack of Awareness

While denial is people actively debating that gender inequality exists, lack of awareness is where people are not even engaging in the conversation and therefore have no idea that there is an issue with gender inequality. To effectuate change and get more women into leadership positions it is necessary to start with awareness. Awareness exists on the individual, organizational, and industry wide levels (Heffernan & Kihl, 2024). Awareness is also a continuum that runs from low (does not see a problem and believes that the system is fine), intermediate (knows there is a problem but does not know how to effectuate change), and high (knows there is a problem and work to make change) (Heffernan & Kihl, 2024).

For gender equality to be achieved people, organizations, and industries must stretch their awareness to high awareness. To achieve gender equality there must be both a covenant of the individuals along with the organization circumstances to reach the goal (Scherpereel, 2023). Currently, though, there is no requirement for individuals, organizations, or industries to stretch their awareness to the high end of the scale because there are no consequences.

Gaps in Existing Knowledge

The literature available on gender inequality and the problems females face is extensive (Belingeri et al., 2021). There are all kinds of research into the different types of barriers, transgressions, inequalities, etc. that exist which inhibit women from ascending to leadership positions (Belingeri et al., 2021). What is lacking, overall, are effective solutions to solving the problem of gender inequality and the gender bias which permeates society (Belingeri et al., 2021).

In terms of the problem there needs to be a clear understanding of what the issue is and how to fix it. In looking at this it is necessary to differentiate the terms inequality, equality, equity, and justice. Inequality is when people do not have the same access to possibilities and things (Juda, 2022). Equality is when everyone has the same access to possibilities and things (i.e., everyone receives the same treatment) (Juda, 2022). Equity is focused on individual fairness by giving specific and customized advantages to those who need additional support (Juda, 2022). Lastly, justice is about fixing the system so that fairness is universal to everyone (Juda, 2022).

To effectuate change the discriminatory and unjust system must be reformed (DeVona & Weiner, 2024). “To enforce women empowerment...we need to implement justice...” (Farrukh & Baqai, 2023, p. 223). Justice will combat the system issues that ridicule women and their attempts to reach leadership positions. Justice comes in the form of laws. Laws that have been implemented over the years include:

1920 – Ratification of the 19th Amendment (giving women the right to vote) provides that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex” (U.S. Const. amend. XIX).

1963 – Equal Pay Act, amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 prohibited gender discrimination for men and women performing the same job in the workplace and states in relevant part “prohibit discrimination on account of sex in the payment of wages” (Equal Pay Act, 1963).

1964 – Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted to ensure overall equality in the workplace and prohibited discrimination against employees based on “race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” (Civil Rights Act, 1964).

1972 – Educational Amendment of 1972 (Title IX) was a monumental law enacted to ensure that “[n]o person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Title IX of the Educational Amendments, 1972).

1978 – Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 amended Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and provided that “[o]n the basis of sex” employers are prohibited from using “pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions” to discriminate against women in all employment decisions such as hiring, promotion, and suspension (Pregnancy Discrimination Act, 1978).

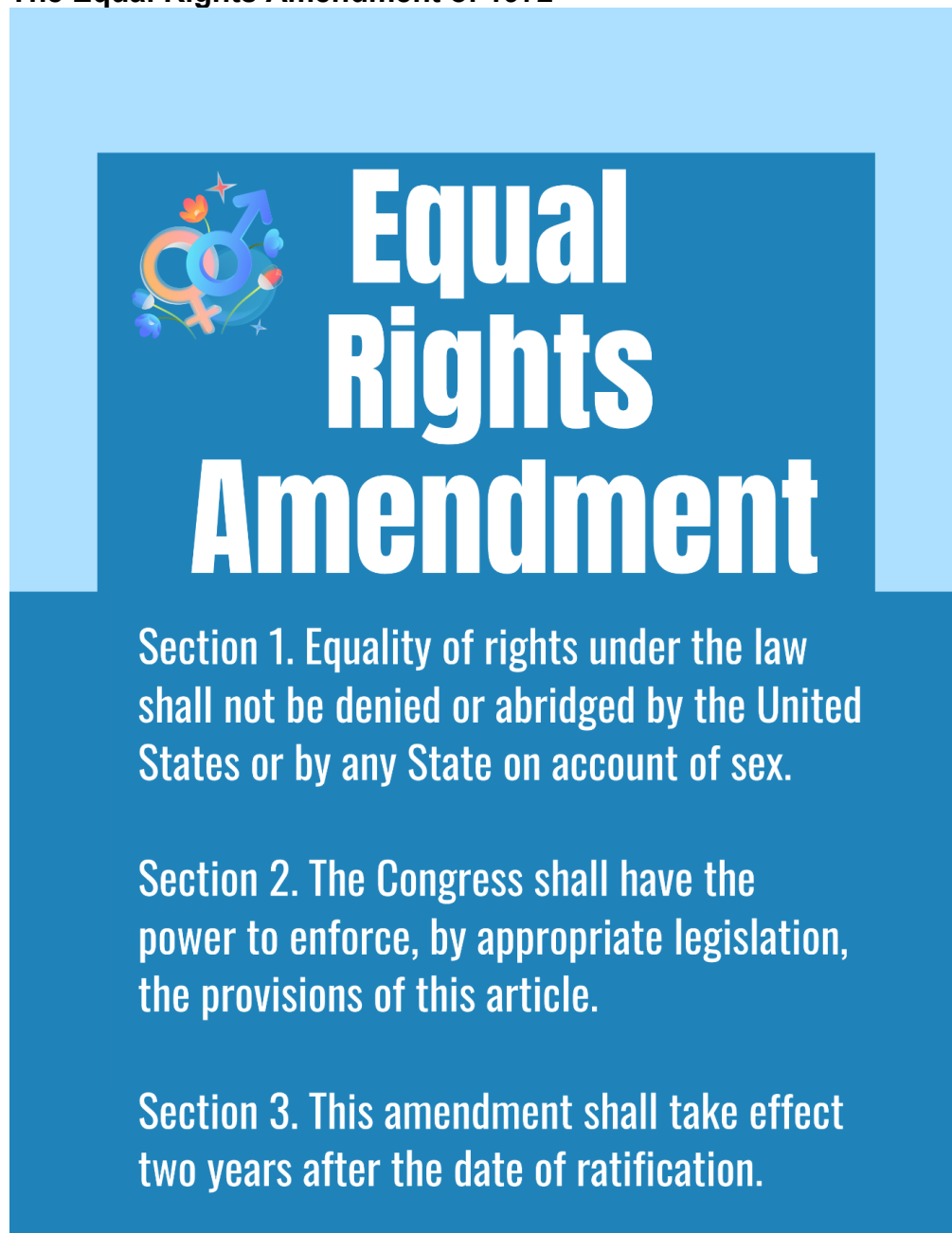
With all these laws on the books and in effect how are women not already afforded equality? The laws and protections which have been afforded above are a good start but as can be seen through the cited research herein, women are not afforded the same equality as men, and this is manifesting itself in the lack of women in leadership positions. What is missing in the United States which has not been assessed, and which would evolve the equality fight is an Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution.

The Equal Rights Amendment

Work has been occurring for the last 100 years to add an amendment to the United States Constitution guaranteeing equal rights (Columbia Law School, 2021). This battle originated in 1923 shortly after the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution which gave women the right to vote (Columbia Law School, 2021). Although simple in language, the Equal Rights Amendment implications would have far reaching repercussions (Columbia Law School, 2021).

In 1972 Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment (Columbia Law School, 2021). The text of such amendment was “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex” (Columbia Law School, 2021, para. 8). See Figure 3 for full text of the amendment.

Figure 3
The Equal Rights Amendment of 1972



Source: Columbia Law School, 2021; Author's Illustration (2025).

To finalize the amendment, it had requirements imposed by Congress so that it would take effect two years after it was ratified by 38 states (Columbia Law School, 2021). In 1973, 30 of the 38 states had ratified the amendment (Columbia Law School, 2021). There was a seven year extension of time implemented to achieve the ratification requirements (Columbia Law School, 2021). At the end of the ratification time limit imposed by Congress, the Equal Rights Amendment had obtained ratification by 35 states (Columbia Law School, 2021). The amendment, though, was still three states short (Columbia Law School, 2021). At this time there was a large anti-Equal Rights Amendment push along the lines of fear and misunderstanding of what such an amendment would mean to 'traditional' American values and as a result the amendments progress came to an abrupt stop (Columbia Law School, 2021).

It was not until 2017, 2018, and 2020 that the Equal Rights Amendment regained its momentum and received the final three ratifications it needed from Nevada, Illinois, and Virginia for it to achieve approval of the required ratification from 38 states (Columbia Law School, 2021). The problem, though, is that the time for the ratification process had long expired (Columbia Law School, 2021). Additionally, there had been some states who attempted to rescind their ratifications (Columbia Law School, 2021). These things leave the status of the Equal Rights Amendment uncertain.

Why the Equal Rights Amendment is Necessary

The amendment is necessary to make a difference for gender equality. Although many strides have been made in the last several decades for gender equality through different court cases and rulings there is still work to be done. The biggest portion of cases that ruled in favor of gender equality did so under the auspices of the 14th Amendment (Venetis, 2024). The 14th Amendment is no substitute for an equal rights amendment to the United States Constitution.

The 14th Amendment provides in relevant part that no State shall “...deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws...” (U.S. Const. amend. XIV). This amendment was originally enacted in 1868 after the Civil War (Venetis, 2024). The intention of the amendment was to prevent racial discrimination since Black people were entitled to equal protection (Venetis, 2024).

The 14th Amendment is written quite broadly with no mention of gender or sex in it (U.S. Const. amend. XIV). There were several attempts prior to the 1970s to use the 14th Amendment to provide equal protections to women but they were unsuccessful (Venetis, 2024). It was not until Ruth Bader Ginsburg argued and won five of six Supreme Court cases in the 1970s which ushered in an era of unprecedented rights to women which arose out of Ginsburg’s legal brilliance and maneuvering of the 14th Amendment (Venetis, 2024).

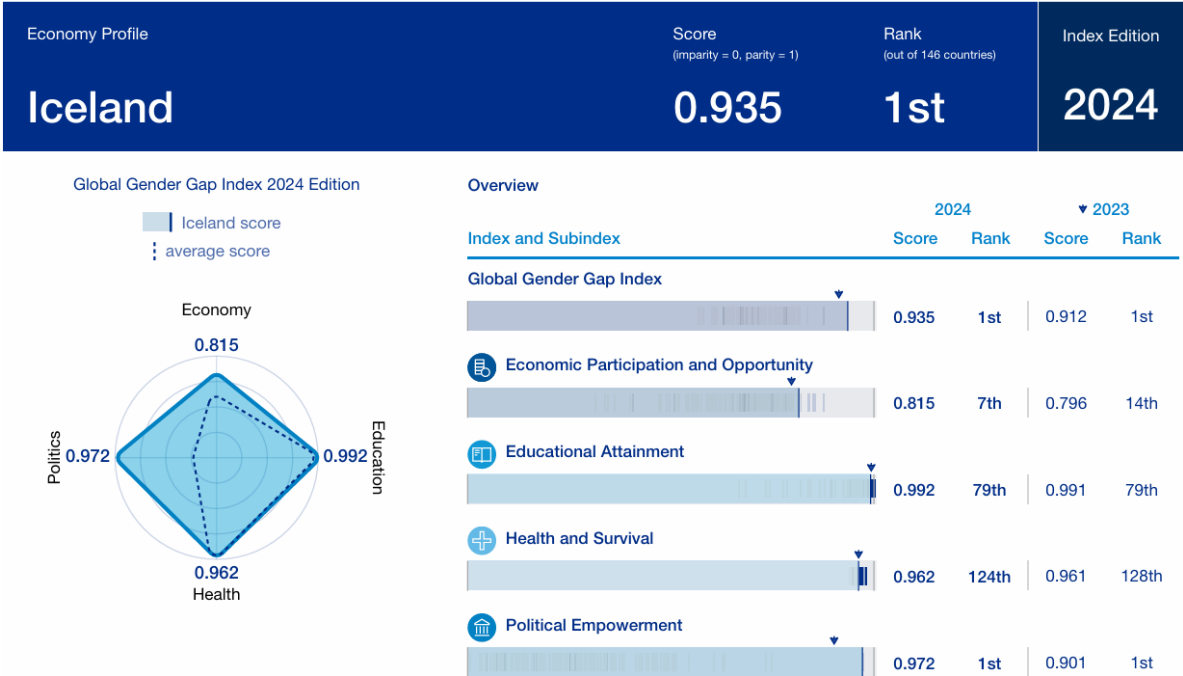
While Ginsburg’s efforts and advancements for women are phenomenal, they were at the hand of an amendment which was originally intended for racial disparities and only effectuated through constitutional interpretation. The issue with this is that it leaves those rights which were established by caselaw vulnerable to reassessment by another composition of the Supreme Court of the United States who may interpret the 14th Amendment in a different manner. Nothing more plainly frames this issue than the famous quote of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia who famously said in 2011 “Certainly the Constitution does not require discrimination on the basis of sex. The only issue is whether it prohibits it. It doesn’t” (Jenkins, 2019, para. 4).

The Equal Rights Amendment is necessary as it will solidify the tenet of equality which is the cornerstone of America and American democracy (Columbia Law School, 2021). The Equal Rights Amendment will also fill in the deficiencies that exist in the current law schemes and require the utmost level of review for discrimination based on gender (Columbia Law School, 2021). It will also bring the United States on par with the 14 countries who have already enacted this safeguard of legal protection (Buchholz, 2023).

Taking the Equal Rights Amendment One-Step Further: Iceland, a Paradigm

Iceland is one of the 14 countries worldwide that has full legal protections for women and gender equality (Buchholz, 2023). Additionally, according the 2024 Global Gender Gap report Iceland ranks first out of 146 countries in achieving gender parity according to its global gender gap index with a score of 0.935 (1.0 being full gender parity) (World Economic Forum). Iceland, it appears, is leading the way to gender equality as its Constitution states clearly and in relevant part, “[e]veryone shall be equal before the law and enjoy human rights irrespective of sex, religion, opinion, national origin, race, colour, property, birth or other status. Men and women shall enjoy equal rights in all respects” (§VII, Article 65). Figure 4 shows the breakdown of how Iceland measures in terms of the different indices and subindices regarding the gender parity.

Figure 4
Iceland Gender Parity Profile



Source: World Economic Forum, 2024, p. 203.

Even with such clearly stated protections in its Constitution, Iceland takes its gender equality protections one step further. The government enacted the Act of Equal Status and Equal Rights Irrespective of Gender to clearly set forth and delineate the requirements and parameters of its equal protection guarantees for citizens (Government of Iceland, 2021). The purpose of this is to maintain gender equality (Prime Minister’s Office, n.d.).

The Equal Status Act is overseen by the Prime Minister’s Office (Prime Minister’s Office, n.d.). The Directorate of Equality is the establishment under the Prime Minister whose job is to “supervises the implementation of the Act, provides advice, public education and information concerning gender equality” (Prime Minister’s Office, n.d.). Additionally, every four years an action plan must be submitted and approved by Parliament which sets forth the plans and tasks to continue to foster gender equality in Iceland (Prime Minister’s Office, n.d.).

Action Project: Equality for All

It has been well established herein that there is a lack of women in leadership positions, which is due to gender inequality (DeVona & Weiner, 2024; UN Women, 2023). While equality is the goal, the pathway forward to allotting women the opportunity to reach leadership positions is through justice. Justice can be achieved through fixing what is broken in the system (Farrukh & Baqai, 2023, p. 223) and herein what is broken is a lack of explicit and legal protections of equality for women. The way to achieve these protections is through the implementation of stronger policies and legislation to ensure equality and that women have the same rights and privileges as men. The enactment of such policies and legislation is a two-part plan which includes:

- First, finalizing the Equal Rights Amendment: publication and certification of the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution.
- Second, expanding the protections of equal rights through:
- Reinstatement of along with Expanding the Scope and Operation of the Gender Policy Council;
- Establishing a Secretary of Equality; and
- Implementation of Federal Regulations with benchmarks for gender equality.

Step 1: Finalizing the Equal Rights Amendment

As has been laid out herein, the Equal Rights Amendment is in flux at this time. It has received the requisite number of state ratifications for addition as an amendment to the United States Constitution, yet it did so after the ratification deadline which was set by Congress (Columbia Law School, 2021). This conundrum leaves the amendment in an area of legal uncertainty. The last step for any constitutional amendment to become law is for the United States Archivist to publish and certify the amendment (Cohen & Codrington, 2019). Therefore, until the Archivist takes such actions, the Equal Rights Amendment shall remain in an unknown state.

Step 2: Expanding the Protections of Equal Rights

Even with the implementation of the Equal Rights Amendment there is still work to be done. The mere act of stating that men and women have equal rights is not enough. There needs to be policies and procedures in place to ensure that the provisions of the Equal Rights have the effect they are intended to have.

Reinstatement of and Expanding the Scope and Operation of the Gender Policy Council

In 2021 the Office of the President established the Gender Policy Council (“GPC”) (United States Government, 2024). The purpose of the GPC is to “to advance gender equity and equality in both domestic and foreign policy development and implementation” (United States Government, 2024). This council reports to the President and takes a whole government approach to the issue of gender equality by working with all governmental agencies to effectuate gender equality and policies (United States Government, 2024).

As a relatively new council, the GPC has made some significant strides and accomplishments in the realm of gender equality. According to the February 2023 Progress Report on the National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, the White

House identified several areas within which progress had been made which included, among others, “Supporting Access to Good Jobs and Advancing Workplace Protections.” Included as a subset in this strategic initiative was “Launching the Good Jobs Initiative” and “Protecting workers with caregiving responsibilities from discrimination” (The White House, 2023).

During President Trump’s second term he took action to dismantle the GPC (Executive Order No. 14148, 2025). This is a setback to moving forward with achieving more women in leadership positions. As such, reinstatement of the GPC is called for and necessary in the movement towards gender equality.

With reinstatement of the GPA there needs to be an eye towards where GPC took us and where women need to go. The efforts of the GPC moved in the right direction for the general equality of women, but they were not strong enough to make the broad and exacting changes needed to advance women. The reinstatement of the GPC needs to expand their strategic priorities and specifically work towards addressing the issue of the lack of women in leadership. As has been set forth herein, the issue of lack of women in leadership is an issue which needs attention from the highest level of government to make progress.

Establishing a Secretary of Equality

In addition to expanding the scope and operation of the GPC there is a need to add a Secretary of Equality to the President’s Cabinet. Currently the President’s Cabinet includes the Vice President, 15 executive heads, and seven additional cabinet level advisors (Greenspan, 2023). The reason for the addition of a new cabinet secretary is because the “Cabinet members...play a key political role, providing public support for White House policies and technical expertise in implementing them” (Greenspan, 2023). The United States is at a critical junction in its push toward gender equality and based on this the addition of a Secretary of Equality would be beneficial in moving the initiative forward.

Another aspect of the addition of a Secretary of Equality would be that it would serve as a central hub for gender equality and claims of discrimination. Currently there are Offices of Civil Rights spread across multiple federal agencies such as Department of Justice (Department of Justice, 2024), Department of Education (Department of Education, 2024), and Health and Human Services (Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). Each of these agencies is responsible for overseeing and establishing its own enforcement of civil rights issues which includes discrimination (Department of Education, 2024; Department of Health and Human Services, 2024; Department of Justice, 2024). The Secretary of Equality could be an integral part of streamlining and universalizing gender equality across agencies. This would be reflective of the reach of the GPC as it was set up as a council which services the whole of government (United States Government, 2024). Additionally, the Secretary of Equality would be responsible for following and reporting the progress towards achieving gender equality.

Implementation of Federal Regulations with benchmarks for gender equality

The last step in enhancing and expanding of the Equal Rights Amendment is the implementation of federal regulations with benchmarks for gender inequality. In 2020 the Pew Research Center conducted an online survey wherein they asked several questions about gender equality (Barroso). Included in the survey was a question as to whether people thought that the United States had gone far enough with its efforts of equal rights (Barroso, 2020). The majority of American adults said no, the US has not gone far enough in its efforts with equal rights (Barroso, 2020). Therefore, in addition to finalization of the Equal Rights Amendment there needs to be efforts to implement specific federal regulations regarding gender equality.

As set forth above, Iceland has made significant strides with gender equity, and they have a specific act which addresses gender equality (Government of Iceland, 2021). In looking at Iceland's legislation, one of the most impactful requirements is a required threshold of women on certain entities and boards at 40% (Government of Iceland, 2021). While this is an ambitious and, arguably, not a feasible requirement in the United States the fact that there is global legislation which requires specific thresholds to reach gender equality shows that there is a long way to go in the United States before we reach gender equality.

Conclusion

Increasing the Number of Women in Leadership Positions

This research began with the issue of the lack of women in leadership positions. The end of this research, with the implementation of the proposed action project, will result in the eventual achievement of gender equality. As gender parity is achieved women will not face as many hurdles as before in their journeys to become leaders. The result of this will be an increase in the number of women in leadership positions.

Explicit Legal Protections

The finalization of the Equal Rights Amendment will be an explicit protection for women. This, coupled with the proposed legislative and policy changes, will amount to specific and direct legal protection for women. This protection will provide a direct protection to women and not require the indirect judicial interpretation that has been relied upon by the Supreme Court's use of the 14th Amendment (Venetis, 2024). Finally, the enactment of a federal Equal Rights Amendment would end any discrimination which may still be lurking within the states as state law cannot supersede federal law (U.S. Const. art. VI, §2).

Good for 'Business'

Not only would the implementation of the Equal Rights Amendment increase the number of women in leadership positions in business, but it would also be economically beneficial. Studies show that because women do not participate fully in employment and in entrepreneurship there is a cost of approximately 15% to the world of its Gross Domestic Product (Sylvie, 2020). This gender inequality causes an actual cost to society and the world (Sylvie, 2020). It has been estimated that if women were to fully participate in the economy in a manner which is equal to how men participate then there would be an additional \$28 trillion amount added to the Gross Domestic Product by 2025 (Sylvie, 2020). By failing to achieve gender equality businesses are losing out on additional profits.

Improving Culture

The addition of an Equal Rights Amendment would influence culture. Culture, as has been seen in the last several years, has been shown to change quickly when the conversation shifts (Law, 2020). It is when this shift occurs that things that were previously allowed are now no longer okay (Law, 2020). If this were to evolve through the lens of gender equality there could be a trickle-down effect of fostering a culture which reflects gender equality throughout all aspects of culture and society. This would be separate and apart from legal requirements and transcend into moral tenets.

Strengthening the Theory of Equality

While the research herein originally started with the study of equality and how gender inequality was inhibiting women from attaining leadership positions the final theoretical implications are broader in scope. The result of the research and action project is to achieve gender equality through the finalizing of the Equal Rights Amendment and issuance of corresponding legislation and regulations to strengthen gender equality. These actions enhance not only number of women leaders, but they strengthen and further the theory of gender equality and equality of women.

Challenging the Assumption that Equal Rights Amendment is Unnecessary

The 14th Amendment has been used as the basis for several seminal rulings to infer gender equality to women. The use of this amendment has been touted as the baseline for such equality, but it was never the intent of the amendment. The action project herein would finalize the Equal Rights Amendment, and with this amendment, gender equality would be solidified and not just inferred through the language of the 14th Amendment.

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