
Women at the Top

Powerful Leaders Define Success as Work + Family in a

Culture of Gender

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How do women rise to the top of their professions when they also have significant family care responsibilities? This critical question has not been addressed by existing models of leadership. In a review of recent research, we explore an alternative model to the usual notion of a Western male as the prototypical leader. The model includes (a) relationship-oriented leadership traits, (b) the importance of teamwork and consensus building, and (c) an effective work–family interface that women with family care responsibilities create and use to break through the glass ceiling. We adopted a cross-cultural perspective to highlight the importance of relational orientation and work–family integration in collectivistic cultures, which supplements models of leadership based on Western men. Our expanded model of leadership operates in the context of a “culture of gender” that defines expectations for women and men as leaders. This complex model includes women in diverse global contexts and enriches our understanding of the interplay among personal attributes, processes, and environments in leadership.

Keywords: women leaders, work–family interface, leadership model, culture of gender

There are two very different stories about women’s leadership around the world, and depending on which one you choose to tell, and your attitudes toward women in leadership positions, the news is either very good or very bad. Despite the endless blogging and newspaper headlines to the contrary, women are not “opting out” of the workforce to stay home with their babies. The workforce participation of mothers did drop by 2% since its peak in 2000, but as economist Boushey (2005) demonstrated, there was a similar drop in employment for women without children and for all men, which was caused by a general recession from 2001 to 2004. For the first time in U.S. history, women are close to surpassing men in their employment rate, largely because most of the jobs lost in the recent recession have occurred in manufacturing, construction, and finance, where the jobs are largely held by men. The most recently available data show that women now hold 49.1% of jobs in the United States (Rampell, 2009). On the other side of the globe is China, where economic development and culture differ from those in the

Western industrialized world but the figure for women’s employment is quite similar (45%; “Women Take 45%,” 2007). Women are better educated than ever before; they comprise the majority of undergraduate college enrollments in industrialized countries and are catching up in the developing countries (57% in the United States: Peter & Horn, 2005; 44% in China: Department of Population, Social, Science and Technology Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics, 2004). As might be expected from the growing trend of women’s higher educational achievement, there are more women than men in mid-level management positions, which has created an overflowing “pipeline” of managers ready for advancement to top-level executive positions in the United States.

Now for the bad news: Despite women’s success in education and mid-level management, few women make it to the “O” level—CEO, CFO (chief financial officer), CIO (chief information officer), or CTO (chief technology officer)—in the corporate world or to comparable top levels in noncorporate settings, such as the highest levels of political office or the top rungs of the academic ladder. In the United States, women hold approximately 50% of all management and professional positions, outnumbering “men in such occupations as financial managers; human resource managers; education administrators; medical and health services managers; accountants and auditors; budget analysts; property, real estate, and social and community service managers” (U.S. Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau, 2006, para. 12). Despite their middle-management success, only 2% of the Fortune 500 CEOs and 2% of the Fortune 1000 CEOs are women (“Fortune 500 2006: Women

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CEOs,” 2006). Comparable data from the FTSE (Financial Times Stock Exchange) 250 (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2006) show that 2.8% of CEOs for the top 250 companies listed on the London Stock Exchange are women.

A half century after the women’s movement, women have only moved to the halfway mark in the corporate world and other organizations in the industrialized Western societies; most are stuck in middle management. Women in other parts of the world are still far from that halfway mark. For example, in China, women make up 16.8% of the heads of government departments and the Communist Party, social organizations, enterprises, and institutions (Department of Population, Social, Science and Technology Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Even in Hong Kong, which continues to be a more westernized and economically affluent special administrative region after its reunification with China in 1997, women constitute 29.1% of persons employed as managers and administrators (Census and Statistics Department, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2007). A bevy of commentators have suggested that women are better suited for the “New Economy,” with its emphasis on communication and interpersonal skills and the rapid loss of jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, and other job sectors in which physical strength is an asset. Although this may seem like a logical conclusion, there are very few women who have made it to the top leadership positions.

Why are there so few women at the top of the leading organizations given the large numbers that are stalled at middle management? An important clue can be found by taking a closer look at the women who have made it into the rarified atmosphere of life at the top. Almost half of these top executives have no children, and almost half of all women in the United States with salaries greater than

\$100,000 have no children (Dye, 2005; Hewlett, 2002). Similar data have been found for women who achieve at the highest ranks at research universities, where there have been extensive and eye-opening analyses of the success of women with children. Only one third of all women who began their jobs at research universities without children ever become mothers, and among those who attain tenure, women are twice as likely as their male counterparts to be single 12 years after obtaining their doctorates (Mason & Goulden, 2004). The double standard is alive and well in the workplace. The presence of children signals stability and responsibility for men, who are assumed to be better workers because of their roles as breadwinners. The identical situation for women has the opposite effect.

Recent studies have confirmed the *motherhood wage penalty*, a term that describes the consistent finding that mothers earn less than comparable women without children and less than men in general. By contrast, married men enjoy a *marriage premium*, which refers to one of the most reliable findings in the labor economics literature—the economic advantage that fathers enjoy in the workplace (Hersch & Stratton, 2000). In an experimental investigation of this phenomenon, Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007) responded to a variety of employment advertisements with applications from women that varied according to whether the women had children or were childless. The applications were carefully matched on work-relevant dimensions. Only 3.1% of the mothers were invited for an interview, compared with 6.6% of the identically qualified women who had no children. Discriminatory practices against women were further documented by these researchers when paid undergraduates rated fictitious applicants for employment. Mothers were rated as less competent and were offered a lower starting salary than comparable women without children. The choice for highly successful women has been clear: Choose either a baby or a briefcase.

But what about those women who refused to make such a choice and succeeded at the top of their professions with children and other family care responsibilities? What can we learn from these women who are leading dually successful lives with (by their own description) happy, thriving families and occupational success at the highest levels? While there have been many studies on work–family conflicts for women workers or managers in general, there are few such studies on women leaders in the literature and none that specifically compared women with and without family care responsibilities.

Given the small number of women at the top, most studies on women leaders have relied on in-depth and qualitative interviews. Studies of these exceptional women are not representative of the norm, but they highlight gaps in our understanding of leadership from a gender-sensitive perspective. These studies do not have representative samples, as the population is small, but generally rely on personal networks and snowball techniques in reaching these exceptional targets. For example, Cantor and Bernay (1992) interviewed 25 American women politicians holding high federal, state, and local elected offices; they used structured questions to investigate how these women de-



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veloped the leadership qualities that enabled them to succeed in politics. Cantor and Bernay identified three critical elements in the leadership equation for these women politicians: competent self, creative aggression, and womanpower. Instead of attempting to behave like men in a male environment, these women leaders embraced and integrated typically female qualities, such as tenderness and caring, with assertiveness and achievement orientation. White, Cox, and Cooper (1992) interviewed 48 women executives, entrepreneurs, politicians, and senior professionals in the United Kingdom on their childhoods, education, and work and family histories to examine their career trajectories. Walton's (1997) study of 11 women heads of colleges in the United Kingdom also adopted an interview method to cover a range of themes, including the women's academic career paths, family influences, self-worth, and job satisfaction.

Qualitative studies of women leaders from other ethnic backgrounds have also been conducted in recent years. Gomez and her colleagues (2001) conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews to investigate the career development of 20 notable Latinas in the United States whose contributions on the local, national, or international level were recognized in their communities. Their study included contextual and cultural variables in addition to personal variables and the family-work interface. The contextual and cultural factors included social movements, economic trends, public policies, and discrimination at the macro level. At the more personal or interpersonal level, the individual's socioeconomic and educational background, social support, availability of mentors, and role models were important factors.

Richie and her colleagues (1997) also used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to compare nine high-

achieving African American women and nine European American women across eight occupational fields in the United States. The interviews covered the participants' work behaviors and attitudes, their sociocultural and personal backgrounds, and the current contextual conditions that led to particular career actions and consequences. The stories told by their participants showed that they achieved career success on their own terms. Their leadership styles were characterized by interconnectedness. Social support provided an important means for them to balance their personal and professional lives. The authors concluded that women's career development differed from men's, and they confirmed "the inappropriateness of applying career theories written by and based on White men to White women and people of color" (Richie et al., 1997, p. 145).

Kawahara, Esnil, and Hsu (2007) interviewed 12 Asian American women leaders who were considered to be high achievers. The themes that were covered in the interviews included the women's personal attributes, leadership styles, support systems, self-worth, and cultural competence. The comments collected from the interviews demonstrated the emphasis on relating to others and creating a harmonious environment, both of which are reflective of collectivistic values. Family and partner support were recognized as playing an important role in these women's achievement.

Studies with women leaders from different ethnic backgrounds highlight the additional context of culture in which women navigate through the *labyrinth*, a term preferred by Eagly and Carli (2007) to the *glass ceiling* metaphor. Culture defines the expectations for women's and men's roles in society and sets the norms and values in social behavior. Cross-cultural studies of top women leaders could provide a richer understanding of the convergent and divergent contextual factors that characterize women's leadership.

Using semi-structured open-ended interviews, we studied 62 women at the top of their professions who either were or had been married and who had significant family care responsibilities (usually children, but we also included care for other family members such as a disabled sibling or parent). Top-level positions included legislators, government ministers, business executives, college presidents, chiefs of police, and other senior-level professionals from China, Hong Kong, and the United States (Halpern & Cheung, 2008). These three societies provide a comparison in terms of cultural context and socioeconomic milieu. Hong Kong is more similar to China in cultural background but at the same time is more similar to the United States in terms of socioeconomic environment, whereas China and the United States are more distinct from one another in both culture and socioeconomic milieu (Watkins, 2006). In addition to describing their career development and leadership styles, these top women leaders in American and Chinese societies described how they created and negotiated a work-family interface. These highly successful women shared their strategies for leading dually successful lives. This study provides a cross-cultural perspective on the key issues for studying women's leadership. We use the

lessons we learned from our study to structure the framework of the following review of the research literature on women leaders.

Integrating Work and Family

Previous research on women in employment has highlighted work–family balance as a major concern (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Byron, 2005). Working mothers everywhere are known to be short on time, always working a “second shift” after they finish a day at their hectic jobs (Hochschild, 1989). Many countries across the world have conducted time use surveys (United Nations Statistics Division, n.d.). The common finding is that women in paid employment generally spend more hours per day on household duties than do their male counterparts (e.g. Galinsky, 2005). Early studies of work–family balance adopted a scarcity perspective (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). It was assumed that the demands of family and work were competing for a finite amount of time, resulting in conflict and stress.

By studying women leaders who managed to maintain their family lives while they advanced in their careers, we identified personal characteristics and strategies that women used to overcome these barriers. As workers in “extreme jobs” that require “24/7” commitment (Hewlett & Luce, 2006), the dually successful top women leaders we interviewed employed many strategies to “make more time.” As revealed in our study and other studies of women leaders, these women considered themselves to be experts in multitasking. Because they each lived one life rather than two separate lives at work and at home, they created links between family and work, although they kept their role identities distinct. For example, children went to work with them and often accompanied them on business trips, not only because it allowed the women to spend more time with their children but also because it helped the children understand where their mommies went when they left the house. The women worked from home at least part of the time, often setting rules for switching activities, such as working on Sunday night rather than during the day when they spent the weekend with family, or always being at home for dinner and then working after the children went to bed.

Beyond Work–Family Balance

Recent research on the work–family interface has taken a more balanced view and considered more complex interactions between the work and family domains, which include both negative and positive spillovers in the work–family interface (Rapaport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002). From their meta-analysis reviewing 178 studies on the work–family interface, Ford, Heinen, and Langkamer (2007) found that support from family and work domains was positively related to cross-domain satisfaction. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) found that when work and family were integrated, the two roles could enhance each other. In integrating these two roles, managing role boundaries was more important than just reducing time at work.

Particularly for women, the work–family boundary is more permeable. Thus, we propose that the metaphor of work–family balance be replaced with a metaphor that recognizes the gains that can be achieved by combining or integrating work and family roles (Halpern & Murphy, 2005).

Baltes and Heydens-Gahir (2003) extended a general model of life management strategy to study work–family conflict. They classified the repertoire of adaptive behavior strategies as SOC: selection, optimization, and compensation. The primary focus of *selection* is on the articulation and setting of goals, which give direction to behavior. In our study (Halpern & Cheung, 2008), the top women leaders were very clear about their goals and their priorities. Family and work were both important, and day-to-day decisions were based on family and work needs. They also excelled in the *optimization* strategies through scheduling of time and multitasking. They were flexible in adopting the *compensation* strategy by using alternative means such as outsourcing when time and material resources were limited.

In order to accept the alternative means of fulfilling the demands of a role, many women leaders redefine the structural and personal roles that the workplace and the society have imposed on women (Frone, 2003). In the studies reviewed, most of the women leaders who are married and have families embrace both their family and work roles. However, instead of being superwomen who hold themselves to the highest standards for all of the role-related tasks of being wives and mothers, they adopt different internal and external strategies to redefine their roles. They learn to let go and outsource household tasks just as they would outsource work in a busy office. They recognize that they do not have to do it all by themselves. They alter their internal conceptions of the demands of their work and family roles and define these roles in ways that are meaningful and helpful to them.

Research on work–family balance in Chinese societies suggests a different cultural perspective in understanding the definition of work and family roles. These studies show that work and family are viewed as interdependent domains, unlike the distinct segregation of these two domains in Western concepts of work and family. In individualistic societies, overwork would be considered as taking time away from the family and sacrificing the family for the advancement of one’s own career. In collectivistic societies, overwork is likely to be seen as sacrificing oneself for the family, since commitment to work is viewed as a means to ensuring financial security for the family (Yang, Chen, Choi, & Zou, 2000). The needs of the self are subsumed under the needs of the collective. As such, the work–family boundary is more permeable in Chinese societies (Francesco & Shaffer, 2009).

A cross-national comparative study (Spector et al., 2004) involving 15 samples of managers across three culturally distinct regions—Anglo-majority countries (Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and the United States), China (Hong Kong, mainland China, and Taiwan), and seven Latin American countries—showed that for the Anglo culture, working long hours was related to work–family

stress. For the Chinese and Latin cultures, this was not the case. For the Chinese managers, being married and having children were associated with higher job satisfaction and psychological well-being. A series of studies conducted by Aryee and his colleagues on the work–family interface in Hong Kong (Aryee, Field, & Luk, 1999; Aryee, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999) also showed that work and family involvement per se did not lead to work–family conflict. Time conflict did not necessarily lead to strain.

A recent study of working adults in the United States found that women and men with an egalitarian outlook on life, which means they were committed to both their work and their families, reported feeling less guilty when family life interfered with their work than traditional women and men whose commitment was to only one of these spheres of life (Livingston & Judge, 2008). It is interesting to note that these researchers did not find much guilt when work interfered with family life, although one possible explanation for this asymmetry is that few of their participants had partners (36%) or young children (25%). The successful combination of family and work will depend on the obligations people have in both of these spheres.

Past studies of work–life balance rarely included leaders at the top with substantial family care responsibilities and have not considered their responses as a distinct group. Partly it is because this is not an issue that is considered important to men as leaders; partly it is because there are very few top women leaders to be studied. In studies of women leaders, however, we found that the dually successful Western women leaders tended to integrate their work and family roles in the collective unit of the family. Many also regarded family as their priority, and the motivation to succeed at work was to contribute to the well-being of their families and children. In reframing their work as an ally instead of an enemy of the family (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000), the women leaders in many of the qualitative studies we reviewed reported satisfaction in both domains.

Redefining Roles

In order to integrate their family roles and work roles, the women leaders in the studies we reviewed redefined their own norms for being a good mother and being a leader, making these roles more compatible than they were under the norms prescribed by the larger society. According to their own definitions, a good mother is highly involved in her children’s lives and activities, but she does not need to spend all of her time with them. Typically, the women leaders in these studies described their devotion to their children and their families. But because they considered family their highest priority, they dedicated themselves to finding solutions to make it work. These solutions included self-enforced standards to ensure that they always had dinner with their families, took the children on any business trip that lasted more than three days, never missed an important event such as a school play or soccer game, and helped with homework every night. For example, in our study (Halpern & Cheung, 2008), one Hong Kong woman executive made a long-distance telephone call to her children every night when she was posted overseas (before

Internet communication was widely accessible) and had them fax their homework to her hotel room, which she then faxed back to them after she reviewed it. Several Chinese women leaders talked about going home to eat dinner with their families before leaving for a business dinner or an evening meeting in order to maintain family togetherness. U.S. women leaders talked with pride about never or rarely missing an important event in their children’s lives, which they achieved by arranging their work around these events.

These highly successful women also redefined their roles as successful leaders, which included work + family. They worked long hours, but they also managed to leave work for family time. They counted performance and outcome rather than the actual hours at work. Earlier in their careers, some of the women “flew below the radar” and just left work without announcing why to be at after-school events, completing their work later in the evening. Their employers learned that it was their performance that counted. Once they were in positions of leadership, the women leaders had more control over their work schedules, which allowed them to handle dual demands more openly.

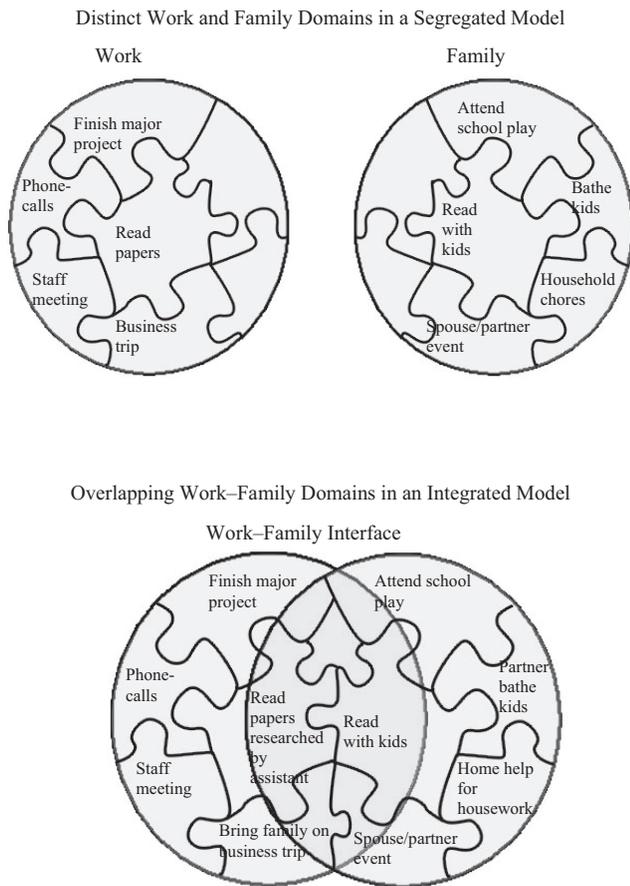
Women’s dual roles may be viewed as two circles, one representing family and one work. When the demands of a two-circle life are too much for anyone to manage, the total area for both circles needs to be reduced. One way to reduce the total area is to overlap the circles when possible, symbolically blending work and family (see Figure 1). The portion of the family circle that extends beyond the overlap can be reduced with practical strategies such as hiring help to clean the house, prepare meals, and even shop for presents—by outsourcing anything that does not directly contribute to spending time with one’s family. In addition, the portion of the circle representing work that is not overlapping with family can also be reduced. Employees can be empowered to do their work without the direct involvement of the women leaders. Many of these high-powered mothers created work-related expectations that also reduced the size of the “work” circle, such as always leaving work at 7:00 or whatever time they routinely set for themselves and scheduling luncheon meetings instead of evening dinners with clients so as to eat dinner with their families.

Family and Spousal Support

Inevitably, the women leaders interviewed in the various studies all cited the importance of their family support in making it to the top. Having collective identities that emphasized family loyalty, they also fell back on their families to provide support. They relied on some combination of supportive husbands, extended families, and hired help in societies where domestic help was accessible.

The extended family provided much needed help with household chores and child care. Particularly for women from collectivistic societies, proximity to the extended family facilitated their support networks. Part-time and live-in home help supplemented this network. Even in the United States, home help is not as economically inaccessible to professional women as many people believe. The difficulty lies more in getting reliable and stable home help,

Figure 1
Segregated Versus Integrated Models of Work–Family Interface



as well as in women’s personal belief that they have to do everything themselves. In interviews with women leaders, they would talk about child-care arrangements, supervision of domestic helpers, and maintaining emotional labor with the extended family. In studies of male leadership, these arrangements are assumed to be taken care of by someone and are rarely explicitly discussed.

Another distinctive concern for women leaders is their spousal relationships. Studies of marital relationships show that one of the biggest problems for working women is their husbands’ lack of support for their careers (Gilbert, 1988; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1991). In Western studies of mate selection, men prefer to marry down, which usually includes marrying women who are shorter, weigh less, have less education, and earn less than they do (Schoen & Weinick, 1993). So the superior social status of women leaders may pose a threat to their marriages if their husbands are uncomfortable breaking with traditional sex role norms.

The married women leaders in the various studies converged in their appreciation of their husbands’ support.

Otherwise, their marriages might not have lasted. The supportive husbands were reported to take on a substantial share in housework. More important, they provided emotional support and encouragement. In our study (Halpern & Cheung, 2008), we specifically addressed the women leaders’ relationships with their husbands. Under the strong patriarchal norms in Chinese families, the success of women leaders might have posed a stronger threat to their husbands. However, in this selective sample of women leaders who had stayed married, many described their husbands as their biggest fans, cheerleaders, coaches, and mentors. These husbands were self-assured and confident of themselves. They endorsed egalitarian values toward women. They did not endorse the hierarchical patriarchal norms of marriage and did not feel threatened by the reversed normative roles that put their wives in the lime-light and gave them “superior” status.

It is particularly difficult when a family moves for the advancement of the wife’s career and the husband takes up the role of the trailing spouse, often with uncertain career prospects at the new location and the loss of a good job at the old location. However, the couples who moved repeatedly to accommodate the wife’s promotions considered the sacrifices made by the trailing spouse to be worthwhile. For these couples, the wife’s accomplishments and the resources she brought to the marriage were redefined as collective assets to the family instead of threats in a power struggle.

The women leaders who stayed happily married emphasized that they and their husbands grew together in the marriage. They exhibited what marital counselors would call healthy couple behaviors—responsibility, alignment of goals, mutual encouragement and acceptance, commitment to equality in the relationship, empathic listening and open communication, willingness to discuss their relationship, and willingness to engage in joint conflict resolution (Blume, 2006). There was a great deal of give and take, discussion, and negotiation in these marriages. Amidst their busy schedules, our interviewees created the time and space to share their lives with their marital partners. Many of the women mentioned how they designated evenings or weekends for the family or for special dates with their husbands.

Women’s Style of Leadership

Do women lead differently from men? Eagly and Carli (2007) observed that while leadership roles promote similarities in male and female leaders, women generally have a more democratic, participative, and collaborative style of leading. Stern (2008) reviewed studies of high-achieving women and concurred that these women tend to adopt a relational leadership style. They also demonstrate a strong sense of conviction and self-worth. Femininity and leadership are no longer considered incompatible. Virtually all of the women we interviewed believed that their style of leadership as women was better suited for the contemporary workplace. They did not reject femininity or shy away from including family roles as metaphors for their leadership roles. Some of the Chinese women talked about lead-

ing like grandmothers or mothers, which included being firm when necessary but always supportive, similar to what Cantor and Bernay (1992) described as “maternal strengths” in the American women politicians. These women were not advocating for a “mushy” or feel-good notion of what a “feminine” approach to leadership might be. Instead, the usual definition they provided included being serious about their work, maintaining the highest personal standards, promoting communication, and being considerate and respectful of their staffs. They also strongly emphasized the notion of a leader as a person of moral character and a role model, which together with a relational orientation have been found to be defining characteristics of leadership in Chinese culture (Smith & Wang, 1996). In Stern’s (2008) review of women leaders, making a social contribution and being of service to others were also featured in the women’s narratives about their leadership. In Cantor and Bernay’s (1992) description of the “womanpower” of women politicians, advancing an agenda of helping others was one of the key motives for their entering politics. Women leaders are particularly conscious of their role in promoting gender equality in their organizations.

In the narratives of women leaders, competition and power are rarely featured. Few of the women leaders in the studies we reviewed mentioned their own power in their narratives about their leadership style or goals. Instead, they emphasized empowering others and creating consensus. They demonstrated what Chin (2007) described as the collaborative process in feminist leadership. Almost all of the women talked about creating flatter organizations and sharing information widely throughout the organization. What emerged is a definition of what is known in the leadership literature as a *transformational* leadership style. Burns (1978) defined transformational leaders as those who “engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p. 20). Over the past 30 years, the concept of transformational leadership has evolved to include leaders who are inspiring, optimistic, moral, and equitable. Judge and Piccolo (2004) built on earlier work in their study of transformational leadership and extended the concept to include charismatic individuals who provide others with inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and a higher purpose in life. This style of leadership is most often contrasted with the more traditional and hierarchically organized transactional style. Transformational leaders transform others by pushing them to assume new points of view and to question their prior assumptions (Goethals, 2005). The perception that women tend to use transformational styles of leadership to a greater extent than do men was confirmed in a meta-analytic review by Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen (2003) of 45 separate studies. These researchers also found that women leaders tended to engage in more reward-contingency behaviors than men leaders. In other words, the women leaders linked employee rewards to their behaviors in appropriate ways that allowed employees to see the link between their efforts and outcomes at work and the rewards

they received. Although the size of the effect that differentiated women from men leaders was small, the meta-analysis showed consistent findings that favored women leaders.

The definition of transformational leadership is more congruent with the interpersonal characteristics associated with women leaders than with the aggressive and hierarchical characteristics associated with male leaders. Women leaders across different studies converge in stressing the importance of communication and team building. In a meta-analytic review of the literature, Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam (1996) found that transformational leadership has a greater association with effective outcomes than does transactional leadership. Logically, then, it might be expected that women, in general, would be more effective leaders because they are more likely to use the style that is associated with better outcomes. The few studies that have examined the effect of having women in top corporate positions confirm this prediction. In one study, researchers sampled over 700 businesses listed in a *Fortune* magazine list of 1,000 businesses (Krishnan & Park, 2005). They found that women constituted 6.7% of the “top management teams” and 2.8% of the line positions on these teams. (Line positions are those directly related to the profitability of the corporation, as opposed to positions in human resources or communications, which are more likely to be filled by women.) The main finding was a significant positive relationship between the number of women in top management and the financial performance of the company. This is a powerful and important finding. In explaining their results, these researchers noted that differences between female and male leadership styles were crucial, especially women’s greater willingness to share information, which can drive better performance throughout the company. It is good for business to keep everyone in the know so they can act with fuller knowledge about the entire company.

Climbing One Rung at a Time

As Cantor and Bernay (1992) pointed out, most women leaders did not have sandbox dreams of greatness in their childhoods. The women leaders in our study (Halpern & Cheung, 2008) created successful lives for themselves by working hard and working smart. As in Gomez et al.’s (2001) study of Latina leaders, mothers and mentors figured prominently in the women’s tales of how they got where they are today. Their mothers played an important role in inspiring them to try their best and in building their self-confidence early in life, and mentors provided an insider’s guide to what they needed to know and provided networking opportunities. We note here that although the idea of mentoring is not as well recognized in Asian cultures as it is in the West, the Asian women often acknowledged informal mentoring relationships, without using this particular label.

An important path toward success for most of the contemporary women leaders was through education. The women achieved a high educational level, which built their self-efficacy and provided them upward mobility. Notwith-

standing the sociocultural barriers to women's higher education during their lifetimes, the women in the various studies were either encouraged by their families to pursue education as a key to a better life or strived on their own at a later stage in life to get the preparation they needed for advancement. As Fassinger (2005) suggested, high self-efficacy is a key to women's career success.

In Madsen's (2007) study of 10 American women who served as college or university presidents, a pattern of ongoing personal and professional development was identified. These women leaders demonstrated a continuous process of self-monitoring and self-empowerment in taking on challenging responsibilities while inspiring and supporting the people around them.

In Gomez et al.'s (2001) study of 20 Latina leaders, the career-life path of the participants was characterized as an implementation of the self within an immediate context, influenced by their family background, sociopolitical conditions, and cultural environment. Equipped with an ardent sense of self, the participants used social support networks and cognitive reframing to maintain a balanced perspective or to open new doors when confronting challenges.

As in Gomez et al.'s (2001) study, the women we interviewed concurred in acknowledging a pattern of unintended leadership development. In the early stages of their careers, none of the women planned on making it to the top of their professions or, to use Eagly and Carli's (2007) metaphor, making career moves within a labyrinth. They did not strategically plan their routes or attempt to identify the blind alleys at that stage. As many of the women leaders told us, they never thought it would be possible. They found meaningful work that they loved and climbed one rung at a time as they rose to meet new challenges. Few of the women took career breaks or used any family-friendly policies such as part-time employment or flexible scheduling as they moved through the ranks, in part because these options were not generally available at the time. Their stories reflect that they used a blend of "whatever works."

It would be misleading to label circuitous and unplanned routes to the top as serendipity because the opportunities opened for women who were prepared for the uphill climb. The choices the women leaders made earlier in their careers were considered assets rather than losses. Take the example of Sarah Weddington, the former presidential advisor who did not get a job at a high powered law firm when she got out of law school because she was a woman. She ended up with the opportunity to argue the landmark *Roe v. Wade* case in the U.S. Supreme Court and then went on to find jobs in the higher rungs of politics and government. She called it the "step-by-step method of leadership" (Halpern & Cheung, 2008, p. 219). This is similar to the description by Cantor and Bernay (1992) of how women politicians turned what others perceived to be obstacles into possibilities for themselves.

Our sample included two women who became a chief of police and a chief of one of the largest sheriff's departments in the United States, positions that epitomize male leadership. The police chief told us that as she was being

promoted within the department, she realized that she would need to have a college degree and a master's degree to make it anywhere near the top, and she had neither. What she did have at the time was a full-time-plus job as a detective with irregular work hours (homicides do not happen within a 9 to 5 day) and young children. She took her time and waited until her children were in high school and then went to college at night, earning both of the necessary degrees and, ultimately, promotion to the top of the force. A number of the women entrepreneurs from China served previously in the People's Liberation Army, a choice that becomes more understandable when one considers that the only alternative they might have had at the time was to be educated by peasants in the countryside, an educational experience that was in accord with the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. Their military training prepared them well for taking the risks they had to take in starting their own businesses later during the new economic reforms in China.

Now that they are in positions of leadership, the successful women leaders are making it easier for the mothers (and others) who are behind them to handle the often competing demands of running a corporation and going home to change diapers and read bedtime stories. As leaders and policymakers, they are competent professionals who overtly demonstrate their care for their employees and clients in their official policies and everyday interactions, thus creating a model of leadership that takes the best parts of both of the traditional roles of leader and mother.

Cultural Differences and Convergence

The field of cross-cultural leadership has underscored the importance of examining contextual factors when defining leadership (Avolio, 2007). Studies of ethnic women leaders have also highlighted how sociocultural context and cultural identity shape the interpretive lens with which women view the career-life paths they steer (Gomez et al., 2001; Richie et al., 1997).

In cross-cultural psychology, national cultures have been compared in terms of different dimensions of societal norms (Hofstede, 1980). Anglo cultures, like that of the United States, are considered to be individualistic. In these cultures, identity is based in the individual, and emphasis is placed on autonomy and independence. Individuals are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families, which consist of the nuclear unit of a couple and their children. In contrast, Asian cultures, like that of the Chinese, are considered to be collectivistic in orientation. Identity is embedded in the social system, an organization, or a group to which the individual belongs. People are born into extended families that take care of them in exchange for their loyalty. Interdependence and harmony among group members are emphasized. As in other societies that emphasize family orientation, the Chinese and the African American women leaders in our study as well as the Latina leaders in Gomez et al.'s (2001) study were more likely to receive social support from their extended families than were the Anglo women leaders.

Culture also defines the social expectations for women's and men's roles. In traditional Chinese culture, women's roles are defined by their different family roles throughout the life stages: daughter, wife, and mother, who should obey, respectively, their father, husband, and son. However, cultural ideologies change with historical events, although there is some lag time before normative attitudes and behaviors change. Socioeconomic and political developments in contemporary China have expanded women's roles. The Communist Party ideology has emphasized liberating Chinese women from their feudalistic oppression as one of the goals of class struggle, and the late Chairman Mao's motto that "women can hold up half the sky" during the 1960s encouraged women to participate in all walks of life. Global campaigns of the women's movement have raised consciousness on gender equality and women's empowerment. There are now legal instruments in China, Hong Kong, and the United States to protect women's rights in employment. However, the structure of the patriarchal family role ascribed to women has moved relatively little despite large changes in the everyday lives of women and men.

Despite great differences in the sociopolitical context during their childhoods, there were striking similarities among the women from China, Hong Kong, and the United States. Many of the mainland Chinese women experienced hardship as they grew up during the Japanese incursion, the Second World War in the 1940s, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, which was followed by the horrific conditions during the Cultural Revolution, a time when education was denigrated and families were torn apart. The women leaders from Hong Kong had a "foot in two cultures," living first under British rule and, since 1997, under a special administrative region of China which continued to flourish as an international financial center. The leaders from the United States grew up just as opportunities for women opened up as a result of affirmative action and increased legal protection against overt discrimination, although the Equal Rights Amendment failed to gain sufficient support to become national law. Despite the vast sociopolitical differences among these three societies, the culture of gender, with its prescription of appropriate gender roles, exerted a stronger impact on women.

The narratives of the women leaders whom we interviewed (Halpern & Cheung, 2008) highlighted themes that reflected their cultural ideologies. Although all of the women leaders featured their family roles prominently in describing their personal identities, what they considered to be the essential tasks of these roles differed. The American women leaders prided themselves on never missing their children's school plays or soccer games; mothers in Hong Kong put more emphasis on helping their children with their schoolwork. A dominant feature in the Chinese mother's role is overseeing their children's education, with heavy emphasis on supervision of homework and preparation for examinations. Food is another cultural theme that is prominent in the Chinese family. The Chinese mothers from mainland China, Hong Kong, and the United States alike emphasized family dinners as a symbol of family

togetherness, describing how they ate with their children before they went out to their own business dinners or went back to work at the office at night. When the hierarchical norms of husband and wife were reversed, the Chinese women leaders were sensitive to how their husbands might lose "face" and took measures to protect against such situations.

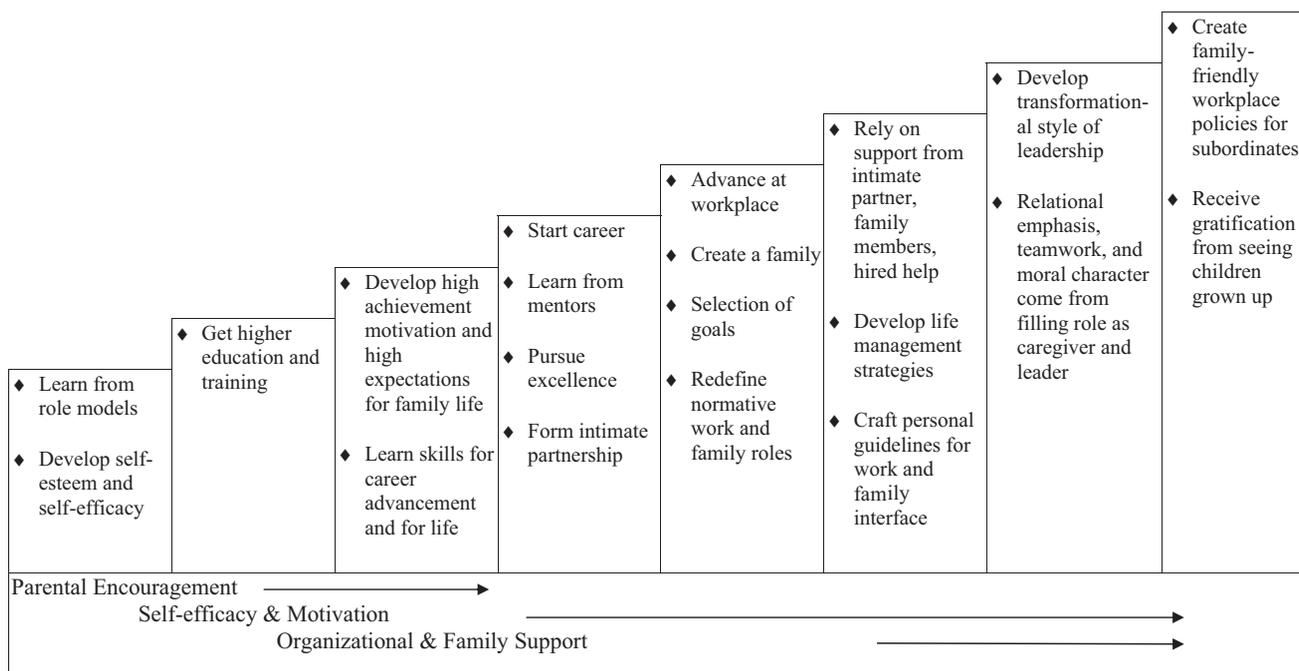
Although culture prescribes the expectations for gender roles and behaviors, there are differences within the culture in the way in which individuals play out these roles. We recognize that there are also ethnic, regional, and class differences within the larger cultural group. For example, some of the American women leaders relied on live-in helpers, with fewer of them relying on their extended families for help with child care than the women in mainland China and Hong Kong. The physical distance for the U.S. women from their extended families may have been a barrier that made using this resource a rare occurrence.

The Culture of Gender

When we began our study, we thought there would be many differences between the Chinese and American women leaders in how they managed the combination of top-level work and a successful family life. We expected that the American women leaders would segregate their work and family roles more distinctly, as suggested by Western theories and research on work-family conflict. However, the cultural differences we found relate more to the contents rather than the structure of the role ideology. There was more convergence in the way that these women leaders interwove work and family roles on their paths to the top. Even though they subscribed to gender roles, the Chinese and the American women leaders alike defied the constraints of sexism, which is pervasive across culture. They embraced the multifaceted roles involved in being women. With their growing confidence in their own identities, they did not need to conform to the roles and behaviors of men in order to become leaders. Unlike Western men, they did not segregate their work roles and family roles into distinct domains that could result in conflict. Instead, they integrated their work and family roles in ways that enabled them to harmonize both. Their successful strategies can inform our understanding of the work-family interface. A recent study of working adults in the Netherlands also found that women were more likely to use strategies that facilitated the combination of work and family than were men (van Steenbergen, Ellemers, & Mooijaart, 2007). Instead of viewing the combination of these two spheres of life as necessarily negative, the women found ways to benefit from combining their dual roles, which was a consistent theme among our sample of women leaders and other studies of women leaders with families.

In hindsight, one reason for the cross-cultural similarities is that all of the women share what we are calling "the culture of gender." Notwithstanding the cultural differences found according to the usual understanding of culture, there are pancultural gender role norms that create opportunities and constraints for all women leaders (Ingle-

Figure 2
Step-by-Step Model of Leadership Development Incorporating Work and Family Roles



hart & Norris, 2003). In every society, gender norms prescribe the roles and behaviors that differentiate the experiences of women and men. There are restrictions inherent in the roles of women that make it difficult for them to achieve at high levels in demanding careers. Across national boundaries, women leaders are exposed to similar stereotypes that form sexist prejudice in organizations and to the same media that scrutinize their physical appearance, clothing, and family responsibilities with a magnifying glass while portraying their male counterparts as dealing with substantive issues. Reviewing the culture of gender helps us to expand our understanding of leadership, which includes not only individual traits and behaviors but also the process of integrating work and family as two major domains in a leader's life.

An Alternative Model of Leadership

Leadership studies have moved beyond the "trait" and "situation" approaches to more integrated theories of leadership that include the contributions of relationships, contexts, and culture (Avolio, 2007). We note here that in all the qualitative studies of women leaders, researchers relied on the women's tales of their success and how they perceived the interplay among their life roles. The use of semi-structured interviews led the participants to respond to particular aspects of their careers in ways they chose to recall. Families, employers, and employees may have perceived the lives of these women very differently, but we were more concerned with how the women explained their

own choices and actions. They were (mostly) pleased with their success at work and at home, which led us to label them as dually successful.

The success stories of the women leaders in various studies show us not only a fuller picture of how women can attain leadership but also how gender can inform leadership research. The study of women's leadership styles and their integration of work and family roles have enriched our understanding of the interplay of personal attributes, processes, and environment in a complex model of leadership that includes women in diverse global contexts. Their exceptional experiences guide us to consider an alternative model to the usual notion of a Western male as the prototypical leader in an organizational setting. This alternative model encompasses a fuller picture of leaders as human beings who steer their lives successfully (Figure 2). It includes the multiple roles of leaders in a complex world. It shows the developmental steps taken by the leaders navigating through their life courses, which are shaped by sociopolitical conditions and current contexts. These contexts may facilitate greater access to education and mentoring for women, which in turn build up their self-efficacy. Flexible working conditions and social support make it possible for women to combine work and family. These steps are not meant to be rigid sequences but are intended to illustrate the incremental and interactional nature of leadership development. The model strengthens the consideration of the interpersonal and relational dimensions of leadership. The transformational leadership style creates a

flatter organization in a global work context. This model also recognizes the importance of the integration of different domains of a leader's life. The interplay of these domains varies during different developmental stages of the leader's life course. We suggest that filling family roles such as those of mothers and caregivers, becoming leaders at work, and making these roles compatible have helped women to cultivate the transformational style of leadership.

We base our suggestions on the lessons we learned from the successful women leaders who have families, which is an unusual group. We do not intend to paint an overly rosy picture of these women's lives. They had their share of hardship and strain at work and at home. But they have managed to steer through the labyrinth despite the barriers. We did not speak to their family members and get their perspectives. That will be a direction for future studies. We also recognize that women leaders without families may face convergent and divergent issues, and so do men leaders with and without families. What we are suggesting is that a more comprehensive and inclusive model takes into account the gaps in existing models. Future research could compare how women at different stages of the career development and family life cycles construe their life purposes in incremental steps, and how powerful men and women define their success as work + family in a model of transformational leadership.

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