

Women Pursuing Leadership and Power: Challenging the Myth of the “Opt Out Revolution”

Overview

Recent media articles have heralded the “Opt Out Revolution,” claiming that women are shunning leadership and power at work for full-time motherhood. This claim has garnered remarkable currency. Stories in *The NY Times Magazine*, *Time*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Fast Company*, and CBS’s “60 Minutes” built on one another to create a tenacious narrative that women are choosing to leave or avoid high powered positions at work in order to become full-time parents.¹ Underpinning these arguments is the assertion that women are ambivalent about leadership and power and are willing to sacrifice these to invest in their families.

Patricia Sellers’ lead article in *Fortune*’s October 2003 issue on the 50 most powerful women in business was entitled “Power: Do women really want it?” She concluded that women lack power in business largely because they do not want it enough. Lisa Belkin’s article in *The New York Times Magazine* led with the title “Q: Why don’t more women get to the top? A: They choose not to.” Belkin argued that women are not in top leadership roles because they choose to leave the workplace for motherhood. Linda Tischler’s February 2004 article, “Where are the women?” in *Fast Company* argued that there are few women in the corner offices in Corporate America because women do not have the drive to compete as hard as men for leadership and power. And in March 2004, *Time* ran a cover story with the headline “The case for staying home: Why more young moms are opting out of the rat race.” This article featured women who are “sticking with the kids” rather than staying in the workplace.

These assertions about women “opting out” are disturbing and, indeed, dangerous. First, they are stories of a few women. They are based on anecdotal information from small samples of women – primarily privileged, white, female managers and executives – rather than on statistical survey data of large numbers of women.² Second, if taken into mainstream thinking, these assertions will curtail opportunities for women. They reinforce gender stereotypes that women are not as committed as men to the world of work and that women do not “have what it takes” to be leaders. And, third, these assertions take the mantle of responsibility for change away from organizations and policymakers and place it squarely on the shoulders of individual women.

Disturbed by the extent to which the notion of the “Opt Out Revolution” has been taken up as “truth” despite little support-

ing data, the Simmons School of Management collaborated with Hewlett Packard to survey professional women about their views of power and leadership.³ Our findings challenge the assumptions underlying the purported “Opt Out Revolution.” Indeed, women responding to our surveys are pursuing, not shunning, power and leadership. Even more important, they are pursuing leadership and power for goals much broader than their own personal gain and career advancement. They are seeking to strengthen their organizations and make constructive contributions to their communities and society. They are also redefining traditional models of leadership and power, moving from individualistic and hierarchical models of power *over* others to more collaborative models of inclusion and expanding power *through* others. Learning from these women’s perspectives can not only help us understand women’s career motivations and aspirations, but it can also deepen our understanding of the exercise of power and leadership in the service of building effective organizations.

The Surveys

In 2003 and 2004 we administered two separate, but related, surveys, each to approximately 500 professional and managerial women with extensive work experience attending leadership conferences hosted by the Simmons School of Management. The first survey focused on women’s aspirations and views of leadership, while the second focused on women’s views of power. Together, the findings from the surveys provide important insights into women’s attitudes, aspirations, and use of power and leadership (see Endnotes for the demographic profile of respondents and survey methodology).

Attitudes toward Leadership

Women do aspire to leadership in their organizations. Three-quarters of our respondents indicated that they wanted to be influential leaders in their organizations and viewed this as an important criterion in selecting their next jobs. Importantly, nearly half (47%) aspired to the highest leadership positions.⁴

Interestingly, leadership aspirations do not vary significantly across generations. Indeed, women under 34 had the highest percentage reporting aspirations for leadership influence (78%) and leadership positions (55%). Stories on the “Opt Out Revolution” assert that it is the mid-career women who are exchanging leadership for parenting responsibilities. In contrast, we found no statistically significant difference in the leadership aspirations of women with or without children.

We also found that women of color and white women differed significantly in their aspirations for leadership: 85% of women of color, compared to 70% of white women, aspired to be influential leaders. And 53% of women of color aspired to top leadership positions, compared to 45% of white women. This finding is notable given the paucity of women of color in leadership positions in Corporate America.⁵

Leadership for What?

Most interesting were women’s motivations for pursuing leadership. The majority were not motivated by traditional models of leadership focusing on rank, position, or “turf.” Only 28% reported that it was important to them to “be in charge of others.” Nor were they primarily motivated by status or rewards. Indeed, only 53% reported that it was important to them to make lots of money. Rather, more than 70% of the women reported that it was important for them to make a difference, help others, contribute to their communities, and make the world a better place (Chart 1).

Attitudes toward Power

Women respondents’ attitudes toward power echo their attitudes toward leadership. Contrary to conventional wisdom asserting that women are often ambivalent about power, 80% of the 421 women respondents to our 2004 survey on power indicated that they were comfortable with power, respected it, and liked what they could accomplish with it. Similar to our findings on leadership, the majority of women were not pursuing power out of self-interest nor for personal gain. Only 45% of the respondents said that they wanted power explicitly to move up the organizational ladder and only 32% indicated that they actively competed for power. In contrast, 65% said that they saw power as important to effective leadership and 70% wanted power in order to change their organizations (Chart 2). Indeed, the most important reason women gave for pursuing power was to make positive contributions to their organizations. Women also drew a clear distinction between exercising power and engaging in “office politics,” which they viewed very negatively. Contrary to expectations set by the “Opt Out Revolution” story, we found no significant differences between women with or without children in their atti-

tudes towards power. We also found few generational differences, except that women under 35 had less experience with power and did not agree as strongly as older women that they liked what they could accomplish with power.

To examine power through a gender lens, we asked respondents to characterize their perceptions of the behaviors of powerful men and women in their organizations. Interesting gender differences emerged. While powerful men and women were both seen as “able to make things happen” and

“achieve results,” men were seen as more likely to assert control over others while women were seen as working with others to achieve results (Chart 3, next page). There was a significant difference in the extent to which powerful women, as compared to powerful men, were seen to work well with others, make decisions collaboratively, communicate in a compelling manner, and develop others. These findings suggest that women tend to interpret and enact power differently from men. As a group, women are much less comfortable with traditional models of power over others but, indeed, are comfortable in exercising power with and through others.

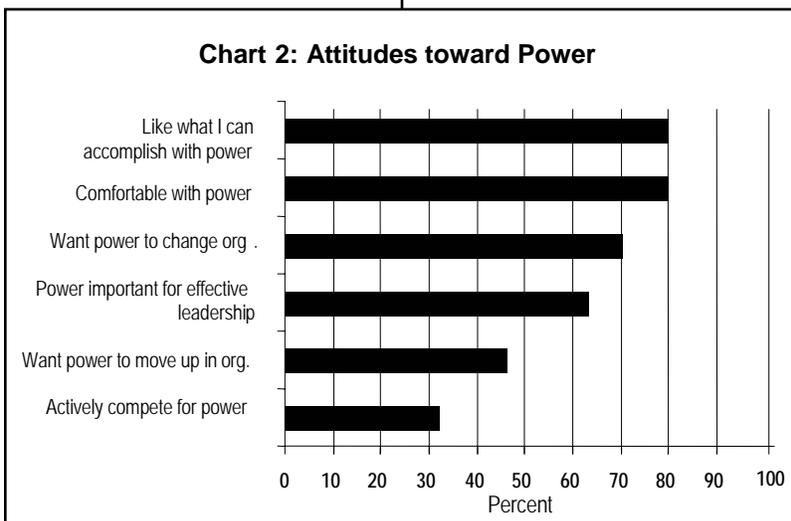
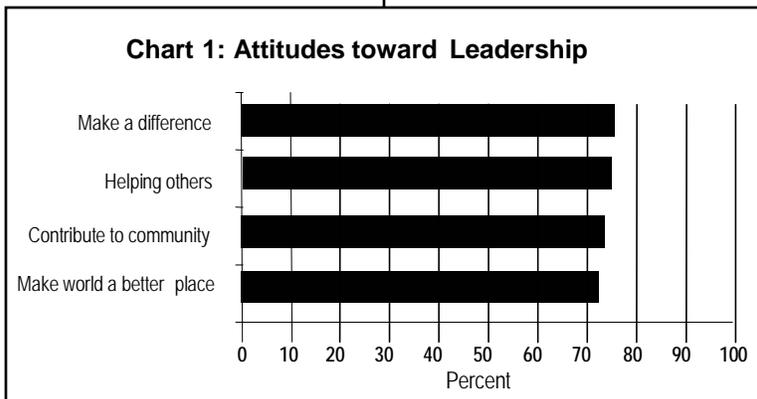
Strategies for Acquiring Power

Women’s reliance on exercising power through others, as opposed to over others, is evident in the strategies they use to acquire power. Our statistical modeling revealed that women acquire power by:

- *building relationships* – focusing on empowering their teams or units, supporting co-workers and subordinates, and building networks of allies; and
- *achieving results* – identifying new opportunities, taking risks, and expanding access to resources.

However, even more importantly, our modeling also showed that the most

important means our respondents use to acquire power is through first building relationships and then using them to achieve results. Interestingly, the least important strategies for acquiring power are traditional strategies such as developing positional power through direct competition for plum assignments; expanding “turf” or the number of direct reports; working long hours; exchanging favors; and connecting with other powerful people.



We found no significant differences between women with and without children in the ways they acquire and exercise power. However, we did find discernable generational differences. Compared to older women, women under 35 relied equally on results but less on relationships to acquire power.

Power for What?

One of our most striking findings is that women’s goals for exercising power, like their goals for leadership, are focused externally on changing their organizations and society more broadly. Our statistical modeling revealed that women’s primary goals were 1) *strategic* in that they want to chart the direction of and influence the priorities in their organizations, including ensuring that diversity goals are set and met; and 2) *socially-minded* in that they want to ensure that their organizations fulfilled their responsibilities to their communities and that their business operations were socially responsible. Again, these goals for exercising power held constant for women with and without children. Women under 35, especially women of color, were the most adamant that they wanted to use their power for socially-minded organizational activities.

Conclusions

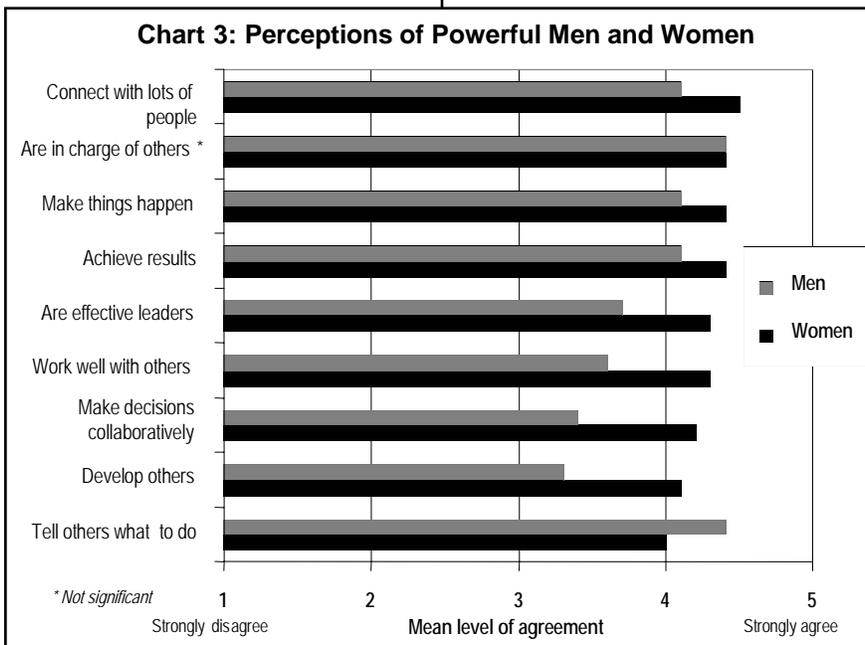
The issue of mothers “opting out” of the workplace has been overplayed in the media. Women responding to our surveys indicate clearly that they are committed to workplace leadership and to exercising power constructively. In contrast to the assertions of the “Opt Out Revolution” that women with children are turning away from leadership and power to become full-time parents, we found no significant differences between women with children and those without in terms of their attitudes toward leadership and power. Indeed, our data tell a contrasting story. A significantly smaller percentage of women with children (24%) compared to women with no children (31%) reported that they “often think about quitting their job.” Moreover, women with children reported higher levels of satisfaction with their opportunities to advance in their organizations.

These findings do not imply that women with children do not face challenges in the workplace. They do. A larger percentage of women with children (48%) than women without children (38%) agreed strongly that they have to adjust their styles to advance. Our data suggest that women are making the adjustments necessary to succeed and at the same time are striving to

change their organizations to make them both more effective and more equitable for women.

By challenging women’s commitment to work and to their organizations, the “Opt Out Revolution” narrative is detrimental to the majority of women – mothers or not – who are offering constructive leadership in their workplaces. Moreover, taking the spotlight off of organizations and focusing solely on women’s individual choices threatens to set back the significant

progress that many organizations have made in changing their work culture and practices to ensure that women have the same opportunities as men to take up leadership and contribute fully to their organizations.⁶ The top echelon of leadership is the remaining frontier for women. We cannot afford to lose momentum in this arena, especially when we consider the positive motivations that guide women’s quest for leadership and power.



Women are redefining

leadership and power. Our findings suggest that women are not shunning leadership and power, at least not on their terms. They may be turning away from the more traditional trappings of hierarchical leadership and power, as manifested in office politics, turf-building, and “being in charge of” others. But they are engaging actively in pursuing leadership and power with the aim of achieving bottom-line results, supporting their employees, and making change that is beneficial to their organizations, their communities, and society. Moreover, the majority are exercising power and leadership in ways that are inclusive and collaborative, focused on engaging and empowering followers to achieve organizational goals. Their espoused styles of leadership reflect contemporary models for leadership effectiveness⁷ and they are exercising power for positive social ends. This is most apparent in our final statistical model where we combined the ways women acquire power with their goals for exercising power. We found significant interrelationships between how women were using power with others to obtain outcomes that benefited not only their organization and organizations’ strategies, but also society more broadly.

Women pursuing leadership and power benefit all inside and outside our organizations.

There is no question that we need leaders who work for the good of their organizations and society. Yet women, the majority of whom espouse and enact these values, continue to hold few positions at the top of our organizations. Our research, and that of many others, suggests that the paucity of women at the top has little to do with their lack of

interest in leadership and power or their choices to leave the world of work to pursue parenting. Rather, the lack of women at the top has much more to do with subtle, but tenacious, biases about women and leadership that persist, below the surface and often unrecognized, in organizations today. Indeed, the vigor by which the “Opt Out Revolution” gained currency and escaped scrutiny reflects the power of these deeply held gendered assumptions that continue to shape models of leadership and leaders.

Our findings redirect attention to the changes organizations need to continue to make to ensure that they reap the full benefits of having women as responsible and socially-minded organizational leaders. The stark message from our surveys is that while women are committed to their organizations and to pursuing leadership, they still do not see an even playing field. While 89% of the women in the 2003 survey considered that opportunities for women’s advancement had improved over the past 10 years, only 58% were satisfied with their own opportunities to advance. Moreover, only 30% believed that women and men have an equal chance of advancing to the highest levels.

The implications of these concerns are sobering. Our statistical modeling revealed that dissatisfaction with advancement opportunities was the most critical factor influencing women’s considerations of leaving their organizations. Even more worrisome is that this concern is most prominent among women who see themselves as effective leaders. This lack of satisfaction with advancement is directly related to women’s perceptions about whether they have opportunities to exercise power and leadership. The lesson for organizations is that constraining possibilities for women to lead will result in the costly loss of talent. The more intangible, and perhaps more significant, cost is the loss of leaders – leaders who are committed to building effective organizations that serve as exemplary corporate citizens.

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Notes

¹Belkin, L. Q: Why don’t more women get to the top? A: They choose not to. *The New York Times Magazine*, October 26, 2003; Sellers, P. Power: Do women really want it? *Fortune*, October 13, 2003; Staying at home: Career women

deciding to stay at home to raise their kids. “60 Minutes.” CBS News, October 10, 2004; Tischler, L. Where are the women? *Fast Company*, February 2004; Wallis, C., et al. The case for staying home: Why more young moms are opting out of the rat race. *Time*, March 22, 2004.

²U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a drop in the workforce participation of mothers with children under 3 from 61.4% in 1997 to 60.2% in 2002. However, these data are not disaggregated by professional and managerial rank and cannot be interpreted as supporting the argument that women are shunning top level positions of leadership and power.

³We gratefully acknowledge Hewlett Packard’s support in the design and administration of these electronic surveys.

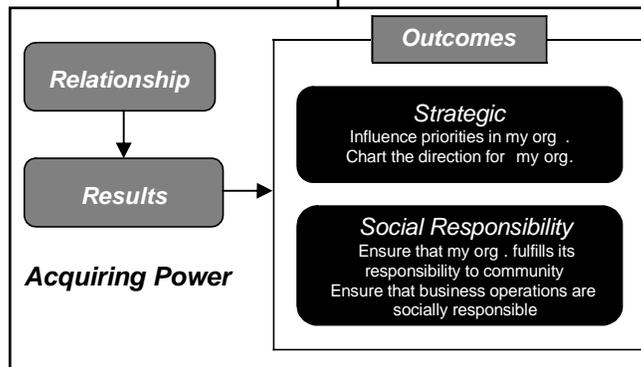
⁴These findings conform to those from a survey of 1,192 male and female executives in Fortune 500 global companies. Here 52% of the female executives reported that they aspired to the most senior positions. Family and Work Institute, Catalyst, and Boston College Center for Work & Family. 2002. *Leaders in the Global Economy: A Study of Executive Women and Men*.

⁵Catalyst. 1999. *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Opportunities and Barriers*. New York: Catalyst.

⁶Merrill-Sands, D. and Kolb, D. 2001. *CGO Insights #9, Women as leaders: The paradox of success*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management; Meyerson, D. & Fletcher, J.K. 2000. A modest manifesto for shattering the glass ceiling. *Harvard Business Review*. 78 (1): 127-136.

⁷Badaracco, J.L., Jr. 2001. We don’t need another hero. *Harvard Business Review*. 79 (8): 120-128; Kouzes, J. & Posner, B. 2002. *The Leadership Challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Collins, J. 2001. Level 5 leadership. *Harvard Business Review*. 79 (1): 66-76.

Methodology: The table below gives a demographic profile of our participants. Survey data was coded and analyzed using statistical software (SPSS). Frequencies, descriptive statistics, and analysis of means were used in the first wave of our research. Additional work on understanding the underlying themes was obtained through factor analytic techniques, also in SPSS. Final analyses and data were then submitted to structural equation modeling (using Lisrel), thereby allowing us to adopt a rigorous approach to understanding women’s perceptions of power and leadership and an understanding of the complex relationships between these perceptions and how they influence women’s behavior.



Demographic Profile	2003 survey: Women's aspirations and views on leadership (n=571)	2004 survey: Women's aspirations and views on power (n=421)
Average Age	42	43
Average Work Experience	21	20
Race	87% white Caucasian; 13% women of color	79% white Caucasian; 21% women of color
Position	50% middle and senior managers	64% middle and senior managers

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