



Vaasan yliopisto  
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**Underrepresentation of women in top corporate  
leadership in the U.S.**

School of Management  
Bachelor's Thesis in  
International Business

Vaasa 2026

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**UNIVERSITY OF VAASA****School of Management**

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<b>Title of the thesis:</b>	Underrepresentation of women in top corporate leadership in the U.S.		
<b>Degree:</b>	Bachelor of Science in Economics		
<b>Degree Programme:</b>	International Business		
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Rodrigo Mello		
<b>Year:</b>	2026	<b>Pages:</b>	45

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**ABSTRACT:**

Naiset nousevat ylimpiin yritysten johtoasemiin Yhdysvalloissa tällä hetkellä nopeampaa kuin koskaan ennen. Samaan aikaan ristiriidat sukupuoliroolien ja johtajakäyttäytymisen välillä ovat suurimmillaan yritysten ylimmissä johtoasemissa. Tämä tutkimus pyrkii löytämään syitä naisten aliedustukseen Yhdysvaltain ylimpien yritysten johtajina analysoimalla sukupuoleen liittyvien ennakkoluulojen vaikutusta johtajaodotuksiin ja selittämällä naisten aliedustukseen johtavia esteitä tämän avulla. Tutkimus on tehty kirjallisuuskatsauksena pääasiallisen tutkimuskysymyksen ympärille. Tutkimuksen pääasiallinen tutkimuskysymys tutkii kuinka havaitut ristiriidat sukupuolistereotyyppien ja johtamisodotusten välillä auttavat selittämään naisten aliedustusta ylimmissä johtoasemissa Yhdysvalloissa. Päättämiskysymystä tukevat kolme alakysymystä, jotka tutkivat johtajaodotuksia, sukupuolittuneita odotuksia, stereotyyppisiä ja naisjohtajien etenemisen esteitä. Tutkimuksen teoreettisena viitekehysenä toimii roolien yhteensopivuusteoria (engl. the role congruity theory).

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että havaitut ristiriidat sukupuolistereotyyppien ja johtajaodotusten välillä selittävät naisten aliedustusta ylimpien yritysten johdossa Yhdysvalloissa määrittelemällä ennakkoluulojen asettaman pohjan haasteille, jotka estävät naisten uran kehitystä kohti korkeimpia johtoasemia. Kuten roolien yhteensopivuusteoria ehdottaa, tutkimuksen keskeisin tulos esittää ennakkoluulojen olevan naisten epäsuotuisemman arvostelun ja sukupuolisyrynnän takana. Tämän seuraamusten summan juuret pohjautuvat johtajuuden maskuliiniseen luonteeseen, joka rakentaa pohjan sukupuoliennakkoluuloille, joka puolestaan aiheuttaa ristiriidan johtajakäyttäytymisen piirteiden ja naisten toivottavan käyttäytymisen välille johtaen naisiin kohdistuviin negatiivisiin asenteisiin ja arviointeihin. Yhdessä nämä elementit johtavat lasikattoilmiön (engl. the glass ceiling phenomenon) syntyyn. Lasikatto estää naisten etenemisen yritysten ylimpiin johtoasemiin luomalla sille esteitä, ja kokonaisuudessaan tämä seuraamustenketju toimii edesauttajana naisten aliedustukselle.

Women are reaching top corporate leadership positions in the United States faster than ever. At the same time the incongruity between the gender roles and leadership behaviour is at its highest when reaching top level leadership. This thesis aims to find the reasons behind the underrepresentation of women in U. S. top corporate leadership by analysing the influence of gender prejudice on expectations of leadership and explaining the barriers causing underrepresentation of women by them. The thesis is conducted as a literature review around the main research question of how does perceived incongruity between gender stereotypes and leadership expectations help explain the underrepresentation of women in top corporate leadership in the U.S. The main research question is supported by three sub-questions circling around the topics of leadership expectations, gendered expectations, stereotypes and barriers to advancement of female leaders. The theoretical framework of this thesis is described by the role congruity theory.

The key findings of this thesis suggest that the perceived incongruity between gender stereotypes and leadership expectations explains the underrepresentation of women in top corporate leadership in the U.S. by defining the bases caused by prejudice for the barriers that block the advancement of women into top leadership positions. As role congruity theory suggests the key finding of this thesis is that prejudice is behind the unfavourable judgement of women and gender discrimination. This sequence of consequences stems from the masculine nature of leadership setting the base for gender prejudice, causing incongruence with leadership behaviour and desirable behaviour of women, leading to negative attitude and evaluations toward women. Together these elements lead to the appearance of the glass ceiling, blocking the way to top corporate leadership positions by creating barriers for the advancement of women, overall contributing to the underrepresentation of women.

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**KEYWORDS:** Gender, leadership, prejudice, stereotypes, gender bias

## Contents

1	Introduction	6
1.1	Research questions	7
1.2	Definitions of key terms	8
1.3	Structure of the thesis	10
2	Theoretical Framework	12
2.1	Role congruity theory	13
2.2	Masculine nature of leadership	15
2.3	Top corporate leadership in the U.S.	16
2.4	Summary	17
3	Gender and Leadership Expectations	18
3.1	Expectations in top corporate leadership	18
3.2	Gendered expectations	20
3.3	Evaluation of leadership	22
3.4	Summary	23
4	Underrepresentation of women in top corporate leadership in U.S.	25
4.1	Underrepresentation of female leaders	25
4.2	Barriers to advancement to leadership for women	27
4.3	Attitude toward female leaders	30
4.4	The importance of women	34
4.5	Summary	35
5	Conclusions	37
5.1	Implications & limitations	39
5.2	Suggestions for future studies & the use of AI	41
	References	42

## Figures

<b>Figure 1.</b> Pathways from stereotypes about women to gender bias and discrimination.	14
<b>Figure 2.</b> U.S. values of Hofstede's six dimensions.	19
<b>Figure 3.</b> Comparison of Mean Scores for Sex and Culture.	33
<b>Figure 4.</b> The road for women to advance to top corporate leadership.	39

## Tables

<b>Table 1.</b> Challenges women experience in leadership.	28
<b>Table 2.</b> Responses by Men and Women in Selected Years to Gallup Poll's Question About Preferring a Man or Woman as Boss.	31
<b>Table 3.</b> Estimated marginal means and standard error of polarity indices and neutrality indices for the stimuli "typical leader," "male leader," and "female leader" by participants' gender.	33

## 1 Introduction

The attention towards the lack of women in leadership positions in the United States companies started only in the late 1970's. Back then of the U.S.'s 1300 largest companies only 147 directors on the boards were women and, despite efforts to advance talented women to corporate leadership, thirty years later women still held only a small percentage of board seats in the nation's corporations (Wolfman, 2007). What makes the topic of leadership and underrepresentation of women relevant today is the fact that women are reaching top leadership positions in the U.S. business in a way that is historically progressive and results from the socio-economic changes that have affected the world on a global level (Lynnes & Grotto, 2018; Pranathi & Lathabhavan, 2021). At the same time, these accomplishments do not remove the fact that looking at the broader statistics women still remain underrepresented in top leadership in the U.S, as in 2025 roughly 11% of the Fortune 500 companies CEOs were women meaning that only 55 women were heading the major firms of the U.S. (Society of Women Engineers, n.d.). The Fortune 500 is a ranking list used to recognize the 500 biggest companies in the U.S. by using annual revenue as the measuring method (Hayes, 2026).

The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 aims for achieving a more evolved gender equality across the globe (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). During the recent years, the publishing of this goal has resulted in more attention being directed towards female leaders, since closing the gender gap between women and men play an essential role in achieving the goal. While businesses often express the struggle of holding on to talented women in their leadership positions, the struggle presents itself as empty words for female leaders in these positions (Berry & Franks, 2010). The emptiness of the words results from women still having to face barriers stemming from their gender to advance to top leader positions (Berry & Franks, 2010). While these barriers are well-documented in the literature, understanding the factors shaping the experience and success of women is less focused on (Glass & Cook, 2016). Therefore understanding the indirectness and directness of those barriers to the advancement is the first step on facing and conquering the SDG 5.

This thesis aims on analysing the relationship between prejudice, leadership expectations and underrepresentation of women leaders in the context of U.S. top corporate leadership with the theoretical framework defined by the role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). While focusing mainly on role congruity theory, the thesis uses other theoretical angles to support it. These supporting angles are masculine nature of leadership, the glass ceiling phenomenon, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, leadership expectations and barriers.

### **1.1 Research questions**

The main goal of this thesis is to find an answer to the research question "*How does perceived incongruity between gender stereotypes and leadership expectations help explain the underrepresentation of women in top corporate leadership in the U.S.?*". It supports the purpose of this thesis which is to find the reasons behind the underrepresentation of women in U.S. top corporate leadership by analysing the influence of gender prejudice on expectations of leadership and connecting it to the underrepresentation.

The thesis aims to find an answer to the main research question through three sub-questions. The first sub-question of this thesis is "*What leadership traits or expectations are associated with top corporate leadership in the U.S.?*". While thesis analyses the traits and expectations and views them through the context of top corporate leadership, the answer to the first sub-question lays the foundation on how leadership is typically seen and pictured in the U.S.

The second sub-question is "*How are these leadership expectations gendered in research on stereotypes and leadership?*". This question focuses on the gender and gender stereotypes typically associated with the introduced leadership expectations. Finding an answer to the second sub-question is essential because gender stereotypes have a connection to the barriers women face in terms of their underrepresentation in leadership

positions in the U.S. It helps understand the reasons behind the formation of the barriers which plays an important role on figuring out how to avoid their appearance.

The third sub-question of this thesis is “*How does role congruity theory explain the barriers women face in reaching top leadership positions?*”. This sub-question connects to the previous two by combining the prejudice of gendered stereotypes to the leadership expectations. The thesis analyses the incongruent relationship of these two aspects and gives an explanation on their connection to the barriers that women face.

## **1.2 Definitions of key terms**

Barr et al. (2023, pp. 13–14) describe *gender* as a complex, multidimensional concept that influences multiple human actions such as social interaction, identity and health. As a term gender includes both gender identity and gender expression (Barr et al., 2023, pp. 13–14). Gender identity describes the internal sense of an individual’s self-image and gender expression on describes the ways in which the individual expresses their gender to others. Gender is a social, cultural and structural attribute that links individual identity to cultural and social expectations associated with certain sex traits, having an impact on people’s career opportunities and daily life.

*Leadership* is a complex concept, which has multiple different definitions (Brent et al., 2019). As one definition, Northouse (Bwalya, 2023, p. 181) and Karaszewski and Drewniak (2021) describe leadership as a social process in which a person influences and guides others to achieve a set specific goal or vision. To get these individuals or groups to act as expected and to work effectively and collaboratively, the concept of leadership combines not only specific character traits, but also talents to inspire, motivate and empower them. According to Nizarudin (Bwalya, 2023, p. 181), a wide range of behaviours, skills and traits are covered by the term leadership. Together these aspects include for example empathy, strategic thinking, communication and decision-making.

This thesis views *prejudice* from the viewpoint of gender and leadership. *Prejudice* in the context of gender roles and leadership roles is born when the stereotypical understanding of a social group owned by social perceivers runs into a conflict with the attributes that are as a seen necessary in certain social roles, such as leaders, to gain success (Eagly & Karau, 2002, pp. 573–574). This discrepancy between stereotypical group members and social roles merges in the perceivers mind into a degraded image of the group's member as the potential occupant of the role. In the perspective of leadership, the prejudice towards female leaders is caused by the incongruity of the relationship of trait expectations of women and expectations of the leader role.

Ellemers (2018, pp. 275–278) describes *stereotypes* as a reflection on general expectations about members of specific social groups. In general, stereotypes are helpful if there is a need to quickly estimate unknown individuals' behaviour or the difference between large groups of people. Therefore, stereotypes help make sense of the world. Stereotypical perceptions of a particular feature characterising a member of a group can often lead to not only overemphasizing differences between them but also underestimating variations within groups (Ellemers, 2018, pp. 275–278). Together these aspects make stereotypes impractical if the focus is supposed to be in estimating the exact potential or evaluating the defining characteristics of a specific individual. In perspective of genders, stereotypes not only rely on existing differences but affect the way men and women define themselves and are treated by (Ellemers, 2018). The stereotypes of the gender's behaviour are widely spread, which indicates that some truth can be found in them.

Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023, p. 366) describe *gender bias* as the unequal conscious or unconscious treatment of an individual that is based on their gender which leads to discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes. The attitudes and beliefs intentionally expressed describe the conscious gender bias whereas unintentional attitudes outside of the persons awareness describe the unconscious gender bias. From the viewpoint of organizations, gender bias is widely spread because of gender stereotypic

expectations of women's positions in them (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 366). The importance of understanding gender bias arises since they can influence evaluations of leadership behaviour and be visible in how female leaders are treated (Roper, 2019).

### **1.3 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter is the introduction-chapter, and it focuses on introducing the topic, its background and relevancy and states the purpose of the study. The introduction contains three subchapters. The first subchapter focuses on the research problem and research questions, the second defines the key terms and third explains the structure of the thesis.

The second chapter sets the theoretical framework of the thesis by covering the role congruity theory and top corporate leadership in the U.S. In addition, it helps explain why leadership is often thought as masculine concept and described with masculine terms.

The third chapter combines gender to leadership expectations. It explains what traits are expected from leaders in top corporate leadership, how the expectations are gendered and how leadership is evaluated. This chapter gives an answer to the first and second research sub-question of the thesis.

The fourth chapter focuses on underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in the United States. It analyses on the characteristics of the U.S. leadership culture, introduces the state of the female underrepresentation, describes the barriers women face when advancing to top leadership positions and introduces the differences in attitudes towards women and men in leader positions. In addition, the chapter recognizes the importance of women in leadership. The chapter focuses on answering to the third sub-question of the thesis.

The purpose of the fifth chapter of the thesis is to link the key findings of the previous chapters to each other and present the conclusions. Combining the key findings of the previous chapters aims for giving an answer to the main research question of the thesis. While answering the main research question, the chapter also integrates the implications and limitations of the thesis, discusses suggestions for future studies and states the use of artificial intelligence.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

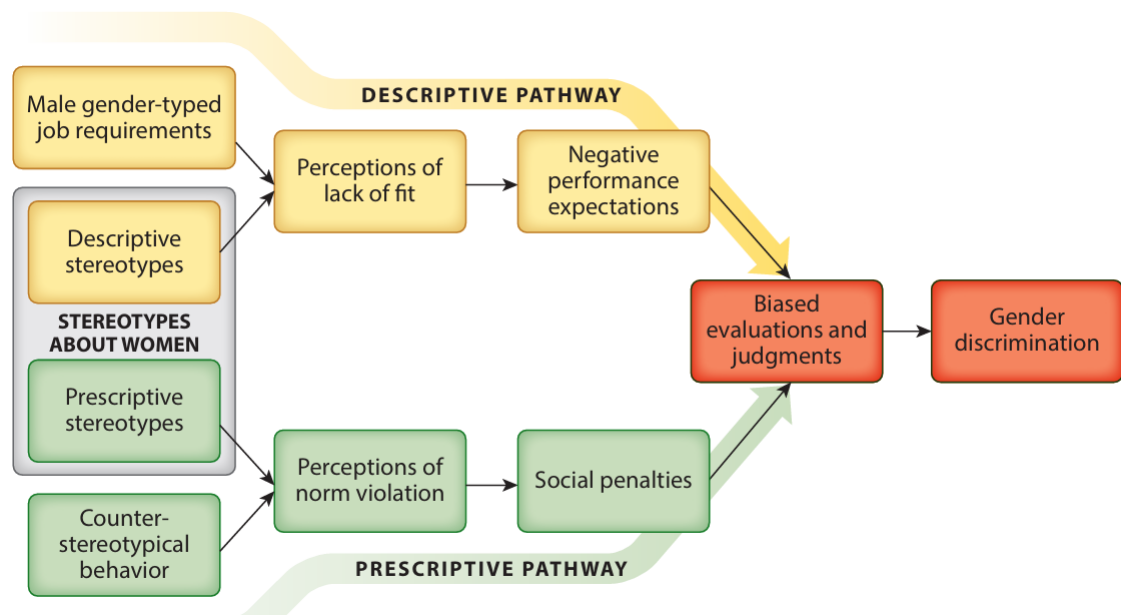
Dodge and others and Guney (Chullen et al., 2017) have concluded that while research shows both genders being just as capable to succeed in the top-level leadership positions, women are still seen lacking the necessary aspects for success. The aspects of knowledge, skills or abilities are the ones women are most often seen missing. Therefore, Javalgi and others and the U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission (Chullen et al., 2017) raise the worry of conscious and unconscious stereotyping of female leaders resulting in serious consequences such as their underrepresentation. Together these concepts make the thought of women being less capable worrying and increase the importance of this thesis to find the ways in which prejudice explains the barriers women face.

Research done on managers at differing levels has found that agentic characteristics are seen to be more important than communal characteristics for all leadership roles, but as advancing to higher levels, the importance of agentic characteristics rises (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Since agentic characteristics are more commonly connected to the male gender (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023), the aspects together present the incongruity between the gender roles and leadership behaviour being at its highest in top level leadership. This concept is particularly useful for this thesis because it sets the base on understanding the reasons for the underrepresentation of female leaders and helps justify the part role congruity theory plays in it. Therefore, this chapter focuses on introducing the theoretical framework of the thesis starting with the main theory *role congruity theory*, continuing with the most significant supporting angle of *masculine nature of leadership*, and finishing with describing *top corporate leadership in the U.S.* Other supporting angles such as stereotypes, the glass ceiling phenomenon, Hofstede's cultural dimensions leadership expectations and barrier are included along the research to make the base role congruity theory sets stronger.

## 2.1 Role congruity theory

Role congruity theory is based on how social role theory treats the content of gender roles and their significance in promoting sex differences in behaviour and reaching beyond it by proposing new provable predictions of prejudice and its consequences (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The theory is particularly useful for this thesis, because it offers an effective organizing framework for empirical findings to consider the compatibility between gender roles and leadership roles. In other words, the role congruity theory helps explain why women may face disadvantages in reaching leadership positions.

The potential for prejudice is higher against women than men in leadership roles, because prejudice is produced by the concept of female gender role being more likely incongruent with leader roles than the male gender role (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). The role congruity theory leads to suggest that the prejudice women face when advancing to higher leadership positions takes two different forms and contains two different kinds of disadvantages. The first of these disadvantages describes the view of women possessing less leadership ability than men, which derives from the female role's descriptive aspect. This disadvantage is born when perceivers combine the descriptive aspects of a gender with leadership roles. Figure 1 visualizes the pathways stereotypes take to lead to biased evaluations and judgements (Heilman et al., 2024). The descriptive pathway of figure 1 is useful for describing the first disadvantage since it visualizes how leadership from the viewpoint of traits should be more stereotypically accurate for men than women which builds the base for less favourable evaluation of the leadership ability of women.



**Figure 1.** Pathways from stereotypes about women to gender bias and discrimination (Heilman et al., 2024, p. 170).

The second disadvantage stems from the first disadvantage and it views the less favourable evaluation of behaviour that is derived from the injunctive aspect of the female gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The base for this second form of disadvantage builds from the perception of agentic behaviour being less desirable or stereotypical in woman than men. The disadvantage rises since the desirable behaviour of leaders does not match with the desirable behaviour of women and resulting in women being evaluated more strictly than men even when women show actual leadership like behaviour. This stems from the concept of leader behaviour not responding to the traditional view of womanlike behaviour and results to violating the female gender role. The prescriptive pathway of figure 1 is useful for describing the second disadvantage since it visualizes how leadership behaviour should be stereotypically seen more from men than women which builds the base for less favourable evaluation of the leadership ability of women. Together the two forms of prejudice build the base for less positive attitudes and evaluations toward female leaders than male leaders and by that result in making achieving leadership positions and success more difficult for women (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 573). The role congruity theory is particularly useful for this thesis because it explains through

these disadvantages not only why women may be seen as less fitting for leadership roles, but also why women can be evaluated negatively even when they show leadership behaviours that are normally valued in male leaders.

## **2.2 Masculine nature of leadership**

The nature of leadership is most often seen as masculine. This stems from the academic culture of leadership being mainly shaped through male-dominated history (Berry & Franks, 2010). According to Berry and Franks (2010) the gender research conducted by men hold a large portion of research on gender and usually cover questions of questionable authenticity. This leads to not only many recurring research questions of women in organizations as leaders to include gender-power assumptions but also to the research being shaped by frameworks of men's world. This phenomenon holds a lot of power to itself because the idolization of leadership is strongly conducted through masculinity. Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell and Ristikari (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023) have suggested that the masculinity of leadership nature adds prejudice towards female leaders. Therefore, the stereotype of the male gender being the norm in leadership has a negative effect on career advancement of female leaders.

The issues regarding masculine power circle around gender and the norm in leadership seen to be power of male. The norm of male power is often described with the sentence "Think Manager... Think Male" (Berry & Franks, 2010, p. 3; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023), which shows that male-like qualities are the ones to aim for when practising leadership. The view of male as a norm affects for instance exploring some topics making them critical or dangerous since they are likely to cause anger and irritation because of their sensitive nature of insinuating the vulnerability of women. Health, menopause and menstruation are seen as some of the examples that match this description (Berry & Franks, 2010). Therefore, the view of male as a norm becomes crucial in this thesis since it may cause limitations in the study of women in leadership positions.

The masculine nature of leadership is a consequence of the large number of men occupying the leadership positions in organizations (Pranathi & Lathabhavan, 2021). The large number of men can be a result of men being more often perceived to meet the high standards for competence when it comes to leadership as they are accepted more promptly than women when they show behaviours of confident and assertiveness (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Together these aspects show the impact of men especially in organizational settings, since the people more likely to be promoted to top leader roles have to be perceived as capable to lead. Together these concepts make adding the theory of masculine nature of leadership to support the role congruity theory necessary for this thesis since the masculinity helps explain the reasonings for the prejudice of role congruity.

### **2.3 Top corporate leadership in the U.S.**

Leadership shows its importance for corporate life in many ways. Even though successful leaders do not do it by their own but by relying on others like their teams, a strong leader is essential for an organization to succeed and differentiate from others (Ross, 2008). To achieve the perks, organizations aim to strengthen their leadership teams to enhance their position in the competitive market. If the strengthening is done effectively leadership becomes an important competitive advantage in the U.S. corporate world. In addition to the competitiveness, in long term, these leaders that own the ability to fulfil role of an effective leader are essential for the organization's health. It does not matter whether organizations find them, train them or promote them for the task. It's important to note that not all successful leaders fit into just any organization and make them succeed (Ross, 2008). To make a leader the competitive advantage, it's important to find the appropriate fit.

The leadership positions in corporate world are gendered occupations privileging masculine work ethic (Glass & Cook, 2016), hence nowadays just a small percentage of top corporate leaders are women (Wolfman, 2007). This phenomenon of underrepresentation is inconsistent with past predictions, steadily growing weight for women in economy,

the rising visibility of a large pool of unused talent or the case for making corporate leadership more diverse to be more effective on competing in the global economy. Women often struggle proving themselves as leaders in the corporate world, since they are seen as women but not as leaders in the male dominated executive positions (Glass & Cook, 2016). The background of U.S. top corporate leadership is necessary for this thesis to explain the importance of removing the barriers and achieving gender equality in leadership.

## **2.4 Summary**

The analysis of this thesis is based on the main theoretical framework of role congruity theory and supported by masculine perception of leadership and other supporting angles included along the research. The thesis views the underrepresentation of female leaders from the focus point of top corporate leadership in the U.S. The role congruity theory explains why women may face disadvantages when reaching for top level leadership position by proposing new provable predictions of prejudice and its consequences to consider the compatibility between gender roles and leadership roles. The culture of leadership has been shaped by men which has led to viewing male as the norm of leadership. The masculine perception of leadership helps explain the reasoning behind the of incongruence between the prejudice in the traits of women and leaders. Effective leadership and finding a fitting leader are important for corporations' success, competitiveness and health. Since women are struggling to prove their capability for leadership, they remain underrepresented in U.S. corporate world.

### **3 Gender and Leadership Expectations**

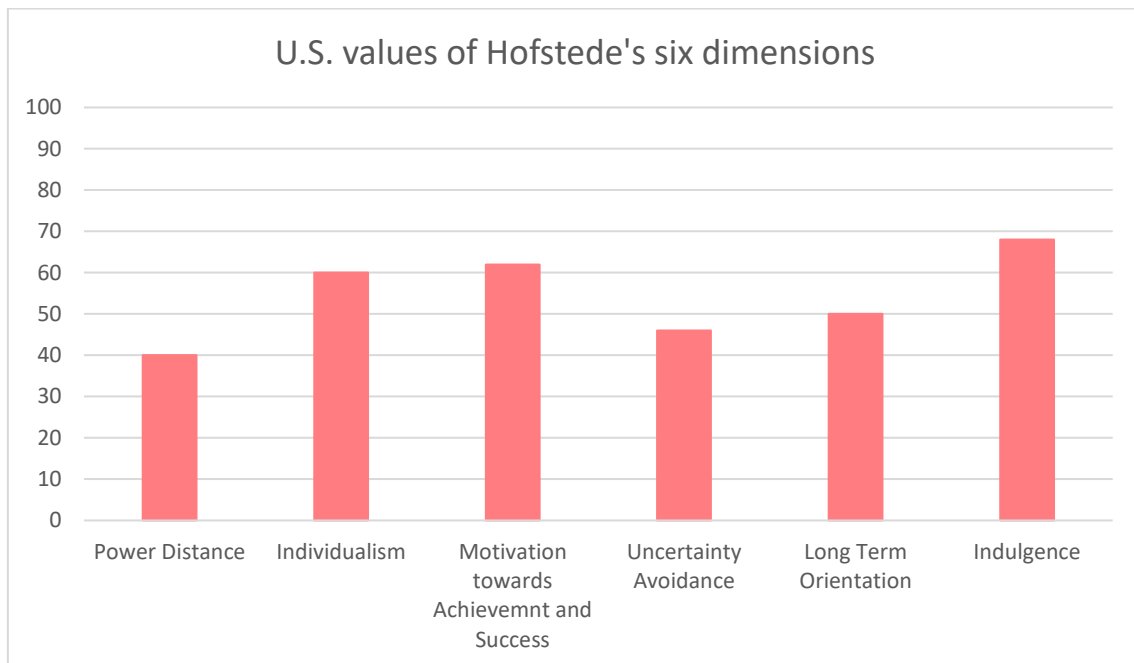
The relationship between gender and leadership is complex as the gender of the leader influences leadership processes both directly and indirectly (Shen & Joseph, 2021). In organizations this complexity reflects from the environment being based on traditional gender roles. This leads to the thought of leadership as a concept to be limited for the male gender only affecting the evaluations of female leaders negatively (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). This chapter will examine the relationship between gender and leadership expectations by reviewing traits and expectations associated with top corporate leadership, explaining how the expectations are gendered and discussing how these concepts together connect to leadership evaluation.

#### **3.1 Expectations in top corporate leadership**

Expectation of how leaders should behave or what traits should they possess shape the way top corporate leadership is viewed. This chapter will shortly go through the expectation mentioned commonly in leadership literature overall and in the context of U.S. In leadership development certain traits expected from leaders have been seen throughout the human history (Ross, 2008). These traits are a positive attitude, self-confidence, risk taking nature and a pragmatic approach to leading. Positive attitude is expected since it not only allows leaders to see diverse opportunities, but it also keeps them motivated and helps them find alternative ways in problem solving. Self-confidence in the other hand gives leaders the strength in their decisions and makes them aware of their capabilities. A risk-taking nature makes the leaders pursue new approaches and lastly, pragmatic, meaning not theory based, approach make the leaders search for new solutions considering the circumstances and assessing the likely outcomes. Together these historically expected traits set the base for leadership expectations since they have a positive effect on the success of the organizations.

The U.S. culture shapes leadership expectations in multiple ways. Figure 2 measures how much each value of Hofstede's six dimensions is appreciated in the U.S. In figure 2 the

bar measuring individualism in tall, which agrees with Hofstede's (Kovačević et al., 2025) description of leadership culture in the U.S. being highly individualistic. Another one of the tallest bars in figure 2 is the one measuring motivation towards achievement and success. This indicates the high appreciation of these qualities as Hofstede in Kovačević's and others' work (2025) describes the "can-do" mentality and short-term goals being valued and personal achievements being used as measures for success. Together these characteristics describe the leadership style of the U.S. since it is associated with a democratic leadership style that emphasizes transformational leadership, employee's autonomy and innovation (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kovačević et al., 2025, p. 21; Shen & Joseph, 2021). Participatory leadership models are favoured as they empower employees and encourage communication. It's important to note that due to the diverse migration backgrounds of its citizens leadership in the United States is not homogeneous (Kovačević et al., 2025, p. 14).



**Figure 2.** U.S. values of Hofstede's six dimensions (The Culture Factor, n.d.).

When viewing leadership expectations from the context of the corporate world, the fast-changing environment of it not only leads to leaders being expected to be able to adapt

quickly into challenging and changing circumstances but also makes the organizations constantly look for new ways to be more effective, gain efficiencies, incorporate new technologies and pursue new opportunities (Umoh, 2025; Ross, 2008). Together these result to the leadership environment to lack stability. Hence it is expected for a leader to be able to balance stability while pursuing the new and changing requirements. These aspects can be seen from the expectations of the next top corporate leaders, such as the Fortune 500 CEOs. The next Fortune 500 CEOs are expected to shape disruption, drive transformation, modernize operations, integrate AI responsibility and expand the meaning of leadership (Umoh, 2025). Therefore, the traits that are expected from these CEOs are accountability, empowerment, encouragement and visionary thinking.

### **3.2 Gendered expectations**

Some expectations for leaders are gendered resulting in unfair evaluation of the different genders as leaders. Because leadership is defined by masculine traits women are being expected to possess less leadership ability than men which supports the disadvantages that role congruity theory proposes (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Scheuer et al., 2025). Even though when women act more in leadership positions the less attention is being directed to how they are generally seen, still gendered expectations and prejudice appear. These concepts are born from the principle of leadership-like behaviour does not responding to the desirable behaviour of women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This chapter will go through these gendered expectations of leadership from the viewpoint of prejudice.

Stereotypes are one of the reasons for expectations to appear gendered. Stereotypes of genders not only have an indirect impact on individual's qualities, priorities and needs, it also affects the standards that are held towards them (Ellemers, 2018, pp. 280–281). The reason of gender stereotypes affecting the expectations can be partly explained by the U.S.'s fit to Hofstede's masculine societies (Chullen et al., 2017). Because of this fit, it is expected for men to be tough and focused on material success in the U.S. whereas women are expected to be more modest and tender with the focus on quality of life. The impact that stereotypes have for perception of women can be seen especially in research

revealing that relational criteria is dominating the way of viewing and evaluating women aiming for leadership (Chullen et al., 2017). For example, gender stereotypes can act as strengtheners for the barriers of glass ceiling phenomenon, which blocks women from advancing into higher leadership roles (Kapoor et al., 2021).

Based on the number of mentions in literature, the most common gendered expectation women face is related to parenthood and more specifically the role of a caregiver (Ellemers, 2018; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Women are usually seen more caring, warm, nurturing, affectionate and interpersonally sensitive whereas are seen more assertive and aiming their focus more on work and individual tasks (Ellemers, 2018; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, Li & Albdiwy, 2025) Thus, when becoming parents, it's usually assumed that caring for the children becomes number one priority for women. In other words, the responsibility of being a caregiver falls to women. This should result in negatively in work ambition and commitment of women, whereas men are not seen to face these implicit expectations while becoming a dad. According to Lynnes and Judiesch (Ellemers, 2018), although a survey of over 40 000 employees in 36 countries reveals that combining work and family roles bring similar issues no matter the gender, managers still see parenthood as a problem for women and not for men. On the other hand, the "women as caregivers" mentality has positive aspects affecting their leadership abilities. For example, because of the given mentality the expectations of the ability's women possess to multitask at work rise (Pranathi & Lathabhavan, 2021). This expectation is a result of this mentality since because women are seen to have the ability to multitask home related tasks such as cooking, housekeeping and being a mom, they are seen to reflect these abilities also at work. Multitasking and keeping multiple strings in one hand is as an ability is appreciated in when it comes to the fast-changing environment of leadership (Pranathi & Lathabhavan, 2021, Ross; 2008).

Going beyond the gendered expectations has proven to be difficult for women. To achieve equality in leadership, early on women in leadership positions have tried to prove their similarity to men (Berry & Franks, 2010). While with this goal women

succeeded to point out that they can possess similar career aspirations, work motivation and leadership styles as men, the principle argues with the reality of leadership styles women tend to show. These leadership styles are often quite different than men's. Berry and Franks (2010) argue that women own more collaborative leadership styles as they listen more carefully and are more reactive to coworkers. This can be interpreted from a trend of women favouring more interactive leadership styles than men, as men tend to gain power through more dominate of top-down communication styles. Overall women are more often expected to take on more of a collaborative, cooperative and democratic leadership style whereas men seem to choose a more directive, competitive and autocratic style (Pranathi & Lathabhavan, 2021; Shen & Joseph, 2021). Together the findings of this chapter explain how gendered expectations arise from prejudice and how they have a role in creating barriers for the advancement of women while emphasising the negative effects of gendered expectetations. Overall, although some literature highlights collaborative leadership style of women as a strength, role congruity theory suggests that this same expectation can become restrictive if women are expected to be collaborative but punished for being assertive.

### **3.3 Evaluation of leadership**

The gender prejudice in leadership affects the way in which leadership is evaluated. The impact of genders can be explained with Gorman and Schein (Glass & Cook, 2016) concluding leadership evaluation consisting of cultural schemas associating leadership with masculinity. Eagly and Carli and Eagly and Karau (Glass & Cook, 2016) add that these schemas feed the perceivers assumptions of what kind of a person is fit to successfully lead the organization. Negative evaluations are usually irrespective of the performance, ability and preparation women display reflecting, according to Livingston and others (Glass & Cook, 2016), on the fact that if any dominance or authority is displayed by a women the risk of negative evaluation rises since the woman fails apply to the traditional gender norms even though these shown behaviours are typically connected to an effective leader. Thus, cultural schemas of masculinity can affect the evaluations of women fitting to the leadership role in a negative way.

According to research, evaluations of leadership behaviour are currently almost entirely based on ratings provided by bosses, peers or subordinates (Shen & Joseph, 2021). In these kinds of evaluations, the raters typically are asked to recall behaviours of the leaders over a certain period. Scholars have had doubts of the evaluations' consideration as high fidelity since the perceivers have shown to rely on cognitive prototypes and heuristics while performing the evaluation. In addition, evaluations based on coworkers' opinions can be tricky, because the evaluators might tend to aim to appear better in their responses (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This happens because the evaluators might fear that the honest answer will make them look prejudiced. Some writers have presented that gender is likely to affect the perception of leadership behaviour (Shen & Joseph, 2021). According to Scott and Brown's (Shen & Joseph, 2021) research, it is easier for perceivers to code the behaviour of male leaders than female leaders, which reflects on the importance to be careful when interpreting the differences between the genders. The differences in encoding can differ when compared to the actual behaviour of the leader and it is unclear how much this can distort conclusions that connect to evaluation of leaders. Together these findings indicate that evaluations of leadership are complex to conduct and should be examined with caution.

### **3.4 Summary**

Expected leadership traits such as positive attitude, self-confidence, risk taking nature and a pragmatic approach to leading have been seen thorough human history, but nowadays the fast-changing environment of the corporate world has created an addition of new expected traits. In the context of the U.S. these new expected traits include adaptability, accountability, empowerment, encouragement and visionary thinking. According to Hofstede the leadership culture in U.S. is individualistic, where indulgence and motivation towards achievements and success is highly appreciated (Kovačević et al., 2025). Together all these aspects of the U.S. leadership environment make the relationship between gender and leadership expectations complex.

Prejudice causes some of the leadership expectations to be gendered. Women are expected to possess less leadership ability than men, since the leadership-like behaviour does not respond with the desirable behaviour of women. While the U.S. men are expected to be tough and focused on material success, women are expected to be modest, tender and caring with the focus on quality of life. Together these expected traits act as strengthens for the in literature most commonly mentioned gendered expectation of women being the caregiver of the family which results negatively in work ambition and commitment. While some literature highlights the positives gendered expectations give for women, this example helps explain how gendered expectations affect negatively in the evaluation of women. When it comes to the style of leadership, women are expected to go for more of a collaborative, cooperative and democratic leadership style whereas men for more directive, competitive and autocratic style. Together with role congruity theory's suggestion, the expectation of the leadership style of women can become restrictive if women are expected to be collaborative but punished for being assertive

Evaluating leadership is based on cultural schemas associating it with masculinity, which results in women being evaluated more negatively. The negative evaluation rises since women fail apply to the traditional stereotypical gender norms while showing behaviour associated with leadership. The evaluations are often based on coworkers' ratings, which makes them sensitive for cognitive prototypes and heuristics relating to stereotypes. Together with the perceiver's gender affecting the encoding of the behaviour of leaders, leadership evaluations become complex to interpret.

## **4 Underrepresentation of women in top corporate leadership in U.S.**

Kanter has in Glass' and Cook's work (2016) concluded that in the U.S. corporate world, women in leadership positions display numerical minorities. The decisions of promotion for top level leadership positions are often secretive and non-standardized, which results to the decision being prone to stereotypes and evaluation-based bias (Glass & Cook, 2016). Together these indicate that gender prejudice plays a part on explaining the reasons behind the underrepresentation of women. This chapter will first review the underrepresentation of female leaders in U.S. top corporate world, then describe barriers women face when advancing into leadership positions, thirdly review the attention towards female leaders and finally discuss why women are important to be represented in leadership positions. Combining the findings of these perspectives helps finding the answer for how role congruity theory can explain the barriers for women's advancement.

### **4.1 Underrepresentation of female leaders**

The legislative and regulatory change in the beginning of the 21st century set the base for the composition of the boards of directors of publicly listed companies to change significantly (Wolfman, 2007). The change including the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 and subsequent rules adopted by the New York, American and NASDAQ stock exchanges offered an opportunity for qualified individuals with historically ignored or not known talent by creating a need for new kinds of leaders. This need for a greater pool of candidates for board positions created expectations of candidates who have the time, experience, skills and personal qualities to be model leaders, meaning individuals who own a background that enables them to play productive roles on compensation committees, such as so-called financial experts. Wolfman (2007) describes this cap of unused resource consisting mostly of senior women in business. While this finding indicates there being a gap in leadership that women could fulfil, female leaders remain underrepresented to this day.

While a cap for women leaders in corporate setting exists and progress in raising the number of women being made, achieving gender-equality has proven to be difficult and the percentage of women in leadership positions remains low (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Scheuer et al., 2025, p. 111). For instance, in Fortune 500 ranking, in 2025 roughly 11% of the CEOs in the 500 biggest companies of the U.S. were women, with the percentage lowering to 7.3% when examining the 1000 biggest companies (Scheuer et al., 2025, p. 111; Society of Women Engineers, n.d.). These global perspectives clarify that while U.S has made progress in closing the gender gap in leadership, the rate of progress has been slow compared to other countries (Lynnes & Grotto, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2025). The slowness in advancing the number of female leaders is not consistent with the data showing women being qualified and experienced to take on high level responsibilities (Berry & Franks, 2010). According to the WEF's Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2025), in 2025 the U.S. ranked 42nd out of 148 countries in the index that examines the countries abilities to close the gender cap. The combination of this data indicates that the goal of closing the gender gap proven to be difficult, which connects the valuable talent and human capital of women being wasted in U.S., when many women occupied jobs do in fact acquire the same or similar aspects that higher paid jobs with men acquire (Berry & Franks, 2010; Lynnes & Grotto, 2018).

Understanding the effect of the glass ceiling phenomenon is useful for this thesis because it supports the role congruity theory by describing the invisible barriers caused by prejudice that act as blocks for women when progressing up the corporate hierarchy to top leadership jobs (Berry & Franks, 2010; Kapoor et al., 2021; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). According to Kapoor et al. (2021) the impact of the glass ceiling phenomenon is multi-dimensional reaching its impact on women all the way from individual aspects such as self-esteem to career development and career success. The Glass Ceiling Commission (Kapoor et al., 2021), created as a part of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, described the barriers women face by dividing them to three different classes. The first of these classes constitutes of the societal barriers, the second of internal structural barriers and

the third of governmental barriers. This thesis will focus on the societal and internal structural barriers since prejudice can affect their appearance, thus connecting them to the role congruity theory.

## **4.2 Barriers to advancement to leadership for women**

Women face different kinds of barriers created by gender bias and stereotypes when it comes to leadership in male dominated environments such as the U.S. corporate world (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Glass & Cook, 2016). As Kanter, Reskin and Ridgeway and England (Glass & Cook, 2016) conclude, that the barriers are caused by sex categorization and gender stereotypes making women seem less competent and capable leaders for the decision makers, which leads to them preferring men for high level promotions. These barriers operate at different levels of the organization's hierarchy, including the level of top leadership. In the levels of analysis underrepresentation is highlighted by different factors ranging from macro-level contextual factors, such as societal cultural values, to organizational processes, focusing primarily on interpersonal processes like the role congruity theory (Lynnes & Grotto, 2018). Understanding and recognizing how prejudice affects the barriers women face when advancing to leadership plays a crucial role in overcoming these barriers which leads to lowering the underrepresentation of women. For example, by understanding the reasons behind the barriers, women seek positions with higher risks to prove their competence as leaders (Glass & Cook, 2016). The thesis will next present four barriers to advancement of women caused by prejudice that are commonly mentioned in literature of leadership from the viewpoint of external factors.

Incongruities regarding leadership behaviours are one of the critical barriers women face when advancing to leadership positions (Lynnes & Grotto, 2018). While women are expected to exhibit masculine behaviour stereotypic for successful leaders to seem powerful, exhibiting too much of this behaviour causes women to be seen as unlikeable and results in women receiving backlash for violating gender norms (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Table 1 describes external factors that lead to underrepresentation of women

by defining the challenges of “think manager–think male”, “double bind” and “backlash”. As table 1 concludes, backlash describes the adverse social reaction that is directed to women when they violate gender norms or behave in a masculine way (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023). The barrier of backlash arises when, for example, a female leader must be careful not to exhibit too masculine leadership behaviour in the fear of receiving backlash (Lynnes & Grotto, 2018). This cautious behaviour makes her look like less of a capable leader than men and results in indirectly strengthening the idea of men being better leaders than women. Overall, this behaviour contributes to strengthening the inequality of genders by reflecting how role congruity theory suggests the leadership behaviours of women being expected to be less well received than their male counterparts, resulting in negative evaluations and barriers to leadership development (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). In cases of backlash gender acts as a moderator of the interpersonal processes of leadership identity construction, possibly affecting on the concerns of women regarding if becoming a leader will be incongruent with their identity as a woman. Overall, the barrier regarding incongruities in behaviour encapsulates the challenges of table 1 into one big barrier.

**Table 1.** Challenges women experience in leadership (adapted from Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, pp. 368–369).

External factors	
Challenges	Definition
Think manager–think male	The belief that the right manager or leader is someone with masculine qualities and who is agentic, which indicates that women are not suited for leadership, whereas men are suited for leadership.
Double bind	A situation in which a woman faces a decision that contradicts her gender stereotype, where the two options conflict.
Backlash	Adverse social reaction to women who violate gender role norms and behave in a masculine manner.

To add to the previously mentioned incongruities in behaviour, the masculine nature of leadership and its effect on organizational and cultural values causes a barrier for women to advance to top leadership positions (Lynnes & Grotto, 2018). This barrier arises especially in male-dominated organizations, where the male leaders have the power to influence and shape the values and work culture. The influence on culture can show itself with, for instance, the male leader's expectations for around-the-clock availability and willingness to sacrifice family and personal lives for success, causing an incongruity with the gendered expectation of women having the caregiver responsibility in the family (Ellemers, 2018; Lynnes & Grotto, 2018). While women are balancing work and stereotypical caregiver responsibilities, they are seen to contribute less time on work related development. Through the reducing willingness to hire female leaders this mentality widens the gender gap (Li & Albdiwy, 2025). In addition, the work culture being shaped by men raises the possibility of women being gradually excluded from it (Pranathi & Lathabhavan, 2021). Glass and Cook (2016) reinforce this finding by stating that with golf playing a huge role in sustaining networks in corporate environment, women are often excluded from golf events since the golf course is seen as a men's space. By being excluded from important networking events such as golf, women become left out from sustaining and solidifying the network which reflects to denied support as leaders.

Higher standards for competence held towards women than men create a barrier for women in leadership (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Gaining influence is an important part to achieve higher leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). To be able to gain this influence leaders are not only being expected to be competent but also confident and assertive. The process of this has proven by experiment to be more difficult to women than men, especially when the team is consisted of men. A gender-based barrier for women raises from these expectations since the reactions to assertive and confident women differ negatively from men who own the same attributes. This angle related to backlash supports the role congruity theory by indicating that evaluative bias is directed toward women who show agentic behaviour expected from leaders rather than the communal behaviour expected from them (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Together with standards of

competence that are often deeply ingrained to organizational structures, the barrier of higher standards becomes difficult to overcome (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024)

Lastly, physical attractiveness acts as a barrier for women in leadership especially when advancing in male-dominated organizations (Glass & Cook, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The role physical attractiveness plays relate on how the gender typical stereotypes are applied to her. Typically, attractive women have more stereotypical attitudes attached to them which leads to attractive women being evaluated less favourably than their unattractive peers (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Although some literature emphasizes stereotyping attractive women, Glass's and Cook's (2016) research contrasts these theories by revealing that the capabilities and input of one female leader of successfully performing the leadership tasks was questioned based on her being overweight. The worries reflected on how she could take care of leading other people when she was not seen to be able to take care of her body. Although the two different perspectives view the barrier of physical attractiveness from different angles, they do agree with prejudice being one of the reasons behind this barrier.

While the focus point and consequences differ in each barrier, together all these concepts show that women's underrepresentation is not caused by one single factor, but by the interaction between stereotypes, evaluation processes, and organizational structures.

### **4.3 Attitude toward female leaders**

The attitudes towards both genders in leadership positions are important to acknowledge since they help understand the prejudice that women face. Fishbein and Ajzen (Chullen et al., 2017) conclude the connection between attitudes and prejudice is being created by attitudes having a strong role on shaping behavioural intentions. While the disadvantages the prejudice of role congruity theory causes lead to less favourable attitudes toward female leaders than male leaders, these attitudes have decreased over time (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Table 2 measures the preference of the gender of the leader

by asking from representatives of both genders which gender they prefer to act as a leader. The change in attitude over the years can be seen from table 2, as the responses preferring women have increased and attitudes toward men decreased during the years.

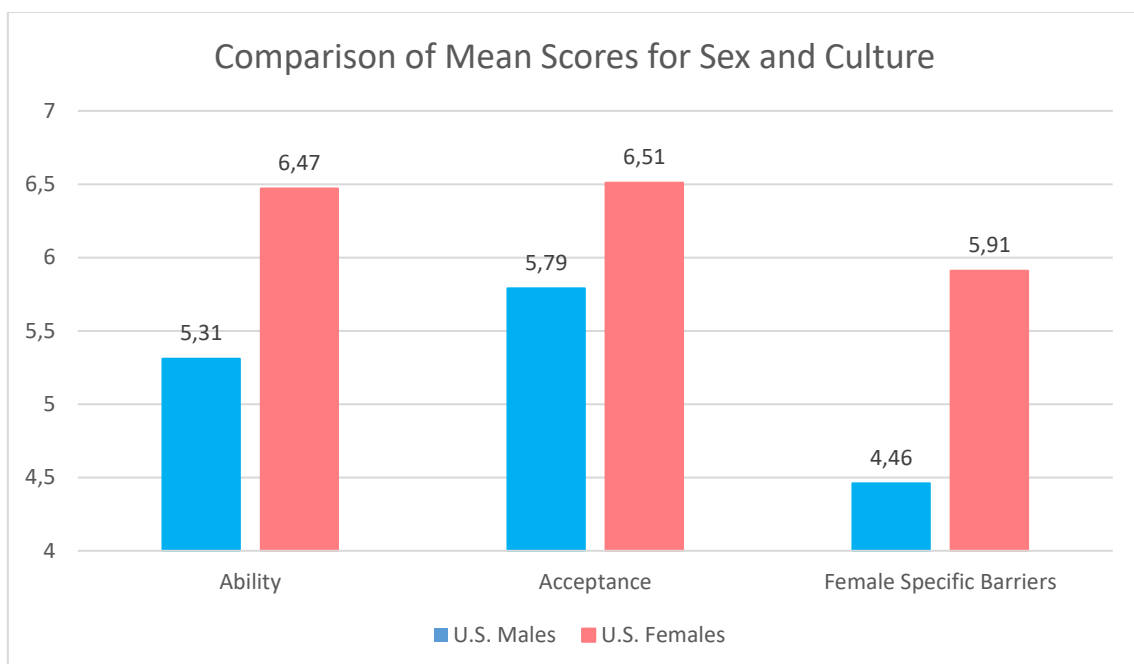
**Table 2.** Responses by Men and Women in Selected Years to Gallup Poll’s Question About Preferring a Man or Woman as Boss (adapted from Simmons in Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 580).

Response and sex of respondents	1953	1975	1982	1995	2000
Man preferred as boss					
Men	75	63	40	37	45
Women	57	60	52	54	50
Total	66	62	46	46	48
Woman preferred as boss					
Men	2	4	9	17	19
Women	8	10	15	22	26
Total	5	7	12	20	22
Either sex or no difference (volunteered)					
Men	21	32	46	44	35
Women	29	27	30	24	22
Total	25	29	38	33	28

When looking at the Hofstede’s cultural dimension theory, U.S. is a fit for the masculine orientation (Chullen et al., 2017). This means that when reviewing the distribution of values between the genders and their social roles, in masculine societies like the U.S. the roles are distinct and clear whereas in feminine societies the differentiation is not strong. This principle suggests that the Americans should express less favourable attitudes towards women leaders when compared to citizens from feminine societies such as the Netherlands. On the other hand, these perceptions of the dimension do not always follow the pattern which makes the Hofstede’s dimensions not easy to interpret. For example, Chullen and others’ (2017) research reveals that Americans’ attitudes toward female leaders were more favourable than the Dutch participants’, which is contrary to the expectations.

The differences in attitudes towards women in leadership positions depend on the genders of perceivers and, like previously mentioned, national cultures (Chullen et al., 2017).

The effect of ability, acceptance and female specific barriers to women advancing to leadership position is measured in figure 3 with the scale being from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree with the higher scores associated with the favourable attitudes. As figure 3 visualizes, when comparing the mean scores, U.S. women hold more favourable attitudes towards women leaders than men do. Out of the three factors in figure 3 the bars representing the answers of women are higher than men's in every one of them indicating that women see female leaders facing more challenges than men. The difference is significantly big especially in the third factor which measures attitudes toward female specific barriers. Together with the other bars, these results can be interpreted to lead to men believing that the three factors have nothing to do with the underrepresentation of female leaders, thus men believing that the underrepresentation of female leaders resulting from something else, such as the lack of capability (Chullen et al., 2017). Further interpreted, men in the U.S. see male leaders as more capable and effective than female leaders. In fact, while a study has shown that 55% of women desire to be in higher levels in their organizations many top-level male leaders still claim that women don't have the aspiration to advance into higher leader positions (Pranathi & Lathabhavan, 2021).



**Figure 3.** Comparison of Mean Scores for Sex and Culture (adapted from Chullen et al., 2017, p. 34).

Overall research in attitudes toward the genders has not been consistent (Eagly & Karau, 2002). While several experiments suggest women having favourable attitudes toward female leader than men and men having more inconsistent attitudes, some methods suggest negative attitudes toward female leaders and neutral towards male leaders from both genders with some even showing more negative attitudes from women themselves (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). Table 3 measures the evaluation conducted by men and women of three types of leaders (typical leader, male leader and female leader, with the help of polarity index and neutrality index. Table 3 visualizes the theory of women rating themselves more negatively by showing the values regarding female leaders, especially when evaluated by women being lower than the others (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023, p. 6). Controversially, some methods suggest women having less prejudice when it comes to preferences for the gender of the leader than men. While the findings in research in attitudes are inconsistent, they do support the role congruity theory by suggesting women being evaluated more critically than men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023).

**Table 3.** Estimated marginal means and standard error of polarity indices and neutrality indices for the stimuli “typical leader,” “male leader,” and “female leader” by participants’ gender (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023, p. 6).

Stimulus	Typical leader		Male leader		Female leader	
	Men ( <i>n</i> =58)	Women ( <i>n</i> =130)	Men ( <i>n</i> =58)	Women ( <i>n</i> =130)	Men ( <i>n</i> =58)	Women ( <i>n</i> =130)
Polarity index	0.51 (0.07)	0.35 (0.05)	0.28 (0.07)	0.40 (0.05)	0.34 (0.08)	0.09 (0.05)
Neutrality index	-0.53 (0.07)	-0.64 (0.05)	-0.56 (0.06)	-0.70 (0.04)	-0.52 (0.08)	-0.49 (0.05)

(Values outside parentheses are estimated marginal means ranging from -1 (= negative evaluation for polarity index and non-neutral evaluation for neutrality index) to + 1 (= positive evaluation for polarity index and neutral evaluation for neutrality index); values in parentheses indicate standard errors.)

To remove the stereotyping and biases women in leadership positions face, only understanding the attitudes alone is not enough (Chullen et al., 2017). It takes continuous

training and support from employers to remove the barriers and increase opportunities for women leaders. These kinds of action could include directly confronting and discussing the possible prejudices with supervisors to help reverse discrimination patterns and reviewing the recruitment and selection criteria to ensure the decisions are based on ability rather than stereotypes.

#### **4.4 The importance of women**

Recognising the value female leaders bring to organizations is important recognize to emphasize the idea of leadership not being limited to only one gender (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Women hold positions that are important for top corporate leadership because women represent several crucial components needed to be considered in top corporate leadership (Wolfman, 2007). For example, when it comes to organizational success, emphasizing the developmental aspects of female employees, recognising their proficiencies and providing an inclusive environment are proven to have a positive impact on the success of the organization (Kapoor et al., 2021) with Detsö and Ross, Glass et al., Herring and Webb (Glass & Cook, 2016) and Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) adding that studies show female leaders having a positive impact on innovation, decision-making, consumer outreach and corporate social responsibility.

The importance of women is highlighted by the fact that women are often raised to higher leadership roles when the firm is struggling or performing poorly, which makes their presence critically important for the success of their companies (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, Glass & Cook, 2016). Data shows how out of the research group 42% of the women were chosen leaders when the firm was struggling, while in the same circumstances the percentage for men was 22% (Glass & Cook, 2016). In comparison when the firm was doing well, 70% of the men were chosen as leaders whereas only 44% of the women. While the importance of women is highlighted during crisis situations, the start in a struggling firm increases the likability of a female leader to experience more monitoring and stricter evaluation is higher than male leaders.

Ely, Gorman and Stainback and Kwon (Glass & Cook, 2016) and Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) suggest that the representation of women in leadership positions increases their opportunities in the organizations overall, which helps reduce gender segregation in them. As an example, research has revealed while having multiple women in leader positions normalizes their presence, it also creates more open-minded environment and encourages the likelihood of speaking up and exhibiting openness (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Glass's and Cook's (2016) research supports these results by recognizing that the low number of women in top leader position results in their voice being ignored and role unrecognized. This reflects the importance of women by suggesting that if women were more represented in top leadership positions, their voice would be more heard.

#### **4.5 Summary**

While progress in closing the gender gap in the U.S. has been made, to this day women remain underrepresented in top corporate leadership. When advancing to top leadership positions, women are faced with the glass ceiling phenomenon which describes the invisible barriers they must overcome to succeed in their advancement. These barriers are often created by gender stereotypes and bias and result on less favourable attitudes toward female leaders. While in literature, some of the most commonly mentioned external barriers are related to different concepts such as backlash, the masculine nature of leadership, higher standards held for women and physical attractiveness, together they all create the picture of underrepresentation not being caused by one single factor, but by the interaction between stereotypes, evaluation processes, and organizational structures. Since closing the gender gap has proven to be harder than imagined talented workforce is being currently wasted in U.S. corporate pool.

The attitudes toward the gender of the leader depend on the perceivers national culture and their own gender. While the research on attitudes has been inconsistent, most studies suggest women having more favourable attitudes toward female leaders than men do. Together with the negative evaluations, less favourable attitudes decrease the

representation of women in top corporate leadership. The representation of women as leaders is important for the success of the organizations since women have a positive impact on for example innovation, decision-making, consumer outreach and corporate social responsibility. Importance of women becomes visual especially in crisis situations since women are likely to be promoted to top leadership positions when the organization is struggling. Overall, the more women are represented in leadership positions, the more likely it is to have their voice heard.

## 5 Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis was to analyse and find an answer to the main research question “*How does perceived incongruity between gender stereotypes and leadership expectations help explain the underrepresentation of women in top corporate leadership in the U.S.?*”. The thesis aimed to provide an answer to this with the help of three sub-questions.

First sub-question analysed *what leadership traits or expectations are associated with top corporate leadership in the U.S.* Based on the research by being fast-changing, unstable and defined by masculinity, the nature of U.S. top corporate leadership environment plays a part in defining what traits are to be expected from top level leaders. In addition to the traits of positive attitude, self-confidence, risk taking nature and a pragmatic approach to leading that have been expected from leaders throughout the human history, adaptability, accountability, empowerment, encouragement and visionary thinking are the traits that are typically associated with top corporate leadership in the U.S. In addition, individualism, indulgence and motivation towards achievements and success are highly appreciated. Together all these qualities set the expectations of top corporate leaders in the U.S.

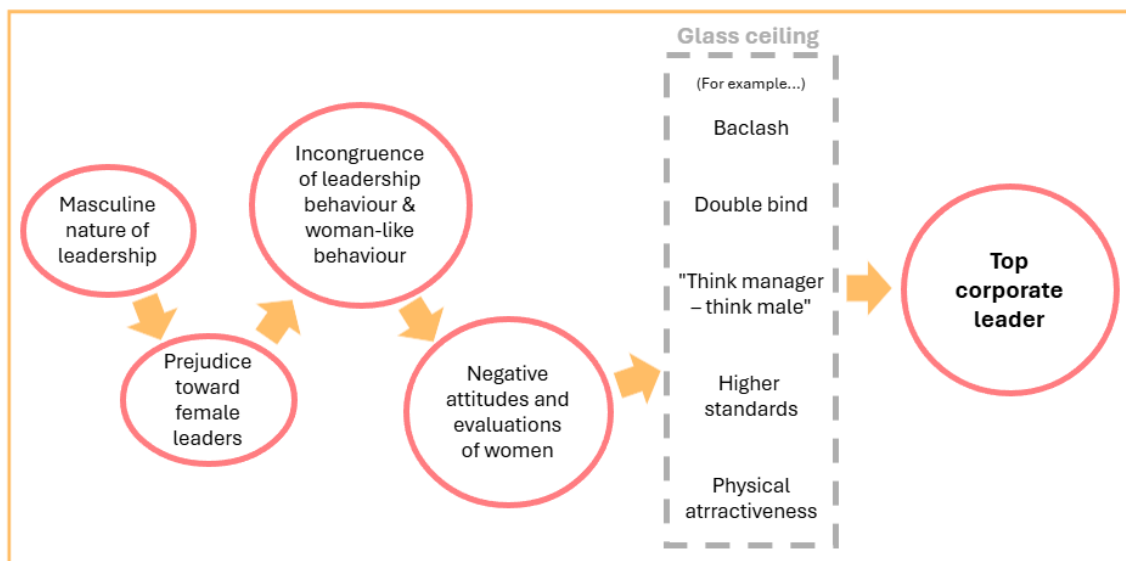
The second sub-question of the thesis analysed *how these leadership expectations are gendered in research on stereotypes and leadership.* Based on the research, expected leadership-like behaviour does not respond to the stereotypically desirable behaviour of women which causes gendered expectations and prejudice to be born. While toughness, focus on material success, directiveness, competitiveness and an autocratic leadership style are expected from men, women are expected to show qualities of modesty, tenderness, caring, collaborativeness, cooperativeness and a more democratic leadership style. Together with leadership expectation, gendered expectation explains how the traits stereotypically expected from men are more compatible with the leadership expectations than the stereotypically expected traits from women. The gendered expectations reflect on evaluations of leadership since they are based on associations of

masculine cultural schemas resulting in women being evaluated more negatively than men. Regardless, research has shown that women hold an important role when it comes to the success of the organization hence valuable workforce is being wasted in the U.S.

The third sub-question of the thesis analysed *how role congruity theory explains the barriers women face in reaching top leadership positions*. Based on the research the role congruity theory proposes new provable predictions of prejudice and its consequences to consider the compatibility between gender roles and leadership roles. Because the behaviours expected from leaders and the stereotypical behaviour of women are not compatible, prejudice toward female leaders appears and causes invisible barriers for advancement of women to appear. In the commonly mentioned barriers that the thesis presents, the defining characteristic of all the barriers is the need for an aspiring female leader to act in a manner that is incongruent with their stereotypical behaviour, like the role congruity theory suggests.

The key findings of this thesis answers to the main research question by suggesting that the perceived incongruity between gender stereotypes and leadership expectations explains the underrepresentation of women in top corporate leadership in the U.S. by defining the bases caused by prejudice for the barriers that block the advancement of women into top leadership positions. As role congruity theory suggests the most significant finding of this thesis is that prejudice is behind the unfavourable judgement of women and gender discrimination. This sequence of consequences stems from the masculine nature of leadership setting the base for gender prejudice, causing incongruence with leadership behaviour and desirable behaviour of women, leading to negative attitude and evaluations toward women. Together these elements lead to the appearance of the glass ceiling, blocking the way to top corporate leadership positions by creating barriers for the advancement of women, overall contributing to the underrepresentation of women.

The key findings can be explained in more depth with the help of figure 4, which visualizes the sequence caused by prejudice toward female leaders in the perspective of a female leader trying to advance to top corporate leadership in the U.S. The prejudice caused by the masculine nature of leadership causes expectations of effective leadership to be incongruent with the stereotypical behaviour of women which leads to evaluations and attitudes toward female leaders to be more negative than male leaders. This sequence continues as the combination of the previously mentioned steps lead to the appearance of invisible barriers of the glass ceiling phenomenon that women must overcome to advance to top leader positions. Because women face these barriers caused by prejudice and men don't, the road for top leadership becomes more complex for women, causing more women to drop out during the way, leading to them being underrepresented in top corporate leadership in the U.S.



**Figure 4.** The road for women to advance to top corporate leadership.

## 5.1 Implications & limitations

Based on this thesis, the U.S. organizations should review their promotion and hiring criteria, structure the evaluation criteria more carefully and create more networking opportunities for women. The first implication suggests integrating the analysis and the

findings of this thesis into the hiring and selection processes of the organizations. The thesis should be implicated in reviewing promotion and hiring criteria to find the presumed prejudice behind them (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Analysis of these criteria is necessary for avoiding gendered assumptions about leader potential. Another implication possibility focuses on the evaluation of leadership. Based on this thesis, evaluations of leadership could be structured more carefully to avoid relying too much on prejudice. Implementing a well-structured, fair evaluation criteria should reduce the influence of prejudice, gender biases and stereotypes in the process of evaluating women and their capability to lead (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Kovačević et al., 2025, p. 14). And thirdly, U.S. organizations should implicate this thesis to increase the number of female leaders. The suggestion of more women in leader positions increasing their opportunities in the organization overall (Glass & Cook, 2016; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023) should suggest organizations to create sponsorship and networking opportunities for women to meet other female leader, especially in male-dominated executive pipelines.

The thesis contains some limitations. One limitation arises from this thesis basing on a literature review rather than empirical data. Therefore, it does not directly review the experiences of women in U.S. top corporate leadership. Another limitation is that the thesis treats the U.S. as a one national context even though it is a large and diverse country and attitudes and perceptions of female leaders may vary across regions, industries and organizations (McLean et.al., 2023). For example, the attitudes may differ when comparing evaluations of leadership in bigger cities and smaller towns. The data used could have been wider and consider the material and views from different parts of the country. A third limitation is related to the barriers. Because the thesis considers only a few barriers stemming from prejudice, it is not extensive enough to consider every type of barrier or challenge women face in leadership. Therefore, presenting a larger number of barriers could have given a wider look on all the challenges prejudice is behind of. Because of these limitations the findings of this thesis cannot be generalized.

## **5.2 Suggestions for future studies & the use of AI**

In future studies it would be beneficial to review for example what part media plays on affecting the construction of prejudice toward women in leadership. Examining representation of female leaders in today's different media outlets', such as movies, television or social media, would bring added value and deeper insights to the formation and appearance of prejudice.

In the process of writing my thesis I have used the ChatGPT-5 artificial intelligence tool. I used the tool especially in the beginning of my research to help with narrowing down the topic and specifying the theoretical framework. During the writing process, I used the tool to help with translating articles to Finnish to understand them better, to find synonyms for terms and to check grammatical errors. Even though the artificial intelligence has acted as a helping tool in the research project, and its use has been responsible, I remain responsible for the content and the academic and ethical quality of the thesis.

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