



November 1979

## Women and Leadership: Strategies for Social Workers and Clients

Abigail C. Nichols  
*University of Texas, Arlington*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Nichols, Abigail C. (1979) "Women and Leadership: Strategies for Social Workers and Clients," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 6 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol6/iss6/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP:  
STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS AND CLIENTS\*

Abigail C. Nichols  
Graduate School of Social Work  
University of Texas at Arlington

ABSTRACT

*An examination of recent research on women and leadership yields several strategies that women, both clients and social workers, can use to facilitate success in administration and other traditionally male work domains.*

The past ten years have seen clear documentation of the problems faced by women who aspire to nontraditional occupations including administrative careers that involve responsibility for mixed-sex work groups. Socialization is blamed for self-defeating characteristics of women and inhospitable responses by potential employers and colleagues. Women are supposedly held back by their own fear of success (Horner, 1969; Tresemer, 1977), passivity (Deaux and Emswiler, 1974; Feather, 1969; Hennig and Jardim, 1977:11), and role conflict (Tropman, 1968). Women without these problems face subtle and not so subtle discrimination from others who do not recognize their skills (Rosen and Jerdee, 1974a, 1974b; Shaw, 1972), who underestimate their career commitment (Cosser and Rokoff, 1971), and who isolate them from informal learning opportunities (Kanter, 1977b; Wolman and Frank, 1975). No doubt, there is an interaction between these internal psychological processes and environmental pressures in creating barriers against success for women. Structural barriers such as inflexible hours and lack of child care compound the difficulties.

On the other hand, the possibility of change finds support in research findings that men and women behave very similarly. Notwithstanding public beliefs that substantial sex differences exist (O'Leary, 1974), extensive review of research on sex differences led Jacklin and Maccoby (1975:37-8) to the conclusion that "Leadership, task persistence, achievement motivation, intellectual abilities, and many other psychological abilities do not favor one sex over the other for job performance. Women are not psychologically handicapped for positions in management."

These findings have affected social work in two ways, both widely recognized. As a profession dedicated to the realization of human potential, we are morally opposed to restrictions on the development of this potential in women. Our opposition holds whether the restrictions appear to be self-imposed (fear of success) or imposed by others (discrimination). Data confirming the unequal opportunities of women thus rekindle a professional commitment to provide services that support rather than restrict the aspirations of female clients. Second, the findings have stimulated a reexamination of the opportunities afforded women within the profession of social work itself. In spite of the numerical predominance of women in social

---

\*Based on a paper presented at the First Annual South Central Women's Studies Conference, Fort Worth, Texas, June 1978.

work and our commitment to human development, the utilization of women in social work reflects wider social practices that result in inequality. Women are paid less for similar work and are much less likely to hold administrative positions (Fanshel, 1976; Gould and Bok-Lim, 1976; Grimm and Stern, 1974; Scotch, 1971; Williams, et. al., 1974). Although some differences reflect choices (Brager and Michael 1969), discrimination also contributes to the disparities in position and salary between male and female social workers (Zietz and Erlich, 1976).

These observations of sex-related differences have stimulated the renewed commitment of the profession to equality of opportunity within social work. For example, the Delegate Assembly of the National Association of Social Workers adopted a new position on the status of the women in the profession and mandated the establishment of a Women's Task Force in May 1973 (NASW News, June 1973:1,4). Simultaneously to these institutional changes, individual female social workers are shedding sex-role limitations to their personal career goals.

The challenge is to find ways to realize these professional commitments and personal aspirations. This paper examines the implications of recent research on women and leadership for several strategies that individual women can use to improve their occupational mobility.

Current research is related to four major type of strategies towards women's achievement of nontraditional roles. One approach seeks to make up alleged skill and motivation deficits that disadvantage women in competition with men. Therapeutic and other techniques for overcoming fear of success, developing achievement motivation, and handling role conflict are representative examples. A second approach focuses on changing problematic attitudes of significant persons within the work environment to enhance the recognition and utilization of women's competence. These attitudes have received considerable research attention (O'Leary, 1974). Mechanisms for changing the attitudes have received less attention. A third approach focuses on structures which affect behavior and attitudes indirectly. For example, lack of child care puts a realistic limitation on the commitment a parent, particularly the mother, can make to work. Corporate career development plans that include geographic moves interfere with the other spouse's career commitments. The fourth strategy calls for women to compensate for inhospitable responses from the work environment and structural impediments in order to succeed in spite of barriers. It is this class of strategies which will be described in terms of the implications of current research.

The contributions of recent research are often indirect and fall short of providing clear evidence for the effectiveness of specific actions by women. On the other hand, by identifying barriers, research has directed attention to the need for strategies for removing or circumventing specific barriers. Hence individual women are saved from surprises and efforts to find generalizable solutions are stimulated. Research findings have also suggested potential strategies and provide at least indirect support for their usefulness. Research also clarifies the trade-offs surrounding the choices facing women in the occupational sphere. Finally, research results themselves can be used in shaping the cognitive strategies women

need to maintain self-confidence and perseverance as they meet the inevitable hurdles.

The strategies to be discussed should be seen as representative rather than exhaustive of the special efforts that can help women. They overlap with other kinds of strategies. Several of the strategies are closely related to what may be termed self-improvement strategies although they differ by developing exceptional strengths rather than filling deficits. The suggested individual acts also contribute to social change as the impact of numerous personal efforts is felt. Women who have succeeded in nontraditional roles in spite of current difficulties inspire women to extraordinary efforts towards what were formerly unthinkable occupational goals even as they collectively work for the social change which will eventually lessen the barriers they face. The importance of the strategies described lies both in their availability and potential efficacy for individual women as they face their personal work environments.

#### 1. Document and Promote Your Skills

The suggestion that women make special efforts to document and promote their skills is based on findings that the skills of women in nontraditional roles are consistently rated as less than those of men when, in fact, experimental controls have provided equal skills (Rosen and Jerdee, 1974a, 1974b; Shaw, 1972). This discrepancy increases where the criteria of performance are nebulous as in management. Sex role stereotypes provide handy rules of thumb when performance criteria are unclear and difficult to measure (Kanter, 1977a:52-5; Shaw, 1972).

Assessment center procedures can be a particular boon to women because they document leadership skills that are not easily quantified in normal daily work. Over the years, management has developed trust in the measures of leadership potential that come from objective evaluations of performance on the simulated exercises that comprise assessment. Thus a good assessment rating is valuable in getting one's competence recognized by an otherwise prejudiced superior. Women undergoing assessment have received similar ratings to men and achieved similar promotions in relation to their ratings (Moses and Boehm, 1975).

#### 2. Tell Others of Your Career Plans and Commitment

Women lose not only because their skills are underrated but also because they are not seen as having the same long-term potential for service as men. In studies of recruitment and promotion decisions, women are less discriminated against on evaluations of competence than on the more critical decision to hire (Cohen, 1976; Rosen and Jerdee, 1974a). A key factor seems to be women's lower rating on potential for long service. This is the variable on which women are seen as most different from men (Rosen and Jerdee, 1974a).

Men are assumed to have career commitment. Women must prove it against the stereotype. Even women with many years of steady employment face managers' continued presumptions that they will quit anytime to return home (Kanter, 1977:67).

### 3. Look for Work Groups That Welcome Women

In spite of much documentation that women face resistance in the workplace, there is also research evidence that women are able to perform well and be recognized in many organizations. Studies in a variety of work settings show women with administrative responsibilities to behave similarly to males in comparable jobs (as described by themselves, their supervisors, and/or their subordinates) (Bartol and Wortman, 1975; Bartol and Wortman, 1976; Chapman, 1975; Day and Stogdill, 1972; Hunt, 1974; Kobayashi, 1974; Longstreth, 1973; Yerby, 1975) and to be similarly effective as measured by co-worker opinion or quantitative output (Bartol, 1974; Day and Stogdill, 1972; Hunt, 1974).

A key person to look for is the potential mentor, the more experienced senior person who may take a special interest in the career of a subordinate and help her along with informal promotion, protection and teaching. Although it is more difficult for male administrators to make the necessary identification with female aspirants (Kanter, 1977:181-4), men do help women in this way. Male mentors figure prominently in the work lives of women successful in nontraditional fields (Hennig and Jardim, 1977:129-31).

Although someone must pave the way, the predominately or exclusively male work group is likely to be least hospitable to an individual woman. The problem is not one of attitude alone but more importantly of the group dynamics stimulated by the arrival of an outsider. Participant observation of sales groups (Kanter, 1977b) and even psychiatric residents (Wolman and Frank, 1975) provides data on how male energy gets redirected from the task at hand to redefining group membership, and the lone female is excluded from group support. In one assessment center study, female performance didn't decrease as the proportion of males in the group increased, but male leadership, forcefulness, dependence, communication and confidence decreased as the proportion of females in the group increased (Schmitt and Hill, 1977).

Look for work settings where women hold responsible positions, but be prepared to work longer and harder than male counterparts for similar recognition. In spite of comparable performance, women were a small percentage of the leaders studied in the research just cited. An explanation is that women must be more competent than men in order to be perceived as equally competent. This contention is supported by findings that female recruits need to be seen as more qualified in their task orientation than males do to be hired (Cohen, 1976) and that women leaders are older and better trained than males in similar positions (Day and Stogdill, 1972). Extra work experience and extra training increase competence and also prove the seriousness of woman's career commitment.

### 4. Develop Effective Mechanisms for Handling Stress

Stress is inevitable as women take on new and more responsible work roles. Particularly nettlesome are the double binds women face in choosing appropriate work behavior. For example, women have to do their jobs especially well in order to be seen as competent, and yet doing a good job in a nontraditional role is often

threatening to male colleagues. This problem is documented in organizational studies (Kanter, 1977a; Wolman and Frank, 1975) and implied by socialpsychological research on interpersonal attraction (Hagen and Kahn, 1975; Piacente, et.al., 1974; Shaffer and Wegley, 1974; Spence and Heimreich, 1972).

Another dilemma that will be discussed at greater length is the issue of leadership style. Management theory suggests the need for both a task and a human-relations focus in good leaders (Campbell, et.al., 1970:415-41). It is further suggested that women will be most successful if they do not deviate too far from societal expectations of them and are particularly considerate and human-relations oriented in their approach to management (Petty and Lee, 1975). Petty and Miles (1976) surveyed social workers and found that, indeed, the satisfaction of persons with a female supervisor increased if the female supervisor used a considerate style. Subordinate satisfaction for people with male supervisors wasn't related to the male supervisor's consideration. On the other hand, satisfaction of social workers with a male supervisor was increased if he was task oriented. Task orientation of supervisor did not effect satisfaction if the supervisor was a woman. Similarly, Rosen and Jerdee (1973) found that supervisors thought a woman supervisor should use a considerate style in their supervision more than was necessary for a man.

On the other hand, by adopting a human-relations oriented leadership style, a woman runs the risk of being seen stereotypically. She is believed to be skilled interpersonally but lacking other needed leadership qualities such as emotional stability, aggressiveness, self-reliance and objectivity. Men, not women, are believed to generally possess these qualities (Schein, 1973). Rosen and Jerdee (1975) showed this experimentally. Bank managers were asked to respond to grievances of employees in a simulation exercise. The grievances might come from a man or from a woman. The style of the grievance could be polite and pleading or aggressive and threatening. Male grievances were replied to favorably - they got what they wanted - whether they were polite or threatening. Women got their way much less, but they were much more likely to receive a favorable response if they were threatening. They seemingly had to take drastic steps to get their manager's attention. A finding that women corporation presidents are more task oriented than male presidents (Helmich, 1974) may reflect an adaptation these women made in order to be taken seriously.

These and other conflicts unique to women require special coping mechanisms if women are to maintain personal satisfactions and avoid defensive responses that further hinder occupational success. (However provoked they have been, emotional displays by women are judged as signs of incompetence (Kanter, 1977:23-5). Similarly, withdrawal also reduces stress at the expense of occupational goals). That women can develop the resiliency needed to live with these conflicting demands is suggested by a finding that female leaders have a greater tolerance for ambiguity than their male counterparts (Bartol and Wortman, 1976).

##### 5. Use Knowledge as a Source of Strength in Pursuit of Professional Goals

Confidence breeds success. Yet sex role stereotypes both undermine and denigrate the skills on which women seek to build their confidence. The literature that documents these processes contributes to cognitive strategies for avoiding self-definitions that reflect social myths. Research findings can help place concerns about adequacy that develop in unfavorable environments into perspective. For example, men consistently overestimate their performance while women underestimate theirs (Crandall, 1975). In spite of the strong stereotypes held, there are few documented differences between men and women in the qualities needed for leadership (Jacklin and Maccoby, 1975). One of the few studies using direct observation of women aspiring to leadership found no differences in their leadership style from that of men and found their groups' productivity only slightly lower (Hunt, 1974). Fears of the image of the domineering female boss may be allayed by findings that women with a high need for dominance engender equal satisfaction and even surpass the performance of high dominance men and low dominance women in group leadership in some circumstances (Bartol, 1974).

#### CONCLUSION

The strategies that have been described reflect a careful examination of one portion of the developing literature on women in traditionally male domains. Although they provide a starting place, these strategies are not enough. Increasingly in question are the tremendous time and energy demands made on male executives. Yet to succeed at these same positions, women must make an even bigger investment since they must overcome sex barriers as well as do the job. Social change is needed both to reduce the barriers for women and to increase options for achieving satisfying work without either men or women having to eliminate the other enjoyable and important aspects of life. Women seeking satisfactory personal and work lives cannot separate their personal aspirations from the social forces that impact their ability to reach their goals. The payoff from energies directed at social change will come, in part, from saving the energy women now spend simply to jump unnecessary hurdles.

#### REFERENCES

- Bartol, Kathryn M.  
1974 "Male versus Female Leaders: The Effect of Leader Need for Dominance on Follower Satisfaction." *Academy of Management Journal* 17:225-33.
- Bartol, Kathryn M. and Max S. Wortman  
1975 "Male versus Female Leaders: Effects on Perceived Leader Behavior and Satisfaction in a Hospital." *Personnel Psychology* 28:533-41.
- 1976 "Sex Effects in Leader Behavior Self-Descriptions and Job Satisfaction." *Journal of Psychology* 94:177-83.
- Brager, George and John A. Michael  
1969 "The Sex Distribution in Social Work: Causes and Consequences." *Social Casework* 50:595-601.

- Campbell, John P., Marvin D. Dunnett, Edward E. Lawler, III, and Karl E. Weick, Jr.  
1970     "Managerial Behavior, Performance, and Effectiveness." New York: McGraw Hill.
- Chapman, J. Brad  
1975     "Comparison of Male and Female Leadership Styles." *Academy of Management Journal* 18:645-50.
- Cohen, Stephen L.  
1976     "The Basis of Sex-Bias in the Job Recruitment Situation." *Human Resource Management* 15(3):8-10.
- Coser, Rose and Gerald Rokoff  
1971     "Women in the Occupational World: Social Disruption and Conflict." *Social Problems* 1:546-9.
- Crandall, Virginia C.  
1975     "Sex Differences in Expectancy of Intellectual and Academic Reinforcement." Pp. 650-85 in Rhoda K. Unger and Florence L. Denmark (eds.), *Woman: Dependent or Independent Variable*. New York: Psychological Dimensions.
- Day, David and Ralph Stogdill  
1972     "Leader Behavior of Male and Female Supervisors: A Comparative Study." *Personnel Psychology* 25:353-60.
- Deaux, Kay and Tim Emswiller  
1974     "Explanation of Successful Performance on Sex-Linked Tasks: What is Skill for the Male Is Luck for the Female." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 29:80-5.
- Fanshel, David  
1976     "Status Differentials: Men and Women in Social Work." *Social Work* 21: 448-54.
- Feather, N. T.  
1969     "Attribution of Responsibility and Valence of Success and Failure in Relation to Initial Confidence and Task Performance." *Journal of Personality and Psychology* 13:129-144.
- Gould, Ketayun and C. Kim Bok-Lim  
1976     "Salary Inequities Between Men and Women in Social Work: Myth or Reality?" *Journal of Education for Social Work* 12(1):50-5.
- Grimm, James W. and Robert N. Stern  
1974     "Sex Roles and Internal Labor Market Structures: The Female Semi-Professions." *Social Problem* 21:690-706.



- Hagen, Randi L. and Arnold Kahn  
 1975 "Discrimination Against Competent Women." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 5:362-76.
- Helmich, Donald L.  
 1974 "Male and Female Presidents: Some Implications of Leadership Style." *Human Resource Management* 13(4):25-6.
- Hennig, Margaret and Anne Jardim  
 1977 The Managerial Woman. Garden City: Anchor.
- Horner, Matina  
 1969 "Women's Motive to Avoid Success." *Psychology Today*, Nov.,3:36-38,62.
- Hunt, Peter James  
 1974 "Women Supervisors: A Study of Their Performance and the Group Interaction in a Simulated Organization." *Dissertation Abstracts International* 35(3):17378.
- Jacklin, Carol Nagy and Eleanor Emmons Maccoby  
 1975 "Sex Differences and Their Implications for Management." Pp. 23-38 in Francine E. Gordon and Myra H. Strober (eds.), *Bringing Women into Management*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Kanter, Rosabeth M.  
 1977a *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.  
 1977b "Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women." *American Journal of Sociology* 82:965-90.
- Kobayashi, Jessie K.  
 1974 "A Comparison of Organizational Climate of Schools Administered by Female and Male Elementary School Principals." *Dissertation Abstracts International* 35(1):129S.
- Longstreth, Catherine Archibald  
 1973 "An Analysis of the Perceptions of the Leadership Behavior of Male and Female Secondary School Principals in Florida." *Dissertation Abstracts International* 34(5):2224-5A.
- Moses, Joseph L. and Virginia R. Boehm  
 1975 "Relationship of Assessment-Center Performance to Management Progress of Women." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 60:527-9.
- O'Leary, Virginia E.  
 1974 "Some Attitudinal Barriers to Occupational Aspirations in Women." *Psychological Bulletin* 81:809-26.

- Petty, M. M. and Gordon K. Lee, Jr.  
 1975 "Moderating Effects of Sex of Supervisor and Subordinate on Relationship Between Supervisory Behavior and Subordinate Satisfaction." Journal of Applied Psychology 60:624-8.
- Petty, M. M. and Robert H. Miles  
 1976 "Leader Sex-Role Stereotyping in a Female-Dominated Work Culture." Personnel Psychology 29:393-404.
- Piacente, Beth S., Louis A. Penner, Harold L. Hawkins, and Stephen L. Cohen  
 1974 "Evaluation of the Performance of Experimenters as a Function of their Sex and Competence." Journal of Applied Social Psychology 4:321-9.
- Rosen, Benson and Thomas H. Jerdee  
 1973 "The Influence of Sex-Role Stereotypes on Evaluations of Male and Female Supervisory Behavior." Journal of Applied Psychology 47:44-8.
- 1974a "Effects of Applicant's Sex and Difficulty of Job on Evaluations of Candidates for Managerial Positions." Journal of Applied Psychology 59:511-2.
- 1974b "Influence of Sex-Role Stereotypes on Personnel Decisions." Journal of Applied Psychology 59:9-14.
- 1975 "The Effects of Employee's Sex and Threatening Versus Pleading Appeals on Managerial Evaluations of Grievances." Journal of Applied Psychology 60:442-5.
- Schein, Virginia Ellen  
 1973 "The Relationship Between Sex-Role Stereotypes and Requisite Management Characteristics." Journal of Applied Psychology 57:59-100.
- Schmitt, Neal and Thomas E. Hill  
 1977 "Sex and Race Composition of Assessment Center Groups as a Determinant of Peer and Assessor Ratings." Journal of Applied Psychology 62:261-4.
- Scotch, Bernard  
 1971 "Sex Status in Social Work: Grist for Women's Liberation." Social Work 16(3):5-11.
- Shaffer, David R. and Carol Wegley  
 1974 "Success Orientation and Sex-Role Congruence as Determinants of the Attractiveness of Competent Women." Journal of Personality 42:586-600.
- Shaw, Edward A.  
 1972 "Differential Impact of Negative Stereotyping in Employee Selection." Personnel Psychology 25:338-8.

- Spence, Janet T. and Robert Helmreich  
 1972 "Who Likes Competent Women? Competence, Sex Role Congruence of Interest, and Subjects' Attitudes Toward Women as Determinants of Interpersonal Attraction." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 2:197-213.
- Tresemmer, David  
 1977 *Fear of Success*. New York: Plenum.
- Tropman, John E.  
 1968 "The Married Professional Social Worker." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 30:661-5.
- Williams, Martha, Lin Ho and Lucy Fielder  
 1974 "Career Patterns: More Grist for Women's Liberation." *Social Work* 19:463-6.
- Wolman, Carol and Hal Frank  
 1975 "The Solo Woman in a Professional Peer Group." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 45:164-71.
- Yerby, Janet  
 1975 "Attitude, Task, and Sex Composition as Variables Affecting Female Leadership in Small Problem Solving Groups." *Speech Monographs* 42: 160-8.
- Zietz, Dorothy and John L. Erlich  
 1976 "Sexism in Social Agencies: Practitioners' Perspectives." *Social Work* 21:434-9.