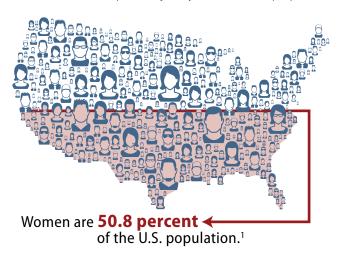# Center for American Progress

The Women's Leadership Gap

Women's leadership by the numbers

By Judith Warner   March 7, 2014

Women make up a majority of the U.S. population

Women are **50.8 percent** of the U.S. population.[1]

They earn almost **60 percent** of undergraduate degrees, and **60 percent** of all master's degrees.[2]

They earn **47 percent** of all law degrees, and **48 percent** of all medical degrees. [3]

They earn more than **44 percent** of master's degrees in business and management, including **37 percent** of MBAs. [4]

They are **47 percent** of the U.S. labor force, and **59 percent** of the college-educated, entry-level workforce. [5]

And yet…

Although they hold almost 52 percent of all professional-level jobs,[6] American women lag substantially behind men when it comes to their representation in leadership positions:

- They are only 14.6 percent of executive officers, 8.1 percent of top earners, and 4.6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs.[7]
- They hold just 16.9 percent of Fortune 500 board seats.[8]
- In the financial services industry, they make up 54.2 percent of the labor force, but are only 12.4 percent of executive officers, and 18.3 percent of board directors. None are CEOs.[9]
- They account for 78.4 percent of the labor force in health care and social assistance but only 14.6 percent of executive officers and 12.4 percent of board directors. None, again, are CEOs.[10]

- In the legal field, they are 45.4 percent of associates—but only 25 percent of nonequity partners and 15 percent of equity partners.[11]
- In medicine, they comprise 34.3 percent of all physicians and surgeons but only 15.9 percent of medical school deans.[12]
- In information technology, they hold only 9 percent of management positions and account for only 14 percent of senior management positions at Silicon Valley startups.[13]

Furthermore…

- Although women control 80 percent of consumer spending in the United States, they are only 3 percent of creative directors in advertising.[14]
- Their image onscreen is still created, overwhelmingly, by men.
- Women accounted for just 16 percent of all the directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers, and editors who worked on the top-grossing 250 domestic films of 2013,[15] and were just 28 percent of all offscreen talent on broadcast television programs during the 2012-13 primetime season.[16]
- When, however, there are more women behind the camera or at the editor's desk, the representation of women onscreen is better: Films written or directed by women consistently feature a higher percentage of female characters with speaking roles.[17]

A stalled revolution

The last decades of the 20th century brought considerable progress in women's professional advancement in the United States. The gender wage gap narrowed, sex segregation in most professions greatly declined, and the percentage of women climbing the management ranks steadily rose. Although the rapid rate of change of the 1970s and 1980s began to slow in the 1990s and 2000s, as the narrowing of the gender wage gap stalled[18] and the percentage of women in management jobs stagnated,[19] a notable increase in women's representation in very top positions did continue:

- In 1980, there were no women in the top executive ranks of the Fortune 100; by 2001, 11 percent of those corporate leaders were women.[20]
- From 1997 to 2009, women's share of board seats in S&P 1500 companies increased 7.2 percentage points, or 94 percent, and their share of top executive positions increased by 2.8 percentage points, or 86 percent. The share of companies with female CEOs increased more than six-fold.[21]

In recent years, however, the percentage of women in top management positions and on corporate boards has stalled.[22]

- Their presence in top management positions today remains below 9 percent.[23]
- The percentage of women on all U.S. corporate boards has been stuck in the 12.1 percent to 12.3 percent range over the past decade.[24]
- At almost 17 percent, women's representation on Fortune 500 boards is slightly higher, but it hasn't budged in eight years.[25]

Women of color face an even wider gap

The representation of women of color in corporate leadership roles is worse still. Women of color are 36.3 percent of our nation's female population and approximately 18 percent of the entire U.S. population.[26] They make up about one-third of the female workforce.[27]

And yet…

- Women of color occupy only 11.9 percent of managerial and professional positions.[28] And of those women, 5.3 percent are African American, 2.7 percent are Asian American, and 3.9 percent are Latina.[29]
- Women of color hold only 3.2 percent of the board seats of Fortune 500 companies.[30]
- More than two-thirds of Fortune 500 companies have no women of color as board directors at all.[31]

How does the United States measure up to other countries?

In private-sector women's leadership, not so badly:

- We're number six in women's economic participation and opportunity on the World Economic Forum's 2013 Gender Gap Index of 136 countries.[32]

But in the public sector—and in our percentage of female legislators in particular—we lag far behind many countries:

- The United States currently ranks 60th in women's political empowerment on the Gender Gap Index.[33]
- The world average for the percentage of women in national parliaments is 21 percent—slightly above the 18 percent in the U.S. House of Representatives.[34]
- Finland, Iceland, and Norway lead the way, with 43 percent, 40 percent, and 40 percent female legislators, respectively, in 2012.[35]
- It's been estimated that for a country such as the United States, which has a winner-take-all voting system rather than a system of proportional representation and no quotas, it will take until near the end of this century to reach a level of 40 percent legislative participation by women.[36]

U.S. women in politics: Much promise, less change

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the percentage of women running for office increased steadily, culminating in the so-called Year of the Woman in 1992, when the number of women in the U.S. Senate suddenly doubled—from two to four—and the number of women in Congress increased from 28 to 47.[37]

In more recent election cycles, however, the percentage of female candidates has essentially plateaued.[38] In the decade leading up to 2012, the number of women elected to Congress remained basically flat, and the number of women in state legislatures actually decreased.[39]

2012 was considered a watershed election year for women in American politics:

- After a series of historic wins, 40 percent of Americans now have at least one woman representing them in the U.S. Senate,[40] and there are no longer any male-only state legislatures.[41]
- New Hampshire, notably, sent an all-female delegation to Congress and elected a female governor.[42]
- Six additional women of color were elected to the House of Representatives, bringing their total number in Congress to a record 28.[43]
- Female candidates were shown to raise as much money, and to be as successful in their election bids, as male candidates running for public office.[44]

In May 2013, an Emily's List poll of 800 likely 2016 voters in nine presidential battle-ground states found that 90 percent of Americans would consider voting for a female president, and three in four believe that a female president would be good for our country. The poll also found that 51 percent of voters believe that women in the U.S. House and Senate are making a "positive difference."[45]

And yet…

- Women today hold only 18.5 percent of congressional seats, and they are just 20 percent of U.S. senators.[46]
- They hold only 24.2 percent of state legislature seats.[47]
- They are only 10 percent of governors.[48]
- Only 12 percent of the mayors of the 100 largest American cities are women.[49]
- On average, women are outnumbered 2-to-1 by men as state-level cabinet appointees.[50]
- Women of color represent only 4.5 percent of the total members of Congress.[51]
- Women of color make up 4 percent of governors, 5 percent of state legislators, and 2 percent of the mayors of the 100 largest American cities.[52]

In sum

Although women have outnumbered men on college campuses since 1988,[53] they have earned at least a third of law degrees since 1980,[54] were fully a third of medical school students by 1990,[55] and, since 2002, have outnumbered men in earning undergraduate business degrees since 2002.[56] They have not moved up to positions of prominence and power in America at anywhere near the rate that should have followed.

In a broad range of fields, their presence in top leadership positions—as equity law partners, medical school deans, and corporate executive officers—remains stuck at a mere 10 percent to 20 percent. Their "share of voice"—the average proportion of their representation on op-ed pages and corporate boards, as TV pundits, and in Congress—is just 15 percent.[57]

In fact, it's now estimated that, at the current rate of change, it will take until 2085 for women to reach parity with men in leadership roles in our country.[58]

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