Leadership styles have changed dramatically over the past 30 years. There is a definite male and female leadership style. Emotional intelligence has facilitated the emergence of women leaders, as have changing societal factors. A recent study looked into the situation in France, which has changed drastically since the milestone date and epoch of 1968. Although there were certain aspects that were peculiar to French culture, no evidence has been found to suggest that France is in any way a “cultural exception”.

This article examines the question of whether changing leadership styles, emotional intelligence and different organizational requirements have favoured the emergence of women leaders, and then switches its attention to France specifically to determine whether this country is in line with the general trends or not.

The climb to corporate success

The climb to corporate success is still a very daunting task for most women leaders in the Western world. There are, however, signs that women are finally starting to overcome some traditionally stiff barriers that have hitherto prevented them from aspiring to the top positions on offer in global corporations. To what extent are women’s leadership styles and personalities more suitable to current organizational requirements than ever they were in the past? Women have made significant progress in aspiring to top leadership positions due to their intrinsic leadership traits and a quickly changing corporate and social environment, but are these developments universal or are they subject to regional differences, particularly between Europe, Asia, and North America?

Women’s progress in their climb to the top

The female presence in top management has undoubtedly become more visible over the past 30 years. To quote one example, in 1972 in the USA, women held 18 per cent of all administrative positions. In 2002, this figure rose to 46 per cent. During the same period, the number of women-owned companies rose to almost 50 per cent in the USA constituting roughly 10.6 million firms. This general trend has been echoed in Europe where there has also been a percentage increase of women-owned companies, albeit on a lesser scale at around 30 per cent.

In previous centuries women leaders were very few and far between. There was an occasional monarch, family business head, civic leader, or government minister. Women were not often perceived as being suitable for leadership positions, but with the advent of globalisation and the subsequent necessity to manage diversity, the economic and political environment has undergone considerable transformation.

Progress made, and the French situation

As regards women’s progress since the 1960s, the study revealed a general consensus that a lot of progress had been made in France, and substantial lobbying had been carried out to promote French women in the workplace. Women are generally “more present” but are not on an equal footing. Recent attempts to have gender parity in local elections for instance (as introduced by the Sarkozy government) were often proved to be merely symbolic, with men inevitably carrying away the key posts. Certain sectors have become saturated for women, such as the areas of social services, teaching, health, etc. Four interviewees in the recent study saw 1968, the year of social unrest and general strikes, as being a symbolically important one for women. This year heralded a new
financial autonomy for married women, who hitherto were not even allowed to open a bank account without their husbands’ consent.

However, to cite another example, in the employers’ union MEDEF there is still “only one regional president and seven departmental heads” who are women (France is divided into 95 administrative departments), and only three women in France are Presidents of Chambers of Commerce. There is a general dearth of women decision-makers in the top corporate circles.

Preferred models of female representation and entrepreneurialism

The Scandinavian model is largely seen as being the best example of female representation according to the study. The reasons given to support why this is so included the inherent infrastructures (crèches, day-care etc.), maternity and paternity leave facilities, equal salaries policies, political representation parity and the general conduciveness of the Scandinavian system to promote women entrepreneurs. The US model was also cited, although to a lesser degree, and although having fewer facilities for women managers, it has made it easier for women to create companies. In 2007, 50 per cent of all companies created in the USA were created by women, compared to 27 per cent in France. Unlike men, women usually create their companies later on in life and their companies tend to be smaller in size.

Women networks

Women are still excluded from male-dominated networks, clubs, and old-boys organizations. However, recent developments in multinational corporations such as IBM and GE France have seen internal women's networks become established and expand.

Gender discrimination

The gender gap at top executive and CEO level was frequently cited in the study, and one of the main reasons for this was the difficulty of having to manage both work and the family simultaneously. The telling time is when women have children and have to “put their professional lives in parentheses”. Although many initiatives have been introduced in France, one being ex Prime Minister Rafarin’s law on gender parity in the public sector, there are still serious doubts about their applicability. There was unanimity of feeling in the area of remuneration in the study, with interviewees often citing the 20-25 per cent pay differential for the same job. Opinions were divided as regards discriminatory recruitment practices however; with one interviewee stating that, “the age of 25 is decisive for women’s recruitment”. There still appears to be an underlying feeling that prejudices still prevail when it comes to recruiting women who may be about to have families.

By and large, the women interviewed in the French study stated that significant headway had been made to further women’s advancement in the workplace in France. It was generally accepted that the role and image of the woman had changed and prejudices are decreasing. Access to education was the most frequently quoted explanation for this, and especially the French Continuing Education Law (1972) which obliges companies to contribute a percentage of its payroll to management training programmes.

Changing work habits such as remote working and flexitime schedules are often mentioned as playing a vital role in women’s advancement. The majority of the respondents felt that gender equality would increase in the coming years, although progress would be slow and will depend on to what extent companies adopt a more proactive approach in terms of trying to prevent women from opting out and keeping them “in the system”.
Invisible barriers

The glass ceiling is still in place in French organizations, although a number of respondents deemed that this phenomenon is decreasing. There are still very few women at board level and they are often “relegated to positions in HRM and Communication”. The barriers of “male nepotism and co-opting” are factors that represent major obstacles in women's climb to the top of the corporate ladder. Women have to “make greater efforts, be more self-confident and have more tenacity” than men to arrive at the same levels in the hierarchy. Women's “physical appearance, their attitudes, and their attire are constantly scrutinized”. The glass ceiling effect is not static, on the contrary, it tends “to move in accordance with women's own self-limitations”, hence the notion that women are not as ambitious as men in aspiring to top leadership positions. Gender diversity in France should be seen as “an opportunity and a driving force in terms of innovation and attaining higher performance levels”.

Positive discrimination

Overall, positive discrimination was not deemed as being a satisfactory system for promoting women in the workplace in France, in as much as there are always ways of circumventing quotas. "Lobbying rather than positive discrimination is often more effective”. There is always the risk that “women are there not for their intrinsic competence but to make up the numbers and this may have a negative impact on their credibility within their teams”. In the political arena, female representation is sometimes symbolic although efforts have been made in recent years to appoint more women to ministerial positions. Some interviewees stressed, however, that the dilemma in France lies in the fact that if “nothing is imposed, nothing moves”.

Time management issues are also cited, and certain companies still lack the necessary infrastructures or adopt less favourable policies in terms of promoting women to higher levels of corporate responsibility. There still exist a disproportionate number of women engineering graduates in France (roughly, 20 per cent of graduates from French engineering schools are women). New policies should be introduced at government level to alter this trend, especially in light of the predicted labour shortage in 20-30 years time.

Women's advantages as leaders

When questioned on advantages that women executives have over their male counterparts, there was a general consensus that women were often “stronger in the fields of organizational ability, anticipation, multi-tasking, and the general propensity to put their team's welfare before considerations of personal ambition”. It is not “power itself, but how power is exercised that constitutes the over-riding difference between men and women leaders”. Women tend not to be warmongers, and are more "relations than production-oriented". In the field of union negotiations women are “less confrontational and more in search of compromise” compared to their male counterparts. Other qualities cited were that women tend to work better in complexity, are better listeners, and are more emotionally intelligent in as much as they control and analyse emotions more effectively.

Male perception of women leaders is changing, certain stereotypes are disappearing, and it is no longer “absolutely necessary for a woman to dress like a male CEO in order to gain recognition”. Strong women leaders are often admired, especially for their ability to balance their personal and professional lives simultaneously.

The majority of respondents saw women-led corporations as being more successful. The main explanation offered is that women “tend to be more effective in the field of financial management applying a greater degree of restraint and prudence and a constant concern not to become over-indebted”. They are more cautious in general, more long-term oriented but perhaps “don't dare to ask for large sums of money”, this may, to some extent, explain why certain venture capitalists, seeking a quick return on investment, are less likely to invest in women-owned companies in France. Women are less likely to take financial risks and are anchored firmly in the long term.
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