

Transcript for Guelph Wellington Women Leaders and the “Glass Ceiling”: Highlights from the Research

March 8, 2021

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A video of this webinar is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZ5zI0-2A11%C2%A0>

[Karen Nelson]: Hi everybody, my name is Karen Nelson, I am the Research Shop Coordinator at the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute, which we call CESI, at the University of Guelph.

Today, along with Aarabhi, I'll be sharing the results from our research that explores the opportunities and challenges local women have faced on their pathway to leadership.

Acknowledgements

[Karen Nelson]: So, this project was carried out by the Research Shop, which is one of the core programs of CESI. Our team included Patricia Butt, Aarabhi Rajendiran, Brianna Wilson, and myself.

Our community partners for the research were Teresa McKeeman, Isobel Boyle and Janet Wood from CFUW [Canadian Federation of University Women]. This project also had support from Melissa Tanti, Community Engaged Teaching and Learning Coordinator at CESI and, finally, I want to acknowledge and thank the 21 women who participated in our interviews for this project. We thank you for your time and providing honest responses to many of our challenging questions.



Introduction & Purpose

[Karen Nelson]: So, I'm going to start by telling you a little bit about us.

CESI [Community Engaged Scholarship Institute] is a research and teaching Institute in the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences at the University of Guelph that brings together community and campus skills and resources in order to advance community-identified research goals. We weave capacity building, community engagement and collaboration through all that we do.

As mentioned, the Research Shop is one of five core programs at CESI. We work with local and regional organizations in the nonprofit and public sectors to carry out high impact community engaged research. We do this by employing students as researchers who review existing literature, conduct community-based research and mobilize knowledge to address the specific research priorities of our partners.

The project we're presenting today was completed at the request of and in partnership with CFUW. It builds upon previously partnered research between the two organizations specifically building upon a study that explored the opportunities and barriers local women face when running for elected positions. Comparisons between that research, which was completed in 2017, and the current research will be discussed at the end of the research part of our presentation today.


So, the goal of this current project was to understand the opportunities and barriers faced by local women who are early to mid-stage career professionals and leaders in their communities. And it's our goal to share these results with the local community in hopes of inspiring action to break the glass ceiling. The research may also be used in developing the second iteration of the women's campaign school organized by CFUW.



Before we begin, I also want to acknowledge that our definition of women encompasses cis gender women, trans women, gender queer women, two spirit, non-binary and gender non-conforming people who identify as women.

Main Findings

[Karen Nelson]: I'm going to briefly share our main highlights before I pass it over to Aarabhi to dive into them in a bit bit more detail.

We found the most commonly identified opportunity for women moving into positions of leadership was reported to be mentorship. Many participants share that having a mentor was fundamental to their professional growth and self-confidence. Because of this, many participants





reported that they felt a responsibility to pay it forward and to become mentors to others on their journey to positions of leadership.

Advocacy in the workplace was also mentioned as an opportunity. Women often face multiple challenges in the workforce and having advocates who will ensure your voices are heard was something that was seen as important.

The most commonly identified barriers related to various stigmas folks may have about women in the workplace. The stigmas identified related to both age, so both in the sense of being perceived as too old and too young for things like a promotion, as well as recent motherhood.

The most frequent advice participants had for future women leaders circles us right back to the most commonly identified opportunity which is mentorship. Finding a mentor was a key piece of advice offered for women pursuing positions of leadership. And it is because of this, we have dedicated the majority of today's webinar to discussing the role that mentorship can play for women leaders. I'm now going to pass it over to Aarabhi who's going to take you through more in depth look at some of our results.

Methods


[Aarabhi Rajendiran]: Thank you so much Karen. So, before we dive into the results, to touch base on the methods, we thought it would be great to discuss what we did to get to the results.



To start off we sent out a nomination survey to local community organizations and networks as a way to seek out women leaders who would be...interested in sharing their experiences and perspectives on leadership. So there was an option for women leaders to nominate themselves, as well as an option for local community members to nominate women um for this project.

Upon completion of the survey we ended up with a list of nominated women leaders who we then invited to take part in online interviews [semi-structured, conducted using Zoom (Nov-Dec)]. So, these interviews were done either as a group interview [2-3 participants], or if the participants were not available for the group times, we conducted individual interviews with them. And in total, we had 21 women leaders. So, once the interviews had wrapped up our research team conducted a thematic analysis, where we identified key themes that were discussed by the participants. And as we conducted the thematic analysis, we shared these findings with our community partners to kind of gain insights on what the next step should be, and that's actually what led us to hosting this webinar on mentorship today.

Demographics

[Aarabhi Rajendiran]: So, moving into the demographics, we had a very diverse group of women leaders who worked in the nonprofit, education, business, and government sectors and the





positions held by the participants included: entrepreneurs [5], managers [4], executive directors [4], faculty members [3], CEOs [3], and mental health professionals [2].

Results

Opportunities

[Aarabhi Rajendiran]: So, moving on to our key findings our participants were asked to share, about both the opportunities, as well as the barriers that were experienced on their pathways to leadership.


So as such, our findings were organized into opportunities as barriers as well. So as Karen had described earlier, mentorship was most identified as an opportunity that had a positive impact for women leaders.

Our participants often noted the importance of self-confidence and believing in oneself, both when seeking and holding leadership positions. So often, this began by having mentors who had confidence in them. Not only did mentors give women leaders confidence, they've also provided the stepping stones that provide our participants to...or lead participants, rather, to their current leadership roles and Karen will dive further into mentorship later in our presentation.

Moving on to advocates and champions... So as noted earlier, advocates and champions are identified as individuals that can be supportive family members, co-workers, and anyone who acts as a support network, both inside and outside of the workplace.

Participants noted the importance of advocacy, especially for young people, who may spend years feeling isolated and trying to navigate spaces alone, not knowing where or how to access additional support. And, of course, networking. So many of the participants cited networking as a key factor in their leadership journey. They took any opportunity they could to be involved in either formal and or informal networks. And establishing networks for women led to what participants described as: an open space to share stories of success and failure, an exchange of ideas and perspectives from others across disciplines, and ultimately community building and capacity development. So, while the importance and impact of mentorship was noted in our interviews, the lack of mentorship and career development was also noted.

When there is support and buy in from the Community to create spaces for networking, it can also increase access to mentorship. It also exposes women to other opportunities and resources available in the community.





Barriers Related to Stigma

[Aarabhi Rajendiran]: So, moving forward to the barriers. Gender-based stereotyping was something that was identified numerous times by participants. Particularly about stereotypes about traditional woman roles and societal expectations on women leaders, which often create unfair assumptions about the about women's ability to lead.

This makes it difficult for women leaders to make breakthroughs with their organizations who don't believe in their capabilities. Advocates for women in leadership and mentors can help navigate these barriers that become very important in breaking stereotypes.

Moving on to personal relationships, often women leaders felt the need to be intentionally private about relationships, family planning and parenting. Men do not often get asked the same types of intruding questions about personal relationships, the way that women do.

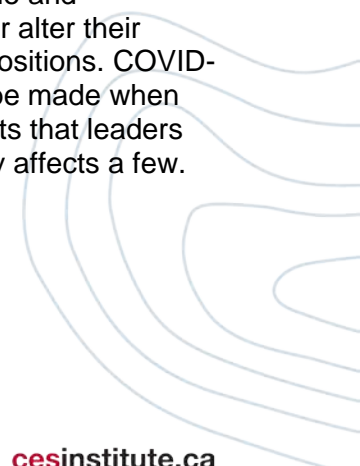
And harassment, due to the sensitivity of this topic it is not possible to share details, however, severe issues of gender-based harassment were identified by the participants. Trauma is something that can be triggered when you're in an environment where gender is not considered. Workspaces need to examine how safe spaces can be created to mitigate and prevent trauma. This includes understanding how vulnerable groups would feel like within the organization, looking at language (so this includes looking at these intrusive questions), and raising awareness of how unfair or inappropriate power imbalances can contribute to a toxic workplace.



Systemic Barriers

[Aarabhi Rajendiran]: And moving on to systemic barriers... So, regarding equity and inclusion in the workplace, with pay especially, we are all aware that that pay and equity does exist. And participants identified having to fight for fair compensation to match their male counterparts.

Regarding communication, when women do not have the power to say no, or to stand up for what is right, it can be very hard to create change within their position. Participants also noted not feeling heard by others, which can lead to a breakdown in communication and make it more difficult to achieve tasks and goals for the workplace and organization that they belong to.

Regarding flexibility for work life balance... So, navigating access to childcare, financial assistance, and support can be extremely difficult, especially for those in part time and contractual work. When workers are unable to take time off or work from home or alter their schedules for childcare, it can create a barrier for women who seek leadership positions. COVID-19 has shown that flexibility in the workplace is possible, creative solutions can be made when barriers affect everyone, and the work will still get done. It is hoped by participants that leaders will continue to make creative solutions possible and available, even when it only affects a few.





And regarding women empowerment versus competition... Over the years, participants have noted that there has been a shift where you now see women empowering other women. In fact, many of the participants were eager to make things more fair for the next generation. They felt that they shouldn't have to go through the same types of obstacles.

Regarding workplace exclusion, many participants identified what they refer to as the 'boys clubs'. And this refers to situations where they felt excluded from conversations about work related matters because of the clique mentality of senior male executives who exclude all other employees either purposefully or simply because they don't even realize that they're being exclusive. So, this includes when senior executives would have meetings about work but outside of workspace and outside of work hours, even when the participants themselves were in a more senior position, so this left them feeling very undermined in their leadership role.

And of course, participants identified the need for structural change in regards to childcare and financial and job security, and specifically for training for new leaders and entrepreneurs. Participants identify that there's a need for training, specifically in finances, human resources, governance of the organization, working with diverse populations, and even soft skills, including collaboration. And, of course, support for recent graduates. Participants identified that post-secondary education needs to create spaces to have conversations with students and staff about their potential and what they can do with it. Creating opportunities for mentorship can support students continued evolution.

So, to wrap up the results, the ... thematic analysis of the findings was an incredibly valuable experience for us. Just through conducting the interviews and hearing what women leaders had to share about their experiences really helped us to gain so much insight on the opportunities and barriers faced by women leaders. It is quite evident that the barriers are numerous, but it is also evident that through having a support system with mentors, advocates and networks, it can help leaders tackle any barrier that's in their way.

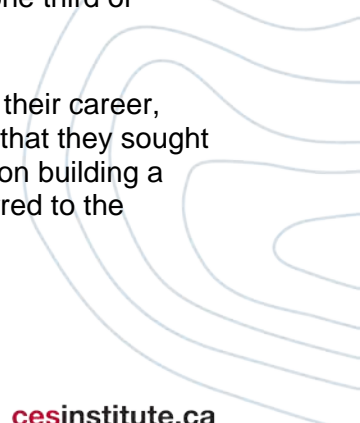
I will now pass it over to Karen who will further explore the value of mentorship.



Discussion

The Need for Mentorship

[Karen Nelson]: Thanks, Aarabhi. So as previously stated, many women we interviewed cited mentorship as a prominent factor in achieving their leadership position. [Nearly one third of participants would suggest mentorship as a strategy for young women]

Specifically, they mentioned women mentors were able to help them to navigate their career, including gender-based obstacles that may be faced. Several participants noted that they sought out their mentor by finding someone they admire and respect, and they focused on building a relationship with them. Many went beyond just recommending mentors and referred to the





benefit they experienced in establishing various types of support for themselves through mentors, advocates, networks, as well as personal therapy sessions. While some women mentioned mentorship as a key factor in their success, many others identified a lack of mentorship in their career development and expressed it was something that could have been if it could have benefited them greatly, had the opportunity been available.

Several of the women expressed the importance of mentorship in some capacity, either through a formal program or even informally. Many participants reported that informal mentors could have provided them with several values, including relational experience (so someone to discuss challenges and triumphs with), tools for problem solving, industry-specific insights on how organizations function, advice on how to navigate different networks, support and recognizing and fostering the leadership potential in young women, and support with career goals. A few participants spoke to the benefits they felt a formal mentor could have given them.



One participant noted they would have benefited from having an established mentor to share experiences of how they managed to navigate challenges and their own pathway. Having a formal mentor in the form of someone who is perhaps further along in their career was something they felt would have helped them. Another participant emphasized the importance of having a formal mentorship program for young women today. Participants recognized that if it wasn't for the more informal mentors they actively sought out, they would not have been as successful as they were.

Several participants mentioned the importance of investing in employees through a formal mentorship program, and one participant mentioned they would have liked having someone to discuss professional development with, and what future opportunities might lie ahead. Some women also mentioned their role as a mentor and discuss the importance of giving back and helping others by supporting them in their journey. In fact, many women reported they wanted to participate in this project because they wanted to make it easier for other women in the future and advocate for them.

As leaders, they wanted to amplify the voices of other women, allow others to learn from and show them the way. These women have held the mentality that other women should not suffer just because they did. A couple of women also discussed the benefits of mentoring others, such as being able to see oneself through a different perspective by viewing how others see them as a leader. It allowed them to reflect for someone with a different perspective by asking questions and see how questions are processed through other eyes. One woman mentioned that leaders need to leverage their time and make a commitment to mentorship. They said it needs to be a priority.

Connecting to Previous Research

[Karen Nelson]: So, as discussed we worked on a project with CFUW that was completed in 2017 [A copy of this study can be found on The Atrium; [Women and Local Politics: Overcoming](#)



Barriers to Participation in Leadership] that sought to identify the barriers that women face when running for elected positions in Guelph-Wellington.

To do this, we interviewed 16 women who had run for political positions locally and held three focus groups of women in the community who were interested in potentially running for public leadership positions in the future. And many of the findings we found in the 2017 study were similar to what we found in the current study.

A lack of resources was found in both studies, although the contexts differed. In the former study, it related to a lack of understanding of the campaign process, whereas in the current study, resources varied from professional development opportunities to changes in childcare. Family obligations were found in both, specifically around a lack of flexibility for family care duties.

In both studies, stereotyping of traditional women's roles was found to have an impact on how others perceive women leaders so, both in terms of the workplace and in public leadership positions. Harassment came up in both, although the format differed. For those running for public positions, it was described more as harassment on social media or online platforms, whereas in the current study it was found primarily to take place in person. A lack of confidence came up in both studies as well, both of which proposed mentorship as a possible solution.

So, similar to our current study, most of the solutions proposed by participants in the former study focused on having a support system, including role models, a strong network, and a robust team. Initiatives to assist women in the school were mentioned as a solution.

So, more than half of the interview participants, as well as participants in the focus groups of our previous study, also identified mentorship as an important part of preparing women for running for elected positions. Especially from former women politicians, in this case. As one interview participant who held an elected position stated, "I'm sitting here today because a woman took the time and saw potential and removed barriers for me."

Concluding Remarks

[For more information, please contact Karen Nelson knelson@uoquelfh.ca Research Shop Coordinator. Twitter @CESIGuelph | @ResearchShop]

[Karen Nelson]: So, overall, our current study, like the 2017 study focusing more on the elected positions, found that barriers continue to exist for women in positions of leadership. Our current study found that many do believe that progress has been made, especially when referring to the recent MeToo movement. However, we found that stigma and harassment still exist for women in leadership roles in our communities. So, as discussed, mentorship was cited to be an important opportunity for many, both in our current and previous study. And it's because of this we asked local women leaders to speak soon on the panel discussing their experiences with mentorship and the role it can play.

