

Guelph-Wellington Women* Leaders and the “Glass Ceiling”

Summary of the Results

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Background

The Research Shop, part of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI), prepared this project at the request of, and in partnership with, the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) – Guelph Chapter.¹ It builds upon [previous research with CFUW](#) that explored the opportunities and barriers local women face when running for elected positions.

The purpose of this research was to understand the opportunities and barriers related to leadership local women face who are early to mid-stage career professionals and leaders in their communities. The goal of this project was to share the results of the research through a [Webinar](#) with the community on International Women’s Day.

Methods

In early November 2020, the research team recruited participants via a nomination survey. Researchers invited members of the community to nominate themselves or nominate other women to participate in the study. Researchers asked those interested to take part in an interview to share their experiences and insights regarding their pathways to leadership.

From late November to December 2020, the research team interviewed 21 women using group (2-3 women) and individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews were one hour in length. Due to circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the team conducted all interviews virtually using Zoom.

During the interviews, participants shared their perspectives regarding mentorship and their experiences that led them to their current leadership positions. Interview questions asked participants to discuss what leadership meant to them, opportunities they had and wish they had, barriers they experienced and overcoming them, and advice for future women leaders. The research team used thematic analysis to organize and analyze the information provided in the interviews and to identify the themes.

Results

The following section includes the results of this project, including demographics and interview themes. These themes revolve around leadership definitions, opportunities, barriers, the current landscape of women in leadership, and participants’ advice for new leaders.

¹ Our definition of women encompasses cisgender women, transgender women, genderqueer women, and two-spirit, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people who are woman-aligned.



Demographics

The 21 women who took part in this research represented various sectors and positions. Sectors included:

- Non-profit (business, community, and health),
- Education,
- Profit businesses, and
- Government.

The positions the participants held included:

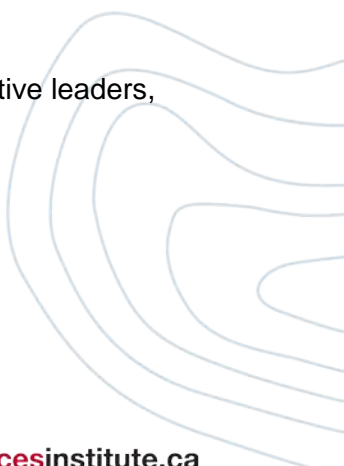
- Entrepreneur (5),
- Manager (4),
- Executive director (4),
- Faculty (3),
- Chief executive officer (CEO) (3), and
- Mental health professional (2).



Defining Leadership

The participants gave a wide range of responses when the interviewer asked them to define leadership. The definitions revolved around:

- Fostering positive space for team members to grow.
- Helping others, especially within one's teams.
 - Examples included:
 - Instilling confidence in team members,
 - Removing barriers,
 - Supporting others to learn and grow, and
 - Bringing out the best in people.
- Improving communication.
 - Examples included:
 - Being mindful of how different people communicate, and
 - Making everyone feel heard.
- Uplifting, inspiring, supporting, and empowering the team.

The participants also mentioned personal skills and qualities that can create effective leaders, such as:

- Trust in one's self and in others,
 - Resilience and flexibility,
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- Bravery,
 - Openness to criticism,
 - The ability to make difficult decisions, and
 - Dedication and passion.


Opportunities Experienced



The women discussed opportunities they had that led them to their position of leadership. The most prominent factors they mentioned were having mentors, advocates, and a strong network, and being driven and motivated.

- **Mentorship:** The participants frequently mentioned having a mentor as a factor that helped them achieve their current leadership position. Women leaders looked up to their mentors as someone to model their leadership after. The mentors recognized their mentees' potential, built their confidence, and provided “stepping stones” to transition into leadership roles.
- **Advocates & Champions:** The participants identified individuals, including their family members, co-workers, and others who provided support networks inside and outside the workplace. These individuals were referred to as advocates and champions for the women. The women noted the importance of advocacy for young people who may face isolation and difficulties navigating spaces alone without knowing how to access additional support.
- **Networking:** Many of the women leaders cited networking as key in their leadership journeys. Establishing networks led to:
 - An open space to share stories of successes and failures,
 - Exchange of ideas and perspectives through interdisciplinary groups, and
 - Community building and capacity development.
- **Being Driven and Motivated:** The participants commonly cited personal motivation and persistence in pursuing their career as a significant factor in obtaining their leadership role. A few of the women leaders created opportunities when they identified gaps within their fields. Exposure to poor leadership styles also motivated some of the participants to remove barriers, such as lack of communication, and create change.

Missed Opportunities

While the women shared many opportunities they experienced, they also identified what supports would have made their journeys to leadership more accessible.


- **Mentorship:** Many participants identified a lack of mentorship in their career development. They also noted that having a formal or informal mentor would have benefitted them greatly if the opportunity been available.
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- **Networks:** Several participants highlighted how beneficial having a supportive group environment would have been to their careers. They mentioned various types of support groups that would have been useful, such as:
 - **Leadership-specific:** There was a noted lack of support groups for women’s leadership and opportunities to come together to discuss their different experiences.
 - **Women-specific:** A wider network of women could expose women to other opportunities and resources available in the community.
 - **Interdisciplinary:** The participants identified a desire to exchange ideas and perspectives with others in different fields.
 - **Mother- and parenting-specific:** It would have benefitted the participants to talk with other parents about balancing work and family duties, especially when their kids were young.
 - **Industry-specific:** The women recommended joining community organizations that resonate or are relevant to one’s field to better navigate industry-specific challenges.
 - **Training:** The participants also referred to missed opportunities regarding education, continuing professional development, and training along their career pathway. They expressed a need for training in long-range career planning, finances, human resources, organizational governance, and soft skills (e.g., effective collaboration and navigating difficult conversations).

Systemic Barriers

The women reflected on the barriers they encountered during their leadership journeys. They discussed stigma, parenting challenges, systemic barriers (e.g., a lack of flexibility and job insecurity), harassment, exclusion, a lack of pay equity, and sector-specific barriers.

Barriers Related to Stigma

- **Age:** The participants identified two distinct ageism scenarios – the assumption of being “too old” or “too young.” They noted that it took a toll on their mental health when co-workers made assumptions about their age because of the need to prove themselves due to both their age and their gender.
 - **Gender-based Stereotyping:** They also shared that stereotypes about “traditional women roles” and societal expectations of women leaders created unfair assumptions about women’s ability to lead. These stereotypes make it difficult for women leaders to make breakthroughs in attaining positions of leadership with those who don’t believe in their capabilities.
 - **Personal Relationships:** Women leaders often felt they needed to be “intentionally private” about relationships, family planning, and parenting. This feeling stemmed from intrusive questioning and assumed biases about their home lives from coworkers.
 - **Race:** There is a lack of representation of women of colour in leadership.
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- **Harassment:** The participants identified severe issues of gender-based harassment. There is a need for workspaces to examine how they can create safe spaces to mitigate and prevent trauma created by workplace harassment.

Barriers Related to Workplace Environment & Policies

- **Workplace Exclusion**
 - Many participants described situations they referred to as a “Boys’ Club” where they felt excluded from work-related conversations and events.
 - For example, senior male leaders would have meetings about work outside of the workspace and work hours. These actions made participants feel undermined in their leadership roles.
- **Need for Structural Change**
 - **Childcare and flexibility:** There is a need for better access to childcare and support in navigating financial assistance for childcare. Participants also identified a need to have flexibility in the workplace to cater to childcare needs. Technology may help overcome childcare barriers, such as the option to join meetings virtually. However, that solution requires leaders who are willing to adapt.
 - **Financial and job security:** Improved policies that protect women’s employment (especially part-time and casual workers) would allow them to feel a greater sense of safety when confronting workplace issues.
 - **Training for new leaders and entrepreneurs.**
 - **Non-profit sector:** There are few resources available for non-profit employees, such as health benefits and funds for professional development. However, the emotional burden is high in the non-profit sector, especially in social work.
 - **Private sector:** The participants identified barriers for women entrepreneurs, including a lack of financial literacy, confidence, and technology access.
 - **Academia:** The participants also discussed the need for spaces where students, graduates, and staff can discuss their strengths, challenges, and future career planning. These spaces could include opportunities for mentorship and support for women who want to enhance their skills without stepping out of the workforce.

Mentorship

Presence of a Mentor:

- Many women leaders cited mentorship as a prominent factor in achieving their leadership position. Specifically, they mentioned women mentors helped them navigate their careers, including gender-based obstacles they faced.
- Several participants noted that they sought out their mentor by finding someone they admired and respected and focused on building relationships with them.



Impact of Not Having a Mentor:

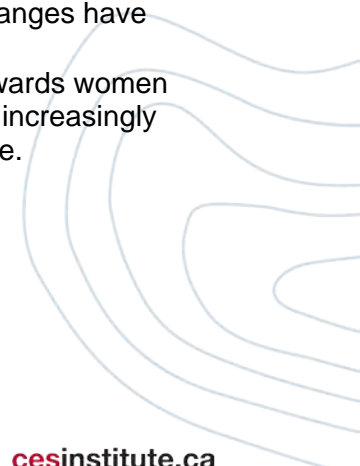
- Many participants mentioned a lack of mentorship in their career development and expressed it was something that could have benefitted them greatly if the opportunity been available.
- Participants spoke about the importance of investing in employees through a formal mentorship program where they could discuss professional development and opportunities.
- They thought that access to mentorship would have resulted in:
 - Relational experience or 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 in recognizing and fostering the leadership potential in young women, and
 - Support with career goals.

Being a Mentor:

- Several women stressed that leaders are responsible for active engagement and active mentorship. They connected this responsibility to their own roles as mentors. They also highlighted the importance of giving back and supporting others in their journeys, particularly young professionals.
- A couple of women discussed the benefits of mentoring others, such as seeing oneself from a different perspective. Mentoring allowed the women to reflect with someone who had a different perspective by asking questions and seeing how mentees processed them through “earlier eyes”, that is through the eyes of individuals who have joined the workforce after them.

Landscape of Women in Leadership

The participants identified several areas of change occurring for women in leadership and challenges that persist.

- **#metoo Movement:** Several participants referred to the #metoo movement and its influence and impact on the workplace culture and climate. The #metoo movement highlighted the frequency of workplace harassment and gender inequality.
 - **Visibility:** There is increased visibility of women in leadership roles. Participants noted that while gender inequity still exists in the workplace, current societal changes have pushed organizations to examine their equity and inclusion policies.
 - **Women empowerment:** Many participants felt there had been a shift towards women empowering other women instead of being competitive. Women are also increasingly advocating for themselves and taking on leadership roles in the workplace.
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- **Challenges:** The participants noted that challenges persist and progress is slow. Pay inequity, difficulties balancing work and childcare duties, and inequitable representation and inclusion continue. These issues require structural changes to address adequately.

Advice for Young Women

The women shared advice for future women leaders to overcome challenges and reach success. They suggested having confidence and a dedicated support system, sticking to your values, taking risks, and seeking opportunities.

Confidence

- Many of the participants emphasized the importance of self-confidence.
- One person noted the importance of positive self-talk, building a resilient mind, spending less time seeking validation from others, being okay with not knowing everything, and continually working at one's confidence.
- Another woman stressed the importance of believing in one's skills and the need for tenacity, drive, and persistent self-confidence. They suggested that these skills could help young leaders overcome barriers and discouragement from others.

Support System

- Many participants referred to the usefulness of several types of supports for themselves through mentors, advocates, networking, and therapy.
- They mentioned the importance of building a supportive community around oneself. One participant also suggested finding a positive work environment where employees feel valued and respected.

Values

- Several women also discussed the importance of knowing one's values, guiding principles, and core beliefs.
- One participant emphasized the importance of identifying these values so that people can protect the things that matter the most to them no matter what.
- Another participant suggested measuring up any potential career decisions against these values to ensure they align with personal principles.

Risk

- Finally, the importance of taking risks was a prominent theme in the participants' advice.
- One woman said it is important to get comfortable with taking risks and learning how to mitigate risks. They added that leadership takes practice. They encouraged women to take chances and accept that mistakes are necessary for growth and learning.



Conclusion

This research identified several key themes on women in leadership positions. For instance, the women in this sample defined leadership as uplifting and empowering others, creating space for everyone to be heard, being resilient and flexible, and trusting one's ability to lead. While personal motivation, advocates, and networks were helpful for participants, mentorship was the most frequently cited factor in successfully attaining leadership positions. The participants' experiences also highlighted that barriers to leadership and challenges related to gender inequity persist. Current societal changes, particularly the #metoo movement, have pushed organizations to re-examine their equity and inclusion policies. However, participants noted that structural change is needed to ensure women have the necessary resources and support required to become leaders.

On International Women's Day (March 8, 2021), the findings from this project helped inform a Webinar titled "Women and the glass ceiling: A discussion of leadership, mentorship, and achieving an equal future." It was a call to action to the community to consider fostering mentorship opportunities. [The Webinar can be found, along with a summary post, on the CESI website.](#)

The research team hopes that the findings from this report will help establish networks and foster mentorship opportunities for women pursuing leadership positions in the Guelph-Wellington community.