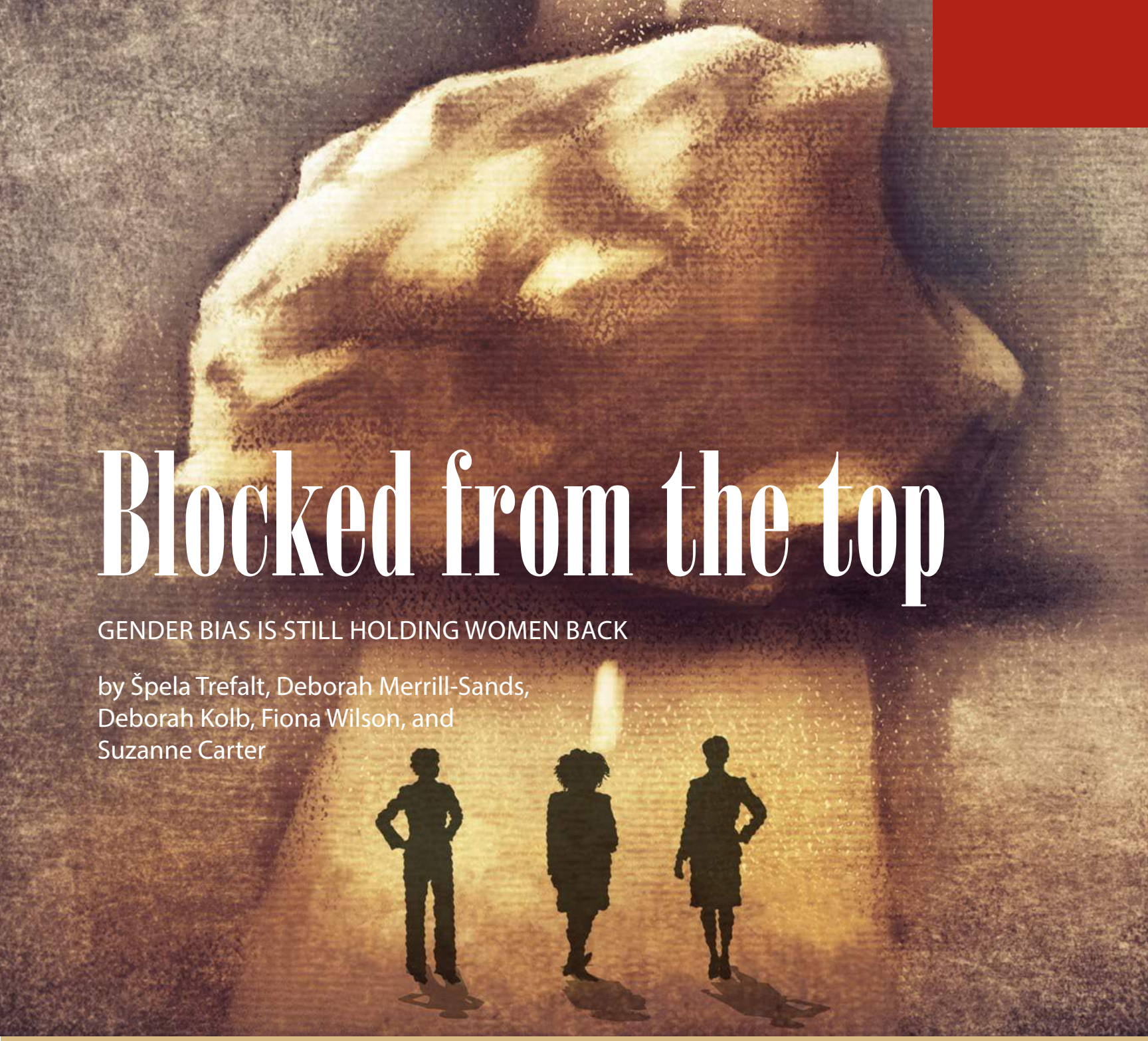

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GENDER BIAS IS STILL HOLDING WOMEN BACK

by Špela Trefalt, Deborah Merrill-Sands, Deborah Kolb, Fiona Wilson, and Suzanne Carter

Change is ever so slow for women in business leadership. The leadership gap between men and women has proven to be stubbornly resilient despite organizations' successes in dismantling most forms of overt discrimination, achieving near parity for women with men in middle management, and investing in women's initiatives and organizational change efforts. In ten years, the percentage of women who are corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies inched up a mere two percentage points from 12 percent to 14 percent. The percentage of women among top earners grew from only 4 percent to 8 percent and the percentage of women serving as board directors increased from only 12 percent to 16 percent. Even in non-profit organizations, women's representation in leadership has remained stalled at about 20 percent.

This persistent leadership gap is a significant cause for concern not only for women with leadership aspirations, but also for organizations that need strong and diverse leadership teams to compete successfully in a rapidly changing and uncertain global economy. Recent studies by the non-profit research organiza-

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tion Catalyst of Fortune 500 companies in the United States and by McKinsey of major businesses in Europe showed a significant correlation between greater representation of women in executive and board positions and stronger financial performance. Catalyst found, for example, that companies with the highest proportion of women corporate officers outperformed those with the lowest proportion by 5 percent when measured by return on equity.

In addition, women bring a wealth of leadership talent to organizations. In standardized leadership assessments women are consistently rated higher than men on the majority of leadership skills needed to run effective organizations, such as setting high standards, driving for results, motivating staff, and building high-performing teams.

How do we unencumber women's paths to leadership? How do we close the persistent leadership gender gap? How do we ensure that organizations are leveraging the fullest contributions of their diverse pool of leadership talent?

Research conducted by Simmons' Center for Gender in Organizations and our affiliates suggests that the gains achieved in gender equity are modest because most organizational change efforts target overt, obvious aspects of gender bias and ignore the more subtle gender dynamics deeply embedded in an organization's culture and in work norms that shape women's paths to leadership. These dynamics, often called second generation gender bias, are deeply embedded in the culture, norms, and work practices in organizations, playing out below the surface of formal systems of hiring, promotion, and compensation.

Second generation gender dynamics

Second generation gender issues cover those work cultures and practices that appear neutral and natural on their face, but can result in differential experiences for and treatment of diverse groups of women and men. Ely and Meyerson identify several different types of second generation practices that create gender inequities in organizations:

Gendered Jobs. Gender typing of jobs occurs when some occupations are seen as a good "fit" with feminine characteristics and others with masculine characteristics. These characteristics can be formally written into job descriptions and/or become the informal criteria by which people are moved into jobs.

Gendered Work. Fletcher describes the invisible work that women often do, but that does not get noticed or recognized.

Gender and Leadership. Gender can impact who is seen to have leadership potential as well as assessment of performance in those roles.

Gender and the Ideal Worker. As women have joined men in the workforce, the issues associated with having both a challenging work life and a fulfilling family life have come to the fore.

Gender and Social Capital. Ties to powerful or high-status others lend standing to an organizational member and are associated with higher promotion rates and better performance evaluations.

Networks and relationships

Networks and good working relationships serve as important resources in organizations. They can be a source of emotional support, feedback, political advice, information about opportunities, and protection. Therefore, relationships can be particularly important when dealing with second generation gender bias.

A study of financial services employees, for example, showed that women get less work-related help from powerful bosses with whom they have ties than do white men. The argument is made that this differential treatment may be a consequence of cultural beliefs that rank women below white men and thus

Opening paths to the top

- Men and women managers responsible for developing leadership talent need to deepen their understanding of second generation gender bias and its differential impact on men's and women's careers.
- Senior men need to be strategic partners in change. They need to be actively engaged in the leadership development of women and to take a leadership role in helping their organizations appreciate the performance benefits that derive from gender diversity in leadership teams.
- Women bosses and mentors need to complement the socio-emotional advice and support that they give mentees with active sponsorship and strategic advice.
- Women pursuing leadership need to be strategic in seeking out sponsors as well as mentors.
- Women pursuing leadership need to invest in learning more about second generation gender issues and how they shape women's paths to leadership.

make investment in women seem less worthwhile. Therefore, for women to benefit from their networks (measured by early promotions), they need to borrow social capital—they need to be connected with powerful others who increase their legitimacy and counteract the view of women as "risky."

Experience of second generation gender dynamics

Most respondents reported that they personally have experienced one or more types of second generation gender issues. The issue that most women experienced was "being asked to put work before all else" (89 percent), followed by the issue of doing "invisible work" (86 percent). Importantly, the majority of women in our sample (59 percent) did not opt out of leadership opportunities due to feeling they did not fit their organization's model of effective leadership.

Women differed widely in the amount of help they reported receiving from their networks in dealing with second generation gender issues—for each issue their responses spanned the entire range from 1 (no help) to 5 (significant amount of help).

Women also reported getting the most help from their spouses/partners (the average was 4.44 out of 5). In addition, they reported getting more help from women than from men across both their professional and personal networks, and getting more help from mentors than from bosses or peers.

Interestingly, a notable proportion of respondents, ranging from 5 percent to 25 percent depending on the issue, indicated that they had experienced a specific gender issue but had not attempted to address it.

Our first critical finding regarding success in dealing with these issues was that help received from men was related to perceptions of higher success whereas help received from women was not related to perceptions of success. Further, we found that while help from individuals in the professional realm and from those within the organization was positively related to perceptions of success, help from personal circles and from mentors outside of the organization actually detracted from perceived success. Also, it was male bosses, not female bosses, whose help was most likely to be experienced as effective.

We found that second generation gender bias is still experienced by women in their organizations.

The difference between perceived amount of help received and the perceived success in dealing with second generation gender issues is particularly intriguing given that these are self reports from the women in the sample.

We make sense of these results in three ways: it may be that the kind of help women mostly seek out and receive is emotional support; even if women receive actionable advice, it has to be firmly grounded in the context of the specific organization in order to be useful; success in dealing with most second generation gender issues was not related to help with those particular issues, but to help overall.

Finally, the fact that more senior than junior women in our sample experienced second generation gender bias, but did not report any more success in dealing with most of these issues, suggests that these senior women achieved organizational success not so much by overcoming gender issues but by adjusting to them. ■