

# Gender biases in leadership selection during competitions within and between groups

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What makes a great leader? Traits that we look for typically include a sense of power, great negotiating skills and lots of charisma. However, a recent study suggests that it is not just an outgoing personality and great communication skills that determine who is chosen as leader of a group. Previous research has implicated that there is a gender bias when selecting leaders; preference for a male versus female leader may depend on the specific situation that a group finds itself in. Psychologists Mark Van Vugt and Brian R. Spisak from the University of Kent wanted to explore this further and see if gender influences the selection of group leaders during various group competition situations.

The researchers studied this by having volunteers participate in an investment game. They were each given \$6 and any of that amount could be invested into a group fund, with the volunteer keeping the rest for themselves. However, if the group fund exceeded a certain amount, the volunteer would receive a bonus, in addition to what was in their private fund. Volunteers were each told they would be part of a group during this computerized investment game, when in fact, they were solely making the decisions.

Before beginning the game, participants were assigned to a specific experimental condition: intragroup competition (volunteers were told that their performance in the game would be compared to others in their group), intergroup competition (volunteers were told that their group's performance would be compared to that of other groups), or a control condition. In the control condition, volunteers were not provided with

any information about competition- it was treated as a regular investment game. Participants were presented with two candidates (one male and one female) and were told to vote for one of the candidates to serve as their [hypothetical] group's leader. Immediately prior to the start of the investment game, half of the volunteers were told that their group had elected a female leader and the remaining volunteers were told their group would have a male leader.

The results, reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, revealed that a gender bias occurred when selecting leaders in various group scenarios. Females were more often chosen as leaders of the intragroup condition while males were preferred to lead intergroup situations. In addition, females were also viewed as being more effective than males in maintaining intragroup relationships. Interestingly, in the control condition, males and females were equally selected as leaders.

There was also an evident gender bias during the investment exercise. In the intragroup condition, investments in the group fund were higher when there was a female leader. For the intergroup condition, there was more money invested in the group fund in the presence of a male leader compared to a female leader.

The authors suggest that these findings are the result of the way our society has evolved. For example, men have traditionally been more involved in combat and war (i.e. intergroup conflict) than women—successful male warriors were held in high status in many societies. That females were selected as leaders in the intragroup conditions and were also viewed as being more effective in maintaining positive relationships within the group may reflect females' traditional roles as peacekeepers and wanting to preserve group order. The authors reason, "Such engendered leadership prototypes are a residual of human evolutionary history that still affects the way people evaluate and

respond to leadership in society today."

However, it is interesting to note that these leadership prototypes may have been in place prior to human evolution. Chimpanzees (our nearest relatives) also exhibit similar gendered leadership standards—the males are in charge of patrolling group boundaries and the females maintain the peace within their group.

Overall, the findings indicate that during times of intergroup conflict a male leader prototype is sought while during intragroup conflict a female leader prototype is sought. The authors noted that these prototypes "emerge from a combination of evolved decision rules and culture specific gender role stereotypes."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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