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KATHRYN DAWSON, MA

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Playing the Game: Understanding the Gender Gap in Art Museum Directorships

KATHRYN DAWSON, MA
University of Washington

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Abstract The Association of Art Museum Directors has identified a gender gap in art museum directorships particularly in the largest and wealthiest institutions. In order for art museums to create inclusive, accessible educational spaces, it is imperative that the field explores the inequities present in its leadership. This research aims to understand the experiences of women who have achieved leadership positions in medium to large art museums. Fifteen art museum directors from museums with budgets from $10-$30 million, from across the United States were interviewed. The desire to make an impact is a strong theme throughout the interviews, as is the desire to remove barriers for others in the field. Another strong theme that emerged is the importance of, and need for, mentorship. Participants highlighted how gender does not operate in a vacuum, however, but rather interacts with other identities, such as age, race, and sexuality. Interviewees emphasized a need to address inherent biases against women's leadership within organizations, particularly on boards of directors. Executives are the foundation for organizational culture, building organizations that make critical choices about whose art, history, and culture is considered worthy of collecting and exhibiting, and how that is done. These findings suggest that further research should be done to investigate how boards of directors might begin diversifying leadership.

About the Author Kathryn is a recent graduate of the University of Washington master's in Museology program. Kathryn also holds a bachelor's degree in Arts Management, Costume Design, and Art History from Western Washington University. She writes, reads, and thinks about the intersection of art, identity and politics, and radical leadership in nonprofits. She is the brains behind the DIY blog Betty the Beta Tester and @museumsforgood on Instagram. Kathryn lives and works in the Pacific Northwest.

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Introduction

The gender disparity in corporate and for-profit workplaces, especially in leadership positions, has been widely discussed and researched across disciplines in the social sciences, sciences, and humanities. Indeed, there is now a great deal of scholarly work not only on gender, identity, and difference itself but also on the gender gap in executive leadership. Non-profit organizations, such as museums, are not exempt from these inequities. This imbalance of power raises significant questions about who selects objects and how they are presented, whose history and culture is considered worthy of collecting and exhibiting, and how this is done. Who works in a museum is a critical part of identifying and shaping the political, ideological, and aesthetic practices at work in an institution.

The Association of Art Museum Director's 2014 and 2017 Women in Leadership reports acknowledged that in museums women are underrepresented in leadership roles and receive less compensation than their male counterparts.[1] The AAMD papers, however, only considered pre-director positions in a limited way, leaving questions about what is occurring to keep women out of the talent pipeline. Engaging this line of inquiry will illuminate the extent and complexities of the barriers women are facing at work, such as salary, schedule flexibility, and lack of mentorships or social capital. This research used interviews to engage with the experiences of 15 women in institutions across the United States with the same budgetary profile as the AAMD paper's identified gap. In order to radically shift the gap in museum leadership, it is important to first understand the complexities that surround how we got to where we are and map a complete picture of the realities for women in executive leadership.

Gender Dynamics

Conceptualizing gender dynamics is foundational to understanding the gender gap in museum leadership. Gender studies literature establishes gender as a socialization process that creates a masculine identity and worldview for men and a feminine identity and worldview for women.[2] Additionally, exploring how these identities are embodied and socially coded into how men and women present themselves and are understood in all facets of their lives, and particularly at work.[3] Contemporary understandings of gender as fluid seeks to circumvent the limitations of a standard gender binary.[4] However, it is important to recognize that binary orientations are deeply embedded in society and culture such that people view them as inherent to the sexes.[5]

According to a 2007 Catalyst report, women comprised 46.5% of the total labor force in the United States and accounted for nearly 51% of all managerial and professional jobs.[6] However, women holding top positions remained at about 7% of all executives nationwide.[7] Leaving women out of leadership is not only bad for women, it is bad for the company and for our economy, as researchers have consistently found that companies with at least 30% female executives make as much as six percentage points more in profits than their all-male counterparts.[8] Furthermore, the Catalyst study notes that inclusion of a large number of women leaders correlates with improved corporate performance.[9]

The Glass Labyrinth

While for decades the metaphor of the *glass ceiling* has been used to illustrate the invisible barrier women face at work, it is now clear that it is not one single barrier that keeps women out of top positions, but rather a winding path full of many obstacles.[10] Coined in the mid-1980s, the metaphor of the glass ceiling describes the hidden and unbreachable barrier that keeps women and minorities from achieving management positions or climbing the corporate ladder.[11] The glass ceiling metaphor, however, implies that women and men have equal access to entry and midlevel positions, which research has found to be untrue.[12]

Instead, the *glass labyrinth* represents a more accurate portrait of women at work, noting that passage through the labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead.[13] The labyrinth metaphor

also acknowledges that the attrition that takes place over a career and that scarcity of women in top positions is the sum of systemic barriers that operate at each level.[14] The labyrinth begins with deeply-held, largely unconscious prejudices that benefit men and penalize women, and continues with resistance to women's leadership, questioning their leadership style and authenticity, and features the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities.[15] In reality, women are not turned away only as they reach the penultimate stage of a distinguished career, but rather disappear in varying numbers at many points leading up to that stage.[16] For many women, the glass ceiling was never even in sight.

Leadership Pipeline and Resistance to Female Leadership

In the early decades of women's leadership research, pipeline arguments pointed to the few women in preparatory programs, assuming that once enough qualified women are in the pipeline, they will eventually assume leadership positions in senior management.[17] However, this assumption is no longer supported by data, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, women have been gaining the majority of bachelor's and master's degrees since the late 1980s and the majority of Ph.D.s since the mid-2000s.[18] Despite contemporary women gaining the requisite experience and education, the pipeline seems to be "leaking" on the way to leadership positions.[19] The cause of this leak may be side-tracking, which ultimately leads women out of the pipeline for leadership advancement while reinforcing stereotypes about women at work.[20]

Women are regularly sidetracked into auxiliary staff roles such as human resources and administrative services, rather than being promoted into positions where they are responsible for an organization's direct functions.[21] The siloing of women into staff positions also results in the feminization of those jobs, causing them to look too much like "women's work" for men to want to do them, creating de facto occupational segregation, a process that is more pronounced for women of color.[22] The siloing of women results in a narrower network and sphere of influence for those women, which means they have less political support within the organization to help them attain senior leadership positions.[23] Even in feminized occupations such as nursing, librarianship, and social work, men ascend to supervisory and administrative positions more quickly than women.[24]

According to GuideStar's 2017 Nonprofit Compensation Report, the median pay for female CEOs lags behind that of men across all budget categories.[25] A recent report published by LeanIn.org found that when women ask for raises or promotions, they often face social repercussions.[26] Seen as bossy or aggressive simply for asking for raises or negotiating salary, these women were more likely to receive negative feedback than men.[27] LeanIn's report stands in contrast to those who have argued that the lack of women in managerial positions is due to increased numbers of women leaving the workforce.[28] The LeanIn report also stresses that these challenges are more pronounced for women of color, who experience the deepest drop-offs in middle and senior management despite being more likely than white women to say they aspire to senior executive positions.[29]

Research has shown bias against women in leadership roles, indicating a core reliance on the assumption that being a woman is incompatible with being a leader.[30] Researchers hypothesize that this reveals that some workers still hold blatant prejudice about women's

leadership abilities.[31] The perception, known as "think leader, think male," favors the leadership of men as more effective, and their masculine traits as indicators of good leadership.[32] Furthermore, behavior that fulfills leadership roles is evaluated less favorably when it is enacted by women.[33]

Women also face stereotypical assumptions about their home lives that lead decision makers to continue to assume their domestic responsibilities make it inappropriate to promote them to demanding leadership positions.[34] Studies have confirmed that women are still responsible for the majority of household labor including parenting, remain the ones who interrupt their careers and are more likely to work part-time, and account for the majority of single-parent households.[35] Women's inability to make large social investments is in contrast with fast-track (male) managers who spend comparatively more time and effort socializing and networking than their less successful colleagues.[36] This suggests that social capital is perceived as even more essential to managers' advancement than skill performance.[37]

Museum Leadership

While many in museum leadership come through the curatorial ranks, research indicates that most curatorial staff are not necessarily suited for a major leadership role.[38] This raises significant questions about how museums can create career paths, manage succession planning, and invest in leadership training.[39] Museums frequently fall into the habit of advancing those with good professional or academic skills and museological ethics without focusing on leadership or management development.[40]

American museums have offered women more high-level opportunities than most other professions.[41] In 1973, AAM Women's Caucus was established to help women in museums challenge discrimination, offer support for open salary information, and guidelines for fair employment practices.[42] Though the Caucus was disbanded only a few years later, very little has changed in the intervening 43 years.[43]

Men occupy more than 77% of director seats at the nation's largest and best-funded museums.[44] In 2014, the Association of Art Museum Directors undertook a study to understand the gender gap in art museum leadership and explore potential factors to help art institutions advance toward greater gender equity (Table 1).[45] Researchers spoke to executive search consultants who noted that the presence of an unconscious bias amongst board members may result in hiring people who look like them, which frequently means white and male.[46] Across all AAMD member museums, women hold fewer than 50% of directorships and the average female director's salary lags behind that of the average male director.[47] When it comes to compensation, the position a director held before entering their current position was found to influence the average salary.[48] While this was true for both men and women, the number of women who have become directors through internal promotion is greater and may have contributed to the salary disparity.[49]

Table 1:

		Men % in Directorship	Women % in Directorship	Wage Index[3]
All Museums[1]	All operating budgets	43.9%	55.6%	$0.71
(n= 781)	Below $3 million	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Above $3 million	56.5%	43.5%	n/a
Art Museums[2]	All operating budgets	58%	43%	$0.79
(n=211)	Below $15 million	52%	48%	$1.02
	Above $15 million	76%	24%	$0.71

[1] American Alliance of Museums, "National Comparative Museum Salary Survey," 2014
[2] Association of Art Museum Directors, "The Gender Gap in Art Museum Directorships," 2014
[3] Indicates average amount women earn per dollar earned by men

Interview Findings

While the path toward museum leadership varies, the experiences of women seeking leadership roles in museums are similar in significant ways. The desire to make an impact is a strong theme throughout the responses, as is the desire to remove barriers for others in the field, particularly as it relates to diversity and equity. Another strong theme that emerged is the importance of and further need for mentorship and coaching. The findings also reveal that curation remains the primary track from which museum directors are selected, though not exclusively.

Education is a cornerstone of the pipeline toward executive leadership positions, but the participant's educational backgrounds varied. Largely, the women had some kind of art historical background, ranging from four with master's degrees, four with full doctorates, and four who hold an incomplete or all but dissertation Ph.D. Others came via alternate routes, with degrees in American Studies, English, and Architecture. Two participants hold only bachelor's degrees.

The majority of the participants had been directors in previous institutions, many having their first experiences in leadership at university museums and galleries. Two-thirds of the participating directors had been directors in their previous institutions, while five had most recently been deputy directors and curators.

While a third of those interviewed had always been interested in pursuing some kind of leadership position, another third felt it was an organic evolution over time. Conversely, three felt that they had to be asked before they considered it, and one had never considered the possibility of being in a leadership role until much later in her career.

Barriers and Challenges

A process mentioned by several participants was the need to "play the game," acknowledging the inherent inequalities in the system that required them to behave in certain ways in order

to succeed. While a few participants explicitly cited overt sexism, the barriers experienced by the majority of the women tended to reflect subtle or unconscious biases. "[Museum boards] really have this internal idea of the museum director and it's always a handsome man with grey hair and a Ph.D. who condescends to them in speaking lofty discursions on art history."

Unconscious biases were noted by four participants and focused on the tokenization of female leaders and the systematic privileging of male leadership. There were also instances of overt gender discrimination described by participants. In these cases, nearly half of the participants noted instances where either they or others around them had been shut down by male colleagues, experienced blatant workplace sexism, or witnessed the gender gap in their pay scale.

> "There's, of course, that situation when there's a group discussion, and women don't get called on as much or they attribute the good point to you made to the man who spoke just after you. That definitely happens. How do you come back from that and point it out without being called a bitch?"

Women of a slightly older generation were more likely to point out the sexist nature of these occurrences, while women of a younger generation were more likely to only notice the pay gap, subtle gender dynamics or be surprised at the persistence of gender discrimination.

When responding to these issues, the general response from participants was to be tenacious. The majority of participants cited toughness and perseverance as their response to the barriers they faced. These participants cited having to work twice as hard to be taken seriously. "It takes a lot to manage being in a position where no matter how successful you are, people are not prepared to acknowledge your expertise."

However, participants highlighted how gender does not operate in a vacuum, rather interacts with other identities, such as age, race, and sexuality. For many, the gender-based barriers they encountered were coupled with age-related biases.

> "I looked young—I was young. Even though I had the leadership capacities and had a more all-encompassing view toward the museum and was always good at fundraising and all of that. It took a while—I had to prove myself longer in order make that leap."

Other impediments cited were family-related challenges, such as the decision to have children and having a supportive partner who's career could sustain moving to new cities or long work hours. These barriers are only compounded by needing to learn how to "play the game" and navigate the realities of their particular contexts. "Figure out how it is that men interview and interview like a man, dress the part, you just have to play the game, because otherwise you just aren't going to get hired."

Mentorships and Impact

Mentorships and role models develop leadership skills and create important networks. While only five participants felt they had very clear mentors, all expressed the great importance of

mentors. Many iterated a profound gratitude for those who helped them, while others noted a desire to have had more direct mentorship. “It’s hard to even begin to say how grateful I am to mentors. I don't think I knew how to seek a mentor, but I know people have done me so many professional and personal favors that I think I stand on the shoulders of many people.” The last third had found no mentors or guides at all, noting a general unwillingness of colleagues to help, that they didn’t know how to find mentors, that they didn’t feel they needed one at the time, or that they never found a match. Two also found that while they did not have direct mentors, they had found role models whose leadership they used as a learning tool.

Participants discussed several traits that contribute to successful leadership, which largely reflects what the literature defines as the transformational leadership style. These traits include collaboration, communication, teamwork, self-awareness, compassion, inclusivity, open-mindedness, and adaptability. Also, strongly noted in relation to museum work were clarity of vision for the organization, management skills, perseverance, fundraising skills, and a focus on community and audience. These skills were largely believed to be skills they grew over time, through hard work, observing others and personal experience.

> “I think back at the outset, it was really trying to prove that you had the same qualities as a man in terms of affect and skill set. Whereas I think as time has gone by, there is an appreciation for how women manage. The difference in a collaborative environment versus a hierarchical environment.”

Further questions focused on how interviewees feel their career paths impacted their leadership style. Five discussed the personal confidence they gained by overcoming obstacles and four went so far as to note that their paths impacted their awareness of and their approach to systemic issues. A few also indicated that they perceive their approach to the work differently because of their experiences. While almost a third said that they do not feel pressure to change their style or that they would not change to fit a mold, another third noted that they do feel the need to “play the game” at times or navigate a gendered double bind.

> “Particularly because I looked so young and I became a director so young, I wore business suits from the age of 28 to 45. You know those really ugly suits…I wore them purely to play the game because I wanted to remove the concern about gender and age. The day I turned 45, I gave every single suit away and I haven't worn one ever since.”

One participant noticed this only early on in her career but has since seen these dynamics subside. Four participants felt that while they lead differently based on the context or situation, they did not feel this was due to gender dynamics but instead a trait of a good leader.

The Future

When discussing what could be done to decrease the gender gap in large art museums directorships, two-thirds of the participants discussed the need for change in board structure

or composition, and for these bodies to address the implicit bias that keeps women out of executive roles.

> "I can't separate the fact that you only see the gap at the leadership level and it doesn't exist elsewhere in the organizations…I think the bias is that they see the CEOs as being the person who needs to raise the money, who needs to be the public face of the organization, who needs to make business decisions, who needs to make business deals and I think there is a bias that men are better at that."

Four women specifically called out the inherent bias they have noticed in the hiring process and two also called attention to the need for search committees and recruiters to also address the gap. "You have to have people who are comfortable with women in leadership roles, and that has not always happened."

Participants also discussed the need for more flexibility and family accommodations, for museums to look critically at the kind of requirements they place on their executives and who that might inherently exclude. A few brought up the need for boards and search committees to be more inclusive as far as educational background and to place more emphasis on their managerial skills and outcomes rather than the candidate's previous position or their degree.

> "I think institutions should be open to and can be open to more than the traditional curatorial pathway. It's interesting because what I've seen within AAMD is that a lot of the female directors have also come from the curatorial track, but some have now come more through a different pathway of either administrative and business side or the education side. So I think institutions and boards being more open to different kinds of experience would help."

Eight participants talked about the importance of creating a leadership pipeline that is encouraging and conducive to women leaders through coaching and professional development efforts.

The women interviewed were split as whether the field, as well as society, is making progress on these issues. Four either said no or that they felt we had moved backward; six said yes, we are trending toward progress; two felt it was an uneven or regional shift. Two suggested that the issue required much wider social change to force real systemic shifts within the field. Overall, many are concerned with the feminization of museums, noting the common trend for fields to experience a reduction in pay and respect when there are more women present. Additionally, several brought up the need for diversity at all levels, meaning a focus on gender balance at entry and mid-level as well as top positions.

Implications

The increase in the number of female art museum directors at smaller or university art museums over recent decades suggests that women are making inroads but the persistent dearth of them in larger institutions is an indicator of further issues to address.[50] On a

systemic level, there are larger issues that institutions and professional organizations could take on to shrink the gap. However, these findings suggest that there may be much bigger problems, like inherent bias and a problematic structure of museum governance. Museums alone cannot combat societal issues, systemic misogyny or racism—but that does not exempt them from working to dismantle these systems. For women, a career in museums becomes a labyrinth of double binds, requiring those who wish to achieve leadership roles to play along, altering the way they speak, what they wear, and how they relate to their colleagues. In the context of American life, the labyrinth asks far more of them than it does of their male counterparts, frequently forcing them to the sidelines before leadership opportunities even arise. Increased awareness and understanding of the gender gap allows both individual museum professionals as well as professional organizations to begin taking action to counteract the potential causes.

While increasing the diversity of executive leadership will not inherently solve all of an organization's problems, it is a significant step in a progressive direction. The Mellon Foundation released a report in 2015 detailing the demographics of art museum staffs which found the case for inclusivity, with respect to both race and gender, in museums to be "clear and urgent" and "constructive responses to it will be critical to the continued vitality of art museums as public resources for a democratic society."[51] Organizations communicate their values in a variety of ways, including whom they choose to hire. By placing emphasis on internal diversity, institutions can communicate their commitment to equity.

Industry groups like the American Alliance of Museums as well as AAMD are beginning to have significant conversations about how to increase equity in the field, but we need more and not only discussions but also concrete deliverables. Smaller groups like the Gender Equity in Museums Movement (GEMM) are endeavoring to create those actionable tasks that will aid museums in this work. However, it is important to remember that this problem does not lie entirely with one single entity, be it boards of directors, museum staffs, recruiters, Museum Studies programs, or industry groups; but rather it is the larger structure that informs and contextualizes them. The dismantling of systemic hierarchies and inequity is a long game and cannot be solved by any single leader, museum, or discipline. Therefore, it is incumbent on all of us who care deeply about the possibility that museums represent to analyze and deconstruct these systems, intervene in the game and pioneer new pathways forward.

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