

Buried Women in Design Leadership-status, Causes & Importance

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Abstract: With the progress of society and the popularization of gender equality, women have made remarkable achievements in various fields. As an important part of the creative industry, the participation and contribution of female designers in the design field cannot be ignored. However, despite the achievements of women in the design field, women still face many challenges in leadership positions. This article aims to explore the current situation of women's leadership in the design field, analyze its causes, and discuss the importance of women's leadership in the design field, in order to attract more social attention and gradually improve women's leadership in the design field.

Keywords: Women's Leadership; Design Field; Gender Equality

1. Introduction

The design field is an industry full of creativity and vitality. It is not only a combination of art and technology, but also a collision of ideas and cultures. In this field, female designers have injected new vitality into the design industry with their unique perspectives and delicate emotions. With the progress of society and the gradual improvement of women's status, female leaders in the design field have begun to emerge. However, despite the increasing participation of women in the design field, the proportion of women in leadership positions is still low. Women account for more than half of the students in design majors, and according to the U.S. Department of Education, more than 60% of graduate graphic design degree recipients are women, while women account for only 11% of design leaders (King, 2023). This phenomenon not only limits the diversified development of the design industry but also deprives many women of the opportunity to exert their leadership potential.

2. Reasons for Lack of Women in Design Leadership

There are a wide range of reasons that prevent women from becoming design leaders, and the range of reasons is wide, from traditional and historical constraints, to gender inequality and self-regulation.

The first reason is different societal expectations are placed on different genders, the residue of the historical gender division of labor and definitions of leadership that are skewed toward masculinity in the traditional sense. The article by E. Smith, R. Von Rueden, et al. (2021) points out that in the U.S., a study found that boys are more likely to be expected to have career expectations by everyone around them, who wanting to groom them as future leaders, and girls tend not to be given such expectations. It diverges the ideological and idealistic tendencies of the different genders at an very early age. So as a result, from adolescence onwards, girls' ambition to become leaders is much more less than boys. In an interview article in Bolt (2020), Sairah Ashman, Global CEO of the company Wolff Olins, shared her experience. She grew up in an even more backward-thinking era than now, surrounded by people who had extremely low expectations of her career goals, and when she was facing her career planning, even her school counselor advised her to become a secretary or a nurse instead of pursuing her profession and achieving higher achievement. And in society, followers tend to be more biased against female leaders, not only male, but also female. On the one hand, women are often perceived as "non-assertive" and are stereotyped as lacking the qualities that are necessary for good leadership such as self-confidence and dominance, but if a woman wants to be a leader and shows these qualities to public, she violates violent gender stereotypes in the eyes of the public, and still not considered as a good leader, just because

it is "abnormal and not traditionally feminine". This is a very strange, obviously unreasonable, and still widespread phenomenon, as E. Smith, R. Von Rueden, et al. (2021) point out, at the aspect of the historical division of labor in human beings, in order to develop better, human juveniles need to be cared for a very long period of time, combined with the uniquely skillful hunting methods of human beings, facilitated a gendered division of labor in which "males did the heavy labor of hunting in the field, and females did the lighter labor, such as picking fruit, and caring for the children". In general, this gendered division of labor provided men with the opportunity to build social networks and accumulate resources, in contrast to women, who are known to have been involved in child-rearing. This kind of labor initially built gender-specific leadership distinctions in ancient times. In agrarian societies, newer farming methods have made labor more physically demanding, which is even more incompatible with pregnancy or breastfeeding, which has further shifted women's work towards childcare, while men have remained focused on working outside the home. This further reduced women's voice, and men's greater access to social resources, also gradually distancing women from their relatives and making it difficult for them to build alliances, and the impression of the difference in resources created by this social division of labor remains to today, which makes people easier to perceive men as more reliable, further reinforces different societal expectations of men and women.

The second reason is the conflict between the constraints from women's family and reproductive and the high labor intensity of designers. As we all know, designers are a profession full of creativity but at the same time with medium to high pressure, based on these, design leaders are also responsible for team planning and program review. Especially in design firms that work on customer orders, overtime work and changing design scheme during breaks based on customer comments is also their daily work. And after starting a family, the reproductive function that women carry always affect their work, as Scott's (2019) article points out that if a woman is in a traditionally heterosexual family that have children, due to objective reasons such as pregnancy, labor, and breastfeeding, or other subjective reasons, a woman will always spend more time than her

husband in childcare and household works, whether this choice is voluntarily or just because a sense of family duty. The prime childbearing years overlap with the period of career advancement, which is 20-30 years old. This inevitably leads to a pause, or even a break in women's careers, and lost connect from the workplace and society. Even though a part of society is calling women to take off their aprons and hold their own businesses, the invisible tendency to divide labor still exists. As a result, one of the biggest pain points for working women is family life. In many families, men and women are treated differently from a young age and have different experiences and expectations because of their gender. Society expects men to focus on their careers and self-actualization, and expects women to be more gentle and to be household managers. Workplaces may also prefer to hire or promote men because of the reproductive functions carried by women may influence their work.

The third reason is the gender bias in the workplace along with unconscious self-bias of female designers regarding advancement, and the lack of female design leadership role models. Not only society and the workplace, but even women themselves have unconscious biases against themselves. an article by Designer Fund (2017) points out that women are often not the first choice for challenging jobs, including management work. And most women don't choose to take initiative; they don't know how well they're suited to those challenging works, because no one told them "you can do it," so they just habitually play small roles when opportunities arise. A survey by E. Smith, R. Von Rueden, et al. (2021) showed that women tend not to get themselves promoted by taking the initiative. What exacerbates this phenomenon is the fact that most of today's old leaders are men, and they often prefer to hire and promote men who are similar to themselves, this is a phenomenon known as the "old boys network ". A survey by Rudman and Kilianski (2000) examined gender discrimination in male and female. A series of photographs were used to test whether respondents tended to associate men with high authority roles and women with low authority roles. The results of the survey showed that both women and men are biased in this way, and although women showed

weaker bias than men, women's self-discrimination against their own gender shows how far-reaching the concepts of gender authority and gender bias are. At the same time, the inequality of pay between men and women due to gender bias, a problem that happens in all walks of life, is also a obvious problem in the designer profession. For the same amount of work, female designers are paid only 80% of what male designers are paid. This certainly discourages women who want to work hard to achieve higher positions (King, 2023). A interview report by Schley(2019) suggests that the lack of role models is also a significant issue in the careers of designer women. Covarrubias, a female design leader, who is the studio director, creative director and design principal at Gensler in Seattle and as president of the International Interior Design Association (IIDA), says she grew up in an environment full of women leaders and never thought women haven't the talent to be leaders. Most female designers don't have enough female leaders, mentors and other role models around them, and Covarrubias believes that this is a key factor - if there were more influential female design leaders, more girls would be inspired and encouraged to do the same thing. But the status now is the opposite, when a woman enters the design industry as a leader, the lack of same-sex among her colleagues can cause her to enter a unnaturalness state and even self-doubt about her position.

The fourth reason, and a more subtle but extremely important one, is that many products are designed for men, which has led to male design thinking being defaulted to mass thinking. For a long time in the history of design, women were invisible and the concept of "human" was defaulted to male. We can see this phenomenon in the design of some of the most important products in history, and Prasad's (2019) article points out that some of the common standards for designing products in life, such as the height of airbags in cars, the dummies used in car accident tests and first aid exercises, the temperature of air conditioning in public places, and the sizes of astronauts' suits and lab coats, are based on the size of men's bodies or their body temperatures. Despite the fact that women make up half of the population, there are still many of these phenomena in our lives, even though women's versions of some of the above items have been developed until now. People are accustomed to male-centered product design,

and define male-oriented design thinking as "more popular and suitable for most people," while many of the products designed by male designers and claim to based on women are just become "pink, shrunken, and cute" based on male products. As in other fields, there is a tacit assumption that men have stronger design leadership. In the midst of a line of products based on men's needs and thinking, it is much more difficult for a female design leader to lead her team in developing a new line of products based on the idea of meeting women's needs, which is supposed to be normal, but still groundbreaking in many areas and may not be recognized at the top, because it is defined as "not based on popular demand". This frustrating situation can also be a deterrent to female designers becoming leaders or using a female mindset to lead design teams.

3. Importance of Female Leadership in Design Field

So why is it important for more women to become design leaders? For all of the above reasons, the path for women in the design field to get promoted and become design leaders faces a lot of difficulties and requires breaking down all kinds of old ideas and psychological pressures. However, it is clear that none of these reasons can reduce the power of women as design leaders. This is true both in terms of design competence and leadership. Paul's (2023) article states that strategic planning skills are the most important qualities of a design leader, which is setting the direction and goals for design teams and organizations. Design leaders need excellent observation skills to align the team's plans and goals with market and client needs. Strong communication skills and the ability to rally the team are also necessary. On the "design" side, design leaders need exceptionally strong creative thinking and diverse design aesthetics to ensure that the team's design solutions are successfully applied and rationalized in different scenarios. Design leadership requires a combination of rationality and sensibility, not only decisiveness and rationality, but also delicate perception and aesthetic ability. Starting from the above, the "mass design thinking" currently used in many fields is a fake mass thinking, which defaults to male as the main

audience, and the other half of the earth is ignored. But women are the largest consumer group, and they should be taken into consideration, because design should try to be for 100% of the people. In a design team with a balance of male and female power, if the design leadership is also 50/50 gender, the discussion about the rationality of the design solution will have more perspectives and the design will be more likely to be suitable for everyone. With female leadership, writing design for women into the proposal is truly thinking for the masses. Women designers allow a new perspective into the thought process and ultimately lead to designs that are more accessible to everyone. Novotney's (2023) study showed that according to a 1992 meta-analysis of 61 studies led by Eagly, women leaders are more inspirational compared to men and are also more skilled at identifying and capitalizing on the organization's strengths. According to a study, in teamwork, groups with more women are more likely to listen to everyone's point of view in the form of equal communication and turn-taking, which is very conducive to capitalizing on everyone's strengths. In another national survey, women were rated as more honest, smarter, and more empathetic and creative. These qualities are ideal for design leaders. In addition, according to social psychologist Dr. Mansi P. Joshi, the presence of female leaders creates an impression of greater equality, which helps to promote equality of treatment, as well as encourage enthusiasm for advancement.

Of course, while the path for female designers to become leaders is so difficult, women are not the only ones who are being limited, and when we call for gender equality and the breaking of the shackles on women's leadership, we are also fighting for the freedom of the other half of the population. While women are defined by society as people who don't need to carry high expectations, this means that men are given high expectations and are expected by those around them and by society as a whole to be in high positions or leaders, and they are pressured to do their best to get promoted. If they don't succeed, many men are defined and even tend to position themselves as failures. As opposed to women who deviate from societal prescriptions being questioned by society, DiMuccio et al.'s (2023) findings suggest that not only women, but also men who deviate from societal prescriptions and expectations may be subjected to ridicule from

other men and society at large, a so-called masculinity that is forced to be tied to leadership. One survey showed that more than half of American adults believe that society looks up to men who exhibit traditional masculine traits. These highly irrational societal norms bring distress to all, even if it is completely unnecessary. In order to achieve the goal of dismantling such irrational norms, the gender dictum of "who is better suited to be a leader" needs to be eliminated, and the differences in thinking brought about by biological differences should not be stereotyped. We can say that an increase in the proportion of female design leaders will bring more delicate and humanized designs to society, and we can also say that men's sense of power and decisiveness are suitable for dealing with complex matters that require quick results, but men can also be gentle, quiet, and be a careful listener and obedient follower in a design team, while women can also raise their voice, be decisive, and be calm, and become a design leader who responds to the call of duty. It takes all kinds of people to make a successful design team, and for a person, not divided into men or women, whether they want to be a backbone designer who follows the leader, a manager who manages the specific actions of the design team, or a leader who directs the team, they should be supported, not coerced by all kinds of invisible pressures, forced to ignore their true talents and do work that doesn't suit them. In summary, the implications of getting more women into design leadership are significant. For a complex set of historical and still-existing societal reasons, the number of female leaders is very low, and this data is particularly thought-provoking in a designer profession where the ratio of males to females is supposed to be balanced. There is no doubt that some ancient historical factors have had a profound effect, defaulting men to better leaders. But as times have progressed and the design profession has flourished with a rapid awakening of artistic and aesthetic awareness, our biases and consciousness have gradually changed. After we understand the origins of these problems, we realize that these constraints are completely unreasonable. It is clear that this division of labor has long lacked justification in a modern society where skills are won over rather than physical strength.

What we can all see in terms of skills is that both men and women are capable of brilliant design, and in terms of objective differences due to gender, we should pay more attention to the advantages and disadvantages that these differences represent and make the most of them. The challenges posed by society can't diminish the potential capabilities of women. Women's strengths in design and leadership include greater empathy, attention to detail, and care for results. The existence of women in design leadership is not only a reflection of social development and equality, but also a way to break down the gender-based constraints and limitations. In addition, since design has historically been dominated by male leaders, the addition of a female perspective to design leadership will undoubtedly help to bring a broader and more holistic perspective, providing new opportunities to make design work for more people, which is, in every way, a step forward for the development of the organization and society as a whole. Whether as a designer, a design leader making important design decisions, or in any other profession, any gender is essential.

4. Conclusion and Prospect

To improve the current situation of women's leadership in the design field, we need to approach it from multiple levels. Firstly, society should strengthen the promotion and recognition of women's leadership, breaking the inherent biases and stereotypes. At the same time, the design industry should establish a sound gender equality mechanism to provide equal opportunities and resources for women. In addition, organizations should also attach importance to the cultivation and development of female leaders, providing them with necessary support and guarantees.

To sum up, although the current situation of women's leadership in the design field faces many challenges, it also has tremendous potential and opportunities. We need to approach it from multiple levels to promote the improvement and development of women's leadership in the design field. Only by doing so can the design industry become more diversified, innovative, and sustainable. At the same time, we need to recognize that the improvement of women's leadership is not only the empowerment and respect for women, but also an important contribution to the entire design

industry and society.

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