

# Women in Leadership



# When Leadership Styles Clash

When a male leader speaks forcefully, he is often described as decisive. When a woman does the same, she is just as likely to hear a different word: difficult.

Women in government, business and nonprofit leadership say the tightrope between being perceived as “too soft” or “too aggressive” remains one of the most persistent and least visible challenges of their careers.

Research shows the experience is widespread. An analysis in the journal *Psychological Science* found that women who succeed in traditionally male-dominated roles are often judged as less likable, even when their performance is identical to men’s — a dynamic researchers call the “likability penalty.”

That perception gap shapes daily decision-making. Several women interviewed said they carefully modulate tone in emails, rehearse how to deliver criticism and give extra credit in meetings to avoid being seen as domineering.

The pressure intensifies for women of color, who face what scholars describe as a narrower range of acceptable behavior at work. In fact, the *Harvard Business Review* says, “They are often held to a much



© ADOBE STOCK

higher standard than their white and male peers and presumed to be less qualified despite their credentials, work product or business results.”

In politics, the double standard plays out in public. Studies of media coverage have found women candidates are more likely than men to have their personalities and

communication styles scrutinized, says Political Parity.

Yet many leaders say navigating those expectations has ultimately reshaped how they lead. Trying to mirror the hard-charging style often rewarded in male peers can backfire, leading to perceptions of inauthenticity.

Experts say learning to name

the double standard in real time can reduce bias and shift team culture, according to Lean In.org.

There are signs of change. Younger workers report valuing empathy, transparency and collaboration — traits long dismissed as “soft skills” — as core leadership competencies, according to McKinsey’s 2025

Women in the Workplace Report.

Still, the balancing act remains. For many women, success has come not from choosing between strength and warmth, but from refusing to accept that they are opposites — and from redefining leadership on their own terms.

# Women and Crisis Leadership

When disaster strikes, leadership is tested in real time. From pandemics to financial collapse and school shutdowns, women at the helm of governments and institutions have guided communities through upheaval with decisiveness, collaboration and building public trust.

Studies consistently show that diverse leadership broadens decision-making and often produces more inclusive policies and communication strategies.

The record of women who have led through these moments suggests that the most effective responses are not defined by gender, but by preparation, transparency and the ability to bring people together during uncertain times.

## PANDEMIC

During the COVID-19 pandemic, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern became a global symbol of crisis leadership. Her government moved quickly to close borders and introduce a clear alert-level system, while she delivered frequent, plain-spoken briefings that helped the public understand rapidly changing rules. Her approach emphasized empathy and collective responsibility, framing the country as a “team of five million,” according to VitalStrategies.org.

In Europe, German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s scientific background shaped a response grounded in data and transparent communication, while Denmark’s Mette Frederiksen paired swift shutdowns with economic protections to prevent mass layoffs.

In Norway, Erna Solberg held televised briefings for children to address their fears, telling

them it was “OK to feel scared” during the “special days.” These strategies built public confidence at a time when misinformation and anxiety were widespread, according to SOCAP Global.

## HEALTH CRISES

The pattern extends beyond COVID-19. During the 2014-16 Ebola outbreak, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf declared a national emergency, coordinated international aid and created a centralized incident-management system to align government agencies and global partners. Her advocacy helped bring U.S. and United Nations resources to the region, turning a fragmented response into a unified campaign against the virus. President Barack Obama invited her to The Oval Office to praise her leadership during the crisis.

## FINANCIAL CRISES

Economic crises have also demanded steady leadership, with women in key roles. In Chile, President Michelle Bachelet used copper-boom revenues to build a sovereign wealth fund before the 2008 financial crash. Those reserves later financed stimulus programs and social supports, cushioning the country against recession and helping restore public approval after earlier political setbacks, according to Britannica.



Sirleaf

AFRICA PROGRESS PANEL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Ardern

ULYSSE BELLIER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

# Changing Face of Farm Leadership

Agriculture has long been male-dominated, but women are now among the sector's fastest-growing decision-makers.

Women are finding their footing in all facets of agriculture, from leading a harvest crew to presenting policy in a boardroom to managing precision-ag technology.

According to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, there are 1.2 million female producers in the U.S., accounting for 36% of all producers, driving \$222 billion in agriculture sales.

While the total number of female producers slightly decreased by 0.2% since 2017, 58% of all U.S. farms involve at least one woman in decision-making.

Female producers are slightly younger, more likely to be a beginning farmer, and more likely to live on the farm they operate than male producers, according to the USDA.

There are still, however, many barriers for women to break in agriculture. Women lead only 26% of state departments of agriculture in the United States, hold only 23% of management positions and hold only 10% of leadership roles in agriculture colleges at land-grant universities, according to the National FFA Organization.

As the number of women in



© ADOBE STOCK

agriculture has grown, so have resources to help them. Women can get involved in leadership at all levels of farming.

The National FFA Organization's Impact FFA: Women Growing Women initiative provides networking, mentorship and leadership development. The program is "dedicated to growing the next generation of female leaders

who will join others to feed, fuel, clothe and sustain the world," according to the FFA website.

Women looking to grow their leadership skills can start by serving on Farm Service Agency committees, serving on USDA research, marketing and consumer outreach initiatives, or industry-specific boards.

The Farm Bureau's Women's Leadership Committee offers resources for women from all walks of agriculture. It offers events such as a communications boot camp, advocacy training, networking and leadership development.

The USDA Women in Agriculture Mentoring Network is another initiative helping women in agriculture connect.

It aims to promote the image, role and leadership of women in farming, youth organizations, academia and business.

The USDA's Women, Land & Legacy program leverages government, nonprofit organizations, faith-based and community groups to help women make informed decisions for their land and their communities.

# The Second Shift Still Exists

When the workday ends for many high-powered women, another shift begins.

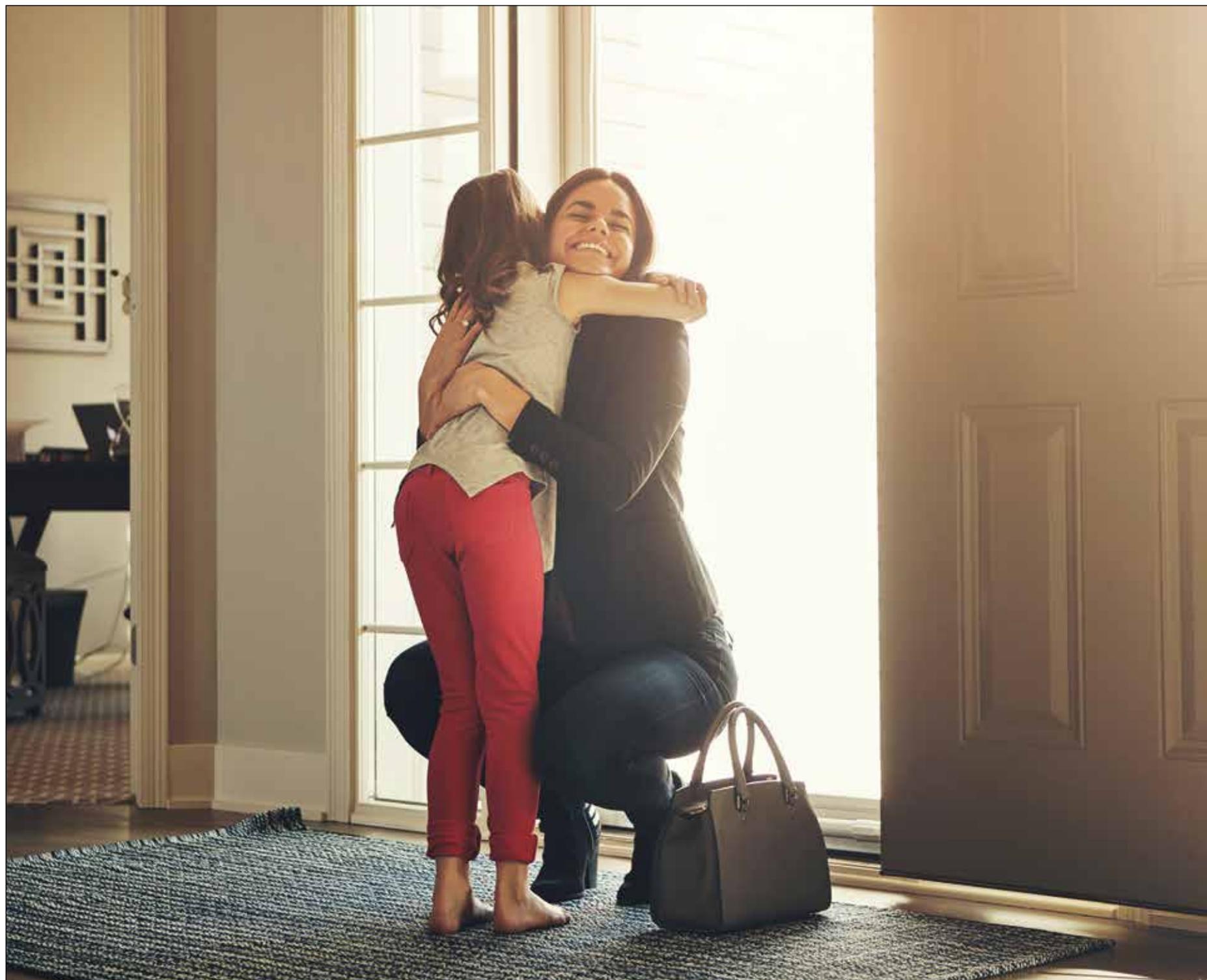
Cabinet secretaries review school forms between briefings. CEOs take late-night calls from caregivers. State legislators schedule votes around pediatrician appointments. Decades after sociologist Arlie Hochschild coined the term “the second shift,” women at the highest levels of business and government say the invisible labor of caregiving and household management still shapes their lives — and their careers.

Workplace research shows women, including those in senior leadership, continue to spend significantly more time than male counterparts on caregiving and domestic responsibilities. That imbalance translates into what many describe as a constant mental checklist: doctor’s appointments, aging parents’ medications, the birthday gift that must be ordered before midnight.

Research published by the National Libraries of Medicine calls the second shift “a major barrier to workplace gender equity.”

For elected officials, the pressures are uniquely public. A Midwestern state senator said she has taken budget calls from a hospital room while sitting with a sick child.

Leaders describe burnout not as a breaking point but as



© ADOBE STOCK

a slow erosion — the cost of being perpetually “on” in both professional and personal spheres. The pandemic, which collapsed boundaries between home and work, intensified that strain and made caregiving more visible, but it did not

fundamentally redistribute it.

Some organizations are beginning to respond, expanding parental leave for executives, normalizing schedule transparency and measuring performance by outcomes rather than hours.

Still, cultural change lags behind policy, and women remain reluctant to speak openly for fear of being perceived as less committed.

Women leaders have pointed out that while the second shift might be less visible

at the top, it’s no less daunting. Behind the public authority and polished resumes, many of the nation’s most powerful women are still clocking in for a job that has no office, no paycheck and no end of day.

# Mentorship as Power

When corporate executive Carla Harris, senior advisor of Morgan Stanley, talks about her rise on Wall Street, she rarely frames it as a solo journey. She talks about the senior leaders who helped open doors for her, and about the responsibility to do the same for others.

Across business, government and nonprofits, women in leadership say mentorship is not simply career advice. It is one of the most effective tools they have to reshape institutions that were not built with them in mind.

“Talent is universal, but opportunity is not,” Harris told audiences in describing why she deliberately mentors and sponsors younger professionals. That distinction between informal guidance and active advocacy has become central to how many women approach leadership.

Research shows why it matters. A study by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co. found women are less likely than men to have senior leaders who advocate for their promotions, a gap that contributes to the persistent drop-off in representation at each step up the



© ADOBE STOCK

management ladder.

For women of color, the absence of mentorship is even more pronounced. A Harvard Business Review analysis found they receive less access to senior leaders and fewer high-profile assignments, limiting advancement despite equal ambition.

That reality is driving many executives and elected officials to formalize what was

once informal. In Chicago, corporate and civic leadership programs pair senior women with early-career professionals, focusing not only on networking but on navigating bias, negotiating salaries and building political capital.

The impact can be measurable. Participants in structured sponsorship programs are significantly more likely to ask for stretch

assignments, receive promotions and stay in their organizations, according to a study by the Center for Talent Innovation.

But the absence of mentorship can be just as powerful — in the opposite direction.

Several women leaders described being the “only one in the room” early in their careers, with no roadmap for how to lead meetings, recover

from mistakes or balance public expectations. Without mentors, many said, they spent years learning through trial and error or leaving workplaces that offered no path forward.

Today, many see mentorship as a form of institutional change. By sharing access, not just advice, they are building networks that outlast individual careers.

# From Grassroots to City Hall

Long before they held gavels, signed budgets or cast deciding votes, many of today's women in public office were knocking on doors, leading tenant meetings or organizing rides to the polls.

Their resumes didn't begin in statehouses or city halls. They began in church basements, community centers and living rooms — places where problems were immediate and solutions required persistence.

That path from grassroots activism to formal power is reshaping local government across the country.

In Boston, Kim Janey rose from years of community organizing in Roxbury to become City Council president and, in 2021, the city's first Black acting mayor, according to the History News Network. Her path was rooted in neighborhood advocacy and education work.

In Mississippi, civil rights organizer Unita Blackwell faced threats of violence and was jailed at least 70 times in the 1960s for helping Black residents register to vote, according to Mississippi Today. A decade later, she was elected mayor of Mayersville, becoming the first Black woman to lead a town in the state and using that office to



NATHANTAIN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

bring basic infrastructure and federal resources to her community.

On the West Coast, Berkeley's Maudelle Shirek didn't seek office until she was forced into retirement from her job running a senior center she helped build, according to Berkleyside. A lifelong labor and antiwar activist, she won a city council seat at 73 and served eight terms. She championed HIV/AIDS needle-exchange programs, created numerous citizen commissions, led the nation's first municipal

divestment from apartheid South Africa and strongly backed major union labor campaigns.

More recently, in New York City, Shahana Hanif translated her grassroots work around housing, immigrant rights, language access, domestic violence and COVID relief into a council seat of her own, according to Time Magazine. She campaigned on the same issues she once championed as an advocate.

And in Seattle, transit organizer Katie Wilson built a volunteer-driven coalition

through years of renter and wage campaigns before winning the mayor's office, defeating a better-funded opponent with a campaign powered largely by community networks, according to the Guardian.

The pattern reflects a broader shift in how political careers are built. Traditional pipelines — law, business, party leadership — are no longer the only routes to power. Organizing provides a different kind of credential: trust.

It also changes how these officials govern. Leaders who

come from advocacy often treat city hall less as a seat of authority and more as an extension of community work. They invite residents into budgeting, prioritize services for those who have historically been excluded and measure success in lived outcomes rather than political longevity.

Women remain underrepresented in mayoral offices and on city councils nationwide, particularly in larger cities. But those who do win are increasingly doing so by turning movement energy into electoral power.

# Women Running Essential Systems

From public health to transit data to local pandemic response, women are leading the infrastructure that keeps daily life moving — often without the spotlight

The systems people rely on most — clean water, buses that arrive on time, vaccination clinics that open when outbreaks hit — rarely make headlines. Neither do many of the women who run them.

Across the country, women are leading the agencies that keep communities functioning, even as those roles remain largely out of the public eye.

In Oak Park, Ill., epidemiologist Theresa Chapple became the face of the village's COVID-19 response, translating complex science into school safety plans, mobile vaccine clinics and daily public guidance. Although at times she faced pushback, residents later campaigned to keep her in the job and named her "Oak Park Villager of the Year," according to the Wednesday Journal of Oak Park and River Forest.

In the world of transportation, Patricia Hu spent more than a decade as director of the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics, the first woman to hold the post.



US DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION/  
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Banks was the first woman and the first Black person to lead AC Transit in the San Francisco Bay Area.

She oversaw thousands of employees and hundreds of thousands of daily riders while pushing for equity, accessibility, environmentally sustainable buses and efficient service for working-class communities.

These roles share a common thread: they are critical, technical and frequently overlooked.

Her work in analyzing travel patterns, crash risks and infrastructure data shaped federal policy and emergency response planning.

Public transit has its own pioneers. Sharon

In public health, women make up the vast majority of the workforce — about 79% — yet hold only about 36% of leadership positions, according to The Nation's Health. That gap that underscores how much of the field's day-to-day work depends on women even when top titles do not.

Transportation shows a similar imbalance. Women account for roughly a third of leadership roles in state departments of transportation, despite making up half the population, and even fewer at the highest executive levels, according to The Equation.

Many of these leaders remain less visible than their peers in more political or high-profile offices. Their success is measured not in speeches but in outcomes: fewer disease outbreaks, shorter commute times, safer roads, reliable service.

The work is technical, collaborative and often behind the scenes. Experts say that is precisely why it has historically been undervalued.