



# Women in Leadership

## PRIORITIES FOR THE AVAPL WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

### A. CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE REGARDING LEADERSHIP: THEMES

The general issues for women in pursuing and carrying out leadership roles relate to continued discrimination and its consequences: women, compared to men, not having access to the same people and opportunities that advance their careers; being less likely to have equal opportunities for growth and development; and being more likely to believe that their gender will play a role in missing out on promotional opportunities. Several specific issues have been especially highlighted for further discussion, mentoring, and other action for the new AVAPL SIG on Women in Leadership, as follows:

1. Gender expectations/roles/stereotypes

Many women describe socialization that did not include expectations that women would become leaders or have the qualities that have defined leadership in a male-dominated culture. How do we help women understand their own implicit biases as well as external biases they face? Also, how do we challenge stereotypical definitions of what makes for most effective leadership, to increase appreciation of qualities many women have developed, e.g., strong collaborative skills?

2. Describing assertiveness as aggressiveness for women

Some women experience that their efforts at advocacy or other assertive decision-making and action are labeled, especially by men, as aggressive.

3. Balance “likability” with success

Related to #1 and #2 above – women can experience that they are perceived more negatively when they take on leadership roles, which conflicts with a natural wish for close, positive relationships.

4. Asking for opportunities/negotiations

This continues #1-3, but had special meaning to women, in that they have little training or mentoring in how to explicitly communicate interests in leadership roles..

5. Pay disparity

Data and experience show that this is still an issue in the US. In VA there is some protection because of the defined pay scales, but this can affect bonuses and possibly things like Special Advancements for Achievement.

6. Support for women in leadership

Women do not always support efforts of other women to become leaders and/or to succeed as leaders. How can we encourage women to provide such support; how can we

identify women who have been supportive and use their experience to guide such efforts? This is, in some ways, the inverse of the perceived ways that men support each other through close networking and sponsorship – sometimes referred to as “the old boys’ club.”. It also is a reminder that it is important to continue enhancing the support that men provide to women in developing leadership skills and opportunities. Data presented at the meeting show that the proportion of women in leadership is changing dramatically, but that there are still fewer women at the higher leadership levels, specifically GS15. How can this progress be continued and accelerated?

7. Ethnicity/minority intersections with gender

Women of minority status, through ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. face added challenges in developing leadership roles. How can we all appreciate these and create a broadly supportive community?

8. Maternity/family leave

How to organize family leave after birth of a child or when other family caregiving is still a challenge. This affects men, as well as women, in terms of ability to take personal leave for family, but it presents special challenges for women regarding leadership roles.

9. Life Balance (career, aging parents, children/grandchildren, health & wellness, etc.)

This is a broader statement of #8 – women often feel like they are juggling multiple balls, not always successfully. Women are eager to pursue their careers and to take on leadership roles, and they also want to be able to fit together a broadly satisfying life. As with #8, this also affects men, but has more impact on women in terms of leadership challenges

10. Getting interrupted

Women report that in meetings their attempts to offer ideas are ignored or interrupted. Women also say they often do not have the skills to know how to challenge this. This is an issue where many women believe that solving #6, having women more supportive of each other, would be especially helpful.

11. Sexual harassment//discrimination

Sexual harassment, including gender harassment, seductive behavior, sexual bribery, sexual coercion, and sexual imposition or assault (including rape and abuse) are experiences that women face at disproportionately high rates. We aim to help support individuals in effectively addressing these situations and in coping with the consequences to their professional and personal lives. We also hope to develop workplaces of psychological safety which act as a buffer against such workplace behavior for both women and men.

## **B. HOW THE SIG MIGHT HELP: THEMES**

1. Establish mentoring network

Many, if not all, of the challenges above could be addressed by effective mentoring. While there was broad agreement on this need and broad desire for the SIG to explore creation of such a program, no specific model was endorsed, and this needs to be explored.

2. Monthly call: didactics for half and dialogue/mentoring for other half

There was strong consensus that a monthly call for members of the SIG would be valuable. On such calls, there could be didactic presentations on info related to the

challenges outlined above, updates, could be addressed, and personal stories could be shared, including those described in #3 below.

3. Promote value of women in leadership (highlight women leaders and accomplishments)  
There was special interest in having a component of each monthly call be used for the brief personal story of a woman in leadership. This could include established leaders and women who have recently successfully stepped into new leadership roles. Other avenues for offering such models also would be appreciated.
4. How to give feedback to colleagues who talk over/interrupt  
This is specifically related to Challenge #10 above – there was broad interest in making this a focus of discussion on the Listserv and when monthly calls can begin.
5. Create allies in female leadership, including men  
Men attended the luncheon and the breakout panels and were clearly supportive. The SIG needs to encourage these allies and develop others. Women need to lead the full community, not just other women, and they need to know how to lead and support men, as well as needing the support of men.
6. Career lifespan – early, mid, late  
Women want it to be clear that the SIG is not just for senior leaders who are well into their careers. Issues of women in leadership affect women across the career lifespan, and SIG activities should address all such issues.
7. Discuss balance across all life aspects, including career, family, personal interests, etc.  
This addresses Challenges #8 & 9 specifically, but is relevant for other issues as well. This also should be a high priority topic for the Listserv and monthly calls.

### **C. HIGH PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR THE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP SIG**

1. Get info out on the Listserv and start discussion on all of the above.
2. Develop a monthly call for SIG members, organized to provide information, allow discussion, and provide personal sharing and modeling each month from a woman leader.
3. Discuss development of a mentoring program – how it should be organized, how to identify and match mentors and those receiving mentoring, how male allies can be valued members of such a program, etc.
4. Reach out to the leadership of the newly formed AVAPL Psychologists of Color Listserv to discussed shared interests and opportunities for collaboration.