

Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations

Beyond the C-suite: Women's access, entry, and engagement in community elites

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Abstract

The nonprofit sector includes over 1.5 million organizations and employs 10% of the American workforce (National Council of Nonprofits, 2017). While women make up the majority of nonprofit employees, they continue to be underrepresented at the senior leadership levels, and particularly in the boardroom. The lack of women at these senior levels has serious implications for these nonprofits, their governance, and the communities they serve (Buse, Bernstein, & Billimoria, 2016; Lublin, 2015; Ostrower, 2007)

The absence of women on major nonprofit boards is not only an issue for the nonprofits themselves, but also suggests another area of leadership that women are not gaining access to—that of the community elite. Community elite refers to the informal, influential network of individuals who control most of the power and resources in a community. In this study, we use a grounded theory methodology as we explore the process by which women ascend to nonprofit board roles and thereby begin moving into a position in the community elite. Our analysis shows that women go through a multi-stage process, which involves both intrapersonal development and interpersonal micro-actions as they transition into their board roles. We believe the implications from this study can help us begin to move beyond gender and formal leadership to also explore how women become part of the powerful community elites that direct business, government, and society.