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Gender Equality in the Workplace

American women have made great progress toward achieving workplace equality, both through societal changes and government regulations that ensure equal opportunities for advancement. For instance, male managers still greatly outnumber female ones. This is partly because there is a common stereotype of women as being “loyal,” while expectations of men lean toward “protection” and “competence.” Men are therefore perceived as better suited for leadership roles.

When women do get promoted, it seems they face another challenge. Victoria Brescoll of Yale University asked volunteers to evaluate a fictional police chief (typically a “man’s job”) and the fictional president of an all-female college (typically a “woman’s job”). Both make the same error - failing to send sufficient police officers or security staff to a protest. In half the situations, the police chief or president making the error is male, and in the other half, female. The study’s participants were far more critical of the female police chiefs and male college presidents. This is a more serious problem for women, who have a higher chance of ending up in a “man’s job” than vice versa.

Some companies attempt to get more women into leadership roles by establishing targets for the percentage of these roles to be filled by women. Economist Herminia Ibarra says this has had many positive results. Ibarra claims that companies often make it hard for women to acquire leadership skills to begin with. For example, men are more likely to be assigned to positions on the “leadership path” and so obtain more experience relevant to being a manager. If women were given the same chances to acquire leadership skills. Ibarra says, it would promote workplace equality.