# "Organizational Wives" – The Career Costs of Helping

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# Executive Summary

Despite comprising nearly half of the global workforce, women are still underrepresented in executive roles across industries and countries. Of the 5,400 companies listed in the S&P Global Corporate Sustainability Assessment, less than 5% had a woman CEO.

Although various explanations for gender disparities in career outcomes have been suggested, including unconscious bias, stereotypes, and greater domestic responsibilities, a less explored factor is women's greater engagement in workplace helping. These workplace helping behaviors are known as *organizational citizenship behavior* (OCB) and are behaviors that exceed job requirements and contribute to the organization. Examples include orienting new employees, helping others accomplish their work, speaking up with suggestions or ideas for improvements, and managing the social environment. These behaviors are positively related to group and organizational performance, efficiency, customer satisfaction, and the quality and quantity of organizational output. Although crucial for organizational functioning, engaging in too much OCB can result in personal sacrifices, such as work-family conflict and working longer hours. OCB can also detract from job behaviors that are more directly linked to rewards and career advancement. Thus, OCB can come at a cost to employees.

Research shows that women are expected to engage in more communal, time-consuming OCB than men. Women also receive more requests for help than men and are 'volunteered' more for low-promotability tasks. In addition to facing higher expectations, women are often penalized for not performing OCB and receive fewer rewards than men for these behaviors. As such, women often assume a 'wifely' role in organizations by taking on necessary, but often invisible, activities that help keep the organization functioning effectively. Gendered expectations, workloads, and rewards result in women shouldering a heavier burden of helping – both at work and at home – which requires more resources and limits their ability to focus on more rewarded tasks that can advance their careers. Women of color face an additional racial burden, known as *cultural taxation,* where they are expected to take on helping behaviors that assist others of the same race, further impacting their career outcomes. Over time – and across women, organizations, and societies – this collective imbalance restricts women's global access to power and influence in decision-making.

This paper calls for a reevaluation of organizational structures and cultures that maintain inequities, urging a shift from focusing on "fixing" women to addressing systemic issues. It calls for organizations and leaders to recognize the value of OCB while ensuring that such work is distributed fairly, paving the way for a more equitable workplace and improved organizational outcomes. This will help enable women to make more meaningful contributions and have greater ability to advocate for organizational and societal changes in the world.

# Introduction and Framing

*Imagine this:* Jane is a managing director and has three peers (all men) within the same division. Jane goes 'above and beyond' her role by helping and taking on tasks that benefit individual coworkers and the division as a whole (e.g., socializing new employees, organizing events, helping others with tasks, smoothing conflicts) but that are not formally part of her role as a managing director. She often works long hours to get everything done. When Jane is asked about these extra tasks, she says the divisional vice president appreciates all that she does, often acknowledging her extra efforts. Six months later, during annual performance reviews, Jane's three peers receive promotions. Jane does not.

This (true) anecdote illustrates the broader phenomenon at hand. Namely, that women often assume a 'wifely' role in organizations by taking on necessary, but often invisible, activities that help keep the organization functioning effectively (Huff, 1991) – a role that may come with a career cost. Although women make up roughly half of the global workforce, they continue to be underrepresented in the executive ranks across industries, sectors and countries (World Economic Forum, 2024), holding 25% of executive positions globally (LinkedIn, 2022). There are, however, significant country differences. Of the 5,400 companies listed in the S&P Global Corporate Sustainability Assessment, less than 5% had a woman CEO. By region, Europe leads the way (7.9%), followed by North America (7%), Asia (3%) and Latin America (1.5%). In the United States, although women hold roughly 52% of professional and management positions, they account for less than 9% of Fortune 500 CEOs and hold 30% of S&P 500 board seats – with women of color holding fewer than 6% of these seats (Catalyst, 2022). The 'drop to the top' is even more pronounced in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) fields.

There is a large body of work on women and leadership (e.g., Bono et al., 2016; Frear et al., 2019; Martineau & Mount, 2018; Ruderman & Ohlott, 2002; Ruderman & Rogolsky, 2014). In particular, past explanations for gender differences in career outcomes are numerous and include unconscious bias (Heilman & Caleo, 2018); gender stereotypes (Ellemers, 2018) and their effects (Bergeron et al., 2006); shifting performance standards (Biernat, 2009), women being held to higher performance standards than men (Lyness & Heilman, 2006) and getting fewer rewards for the same performance (Castilla, 2008; Joshi et al., 2015b); women's lower concentration in line as opposed to staff positions (Helfat et al., 2006); having less access to power and leadership positions (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lyness & Heilman, 2006); gendered organizational processes and outcomes (Fernandez-Mateo & Kaplan, 2018; Joshi et al., 2015a); and greater home and domestic responsibilities (e.g., Hess et al., 2020).[1] However, one explanation that has not been proposed for women's lower career outcomes is women's greater helping behavior at work.

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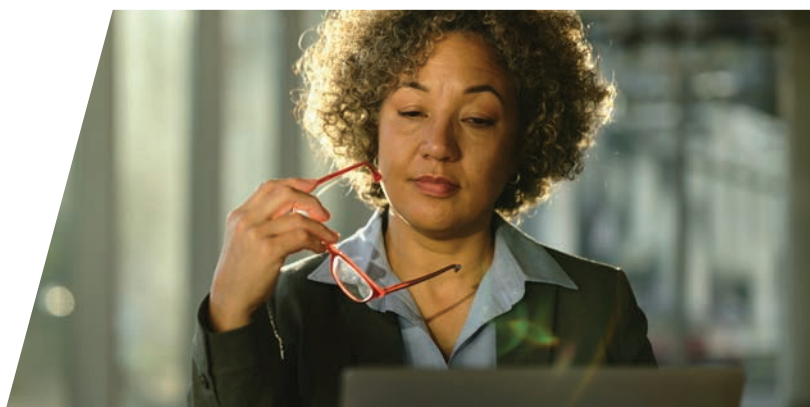
[1] Data from the 2018 American Time Use Survey show that, on average, women spend 5.7 hours per day in unpaid household and care work compared to 3.6 hours per day for men. Even when both partners are working full time, women spend 22% more time per day on care work. Note that these statistics are pre-COVID, which greatly increased the care burden for women.

# Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Such workplace helping behaviors are known by various names. In popular press articles, they are referred to as 'office housework' (e.g., Carpenter, 2017; Corbett, 2021; Grant & Sandberg, 2015). However, in the academic literature (where they have been studied for the past 40 years, e.g., Bateman & Organ, 1983), they are known as organizational citizenship behaviors and comprise one category of job performance.[2] The other category of job performance is task behavior, which refers to the required activities in one's job description or formal expected role. Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is behavior "that supports the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place" (Organ, 1997, p. 95). Examples within extant research include, but are not limited to, orienting or socializing new employees, helping others accomplish their work, cooperating with others, voluntarily doing more than the job requires, sharing information, speaking highly of the organization, conserving organizational resources, making suggestions for improvement, managing the social environment, volunteering for extra tasks, and planning and organizing events (e.g., Bateman & Organ, 1983; Bergeron et al., 2018; Lee & Allen, 2002; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994; Podsakoff &

MacKenzie, 1994; Smith et al., 1983; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Williams & Anderson, 1991). These behaviors normally exceed the minimum role requirements of the job, are not easily enforceable, and performing them is usually at the discretion of the individual (Organ, 1997). Thus, individuals who spend time on these support activities are considered "good citizens" (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Organ, 1988).

## What We Know About Citizenship Behavior and Organizational Outcomes

Part of the intense research interest in organizational citizenship behavior is due to its beneficial impact on organizations. OCB is positively related to group and organizational performance (e.g., Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Whitman, Van Rooy, & Viswesvaran, 2010), overall operating efficiency, customer satisfaction, quality of performance (Walz & Niehoff, 2000) and the quality and quantity of product output (Podsakoff, Ahearne & MacKenzie, 1997). It also is related to less waste and fewer errors, which can be particularly critical in manufacturing and hospital contexts (see N. P. Podsakoff et al., 2014 for a review).

Citizenship behaviors are important because they "lubricate the social machinery of the organization" (Smith et al., 1983, p. 654). Although it is impossible for

leaders to specify in advance all the behaviors needed from employees, this is even more true in today's chaotic, unpredictable, and rapidly changing environment. Citizenship behaviors can fill in the gaps in terms of what is needed at any given moment. Indeed, the importance of helping behaviors to an organization's success has long been acknowledged (Barnard, 1938; Katz & Kahn, 1966). It is well-illustrated in the union protest tactic of a "work-to-rule" order, in which employees begin doing their jobs to the letter of the law (i.e., *only* what is specified in their job description). As intended, this often results in the organization slowly grinding to a halt – with lowered productivity, product delays and occasional factory shutdowns – greatly increasing costs to the organization.

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[2] Newer researchers in this area (primarily from economics) refer to these behaviors as 'low-promotability tasks' (Babcock et al., 2017).

# What We Know About Organizational Citizenship Behavior and Employee Outcomes

Starting in 1983, research highlighted the positive employee outcomes of being a good citizen. For instance, research showed that both OCB and task behavior were related to better performance evaluations (see meta-analysis by N. Podsakoff et al., 2009) and reward recommendations (e.g., Allen & Rush, 1998; Yun et al., 2007). However, there are several issues that plagued this body of work. First, not all studies included measures of both OCB and task behavior, which makes it difficult to know true relationships between OCB and outcomes. Second, reward 'recommendations' are not the same thing as actual rewards. In the meta-analysis, the correlation between OCB and reward recommendations was .77 while the correlation between OCB and actual rewards was only .26, suggesting the relationship between OCB and actual rewards was much weaker. Finally, there exists the questionable assumption that performance evaluations are tightly linked to other career outcomes (e.g., compensation, promotion). See Bergeron et al., 2018 for a more in-depth review of these issues.

In the early 2000s, work on OCB began exploring the 'dark side' of these helpful behaviors (see Bolino & Grant, 2016 for a review). In particular, researchers began expressing concerns about the 'cost' of these helpful behaviors to employees. For example, we now know that OCB is related to higher levels of role overload, job stress, work-family conflict (Bolino & Turnley, 2005), and perceptions of reduced progress towards work goals (Koopman et al., 2016). Other outcomes include 'job creep' (i.e., when one's role becomes larger over time because what was once considered something 'extra' becomes expected; Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004), 'escalating' citizenship (i.e., when one must do increasingly greater amounts of OCB over time in order for it to be noticed, Bolino, Turnley & Niehoff, 2004) and citizenship 'pressure' (i.e., when employees feel pressured and obligated to engage in OCB; Bolino et al., 2010). Using a time allocation framework, Bergeron (2007) theorized that there may be a tradeoff between OCB and task behavior, such that spending too much time on OCB can come at a cost to an employee's task behavior, which may ultimately impact career outcomes.

Subsequent research showed there is merit to these concerns. In a study of salespeople, Piercy et al. (2006) found that task behavior had a much stronger relationship to productivity than did OCB. In a study of faculty members at research universities, Bergeron et al. (2014) found that task behavior had a positive relationship to research productivity (i.e., number of publications) whereas OCB had a negative relationship to research productivity; OCB also resulted in slower advancement speed (i.e., a career plateau at the associate rank). Finally, in a professional services firm, Bergeron et al. (2013) found that OCB had a positive relationship to performance evaluations but a *negative* relationship to task performance, salary increase, and advancement speed (i.e., lower salary increases and a longer time to get promoted to the next rank). This finding was illustrated by an attorney who said "If you spend time on this stuff, it's not rewarded. They kind of pat you on the back and say 'Thanks a lot. Nice job.' But it doesn't count for promotions or bonuses" (Bergeron, 2013, p. 980).

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[3] A meta-analysis is a 'meta' study analyzing the combined results of many, often hundreds, of studies.

# Gender, Social Roles, and Citizenship Behavior

Role theory explains the consistency of individual behavior over time, as roles create expectations shaped by interactions with others (Katz & Kahn, 1966, 1978). People develop their roles through exchanges with coworkers, supervisors, family, and society, which influences how people perceive and define their roles (Graen, 1976; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012) highlights a gendered division of labor, where women are often in communal caretaking roles (e.g., occupations such as elementary school teachers and nurses) and men are often in agentic leadership roles. This leads to societal expectations of communal traits for women (e.g., helpful, supportive) and agentic traits for men (e.g., competitive, assertive, dominant) (Eagly, 1987; Diekman & Clark, 2015). Because of these social roles, women are expected to provide routine support to others while agentic expectations of men tend to be limited to short-term heroic acts (Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Diekman & Clark, 2015).

These social role expectations tend to seep into other areas of life, such as the workplace. Women are expected to engage in more communal types of OCB at work, which tend to be more time-consuming and ongoing, while men are expected to engage in more short-term agentic types of OCB, such as speaking up in meetings and expressing an opinion for the good of the organization (Allen & Rush, 2001; Farrell & Finkelstein, 2007; Heilman & Chen, 2005). Because of the greater, more time-consuming helping expectations for women, they also receive more requests for help than men do (e.g., Babcock, Recalde, Vesterlund, & Weingart, 2017; Mitchell & Hesli, 2013). In one study, women reported receiving 378 new work activity requests across a period of four weeks compared to 118 new work activity requests for men (O'Meara, Kuvaeva, Nyunt, Waugaman, & Jackson, 2017).[4]

## Gendered Rewards

In addition to gendered helping expectations, there are also gendered rewards for the same behavior. For instance, Heilman and Chen (2005) showed that when a woman engaged in OCB, she was not rewarded, but a man was. When a woman refused to perform OCB, her performance evaluation and reward recommendation decreased significantly. There were no repercussions when a man refused (Heilman & Chen, 2005; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs & Tamkins, 2004.). In a similar vein, even when women are rated as performing more OCB than men, they do not receive higher performance ratings than men (Lovell et al., 1999). Allen (2006) found that OCB was significantly related to promotion for men but not for women. More recent research showed a significant relationship between 'office housework' and promotion for men but not for women (Jang et al.,

2021), again suggesting that men reap more benefits than women from such behaviors. In addition, workplace favors performed by men are perceived as more valuable and more deserving of reciprocity than those performed by women (Flynn, 2005), perhaps because women may be more willing to help and therefore seem more altruistic. Several studies show that women tend to reciprocate more than men (e.g., Chaudhuri & Sbai, 2013) but that women tend to receive less reciprocity than men when performing similar favors (e.g., Ashwin et al., 2013). In addition, one study found that men only feel obligated to engage in OCB if they feel valued and supported by the organization whereas women tend to feel obligated to perform OCB whether or not they feel valued and supported (Thompson, Bergeron, et al., 2020).

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[4] Men can also be 'organizational wives.' Indeed, there are plenty of men who step up and go 'above and beyond' – at work and at home. However, as noted earlier, such behavior is less expected and more rewarded when enacted by men than by women – at work and at home. Thus, the use of the term *organizational wife* is intentionally provocative.

# Gendered Science

Taken together, the points above suggest that research should show significant gender differences in OCB. However, this is rarely the case. Although a few studies show that women tend to exhibit more altruistic and helping-related types of OCB than men (Lin, 2008; Van Dyne & Ang, 1998), meta-analyses show no sex differences in OCB (Ng, Lam & Feldman, 2016; Organ & Ryan, 1995). This (lack of) result has vexed gender researchers. In a 2022 paper, Bergeron and Rochford provided a plausible explanation that most of the research measurement scales used to assess OCB were developed largely on male samples (in some cases, samples as high as 95% men), largely by male authors, and are therefore likely biased towards men's OCB. The authors (both women) pointed out that it is likely that the types of OCB more often engaged in by women are missing from these scales. They made several suggestions about the types of OCB that are not represented in commonly used OCB measures.

According to Bergeron and Rochford (2022), a common OCB item is "attendance at functions or events" (e.g., Lee & Allen, 2002; P. Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Williams & Anderson, 1991). However, none of the measurement scales distinguish *attendance at events* from *organizing and planning such events,* which is a time-consuming task that women are more likely to do (Bergeron, Cooper, & Rochford, 2018; Jang, Allen, & Regina, 2021). Second, most OCB scales tend to focus on task-related OCB, whereas women are also likely

to engage in relational types of OCB, such as social support, building community, mitigating conflict, and supporting interpersonal relationships (Bergeron et al., 2018; Carpenter, 2017; Corbett, 2021; Huff, 1990). Indeed, a McKinsey/Lean In study (2021) found that women managers, more than men managers, were rated as checking in on wellbeing, providing emotional support, working to ensure a manageable workload, and helping to manage or prevent burnout. Finally, other research shows that women have an 'invisible workload' that can consist of unrecognized activities that rarely lead to promotion (Babcock et al., 2018). This research shows that women are asked to volunteer, do volunteer, and agree to requests to volunteer for low-promotability tasks more often than men (Babcock et al., 2017).

Importantly, given that current OCB scales are biased towards men's types of OCB, it seems reasonable to expect that meta-analytic results would show that men do more OCB than women. However, as mentioned, this is not the case. The lack of sex differences in OCB (Ng, Lam & Feldman, 2016; Organ & Ryan, 1995) seems to suggest that not only are women doing all the OCB that men do, but they are also doing the types of unmeasured OCB engaged in mostly by women (i.e., the behaviors missing from OCB scales). Thus, due to gender bias in the scales used to measure OCB, the OCB research literature 1) gives a skewed picture of how men and women contribute to organizations and 2) underrepresents women's contributions.

Although the term 'women' has been used thus far, women are not a monolithic group – and yet research can often treat them as if they are. Indeed, this has been the case for much of the work on citizenship behavior. Intersectionality (i.e., "the study of how multiple forms of social inequality interact to produce individuals' unique experiences of marginalization, as well as the study of the systemic practices that perpetuate these inequities") is critical (Crenshaw, 1989; Kaufmann & Derry, 2023, p. 7), although little work on citizenship has taken an intersectional lens (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989) and captured the specific experiences of different demographics groups of women. In addition to identifying the issue of gender bias in current OCB scales, Bergeron and Rochford (2022) pointed out that people of color – and their specific types of OCB – have largely been ignored in the OCB literature. Indeed, many scale development articles do not even mention the racial or ethnic composition of the various samples used in research studies. In a scale development paper on a specific type of workplace helping behavior (i.e., employee voice), the samples were described as 83%-95% Caucasian (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014). In addition to the gendered OCB burden, women of color likely face an additional racial burden in which they are expected to take on helping behaviors that assist others of the same race.[5] This is a phenomenon known as *cultural taxation,* defined as "the obligation to show good citizenship toward the institution by serving its needs for ethnic representation on committees, or to demonstrate knowledge and commitment to a cultural group, which may even bring accolades to the institution but which is not usually rewarded" (Padilla, 1994, p. 26; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). As such, diversity, equity and inclusion-related behaviors (DEI) are a missing category of organizational citizenship behavior.

Indeed, reports show that women are much more likely than men to spend time on DEI work that goes above and beyond their formal job. This can include organizing diversity events, participating in recruiting employees from underrepresented groups, supporting (and leading) employee resource groups and engaging in allyship behaviors (e.g., mentoring people of color, confronting bias, and advocating for opportunities) (McKinsey/Lean In, 2021). For women of color, being at the intersection of gender and race may increase the variety of helping behaviors expected and may exacerbate some of the individual outcomes previously discussed (e.g., fatigue, role overload, etc.). Not engaging in DEI-related behaviors can be difficult as such behaviors can be a way to pave a path toward social justice and can be viewed as a moral imperative. Bergeron and Rochford (2022) issued a call to action for more inclusive research on organizational citizenship behavior.



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[5] Men of color are also subject to cultural taxation. However, women of color are at the intersection of race *and* gender, which exacerbates helping expectations and diminishes rewards.

# The Bigger Picture – What It Means and Why It Matters

OCB is clearly important to the effective functioning of workgroups and organizations. And there are positive benefits for employees who engage in these helping behaviors. At the individual level, OCB is related to positive mood (Koopman et al., 2016), the creation of social capital (Bolino et al., 2002; Martinez et al., 2025) and a sense of meaning and purpose (e.g., Grant, 2007). However, the greater issue is time. Time – and how time is used – is about power (Schulte, 2015). Time is a non-fungible resource, such that there are a finite 24 hours in a day. As such, there can be tradeoffs between OCB and other important activities.

## Citizenship Behavior is Important – But Can Detract from Having Impact

A *Fast Company* article described Richard Feynman, a Nobel-prize winning physicist, saying, "He had little interest in what others did or expected him to do. He wouldn't write any grants, and he refused to go to faculty meetings. He only had the resources to focus on his own discoveries *because his colleagues took care of all that other work*" (italics added, 2002, p. 73). When women do 'all that other work' it keeps them from making their own important contributions and spending their time in ways that may have more impact. One example is networking. We know from research on social networks that network centrality is associated with power, career mobility, information, career sponsorship and leadership (see Brass et al., 2004 for a review). However, research shows that men are more likely than women to report investing time and energy to build their networks (Lauricella et al., 2022). A second example is that helping can come at a cost to task behaviors (Bergeron et al., 2013; 2014). When women take on these helping behaviors and continue to play informal supporting roles in organizations (in addition to their formal roles), it takes time away from behaviors that are more rewarded and that aid in career advancement.

**Although OCB (i.e., helping) is valuable, more important is that this is often unfairly distributed work that impacts the type of influence that women can have (at work and in society).** The societal expectation for women to help more often, and in more resource-consuming ways, results in women having a greater workload simply based on their gender, with fewer resources to meet these demands. This perpetuates an unequal and unfair workload and means that women are less likely to be in positions where they can influence organizational policies and practices,[6] thereby having less ability to advance and enact large-scale change in the world. As a result, their influence in decision-making and advocacy for workplace and societal change is limited, which means having less say in decisions that directly affect them.

**Good performance evaluations can send a 'faulty signal' in that they may not be closely linked to lagged, but arguably more important, career outcomes (compensation, promotion).** This is problematic because citizenship behavior may have different, even opposite, relationships to objective career outcomes compared to its positive relationship with performance evaluations. As a result, performance evaluations can function as a mere pat-on-the-back effect. This disconnect may not be immediately apparent since performance evaluations typically occur annually or more frequently, while promotions and compensation changes often occur far less frequently. Unfortunately, understanding that this is a faulty signal can often come years into women's careers.

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[6] Even once women are in positions are power, this does not guarantee they will work to change gendered processes. The Queen Bee phenomenon shows that women leaders in organizations with men-dominated executive roles often maintain, rather than challenge, gendered hierarchies and may distance themselves from junior women. However, this response is not unique to women and is, instead, a direct consequence of workplace gender discrimination. The same self-distancing response is seen in situations of identity threat with other marginalized groups (see Derks et al., 2016 for a review of this work).

# Pushing Back Against (Systemic) OCB Expectations is Tough

One reason why it can be difficult for women to say 'no' is that women tend to define themselves based on close relationships and maintaining connectedness with others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cross & Madson, 1997). A hallmark of a relational self is mutual concern for the interests and outcomes of others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), perhaps because these individuals view their outcomes as inseparable from the group's outcomes (Cross & Madson, 1997). Thus, women's decisions and social interactions tend to be shaped by obligations and being responsive to others and their needs (Cross & Madson, 1997). Indeed, research shows that individuals who place a high value on relationships tend to help more (Ilies, Scott & Judge, 2006). Beyond this, there are other reasons it is challenging to confront the status quo.

**'Just say no' is easier said than done.** Some might wonder why women don't simply 'just say no' to these expectations. Decades of research shows that women are punished when they violate social role expectations (Eagly & Heilman, 2016; Heilman, 2001, 2012). For example, a study of performance appraisal narratives (Ciancetta & Roch, 2021) showed a backlash effect in performance feedback when women do not conform to communal social role expectations (e.g., being helpful). Other research highlights the likeability-competence double bind that women face, where they can be viewed as likeable or as competent, but rarely both together (Fiske et al., 2002; Heilman et al., 2004). Further, when women try to say no, those around them make it more difficult, often repeating the request in a more forceful or insistent manner (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Misra et al., 2012).

**This is not a 'women's problem'** *in* **organizations – it is a systemic problem** *with* **organizations.** And it is not a problem about men or laying blame on men. It is a problem with the persistence of societal structures and organizational cultures, which are likely exacerbated in countries with more traditional gender norms,[7] that were created in a time that no longer reflects most realities (i.e., when men with full-time stay-at-home wives dominated the workforce).[8] Many workplace 'interventions' aimed at achieving equality for women either focus on women's skill development (e.g., negotiation, confidence) or on increasing women's motivation and ambition to lead. Indeed, some question whether women are "developed to death" (Silva et al., 2012). The underlying assumption is that we need to 'fix women' rather than examine underlying structural factors that maintain inequities and inhibit women from reaching (or wanting to reach) higher ranks in greater numbers (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). As Gloor et al. (2020) so memorably phrased it, we need to "fix the game, not the dame" (p. 497).

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[7] The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2024) provides statistics on several key dimensions of gender progress, including economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment. Europe leads the rankings on gender progress while the Middle East and North Africa lag behind. The countries consistently in the top ten, over the past ten years, include Iceland, Finland, Norway, New Zealand, Sweden, Rwanda, Nicaragua, Namibia, Ireland, Philippines, Slovenia and Germany.

[8] Not only does this historic period no longer exist, but the very concept of 'family' has evolved over time.

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# Solutions – What We Can Do

## Strategies For Organizational Leaders

We often put the onus on individual women to push back against an entire system. It is important to recognize that this is a systemic problem and not an issue of 'time management.' Rectifying the uneven helping load at work requires collective effort and participation. In taking a systemic approach, it is important to recognize the limits of allyship and that allyship continues to put the onus on individuals rather than on the system.[9] Although supportive men allies play an important part, they cannot compensate for a gendered culture and biased expectations, evaluations, policies and practices.

**Consider including citizenship behavior as a specific category in formal performance evaluations.** Add an informal component to the performance appraisal process whereby employees informally track additional tasks that go beyond their formal role. Tracking such behaviors can make it easier to see patterns and will give a more nuanced and accurate reflection of how employees contribute. Such data can then be used to adjust expectations and roles.

**Do not rely on 'favor culture' to compensate for missing or faulty roles, processes or systems**. If your organization requires a lot of employee heroics to get the job done, this may be a red flag that there are missing, inefficient or faulty roles, processes or systems. In such instances, conscientious employees often step in with citizenship behavior to fill the gap. Unfortunately, this type of helping – while ostensibly helpful in the short term – can serve to mask organizational problems in the longer term. Relying on the goodwill of employees to contribute effort above and beyond their roles for too long can lead to stress and burnout (e.g., Bolino & Turnley, 2005).

**Avoid using female names for AI (artificial intelligence) tools – gender-neutral names are best.** It's a concerning trend that so many 'helpful' AI tools, developed by a highly male-dominated industry, have female names – Siri, Cortana, Alexa, Echo.[10] Using a traditionally female name for your organization's AI tool can unintentionally perpetuate gender-based stereotypes and reinforce expectations that women's role in society is to be more subservient and helpful (Bergeron, 2018; LaFrance, 2016). The fact that the AI tool's voice (or name) can be changed (e.g., in iPhones) is irrelevant – the problem is that the *default* setting is for a woman's name and voice to be the 'helper.' This can help implant gendered expectations into future generations, thus perpetuating the problem. To see why this may be problematic, ask ChatGPT or your organization's AI tool "Is it okay to give AI a female name?" and see what comes up. If you are unsure about the gender neutrality of a name, try asking AI or doing a web search for gender neutral names.



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[9] In this context, 'system' refers to the organization and includes leadership practices, management policies, organizational culture, appraisal systems, norms, values and expectations, social networks, and industry context (e.g., Gierke et al., 2025). However, it is important to acknowledge that organizations themselves are part of a larger interinstitutional system comprised of markets, bureaucracies, governance structures, communities, families and religions.

[10] In Greek mythology, Echo was a nymph punished by being able to speak only the last words spoken to her.

# Strategies For People Leaders

Time is the one resource of which we all have the same amount – 24 hours in a day. When employees spend time on helping behavior, it can often come at a tradeoff to other, more important, tasks. People leaders need to ensure that employees are working on the most important tasks, which may mean intervening in the dynamics that lead to women taking on more helping behaviors.

**Create a more equitable climate – call out employees who use gender-biased rationalizations, don't allow others to 'volunteer' women for helping tasks and don't over-thank those who help less than others.** Begin by raising awareness of problematic dynamics and develop a shared vocabulary for what you see. In meetings, women are often 'volunteered' for low-promotability tasks. Frequently, there are rationalizations offered such as "… but Emily is so good at it" or "just this once" or "but she's so organized and competent." This allows others (e.g., men) to be excused from such tasks because they are "not good at that," permitting them to place their focus on more visible and valued work (a common term for this is strategic or weaponized incompetence). In particular, be mindful of temporary lower-status meeting roles (e.g., taking notes or facilitating groups) that limit women's equal participation and prevent them from making strategic contributions. This can set in motion a dynamic that becomes entrenched over time and can make women less visible. Importantly, back women up the first time they say 'no' and call out those who make continued requests. Finally, when assessing helpful contributions, make sure you are making comparisons across *all* employees (e.g., rather than comparing a man to other men or comparing a woman to other women). Otherwise, you run the risk of over-thanking those who might be objectively helping less than others, which sends a distorted message that overinflates their actual level of contribution. A better strategy might be to acknowledge their contribution while also providing the bigger context. "I appreciate that you stepped up to lead Task Force X because 3 other team members have already done this."

**Track and analyze the need for consistent helping requests and reconfigure roles, responsibilities and processes accordingly.** Find out what these extra helping requests are, who is receiving them, and where they come from. Are such requests made equally of men and women? Often, requests for favors and 'extra' helping behaviors can mask an underlying problem – a missing, faulty, or inefficient organizational role or process. By identifying and fixing the source of the problem, the lagged downstream effects may disappear on their own. If such solutions are not feasible, ensure that such helping tasks are shared equitably across the group so that no one team member pays the price. In addition, be aware of your own helping expectations of women and keep an eye out for the expectations of others.

**Say 'no' on behalf of women (and educate repeat 'askers').** Because of negative repercussions for saying 'no,' people leaders can intercede on women's behalf – particularly when the request is coming from a higher organizational level. Often, requests for help are made spontaneously and without much thought of how much time or effort is required to fulfill the request. This is particularly true when employees from diverse groups are asked to serve on committees or task forces to provide 'representation.' This is more likely to happen when an employee is the only, or one of only a few, members of underrepresented members in a department (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012). People leaders may need to intervene when certain employees are expected to serve as 'experts' on a topic based on demographic or other personal characteristics.

# Strategies For Women

It can be difficult, but not impossible, to push back against societal expectations. Think about small actions that can work to change the larger dynamic and your own experience of that dynamic. Importantly, keep in mind that when you say 'yes' to certain tasks, you might implicitly be saying 'no' to more important priorities. Keep your time and attention focused on the biggest ways that you can contribute. Know what is rewarded in your organization – and take care not to confuse appreciation with rewards. Below are some suggestions on how to manage the tension between expectations and behaviors more productively.

**Step back so others can step forward.** Women tend to view their roles more broadly than men (Morrison, 1994) and therefore may take on more than their fair share of work. Keep your hand down and allow others to fill (or not fill) the empty space. In a qualitative study, one (male) participant shared that he withheld his help in a specific situation because it would have created artificial aid and allowed things to continue operating smoothly, thereby masking a problem that he felt needed to be made visible to management (Kelemen et al., 2022). Letting things fall apart may be uncomfortable for some women because it can mean lowering expectations and, sometimes, allowing the negative consequences of action (or inaction). However, this is a way that a system gets feedback, makes issues visible and highlights what needs to be changed.

**Be strategic in saying 'yes' or 'no' to help requests.** First, don't answer help requests immediately as this may lead to longer term regret. Have a few planned responses (e.g., 'That sounds interesting. Let me get back to you on that later.") that buy you some time to consider what the help request will require. If the request is from higher up the chain, consider asking your supervisor to intervene if it is not something you should take on. Second, find a way to highlight your current tasks so that the higher-up asker understands your workload. For example, "Currently, I'm working on A, B and C – where should this extra task be prioritized?" or "Given all that I have going on, what can you take off my plate so that I can do this?" Often, the asker will realize that their request is far less important than your

current priorities. Third, keep track of what those in similar roles (i.e., men counterparts) are doing and use this information in negotiations about new tasks. Finally, calibrate your helping by deciding when it's worth the extra effort – either personally or professionally. There may be some extra tasks that bring you energy and joy, or others that are high visibility and will help you build your network. Time is your most valuable resource – be strategic and mindful in how you spend it.

**Watch your (discounting) language – and don't be afraid to ask for something in return.** Women are often expected to make others feel comfortable. In the context of helping, this may entail using language with the asker that discounts the cost or value of the help provided (e.g., "It was no big deal" or "don't worry about it"), which diminishes the likelihood that the norm of reciprocity will be upheld (Flynn, 2006). More beneficial responses to appreciation might include saying things like "No worries. I know you'd do the same for me" or, perhaps in a joking tone, "You owe me big time." These responses send a subtle signal about reciprocal expectations and can be brought up for future favors. If you are being asked to take on additional tasks or responsibilities, ask for something in return. One coach shared that she knows women leaders who were expected to manage additional teams upon a colleague's departure – with no additional compensation, promotion or resources. Be creative and think broadly about reciprocation – it might be asking for a professional development opportunity, a role on a visible project or access to network connections.

**Find your reciprocity partners – and make help requests contingent upon some initial effort by the asker.** Helping can often be viewed as a social dilemma (Dawes, 1980); that is, a situation in which certain behaviors can benefit the group but may be costly to the individual. Research on social dilemmas shows that one of the most effective strategies is 'tit for tat' (Axelrod, 1984). In the context of helping, this means assisting those who have helped you in the past but withholding help from those who don't 'return the favor.'[11] This strategy ensures that help exchanges remain somewhat equivalent over time and

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[11] Interestingly, in the social dilemma literature individuals who pay the costs of cooperating with others, while not getting any returns from their efforts, are known as *suckers* (e.g., Simmons et al., 1984; Weber & Murnighan, 2008).

can foster longer-term collaborative relationships. A second strategy is to make your help contingent upon some initial action by the asker. A colleague shared that she used to spend an inordinate amount of time fielding requests for introductions to facilitate career opportunities – only to find that many of those who requested her help never followed through. Once this colleague began asking for some initial effort (e.g., sending her an updated resume), she found that only about 1 in 20 people responded, which reduced her helping tasks considerably. Even requesting a 'summary email' from the asker about the request can help. Ultimately, it's important to recognize that some help requests are spontaneous, rather than well considered, and may not be that important.

**Start a 'No' Club.** The No Club started when a group of women colleagues got together to discuss why their careers were less robust than their men colleagues', despite all their effort. They decided to start saying no to non-promotable tasks. In addition to doing research on this topic (Babcock et al., 2017), they wrote a book called 'The No Club: Putting a Stop to Women's Dead-End Work' (Babcock et al., 2022). Holding boundaries around saying no can be a topic in employee resource groups. Such groups can be effective in terms of sharing strategies, implementing them as a collective, and getting advice and support from other women. Particularly when starting a new role, it is important to beware of the consequences of saying yes to extra tasks. A colleague shared that, in the spirit of being a team player, she volunteered for a committee at her new job. The next time a committee assignment came up, she was the one who was asked to do it. Crossing certain boundaries once can set the stage for continual role creep over time.

# Conclusion

In 2020, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres called for the 21st century to be the century of women's equality. He said, "It is time to stop trying to change women, and start changing the systems that prevent them from achieving their potential" (United Nations, 2020, np). For far too long, the burden of action has been put on women rather than on gendered organizational systems. The societal expectation for women to help more, and in more resource-consuming ways, results in women having a greater workload simply based on their gender, with fewer resources to meet these demands. Helping can be women's superpower – but it can also be their kryptonite.[12] For women, this extra helping load can be like competing in the same Olympic sport as a man but while wearing a 75-pound backpack. This issue is about much more than mere career advancement. This is about freeing women up so they can get into positions of power to change the organizations and systems in which they operate. As the Director & CEO of BNP Paribas, Jean-Laurent Bonnafé, said, "No woman should be deprived of her ability to contribute to a better world" (United Nations, 2021, p. 112).

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[12] Kryptonite is the fictitious radioactive substance that can harm Superman, the DC Comics superhero.

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# About the Author

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Diane is a Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership and a former business school professor at a research university. Her research areas include women's leadership and how workplace helping (i.e., organizational citizenship behavior) can hinder women's career advancement, the impact of leader listening on employees' speaking up, and bereavement and grief in the workplace, including bereavement-related organizational policies and practices. Diane earned a PhD in social-organizational psychology from Columbia University. You can find more of her research by visiting her Google Scholar page.

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