

From Leading at Home to Leading at Work

EXAMINING HOUSEHOLD LABOR, GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS, AND LEADERSHIP OUTCOMES

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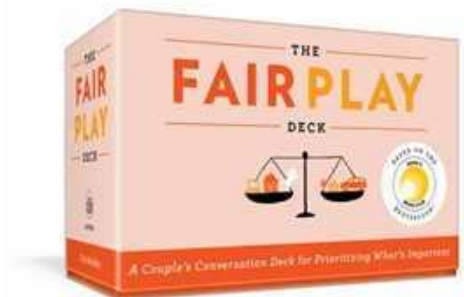


Executive Summary

Despite decades of progress in education and workforce participation, women remain underrepresented in formal leadership roles. Prior research has offered important explanations for this gap, often emphasizing individual preferences, gender bias and stereotypes, or discriminatory organizational practices. While each perspective has merit, they each provide an incomplete account of how leadership decisions are made. In particular, they tend to focus almost exclusively on the workplace, overlooking the broader system in which leadership aspirations develop (for a detailed description of the interinstitutional system, see [Bergeron, 2026](#)).

In this Research Insights paper, we advance a work-life experiences perspective and argue that leadership decisions are shaped across interconnected domains of work and family. From this view, the home is not merely a background context for leadership development but a central part of the leadership ecosystem — one that shapes time availability, cognitive load, emotional energy, and perceptions of whether taking on additional responsibility is sustainable. A critical and enduring inequality within this ecosystem is the unequal distribution of unpaid household and caregiving labor.

Drawing on two complementary studies, we examine how responsibility for household labor, especially perceptions of fairness in how that responsibility is shared, connects home life to leadership-relevant outcomes. In Study 1, we use an experiment to test whether increasing the visibility of household labor alters perceptions of fairness between partners and shapes motivation to lead. Using the *Fair Play* task framework as a tool to make household responsibility more salient, we found that women report significantly lower perceptions of fairness than men when the full scope of household labor is made visible. These fairness perceptions are closely tied to real differences in responsibility and, in turn, to reduced motivation to pursue leadership roles.



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In Study 2, a survey of working adults in dual-earner relationships, we extended these findings by examining ongoing patterns of household labor, fairness perceptions, work-family conflict, and worries about leadership. We show that responsibility for routine, daily household tasks — rather than occasional household tasks — is especially consequential.

Women report carrying substantially more responsibility for these daily tasks and perceive greater unfairness in how they are divided. Importantly, fairness at home is not directly related to worries about leadership. Instead, fairness operates through work-family conflict: When household arrangements are perceived as unfair, work and family roles are more likely to feel incompatible, which heightens worries about leadership, particularly worries about work-life imbalance and failure.

Taken together, our findings suggest that leadership decisions are influenced by a broader system that extends beyond organizational boundaries. Household labor arrangements and perceptions of fairness shape how manageable additional responsibility feels, influencing who raises their hand to lead. By conceptualizing household labor as part of the leadership system, our research offers a more complete explanation for persistent gender gaps in leadership and points to new leverage points for leadership development — ones that attend not only to workplace practices but also to the everyday systems at home that shape capacity, sustainability, and choice.





Introduction

While the corporate world has long been scrutinized for barriers to women's leadership, a less visible yet powerful force is at play: household labor. How the domestic load is shared has long been a point of discussion, but has garnered increasing attention. In 2012, an article titled "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" caused consternation when the author, Anne-Marie Slaughter, a woman holding a high-level US State Department position, chose to step down due to the conflict between work and family (Slaughter, 2012). In her article, she challenged the myth popularized in the 1980s that women can "have it all." In 2015, she followed up her article with a book entitled *Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family* in which she argued that work and family life need to be restructured, bringing attention to how the current system disadvantages women (and men)¹ (Slaughter, 2015). Concurrently, journalist Brigid Schulte was asking similar

questions about time and leisure. After an earlier news article, her 2014 book, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time* (Schulte, 2014), was released. In it, she discusses the factors that contribute to the overwhelm experienced by working parents and what can be done about it. In 2017, Tiffany Dufu's book *Drop the Ball* — part manifesto and part memoir — detailed her own experience with becoming a mother and struggling to balance work and life (Dufu, 2017). She shared how she learned to relinquish control, re-evaluate expectations, and expect more from others. Proposing a system to make visible and equalize the domestic load, attorney Eve Rodsky published the book *Fair Play* in 2019 after becoming frustrated with the division of labor in her own marriage (Rodsky, 2019). This work evolved into a documentary, a podcast, and the [Fair Play Institute](https://fairplaypolicy.org/), which offers coaching and consultation for couples who want to learn how to fairly share household labor.²

¹ In August 2024, the US Surgeon General released an advisory noting that a major stressor on parents is time demands, with the report linking it to mental health and wellbeing.

² To learn more about the Fair Play Institute, visit: <https://fairplaypolicy.org/>



The Fair Play system consists of a unique card-based format in which couples review a set of 100 task cards across several categories and determine which cards are relevant to their household. Each task encompasses full responsibility (i.e., conceptualizing, planning, executing) so that one partner is not just “helping” the other. The five broad categories are:



Home

E.g., essential and repetitive house tasks like groceries, home maintenance, laundry, dishes.



Out

E.g., responsibilities that intersect with life outside the home, such as maintaining the family calendar, store returns, auto maintenance, community service.



Caregiving

E.g., tasks related to care for children and other family members, including health insurance, medical or dental appointments, pet care, homework, morning routines, school drop-offs/pick-ups.



Magic

E.g., largely “invisible” work related to discipline, spirituality, marking holidays or special occasions, and instilling values, with cards related to managing screen time, gifts, holiday cards, romantic gestures, and “magical beings” e.g., the Tooth Fairy.



Wild

E.g., cards that address unpredictable and often stressful major life events, such as home renovations, job loss, moving, a new job, death, and an infant’s first year.

With the Fair Play system, the goal is to arrive not at a 50-50 split of the relevant cards but at a distribution that feels fair and equitable to both partners.

Using the Fair Play system as a basis, our research delves into how the dynamics of home life, particularly the division of household tasks and perceptions of fairness, significantly impact women’s aspirations and anxieties about stepping into leadership roles. By illuminating this often-overlooked aspect of the leadership system, we uncover a new narrative: the home as a pivotal arena for shaping future leaders.

GENDER AND LEADERSHIP: BEYOND EFFECTIVENESS

Research on gender³ and leadership has long sought to explain women’s persistent underrepresentation in formal leadership roles, particularly at higher organizational levels. Early theoretical frameworks, most notably role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), argue that leadership roles are culturally associated with agentic, masculine traits, creating a perceived mismatch with stereotypically feminine gender roles. This incongruity can lead to a perceived lack of fit between women and leadership roles (Heilman, 1983; Heilman & Caleo, 2018) and therefore was expected to disadvantage women in leadership contexts, particularly in evaluations of their competence and legitimacy.

Yet decades of empirical research complicate this explanation. Meta-analytic evidence indicates few consistent gender differences in perceptions of leadership effectiveness (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014), and more recent work suggests that women are perceived to frequently engage in

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³ We use the term gender in the context in which it is used and measured (i.e., research participants indicating whether they are a man or woman) in the vast majority of leadership literature. In addition, the research presented in this Insights paper studied heterosexual couples. Thus, we use the terms “men” and “women” accordingly.



both agentic and communal leadership behaviors associated with effective leadership (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). In fact, in many contexts, others (e.g., peers, subordinates, bosses) rate women leaders as equally or more effective than others rate men leaders.⁴ These findings undermine explanations that attribute leadership gaps to deficiencies in women's abilities or performance (Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015).

Given this context, we turned our attention to leadership motivation and costs to understand the gender gap in leadership roles rather than ratings of leader effectiveness. That is, we explored who seeks out leadership roles, who accepts them when offered, and who opts out altogether.

LEADERSHIP MOTIVATION AND ANTICIPATED COSTS

Leadership decisions are emotional and anticipatory. Individuals consider not only whether they *can* lead but also whether leading will be enjoyable, sustainable, and compatible with other life roles. *Motivation to lead* refers to the drive to pursue leadership training and leadership roles (Chan & Drasgow, 2001); it shapes how people view and navigate their careers (Chan et al., 2012). Although important for understanding gender differences, motivation alone may be a necessary but insufficient condition to take on a leadership role.

Recent scholarship highlights *worries about leadership* (WAL) as an important outcome of this anticipatory process (Aycan & Shelia, 2019). Worries about leadership reflect concerns about the potential downsides of leadership roles and have three dimensions. The first dimension, *worries about failure*, encompasses risks related to continually having to prove oneself, being exposed to more criticism, living with heightened

visibility of mistakes, and losing self-esteem or feeling embarrassment in the case of failure. The second dimension, *worries about work-life imbalance*, includes worries about spending less time with family, being unable to balance and/or fulfill work and family roles, having less personal time (e.g., for hobbies or friends), and not having a personal life. The third dimension, *worries about harm*, covers worries about experiencing relationship problems with partner/spouse, developing stress-related health problems, being a hard-hearted and callous person, treating employees unfairly, and hurting the feelings of coworkers due to work decisions. Taken together, these worries shed light on different factors that may influence choices about leadership.

Gender dynamics play a crucial role in how WAL influence both self-perception and external evaluation. Karakulak et al. (2022) showed that although men and women report similar levels of WAL, its consequences differ by gender. WAL negatively impacts women's willingness to lead, but not men's. In fact, for men, high WAL was positively associated with managers' favorable judgments of their leadership potential. Women's WAL was unrelated to judgments of leadership potential, suggesting that men may benefit from expressing vulnerability, whereas women do not. Further, Auvinen et al. (2022) identified distinct WAL profiles (i.e., the extent to which the three dimensions of worry are more or less salient) and showed that women are disproportionately represented in profiles more sensitive to failure and work-life imbalance. In addition, WAL were more prevalent among younger, rather than older, employees (Auvinen et al., 2022). These findings suggest that WAL may function as a gatekeeping outcome, shaping who raises their hand to lead. Rather than reflecting lower ambition or lower confidence, such worries reflect assessments of

⁴ Men, however, self-rate themselves more highly as leaders than do women.



risk grounded in lived experience.

APPLYING A WORK-LIFE EXPERIENCE LENS TO LEADERSHIP

When it comes to trying to understand gender differences in leadership, various perspectives exist. Some emphasize individual preferences, whereas others focus on gender bias and stereotypes that shape evaluations and opportunities. Importantly, evidence supporting these perspectives varies, depending on how gender is conceptualized and which leadership outcomes are examined (Frear et al., 2019; Leslie et al., 2015). For example, some research distinguishes between gender differences that arise because women and men possess unequal attributes (e.g., experience or tenure) and differences that arise because women and men receive unequal returns for the same attributes. Findings differ across these approaches and across outcomes, such as pay, status, and leadership attainment, suggesting that no single perspective fully accounts for observed gender gaps in leadership.

Complementing this view, a dynamic gender-based perspective further suggests that traditional social role predictions may be limited when applied to understanding contemporary work-family experiences (Leslie et al., 2015). Prior research finds more consistent gender differences in time investments than in attitudes or subjective evaluations of the work-family interface, and little consistent evidence that women and men experience fundamentally different psychological reactions to similar work-life conditions. Together, these patterns suggest that gender disparities may stem less from stable preferences or distinct psychological processes and more from unequal exposure to demanding conditions that accumulate across domains.

We build on these explanations by adopting a work-life experience perspective, which

emphasizes how leadership decisions are shaped across interconnected domains of work and family (Kossek et al., 2017). From this perspective, motivation to lead and perceptions of the anticipated costs of leadership cannot be fully understood by focusing solely on workplace processes, evaluations, or individual characteristics.

Accordingly, we argue that the home sphere is not merely a background context for leadership development but part of the foreground. The home is a critical component of a broader ecosystem that shapes time availability, cognitive load, emotional energy, and anticipatory concerns about work-family balance — all of which are central resources for leadership. To understand gender differences, one of the most important and enduring inequalities within this broader ecosystem is the unequal distribution of unpaid household and caregiving labor.

HOUSEHOLD LABOR: THE DEEP ROOTS OF GENDER INEQUALITY

Women continue to perform a disproportionate share of household labor, even in dual-earner households where partners work similar hours and earn comparable incomes (Fry et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2013). Traditional explanations for household labor inequality often rely on rational models, such as time availability (Shockley et al., 2025). From this perspective, partners allocate household work based on who has more time outside of paid work. Although intuitively appealing, these explanations consistently fail to account for empirical patterns. Women continue to do more household labor even when they work full-time and earn as much as or more than their partners. When time is held constant, gender differences in *the type* of household labor performed often remain unchanged (Pailhé et al., 2019). Analysis of the 2022 American Time Use Survey by the Gender Equity Policy Institute (GEPI) shows that,



on average, working mothers put in 19.5 hours per week on household work and childcare compared with 12.3 hours by working fathers. Mothers who work part-time do 2.4 times as much as fathers who work part-time. In addition, women across all age groups have less free time than men (GEPI, 2024), where women working full-time have 12% less free time than men working full-time. Despite substantial changes in women's labor force participation, the division of unpaid work at home remains deeply gendered. These findings suggest that household labor is not simply a rational response to work demands but instead reflects deeper social expectations about gender roles.

Gender Construction: A More Useful Lens

Gender construction theory offers a more compelling framework for understanding why household labor remains unequal. From this perspective, men and women “do gender” through everyday behaviors, including participation in household work (Shelton & John, 1996). Routine domestic tasks, especially those that must be done frequently and without recognition, become a way gender roles are enacted and reinforced. Women's continued responsibility for household labor affirms cultural expectations of caregiving and household management, whereas men's selective participation aligns with a provider identity.

Central to this asymmetry is an often-overlooked distinction in agency. Household contributions that encompass occasional tasks — home repairs, yard work, vehicle maintenance, technology setup — can typically be scheduled, deferred, or delegated without immediate consequence. By contrast, there is often little meaningful agency over the daily tasks women tend to shoulder. Meals must be prepared, children transported, and household logistics coordinated regardless of

competing demands, urgent deadlines, or personal exhaustion. Rodsky (2019) captures this dynamic with the concept of the **she-fault** — the pervasive default assumption, often reinforced by external institutions (schools, pediatricians, employers), that women bear primary responsibility for household coordination and family logistics, even when both partners are equally employed. The she-fault does not reflect a negotiated arrangement so much as a cultural reflex, continuously refreshed by systems that contact the mother first, assume the wife manages the calendar, and position women as the default point of contact for family matters.

SHARED TERMINOLOGY

She-fault (Rodsky, 2019): The default cultural assumption that women are responsible for household coordination and family logistics, even when both partners work. The she-fault is reinforced externally by colleagues, schools, pediatricians, HR systems, and other institutions that default to contacting and supporting the mother in a predetermined role.

Cognitive labor: The invisible mental work of planning, coordinating, anticipating, and monitoring household tasks. Distinct from physically doing tasks, it often goes unrecognized in assessments of household equity because it is not observable and leaves no physical trace.

Daily tasks: Routine household tasks that must be done regardless of schedule or competing demands (meals, childcare logistics, household management, laundry, groceries). There is typically a lack of agency over these tasks because they need to be accomplished regardless of competing demands, deadlines, or personal fatigue.

Occasional tasks: Periodic household tasks (yard work, car maintenance, tech setup, home repairs) that can often be scheduled, deferred, or delegated without immediate negative consequences. The greater agency in these tasks, and the appearance of contribution from occasional tasks, can mask the invisible daily burden carried by the other partner.





This may seem appropriate for couples who desire certain arrangements (e.g., a working partner with a stay-at-home partner), but these gendered expectations operate even among couples who espouse egalitarian values (Brumley & St. George, 2023). Research shows that changes in attitudes are often not accompanied by changes in behavior (e.g., Ajzen, 2001). Household arrangements often emerge through small, seemingly reasonable decisions that accumulate over time, producing durable inequality without deliberate intent. In this way, gendered divisions of labor can appear rational while simultaneously sustaining the very inequalities they are used to justify (Daming, 2020).

Cognitive Labor: The Invisible Household Work

A critical element of household labor is the difference between responsibility and execution.

Studies find that household labor is not only about *doing* tasks; it is also about planning, anticipating, coordinating, monitoring, and remembering. Consider the example of laundry, which is a frequent household task. On the surface, laundry appears to involve a small number of discrete actions: loading, drying, and folding clothes. In practice, however, it requires continuous monitoring of each family member's clothing needs, tracking schedules and preferences, sorting items by fabric and washing requirements, ensuring supplies are stocked, anticipating upcoming needs (e.g., uniforms or special events), and organizing clean clothes back into appropriate spaces. These anticipatory and organizational demands are rarely counted as “work,” yet they require sustained attention and mental effort. Indeed, some have referred to this as the “invisible third shift” (Krstić et al., 2025).

This cognitive labor is ongoing, largely invisible,



and disproportionately borne by women (Daminger, 2019). Cognitive labor is related to emotional exhaustion and, in turn, to increased turnover intentions and lower career resilience (e.g., handling work problems, adapting to organizational changes) (Krstić et al., 2025). Because cognitive labor is difficult to observe and measure, it is often overlooked. As a result, divisions of household labor may appear equitable when task execution is shared, even when responsibility for managing all the subtasks within a task remains uneven.

Fairness Perceptions: Indicators of a Strained System

Fairness in the home sphere reflects not the amount of work but rather perception of how responsibility is distributed and compared between partners (Claffey & Mickelson, 2009). Importantly, we do not suggest that the connection between household labor and leadership is about the tasks themselves. That is, women do not forgo leadership opportunities because they do laundry or prepare meals. Rather, fairness perceptions capture whether responsibility in one's life is *already* unequally distributed and whether the existing system has the capacity to absorb additional demands.

When household arrangements are perceived as unfair, they signal a lack of reciprocity and of slack in the system. All household labor — anticipating needs, coordinating tasks, and ensuring the work gets done — must continue regardless of competing demands. In this context, leadership is not simply another role but an expansion of responsibility that is difficult to contain or delegate. Anticipating leadership, therefore, involves assessing not just interest or ability but also whether taking on more responsibility is sustainable, given the existing imbalance. From this perspective, fairness perceptions serve as a

perceptual lens through which individuals evaluate the feasibility of leadership, linking everyday housework to broader decisions about optional responsibility and role expansion.

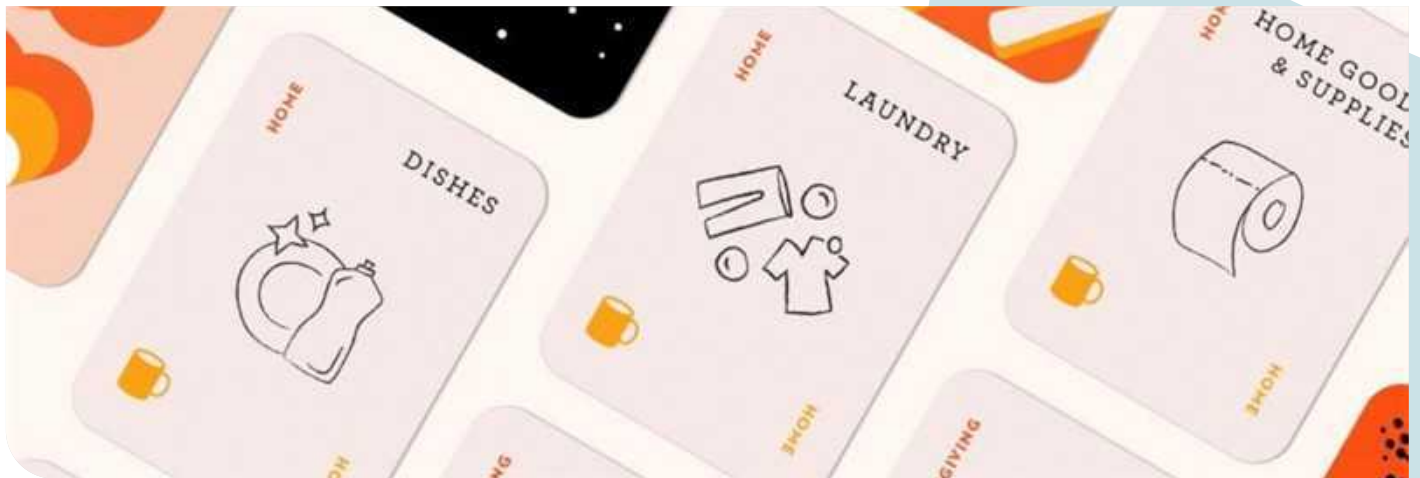
INTEGRATING HOUSEHOLD LABOR INTO THE LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION: CLOSING THE GAP

Existing research establishes several important points: Women are not less effective leaders; taking on leadership roles is about motivation and anticipated costs; a work-family experiences lens considers matters outside of work as part of the leadership equation; and household labor remains a persistent, gendered inequality. Yet, taken together, these conversations remain largely disconnected. As a result, we lack a clear understanding of whether and how daily domestic arrangements shape leadership participation.

Household labor is not merely a private issue — it shapes the conditions under which leadership decisions are made. Carrying primary responsibility for routine and cognitive household work constrains time, recovery, and psychological bandwidth. It also shapes expectations about whether taking on additional responsibility, such as a leadership role, will be sustainable.

When leadership is anticipated as an additional strain to an already imbalanced system, it is more likely to be experienced as costly rather than rewarding. In this way, gendered household labor arrangements can help explain why women — despite comparable ability, aspiration, and leader effectiveness — may be more likely to experience leadership as incompatible with their other roles. Understanding women's leadership participation, therefore, requires attention not only to workplaces and workplace practices and policies (Kossek et al., 2023), but to the everyday systems at home that shape who has the capacity to lead.





Our Research

This research addresses these gaps by examining household labor as a structural component of the larger ecosystem in which leadership operates. Through two complementary studies, we investigate how responsibility for household labor, perceptions of fairness, and conflict between work and family relate to leadership-relevant outcomes. By integrating experimental and survey approaches, our work advances a more complete understanding of how leadership motivation is shaped not only at work but also at home.

STUDY 1. THE VISIBILITY OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR: AN EXPERIMENT

Purpose

The purpose of our first study was to examine whether increasing the visibility of household labor alters perceptions of fairness between partners and, in turn, whether these fairness perceptions shape leadership relevant attitudes. Using an experiment as the design for our study, we varied how individuals were prompted to reflect on and assess the division of household labor in their relationships. In doing so, we paid particular attention to whether making task responsibility more visible and salient influenced evaluations of fairness.

STUDY 1 METHOD

Participant Criteria and Sample

Participants were recruited through Prolific, an online research platform. Participation criteria required that participants be parents, aged 18 years or older, residents of the United States, working at least 30 hours per week and reporting an average of 6.5 years of leadership experience (median = 5 years), and currently in a committed and cohabitating heterosexual relationship. The final sample included 150 participants, consisting of 77 women and 73 men, with an average respondent age of 40 years old. Approximately 85% of participants reported that both partners worked full time (30+ hours per week). The sample was varied in years of leadership experience, with approximately 24% having 0 years of experience, 35% having 1–5 years, 26% having 6–10 years, and 16% having 11+ years.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions (i.e., Fair Play, Reflection, Time Diary, and Percent Estimate) designed to assess perceptions of household labor and leadership intentions. Across all conditions, participants were asked to consider the division of household labor between themselves (self) and



their partner (partner). The conditions differed in the degree of specificity and visibility with which participants assessed household labor. All participants completed the study individually.

Experimental Conditions

Fair Play Cards. In the Fair Play condition, participants reviewed a selection of household task cards adapted from Eve Rodsky's (2020) *Fair Play* deck. The cards represented common tasks related to childcare, specific meal preparation (i.e., breakfast, lunch, dinner), cleaning, yard work, household management, and relationship management. For each task, participants indicated whether they or their partner held primary responsibility, or whether the task was not relevant to their household.

The Fair Play condition used a modified digital version of Rodsky's (2020) card deck. To reduce cognitive overload and ensure compatibility with an online survey, task cards were downloaded from the Fair Play website as a CSV file and reviewed for accuracy. When discrepancies between task names and definitions were identified, original card descriptions were cross-checked and edited.

Task definitions were revised to focus on core responsibilities, described in 40 or fewer words, and stripped of instructional or prescriptive language. There are 100 total cards in the original Fair Play deck, but given that participants completed the task individually, cards referring to "player 1" or "player 2" were removed, leaving 92 cards. Final edits were reviewed and approved by the authorship team.

For each card, participants indicated who was responsible for the task. For each task, responsibility was defined as encompassing three components: 1) Anticipating and remembering what is needed; 2) Planning and coordinating the

activity; and 3) Executing the task. Responsibility was conceptualized in this way to capture both cognitive and physical aspects of household labor (Aviv et al., 2025). Response options were:

- *I am primarily responsible*
- *My partner is primarily responsible*
- *This task is not relevant to our household*

Reflection. In the Reflection condition, participants were instructed to reflect broadly on household and caregiving activities and to consider who held primary responsibility for each. Participants then responded to an open-ended question asking them to describe how household tasks and responsibilities were distributed between themselves and their partner. We encouraged participants to consider a range of tasks and activities and to think about who was responsible for them.

Time Diary. In the Time Diary condition, participants completed a 24-hour time diary, reporting their activities in 30-minute increments from 4:00 a.m. the previous day to 4:00 a.m. on the current day. This approach follows standard time-use methodology and focuses on participants' own activities (i.e., what they were doing at certain times of the day) rather than joint task ownership.

Percent Contribution. We included a control condition to provide a baseline for comparison with the other conditions. In the control condition, participants proportionally estimated the percentage of household labor they and their partner had contributed over the past week across five categories: childcare, food preparation, cleaning, household management, and yard work. Participants were instructed to ensure the percentages added up to 100%. This approach aligns with prior research using self-reported proportional estimates of household labor (Claffey & Mickelson, 2009).





Measures

Perceived Unfairness in the Home. Participants rated how fairly household labor had been divided over the past week across five domains: food preparation, cleaning, household management, yard work, and childcare. Following Claffey and Mickelson (2009), responses were recorded on a 4-point scale (1 = *very unfair*, 2 = *somewhat unfair*, 3 = *somewhat fair*, 4 = *very fair*). Items were averaged to create an overall perceived fairness score.

Motivation to Lead. Participants indicated their agreement with each of the 12 items of the motivations to lead subdimension (Chan et al., 2012) on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*). Example items included: “I have always enjoyed leading others and would assume leadership roles whenever I could,” and “I plan to become a general leader or manager in the near future.”

Analytic Approach

Analyses examined whether increasing the visibility of household labor altered perceptions of fairness and whether those perceptions, in turn, were associated with leadership intentions. Specifically, we tested whether men and women differed in their fairness perceptions across experimental conditions, and whether fairness predicted intentions to lead (*Gender* → *Perceived Fairness* → *Motivation to Lead*).

To evaluate this model, we first confirmed that a range of control variables were equally balanced across conditions (e.g., age, education, income, remote work status; $p_{\text{minimum}} > .10$). We then used structural equation modeling (SEM), with each experimental condition treated as a separate group. SEM, when applied to experiments, offers several advantages over traditional approaches, including the ability to account for measurement error and reduce bias from omitted variables (Breitsohl, 2019). Overall model fit was acceptable: $\chi^2(100) = 126.76$, $p = .037$, CFI = .974, TLI = .963, RMSEA = .061, SRMR = .064.

Study 1 Results and Discussion

Three core findings emerged from our results. First, the Fair Play condition triggered a pronounced gender difference in perceived fairness: Women reported significantly lower fairness than men, an effect that was stronger in the Fair Play condition than in the other conditions. This is likely because the Fair Play condition makes the full spectrum of household labor more visible and makes it more difficult to ignore inequities, given the more specific process required to determine task responsibility. Second, this fairness response reflected real differences in workload. Women reported responsibility for substantially more household tasks than men (55.5% vs. 36.2% of total tasks) and for women,



the number of tasks strongly predicted lower perceptions of fairness, but was unrelated to fairness perceptions for men. This result mirrors many studies that show that women carry a greater share of the domestic load than men. Third, perceived unfairness was associated with motivations to lead, particularly for the women exposed to the *Fair Play* condition.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that increasing visibility does not create inequity; it simply reveals how the household system already operates. When inequities are pronounced, women experience a sharper fairness reaction that subsequently reduces their motivation to lead.

STUDY 2. BUILDING THE BRIDGE FROM THE HOME TO LEADERSHIP: A SURVEY

Purpose

The purpose of our second study was to extend the experimental findings from Study 1 by examining how household labor, perceptions of fairness, and work-family conflict relate to leadership relevant outcomes. While Study 1 highlighted how making household labor distribution visible shapes fairness perceptions, Study 2 examined how ongoing patterns of responsibility (i.e., the distribution of routine vs. occasional household tasks) shape fairness, conflict between work and family, and worries about leadership.

STUDY 2 METHOD

Participant Criteria and Sample

Participants were recruited through Prolific, an online research platform. Our final sample consisted of 404 individuals, all of whom were in committed heterosexual relationships in which both cohabitating partners worked at least 20 hours per week. The sample comprised 66% women and 72% parents (i.e., having at

least one child). On average, participants were approximately 42 years old, worked 39 hours per week, and reported a relationship tenure of approximately 16 years. In terms of leader level, approximately 45% had no direct reports, 35% managed individuals, and 20% had higher-level leadership roles.

Measures

To capture household labor and fairness, we focused on seven core categories common to domestic work. We used the five categories from Study 1, childcare, food (e.g., preparation, shopping), cleaning, household management, yard work, and two additional categories: technology/device management and vehicle maintenance. We added two additional categories to better balance tasks that are often gender-typed (e.g., childcare vs. vehicle maintenance). Household labor was assessed using two complementary measures: respondents' percent contribution and contribution relative to partner.

Percent Contribution. As in Study 1, participants gave a proportional estimate of the percentage of household labor they and their partner had contributed over the past week across the seven categories. Participants were instructed to ensure the percentages added up to 100%. This approach aligns with prior research using self-reported proportional estimates of household labor (Claffey & Mickelson, 2009).

Fair Share (Self and Partner). Across the seven categories, participants rated the extent to which they felt they personally did their share using a 5-point scale (1 = *much less than your share*, 2 = *less than your share*, 3 = *your share*, 4 = *more than your share*, 5 = *much more than your share*). Participants then assigned ratings for their partner's contribution across the same seven household domains, a method that follows established approaches to assessing relative



household labor (Yogev & Brett, 1985). We adjusted this scale to range from -2 to $+2$, with “your share” represented as the neutral point (i.e., a value of zero). This allowed us to easily interpret when participants indicated that they and their partner were doing more than their fair share (positive numbers) or less than their fair share (negative numbers).

Overall Perceived Fairness. Participants rated how fairly household labor had been divided with their partner over the past week across the seven categories. Following Claffey and Mickelson (2009), responses were recorded on a 4-point scale (1 = *very unfair*, 2 = *somewhat unfair*, 3 = *somewhat fair*, 4 = *very fair*). Items were averaged to create an overall perceived fairness score.

Work-Family Conflict. Work-family conflict was measured using 5 items assessing both work-to-family and family-to-work conflict (Netemeyer et al., 1996). Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Example items included: “The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life” and “I have to put off doing things at work because of demands on my time at home.”

Worries About Leadership. WAL were assessed by asking participants to imagine being offered a leadership position in their current organization. Participants then rated the extent to which they experienced concern across 16 items (Aycan & Shelia, 2019) using a 5-point scale (1 = *to a very little extent* to 5 = *to a very large extent*). Example items included: “Mistakes I make being noticed more than before” and “Being unable to fulfill my responsibilities to my family.”

Control Variables. To account for alternative

explanations, we included gender, age, relationship tenure, work hours per week, and personality as control variables.

Analytic Approach

We first looked at the factor structure underlying the set of household tasks and WAL. We then assessed each of our household labor and fairness measures by gender to understand how men and women viewed the division of household tasks in terms of their percent contribution, their relative contribution (self and partner), and the overall fairness perceptions of how the household tasks were divided with their partner. Finally, we conducted mediation analyses to examine whether household labor and fairness perceptions were linked to WAL through work-family conflict.

Study 2 Results and Discussion

Factor analysis of our measures revealed important underlying structures. First, the set of household tasks could be grouped into two broad categories: daily tasks (i.e., childcare, food preparation, cleaning, and household management) and occasional tasks (i.e., yard work, technology/device management, and vehicle maintenance). Second, although Aycan and Shelia (2019) created the *Worries About Leadership* scale to consist of three dimensions (failure, harm, and imbalance), our data revealed that the underlying structure only had two dimensions: failure and imbalance. That is, for our sample, participants did not see worries about harm as separate from worries about failure or imbalance. As a result, in our analyses, we use only those two dimensions as our leadership outcomes. Next, we review the results for each of our three core measures of household labor and fairness.



Figure 1. Percent Contribution

Women and Men Have Different Perceptions of Their Household Contributions

For daily tasks, women perceive they do more than twice as much as their male partners (~68% vs. ~32%), whereas men perceive the daily division of labor as roughly equal (~48% vs. ~52%). For occasional tasks, both men and women perceive men as doing more, but men view their contributions in this category (73%) as greater than those provided by women (~60%).

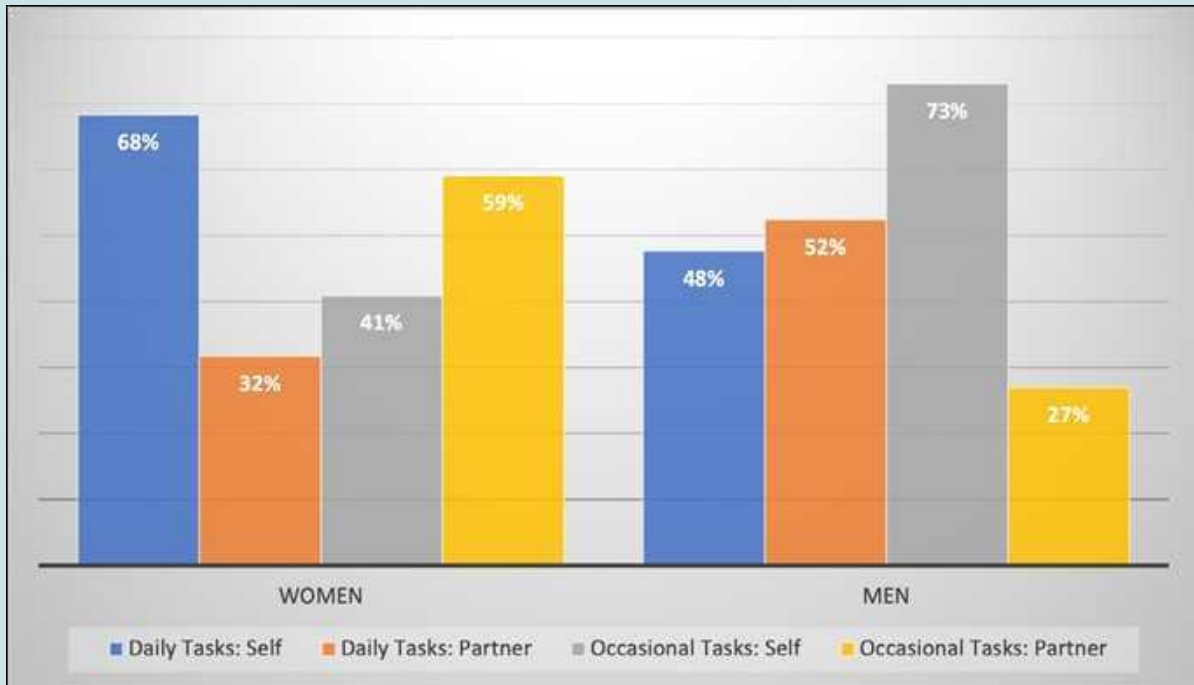


Figure 2. Fair Share

Women and Men Have Contrasting Perceptions of Labor Division Fairness

For daily tasks, women perceive they do much more than their fair share and that their male partners do much less than their fair share. In contrast, men view the daily division of labor as only slightly unfair to their partners. For occasional tasks, although both men and women perceive women as doing less than their fair share, men perceived occasional tasks to be less fair than did women.

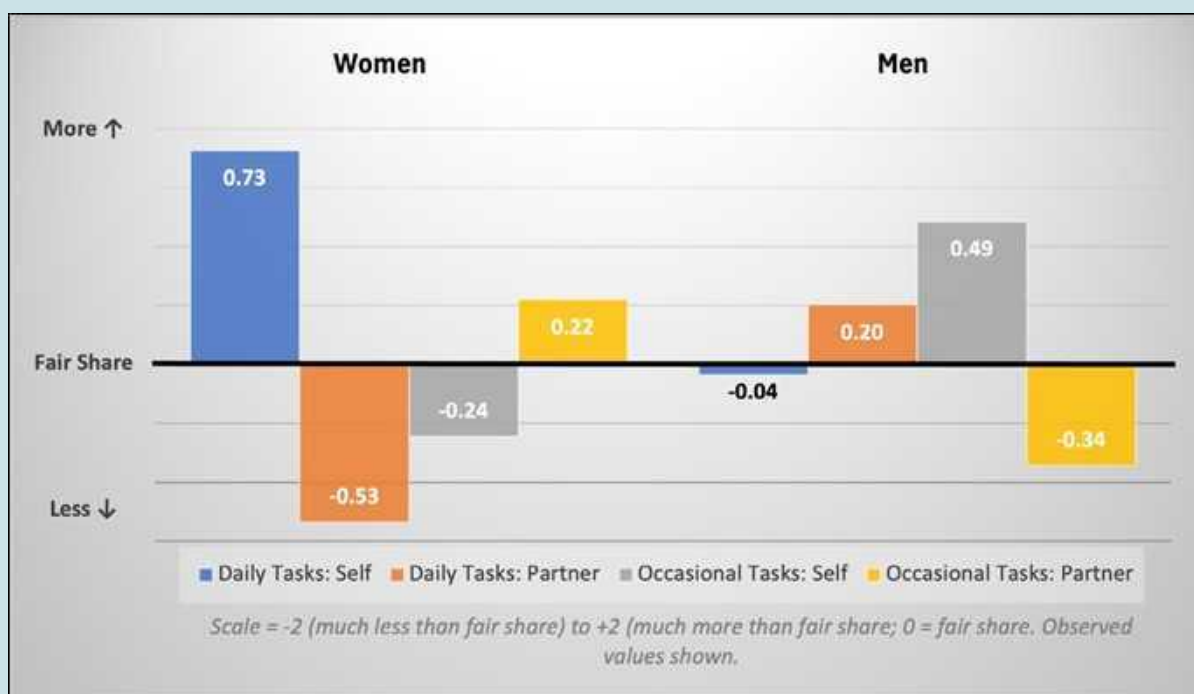


Figure 3. Overall Fairness

Imbalances in Daily Household Tasks Drive Differences in Fairness Perceptions.

When asked about the overall fairness in the division of daily and occasional household tasks, gender differences were significant for daily tasks but not for occasional tasks, with women perceiving greater unfairness in the division of daily tasks than did men.



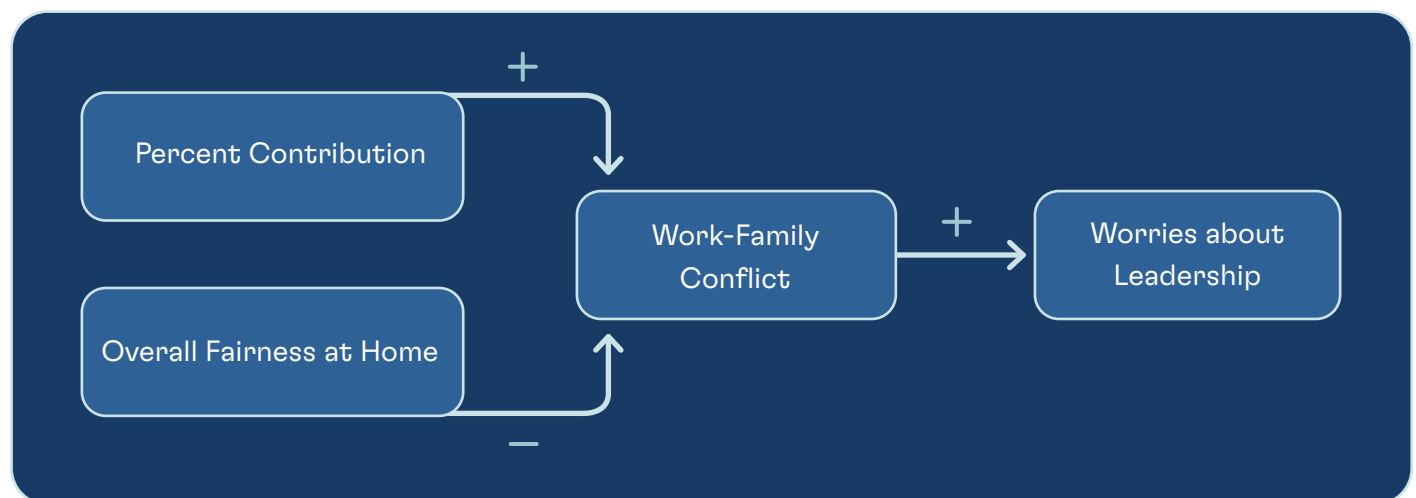
Home Connects to Leadership Through Work-Family Conflict

One of the main objectives of this study was to examine the connection between household labor and leadership-relevant outcomes. To this end, we ran separate mediation models for each household labor and fairness variable for both WAL dimensions (i.e., imbalance and failure). First, we examined whether household labor and fairness were related to work-family conflict. We found that both the percent contributions in daily tasks and overall fairness perceptions regarding daily tasks (but not occasional tasks) were positively related to work-family conflict. Interestingly, the relative contribution (self and partner) to household tasks was not. That is, perceived contribution and overall fairness, but

not relative share, appear to drive work-family conflict. Whether a participant felt that their contribution was more or less than their share of the responsibility was not related to these outcomes. Work-family conflict, in turn, was consistently and significantly related to both WAL dimensions but more strongly related to worries about imbalance than to worries about failure.

Understanding each set of relationships separately, we were then able to test the full mediation model. Consistent with the findings we just reviewed, the percent contribution and overall fairness in daily tasks were significantly, positively related to WAL via increased perceptions of work-family conflict. Notably, we see the strongest effects for overall fairness perceptions. We also examined whether gender moderated these relationships and found no significant relationships, which means the relationships among household labor, work-family conflict, and WAL operate similarly for both women and men.

Figure 4: Linking Home and Work



Integrating Our Findings: Household Labor as Part of a Broader System

Across our two studies, a consistent pattern emerged. Women shoulder more of the everyday work that keeps a household running. When this imbalance is made more visible, women are more likely to perceive unfairness in the division of labor. These perceptions of fairness, particularly regarding the more frequent daily tasks, heighten work-family conflict, which then heightens WAL.

Taken together, our findings suggest that leadership decisions are influenced by a broader system that extends beyond organizational boundaries (see also Bergeron, 2026). Household labor arrangements, fairness perceptions, and work-family conflict function as interconnected components of a broader system, influencing who opts into — or out of — formal leadership roles. Imbalances in household labor shape how individuals experience the relationship between their work and family roles. When responsibility for household tasks falls disproportionately on one partner, the demands of home and work are more likely to feel incompatible. In these situations, time, attention, and energy devoted to one role are experienced as coming at the expense of the other, increasing perceptions of conflict between work and family life.

THE ‘SLOW SLIDE’ OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR ACCUMULATION

Consider this scenario: Early in a dual-career relationship, household arrangements may be perceived as roughly equitable, or at least flexible enough to feel manageable. Decisions emerge organically: Kelly cooks more because it comes naturally and she enjoys it; David handles finances because of his accounting expertise and sets most bills to pay automatically; Kelly absorbs the work of an unexpected home repair because it’s tax season and David is overwhelmed at work. Each decision, in isolation, makes sense in the moment.

Over time, however, these individually reasonable decisions accumulate. Kelly, who first handled school communications, continues to handle them — not because of any explicit agreement or expertise, but because she is already the known contact. Since she also managed the first pediatrician search, she becomes the default for managing all subsequent medical (and dental) logistics. The cognitive labor of tracking, monitoring, and coordinating quietly concentrates in Kelly, compounding incrementally with the birth of other children and the accommodation of David’s career changes. By the time a promotion opportunity appears for Kelly — a few years later — she has worries about how the added responsibility will impact her and her family. Critically, neither Kelly nor David is fully aware of how their household arrangement became what it is and the subtle impact it’s had on Kelly’s career. Neither can point to the decision that created it. Instead, the slow accumulation of small, individually reasonable defaults produces a structural imbalance that has lasting impacts but was never consciously chosen.



Higher levels of work-family conflict, in turn, are associated with greater WAL. Leadership roles are typically anticipated to include expanding responsibility, visibility, and expectations, all of which intensify existing role demands. When individuals already manage competing work and family obligations, leadership may be viewed as an exacerbation of imbalance in a way that feels unsustainable rather than as an opportunity that offers growth or development. Time is a finite resource, and we all operate within the constraints of a 24-hour day. When individuals already feel pressed by responsibilities, they may be more hesitant to expand the scope of their responsibilities, especially when it comes to leadership opportunities.

Importantly, our results showed that fairness at home was not directly related to WAL. Instead, fairness operates through its relationship with work-family conflict. That is, a greater contribution to household labor — especially daily, routine tasks — was associated with higher levels of work-family conflict, reflecting the ongoing strain of managing responsibilities across domains. Conversely, when the division of household labor was perceived as fairer, individuals reported lower levels of conflict in both directions, suggesting that more equitable arrangements reduce the sense that work and family are competing for limited resources.

Mediation analyses supported this process based account. Shouldering more responsibility at home was linked to greater work-family interference, which in turn was associated with increased worries about leadership. In contrast, perceptions of greater fairness at home were associated with reduced work-family conflict and, indirectly, lower WAL. Together, these findings indicate that household labor and fairness perceptions

shape leadership related worries — not by directly influencing attitudes toward leadership but by altering how manageable and sustainable additional responsibility is perceived to be within one's broader life system.

Despite our studies' strengths, some limitations should be noted when interpreting these findings. First, our data rely on individual respondents and their perceptions. Ideally, we would also capture partners' perspectives on household labor division and fairness perceptions. Thus, we cannot assess the alignment (or misalignment) within couples. Second, the cross-sectional nature of Study 2 limits our ability to draw causal conclusions about relationships among household labor, work-family conflict, and WAL. Third, we do not *directly* measure cognitive labor, which limits our ability to assess its unique contribution to household work. Finally, our samples focus on individuals in dual-earner, heterosexual relationships, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other relationship structures. These limitations highlight future research opportunities.





Implications for Practice: Designing Leadership Development with the Broader System in Mind

For organizations and leadership development experts, these findings suggest that focusing exclusively on workplace interventions overlooks a critical part of a broader system in which decisions to pursue leadership positions are made. Moreover, this pattern parallels evidence from organizational settings in which women disproportionately assume invisible, sustaining responsibilities that support collective functioning but that are rarely recognized or rewarded at

the individual level (Bergeron, 2025). Leadership development efforts that attend only to skills, confidence, or organizational bias may fail to address gender-based constraints rooted in everyday life at home. Although some may argue that the domestic sphere is private and should remain so, our research highlights the artificial nature of the divide between work and home. Indeed, this boundary has long been breached by technological advances and, more recently, a greater shift to remote work (Leonardi et al., 2024). Continuing to deny this reality simply perpetuates and justifies the status quo. Making invisible work visible — through structured conversations, coaching, or tools like *Fair Play* — may help individuals and couples recognize how domestic arrangements influence who takes on leadership roles. Importantly, equity in daily household tasks, rather than occasional chores, appears especially consequential for reducing work-family conflict and leadership-related worries.



Solutions: What We Can Do

If household labor shapes leadership decisions by increasing or alleviating work-family conflict, then meaningful solutions must operate at the points where conflict is created, absorbed, or reduced. Truly addressing gender gaps in leadership will require more than changing individual attitudes or offering standalone policies; it requires coordinated action across all levels of the system. The most effective interventions operate simultaneously through households, where joint decisions can be mutually beneficial; people leaders, who shape day-to-day workload, expectations, and definitions of commitment; and organizational leaders, who determine whether those practices are supported, rewarded, and scalable. Below, we outline suggestions for individuals and households, as well as concrete strategies for people leaders to reduce work-family conflict in practice, followed by actions that organizational leaders can take to enable, legitimize, and sustain those efforts over time.

STRATEGIES FOR INDIVIDUALS AND HOUSEHOLDS

Household labor is shaped by organizational and societal systems, but it is experienced through everyday decisions within households. Our findings suggest that perceptions of fairness in how domestic responsibility is shared (especially for routine, daily tasks) serve as a critical signal of whether leadership feels feasible. At the individual and household level, the most effective strategies focus not on doing more or coping better but on setting expectations and making responsibility visible, shared, and sustainable over time.

Recognize that life partner choice will likely impact career outcomes. Career progression is not solely an individual endeavor; it is deeply influenced by the dynamics of intimate partnership. Before making a long-term commitment, have early and explicit career and family conversations. These can include discussing future professional goals and clarifying how each partner defines success, leadership, income, flexibility, and mobility. In particular, talk explicitly about beliefs regarding parenting, breadwinning, travel, relocation, and household responsibilities, and explore the assumptions each partner



inherited from their families of origin. Revisit these conversations regularly as careers and life stages evolve. Partnership can be a leadership asset if the relationship is treated as a long-term, supportive strategic alliance rather than as a default to traditional roles under stress.

Introduce Fair Play (or another system) to make the domestic load visible and equitable.

A central shift is moving conversations away from implicit assumptions and toward ownership. Approaches like the *Fair Play* system are useful because they reframe household work around ownership of the full task cycle — anticipating, planning, and executing — making cognitive labor visible and providing a clearer basis for assessing fairness. This clarity is especially important for daily tasks that quietly accumulate and shape long-term capacity for other roles. Conversations can include defining “standards of completion” to resist perfectionism and to prevent the more detailed partner from redoing tasks, which can undermine motivation and equitable distribution.

Revisit household responsibilities frequently, particularly at key career and household transition points. Fairness is most productive when treated as a forward looking signal rather than a retrospective scorecard. Instead of focusing on who did more in the past, couples can ask whether the *current* division of responsibility allows both partners to take on additional roles, such as leadership, without destabilizing the household system. Framed this way, fairness becomes a question of capacity and sustainability. Job changes, promotions, life changes (e.g., a sabbatical), or shifts in caregiving demands (e.g., a new baby) are natural moments to reassess ownership rather than defaulting to legacy arrangements. Treating household

labor as a dynamic system that evolves alongside work and leadership demands helps prevent outdated divisions of labor from constraining future opportunities that can lead to longer-term resentment.



CAREER INFLECTION POINT AUDIT

Household responsibility typically evolves through repeated transitions, especially as short-term adjustments become lasting defaults. The following career and life inflection points mark opportunities to reassess how routine responsibilities — especially daily tasks — are distributed and whether additional roles, including leadership, feel sustainable.

- **Cohabitation or moving in together**

Early decisions about daily task ownership often establish defaults that are easier to set intentionally than to renegotiate later.

- **Major work role expansions** (e.g., promotions, entry into people management, travel-heavy roles, high-stakes projects)

When one partner's work demands increase, household arrangements often adjust (sometimes permanently) around the change without explicit renegotiation. Without resetting responsibility at home, work-family conflict is likely to intensify.

- **Pregnancy, parental leave, and return to work**

These transitions sharply increase daily and cognitive household work. Defaults formed during this period are especially likely to persist unless actively revisited.

- **Periods of constrained career momentum**

What appears to be a career plateau may reflect limited bandwidth resulting from sustained household responsibility rather than reduced desire or ability.

- **Later life caregiving transitions** (e.g., empty nest, eldercare)

Shifts in caregiving demands create natural opportunities to reassess household responsibility rather than carry forward outdated arrangements.

Recognize and navigate others' expectations

(e.g., in-laws, extended family, community).

It's unrealistic to think that households are unaffected by those circling within their larger orbit. Gendered expectations about household labor can often be reinforced by expectations of extended family and social networks. Individuals and couples can present a united front by discussing how to respond to external pressure in advance and by agreeing upon shared messaging before family gatherings or announcing major decisions. It can be helpful to name generational (or cultural) differences explicitly. This can mean acknowledging and respecting that some family members may hold traditional norms without internalizing those expectations or complying with outdated roles. Seeking allies within the family system who can help normalize shared domestic roles can help. Unchecked external expectations can quietly reinforce inequitable labor patterns — proactive boundary-setting protects long-term equity.

STRATEGIES FOR PEOPLE LEADERS

People leaders shape how work gets done and what “commitment” looks like in practice. When presence is rewarded more than performance, employees with significant responsibilities outside work are disproportionately disadvantaged. Because people leaders sit closest to the day-to-day experience of work, they are uniquely positioned to reduce work-life conflict and make leadership feel more sustainable.

Design roles around deliverables and outcomes rather than fixed schedules and face time. Agree on measurable goals and checkpoints rather than monitoring time spent working. Define success in concrete terms:



What must be delivered? By when? At what level of quality? People leaders can shift performance conversations to focus on results, collaboration, innovation, and impact — not constant availability or specific work hours. Interrupt comments that focus on face time and redirect them toward outcomes. Make sure to reward efficiency and prioritization, not overwork. By reinforcing that outcomes — not hours — drive advancement, leaders remove a structural barrier that often limits women's career progression and may head off men's concerns about using flexible policies.

Give equal importance to employees without family obligations by encouraging a well-rounded life. Supporting caregivers should not create a perception that flexibility is a special accommodation reserved for parents. A healthy culture supports all employees in building meaningful lives outside work, which can make life transitions easier when they happen. People leaders can frame flexibility as human, not parental. Encourage time for personal development, community involvement, hobbies, friendships, and health — not just caregiving. This means using inclusive language such as “life outside work” rather than “family needs.” It also means avoiding assumptions that employees without children are more available. Distribute stretch assignments and high-visibility work equitably to avoid unconscious bias that can unfairly impact career outcomes. At the same time, promote sustainable high performance by encouraging vacation use across the team and normalizing mental health days and personal time. A culture that values “whole people” reduces resentment and fosters inclusion across life stages and personal choices.

Reduce less essential workload expectations and limit time-consuming control mechanisms. Excessive or low-value work reinforces a long-

hours culture and disproportionately impacts those with significant domestic responsibilities. People leaders can clarify what truly matters in their team by identifying the top 3-5 strategic priorities. This means eliminating performative work. Reduce unnecessary reporting, duplicative presentations, administrative bureaucracy, and “visibility” tasks that do not drive outcomes. Streamline approval processes and reduce decision-making layers. One way to see whether tasks or processes are helpful to the collective is to regularly ask two questions: “Who is benefiting from this?” and “If we stopped doing this, what would happen?” To protect your team, you may need to push back on downward demands and clearly communicate trade-offs: “If we add this, something else must shift.” Reducing unnecessary workload is about a focus on what benefits the collective (not just the leader) by concentrating energy where it creates value. Sustainable expectations benefit all employees, particularly those balancing significant domestic responsibilities.

STRATEGIES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS

Organizational leaders play a different but equally critical role. While people leaders implement practices that reduce work-family conflict, organizational leaders determine whether those practices are supported, rewarded, or undermined by the broader system. Without structural backing, even well intentioned people leaders face pressure to revert to norms that reward overwork and silent overload.

Design leadership roles and systems that give people leaders room to act. People leaders cannot sustainably manage workload or protect boundaries if leadership roles are designed around implicit assumptions of unlimited availability and continuous escalation. Organizational leaders



set these assumptions through role design, performance expectations, and promotion criteria. Supporting people leaders requires designing leadership roles with a realistic scope and built in slack. This includes distinguishing core from discretionary responsibilities, ensuring that increases in role scope are matched with reductions elsewhere, and using mechanisms like role scoping, shared leadership, and workload audits at key transition points (e.g., first leadership role, mid-career promotion). When leadership roles are structured to absorb infinite responsibility, people leaders are placed in the impossible position of being asked to deliver sustainability within systems that reward overload.

Ensure people leaders are not penalized for reducing conflict on their teams. People leaders are unlikely to focus on outcomes, boundary setting, or workload discipline if doing so puts their own advancement at risk. Organizational leaders, therefore, play a critical role in aligning incentives so that reducing work-life conflict is treated as a marker of effective leadership, not a lack of ambition. This includes auditing performance evaluations, promotion decisions, compensation growth, and access to stretch assignments to ensure that people leaders who support flexible work, protect boundaries, or redesign workloads are not implicitly penalized. Policies like caregiving leave, flexible work options, and alternative leadership tracks matter here not simply as benefits but as signals about what leadership effectiveness looks like. When people leaders can trust that supporting sustainability will not carry hidden career costs, they are more likely to enact the practices that keep leadership pipelines intact.

Equip people leaders with skills, language, and authority to address domestic load spillover.

Leadership development programs often focus on interpersonal influence and strategic skills while overlooking the structural conditions that shape leaders' capacity to perform sustainably. Organizational leaders can strengthen people leaders' effectiveness by explicitly equipping them to address work-life dynamics as part of their leadership role. This includes providing training and tools that help people leaders have productive conversations about workload, boundaries, and sustainability; recognizing when domestic responsibilities are creating disproportionate strain; and redesigning work in ways that reduce unnecessary conflict. Importantly, this also means granting people leaders the authority to say no, reset priorities, and make trade-offs without reputational damage. When people leaders are supported in addressing work-family conflict directly, responsibility for managing strain shifts from individuals to shared systems.

Include discussion of the domestic load in existing leadership programs. Leadership development often overlooks the structural realities shaping career trajectories. Bringing domestic labor into leadership curricula can enable more honest, sustainable conversations and career planning. Ways to do this include facilitating discussions (and strategies) about negotiating household responsibilities, exploring how implicit gender norms are inherited and how they shape decisions at home and in careers, and cultivating ideas for dual-career partnership strategies. Include reflection exercises about long-term leadership aspirations and shared household planning. Although the tendency is often to focus on women, consider focusing on men as well. Offer programs to men that explicitly address shared caregiving and partnership equity. As part of such programs, create a safe space to facilitate conversations about identity, masculinity norms, and leadership. A productive framing



acknowledges that men's household engagement is constrained by real identity pressures that have their own structural causes. Redefining executive identity can include reinforcing the idea that effective leadership includes boundary-setting, sustainability, and modeling healthy work integration. When domestic labor is acknowledged as a leadership development topic, it shifts responsibility from women to shared systems.

Consider investments in couple-level career conversations as a leadership development strategy. Much of leadership development is organized around the individual as the unit of change. Our findings suggest, however, that some of the most important levers for sustainable leadership lie in the couple relationship rather than in the individual alone. For leaders whose household dynamics are creating work-family conflict and dampening leadership aspirations, individual coaching and career development programs address only part of the problem. Organizational leaders might consider how to create structured opportunities for leaders and their partners to engage in conversations about career sustainability, household equity, and shared planning — not as couples therapy but as a career partnership development activity. This could

be as simple as providing guided conversation frameworks for leaders to use at home, or as intentional as including partner-oriented sessions in executive development programs. The goal is not to position organizations as arbiters of household arrangements but to acknowledge that household dynamics are part of the leadership ecosystem. These organizations can then offer resources that help leaders and their partners navigate that system more intentionally. When household equity is treated as a shared responsibility rather than an individual accommodation, the conditions for sustainable leadership become attainable for more people.

Conclusion

The path to leadership does not begin at the office door. It begins at home, in the daily negotiations over who plans, remembers, and does the work of life. By conceptualizing household labor as part of the leadership system, this research expands how we understand leadership motivation and highlights new avenues for addressing persistent gender gaps in leadership — not by fixing women, but by redesigning the interconnected systems that shape their choices.



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