

## Gender and Leadership Aspiration: The impact of Work Life Initiatives

**Abstract**

Despite the increase of female leaders, women still remain a minority. As aspiration, defined as the interest for achieving a leadership position, is one predictor of advancement, it is important to understand conditions fostering female leadership aspiration. Because women face more domestic and childcare responsibilities, we predict that there is an interaction between gender and work life initiatives. These initiatives help employees balance their work and private life through simplifying the integration and diminishing tension between the two spheres. Because the work life interface poses greater challenges for women, we hypothesize that work life initiatives have a stronger influence on women's leadership aspiration. Results of a survey of  $N = 402$  employed men and women supported this hypothesis. The interaction effect of gender and work life initiatives on leadership aspiration was positive, implying that women's leadership aspiration is more influenced by work life initiatives. Yet, also our other hypothesis that work life initiatives – regardless of gender – are positively related to leadership aspiration was supported. Hence, also men's leadership aspiration was positively influenced by the availability of such initiatives. This study suggest that by implementing work life initiatives, such as e.g., flexible work arrangements, leave of absences or onsite child assistance, organizations may encourage leadership aspiration among both genders. Yet, as the our data shows that the interaction effect of gender and work life initiatives was positively related to leadership aspiration, this may particularly hold true for women.

Keywords: gender, leadership aspiration, work life initiatives

Still today the labor market is characterized by an inequality between men and women within leadership positions. Yet, the number of women within boards of the major listed companies within the EU has risen from 12% in 2010 to 23% in 2016 (European Commission, 2016). Although female leaders still depict a minority, it is expected that more women will occupy leadership positions at all levels in the future (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2003). At the same time, women still face more domestic or household responsibilities than men (Eagly & Carli, 2007, Krantz, Berntsson, & Lundberg, 2005; McKinsey & Company, 2016; Moreno-Colom, 2015), which has been identified as an important barrier for their hierarchical advancement (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Carli, 2007; McCarty Kilian, Hukai, & McCarty, 2005). Presumably it is also a barrier that discourages women's leadership aspiration. Leadership aspiration is defined as the personal interest for achieving a leadership position and the willingness to accept the offer to work in such a position (Singer, 1991). In order to facilitate the integration between work and family or domestic responsibilities "employees today are offered a wide range of work life arrangements" (den Dulk & de Ruijter, 2008, p. 1222). The question arising is whether the availability of work life initiatives has a positive impact on women's leadership aspiration? Understanding leadership aspiration is important because leadership aspiration is a major predictor of both hierarchical advancement (Tharenou, 2001), occupational status (Schoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007) and career attainment (Schoon & Polek, 2011). Thus, factors that are associated with the encouragement of women's leadership aspiration may play an important role in closing the gender gap in leadership attainment.

Evidence regarding gender differences in leadership aspiration is mixed. In reviewing the literature, we casted a wide net and not only draw on research in leadership aspiration but also on research in related, partially overlapping constructs, such as career aspiration (O'Brien, 1996) and managerial aspiration (Tharenou & Terry, 1998). The picture that

emerges is one of findings of lower aspiration for women than for men, mixed with findings of no gender differences. Overall, meta-analytic evidence shows that women have a lower motivation to manage than men (Eagly, Karau, Miner, & Johnson, 1994). Meta-analytic evidence also shows that men generally appreciate leadership and power more than women (Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigan, 2000). These meta-analytic findings are represented in primary research by such studies as Savery (1990) on leadership aspiration, Hoobler, Lemmon, and Wayne (2014) on managerial motivation, and Litzky and Greenhaus (2007) on senior management aspiration. Even when the overall meta-analytic conclusion of lower aspiration among women than among men is clear, there is also evidence that there is variability in this pattern, such as no evidence of gender differences in leadership aspiration (Singer, 1991) or career aspiration (Gbadamosi, Evans, Richardson, & Ridolof, 2015; Morrison, White, & Velsor, 1987). This raises some hope for a contingency perspective – a perspective focused on identifying potential moderating factors in the relationship between gender and leadership aspiration – to identify those influences that would eliminate gender differences in leadership aspiration. Although leadership aspiration is far from the only element in gender differences in leadership attainment (c.f. e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2007; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2016; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Vial, Napier, & Brescoll, 2016), a focus on identifying the circumstances under which women would feel equally encouraged to aspire to leadership would presumably help set the stage for more equality in leadership attainment. In short, the state of the science suggests that women tend to have lower leadership aspiration than men, but also that it is worthwhile to focus on influences that would reduce such gender differences in aspiration. This observation is the jumping-off point for the current analysis.

Our conceptual analysis anchors on the observation that lower aspiration among women is strongly associated with the work life interface. Women projecting themselves in the leader

role anticipate negative implications for their private sphere, including relationship issues (Killeen, López-Zafra, & Eagly, 2006; Lips, 2000, 2001) and insufficient time for the family (Cross, 2010; Ezzedeen, Budworth, & Baker, 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2016). Additionally, today's women still have more family responsibilities (Holt & Lewis, 2001; Maume, 2006; Moreno-Colom, 2015) as well as household duties (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Leonard, 2001; Moreno-Colom, 2015). These greater domestic demands have in fact been associated with "their lesser access to power and authority in society" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 49). We regard these to be highly notable findings because the anticipated negative consequences as well as the private demands might refrain women from expressing leadership aspiration. We thus propose that female leadership aspiration in particular may benefit from work life initiatives, which enable employees to balance as well as to integrate their work and private lives (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2009; Morris, Heames, & McMillan, 2011). We consider the impact of work life initiatives on leadership aspiration a highly interesting avenue of research because work life initiatives are under direct managerial control and can thus be introduced, steered, and adapted actively.

The contribution of our study lies in accentuating the importance of actively supporting women's ability to balance work and life demands for women's leadership aspiration. The interface of work and private life has been mostly neglected so far when studying organizational careers (Guillaume & Pochi, 2009). Our study also contributes to this literature in a broader sense by advancing our understanding of the role of the work life interface in gender differences in leadership aspiration. On the more practical side, our study contributes because it points to actionable insights on which organizations can take action in seeking to address gender inequalities in leadership.

### **Literature Review and Hypotheses**

Work life balance, a balanced equilibrium between one's job and private life, has increased in importance over the last years. Particularly as more generation Y employees are entering the workforce, work life balance rises in importance because this age cohort values an equilibrium between the private and the work life more than previous age groups (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance 2010).

As the importance of integrating work and life for employees – not only for talent acquisition and retention (De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott, & Pettit, 2005; Mitsakis & Talampekos, 2014; Morris, 2008) – is well understood, scholars have focused on examining the impact of work life initiatives. Such initiatives help employees to balance their work and private lives by enriching and facilitating the integration of work and life domains, while striving for reducing stress and tension between these domains (Morris et al., 2011).

Meta-analytic evidence shows that work life initiatives have been associated with various positive effects (Butts, Casper, & Yang, 2013; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Although work life initiatives and work family or family work conflict are not the same construct, work life initiatives are designed to reduce both types of conflict by facilitating the balancing of these life domains. In this regard, a meta-analysis of Hoobler, Hu, and Wilson (2010) is important to mention as they showed that work family conflict and family work conflict are negatively related to career satisfaction and the hierarchical organizational level attained. These meta-analytical integrations of the literature provide circumstantial evidence that work life initiatives may indeed boost leadership aspiration.

In sum then, before turning our attention back to the main focus of this study – the interaction of work life initiatives and gender differences in affecting leadership aspiration – we first focus on work life initiatives from a gender neutral perspective in the proposition that work life initiatives may foster leadership aspiration. Because a multitude of career decision nowadays is made by taking into consideration relevant family factors (Greenhaus & Kossek,

2014; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Powell & Greenhaus, 2012), because the importance of work life balance – particularly among the younger age cohort – is constantly rising (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Twenge et al., 2010), and because work family and family work conflict are detrimental for hierarchical attainment (Hoobler et al., 2010), we predict that work life initiatives have a positive impact on leadership aspiration.

*Hypothesis 1: Work life initiatives are positively related to leadership aspiration.*

### **Women and work life initiatives**

Even though today more than 60% of all 20 to 64 years old women living in the EU are employed (Eurostat, 2014), women are still spending considerably more time on domestic responsibilities than their husbands. Women spend between 1.5 times in the Nordic countries up to 3.4 times as much as their husbands in the Mediterranean countries on domestic responsibilities (Moreno-Colom, 2015). As such, still today women are “widely perceived as having primary responsibility for family care” (Holt & Lewis, 2011, p. 4). Women generally are more likely to prioritize a work-family equilibrium or strive for work life balance (Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2013; Hakim, 2000; Lubinski & Benbow, 2009)

Therefore, women’s careers are considered to be a multi-faceted kaleidoscope as they tend to adjust their career “by rotating different aspects in their lives to arrange their roles and relationships” (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, p. 106). Eagly and Carli (2007, p. 49) even state that the uneven split of domestic responsibilities can be associated with “their lesser access to power and authority in society”. In fact, it has been shown that in some cases the mere information about parental status is sufficient for discriminating against women in terms of starting salary and competence (Benard & Correll, 2015; Correll, Bernard, & Paik, 2007). Looking not merely at parental status, but caregiving obligations, Henle, Fisher, and Mattingly (2015) further emphasized the link between caregiving and lower performance ratings and unfavorable hiring situations. Put differently, women who become mothers are

less likely to be hired or promoted (Berggren & Lauster, 2014; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). As today work-family conflict is still considered a women's issue (Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2013), Hoobler, Lemmon and Wayne (2011) showed that sometimes the mere expectation that women face a potential family work conflict, being the so called family-work-conflict bias, is associated with lower performance reviews and fewer promotions. As such, women's domestic responsibilities can be regarded as a major barrier for women's hierarchical advancement (Cross, 2010; McCarty Kilian et al., 2005).

In order to cater to these domestic responsibilities, women, more so than men, are the ones "limiting their work efforts for the sake of family life" (Maume, 2006, p. 867) and as such many women, particularly those having children, seek flexible jobs (Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2013; Cabrera 2009; Corrigan & Konrad, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ferriman, Lubinski, & Benbow, 2009; Gerstel & Clawson, 2014; Loscocco, 1997). However, as the ideal employee is still characterized as someone who always prioritizes work over family (Bailyn, 2006; Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010; Rapoport, 2002; Williams, Berdahl, & Vandello, 2016), and as working long hours is often equated with commitment (Kossek, Ollier-Malaterre, Lee, Pichler, & Hall, 2016), women who show that they are family-oriented are often considered to undertake an obvious withdrawal from the contest for power (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). Taking part in work life initiatives and a retraction from power can, however, not be equated. In a qualitative study Guillaume and Pochic (2009) have shown that mothers who want to climb up the hierarchical ladder also try to adjust their work life so that it fits their family demands (e.g., through part-time and telework). In fact, Dikkers, van Engen, and Vinkenburg (2010) found that ambitious parents, particularly ambitious mothers, use work life initiatives more often than less ambitious parents. Nevertheless, women more than men actively weigh the costs and benefits of moving up to the next hierarchical level (Cross & Linehan, 2006).

When thinking about moving up the career ladder, women often expect negative consequences. For instance, women projecting themselves in the leader role expect negative implications for their private environment. Women are afraid to have insufficient time for their family (Cross, 2010; Ezzedeen et al., 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2016). Moreover, they fear to face private relationship issues (Killeen et al., 2006; Lips, 2000, 2001). This would seem to be a highly important finding and we expect that work life initiatives, allowing women to better balance their private life with their work life, may have an important impact for their leadership aspiration.

Not surprisingly, women are making more use of work life initiatives than men (Smith, & Gardner, 2007). For instance, more than 30% of women in the EU work part-time (Eurostat, 2014). Women classify the availability of work life initiatives as a kind of organizational support, leading to an increase in their organizational attachment or loyalty (Casper & Harris, 2008; Ollier-Malaterre, 2010). This association between work life initiatives and support is a highly relevant finding, because support is known to be one of the precursors of women's organizational advancement (Morrison et al., 1987; Tharenou, 2001).

Further, looking at female physicians, Pas, Peters, Doorewaard, Eisinga, and Lagro-Janssen (2014) have demonstrated that gender-equality arrangements, which are partially congruent with work life initiatives (e.g., including part-time work or on-site childcare), have a positive impact on general female career motivation for women with clear role prioritization.

In sum, women still have more domestic responsibilities than men (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Leonard, 2001; Moreno-Colom, 2015) and they anticipate more negative consequences than men for the private sphere when envisioning being a leader themselves (Cross, 2010; Ezzedeen et al., 2015; Killeen et al., 2006; Lips, 2000, 2001). Both these influences may discourage women's leadership aspiration and result in lower aspiration for women than for



men. Accordingly, we predict that work life initiatives, which are designed to alleviate negative work-to-life effects, have a stronger positive impact on women's leadership aspiration, because these work life issues are a greater concern for women vis-à-vis leadership aspiration.

*Hypothesis 2:* Work life initiatives have a stronger influence on women's leadership aspiration than on men's leadership aspiration.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

We used an online survey administered by a British online panel provider to collect the data for our study. We selected a British sample as we believed that the British cultural context might be well suited to study female leadership aspiration, being accustomed to female leaders, such as female political leaders Theresa May or Nicola Sturgeon or business leaders such as Emma Walmsley (GSK), Alison Cooper (Imperial Tobacco), or Carolyn McCall (Easyjet) (Telegraph, 2016). The online panel provider recruited respondents who had to fulfill certain criteria, such as having a partner, being working fulltime with at least three years of working experience as well as having at least one year of job tenure. After completing the survey successfully, respondents received a small monetary compensation in accordance with the online panel's modus operandi. Such online surveys are opposed to some critiques. They are criticized for the possibility of respondents' multiple participation (Birnbaum, 2004), technological variations in their layout, potential recognition as spam and usage difficulties for respondents with a lack of online experience (Evans & Mathur, 2005). To surmount these drawbacks, we ensured that each respondent could only fill out the survey once by using personalized links. We pre-tested the survey regarding functionality and readability in different browsers before its launch and only participants of the online panel, hence people being willing to answer surveys, were contacted. As currently 87% of the adult

population in the UK do have internet access (UK Office for National Statistic, 2014), we do not consider the lack of online experience to be a major concern. Therefore, we are convinced that the quality of our online data is adequate and similar to the one of a traditional pen and paper survey.

### **Participants**

In total, 402 respondents answered the survey. Of these 402 respondents, 202 were male and the remaining 200 were female. 50.0% of the women and 49.5% of the men had children. Their age ranged from 21 to 65 years ( $M = 43.85$ ,  $SD = 10.85$ ). Overall, the sample had on average 22 years of work experience, ranging from the required minimum of 3 to a maximum of 50 years ( $M = 22.16$ ,  $SD = 11.85$ ). Their organizational tenure ranged from 1 to 43 years ( $M = 10.88$ ,  $SD = 9.09$ ) and their job tenure ranged from 1 to 35 years ( $M = 7.22$ ,  $SD = 6.26$ ). Concerning job descriptions, more than a quarter (25.6%) reported a managerial job, whereas 11.4% reported an IT, 8.5% a business, 8.0% a teaching, 5.0% a health, 3.7% a science and engineering and 3.7% a legal and social job. The remaining 34.1% classified themselves as having a different job description than the before-mentioned categories. Regarding the hierarchical position, 36.6% had a non-supervising position, 23.1% were first-level managers, 23.1% held a lower/ middle manager position, 8.0% were employed within upper management and 9.2% were executives. The cultural background was relatively uniform as 90.5% were British, followed by 5.0% Continental European, 2.7% Asian, 0.7% Australian, 0.5% African, 0.2% North American and 0.2% South American.

### **Design**

**Leadership aspiration:** Our dependent variable leadership aspiration was measured with a 17-item, 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), measuring both intentions as well as behaviors. To measure the former, we made use of the “leadership and achievement scale” developed by Gray and O’Brien (2007). In addition to their six items, we

introduced another three items according to their call to broaden the scale. Sample items, such as “I hope to become a leader in my career field”, “I hope to move up through any organization or business I work in” and “My aspirations for advancing in management positions are very high” were included in the scale measuring intentions.

In addition to intentions we also measured behaviors – yet still self-reported – in order to have more objective measures than only intentions (Tharenou & Terry, 1998). Regarding the measurement of behaviors, we were inspired by the work of Day and Allen (2004), being adapted from London (1993) and Noe, Noe, and Bachhuber (1990) as well as Tharenou and Terry (1998). The behavior part of the leadership aspiration scale included items such as “I have engaged in career path planning”, “I have updated my skills in order to be more competitive for promotions” or “I have requested to be considered for promotions”. (see the Appendix for the full scale)

**Work Life Initiatives:** The work life initiatives construct was measured by asking respondents to answer questions regarding the availability of five distinct types of work life initiatives (with three different answer possibilities: “yes”, “no” and “I do not know”). While the categories were initially developed by Lobel and Kossek (1996); Morris et al. (2011) selected the five most relevant categories according to their expected usage in practice. The five different work life initiatives categories were *information-based* (i.e., trainings regarding work life initiatives), *job-design* (i.e., flexible work arrangements), *time-based* (i.e., leave of absences), *direct-service-based* (i.e., onsite child care) and *financial-based initiatives* (i.e., tuition reimbursement) (See the Appendix for the full scale). Even when each item targets a distinct type of work life initiative, the logic here is that they can be combined (summed) into one scale as reflecting the organization’s overall focus on work life initiatives (cf. “bundles” of HR practices).

**Gender.** Obviously, we included gender in the design as a predictor variable, as well as the gender by work live initiatives interaction.

**Control variables.** To control for the potential heterogeneity of the sample and because “control variables are as important as independent and dependent variables” (Becker, 2005, p. 275), we chose control variables based on the rationale that they should either covary with gender or possess a strong theoretical basis for inclusion as emphasized by Carlson and Wu (2001). Firstly, we decided to control for organizational experience and work experience, measured in years as men (mean work experience = 26.10; mean organizational experience = 12.18) were more senior than women (mean work experience = 18.17; mean organizational experience = 9.56). Moreover, we also decided to control for job description (1 = manager, 0 = other) as considerably more men (31.7%) than women (19.5%) identified themselves as having a managerial job description. Regarding the hierarchical level, we were further interested to understand whether having a position in the lower or middle management affected leadership aspiration because it has been argued by Eagly and Karau (2002, p. 577), that the incongruity between the leader and female role “might be somewhat lower for middle managers”. Therefore, we controlled for this potential influence on leadership aspiration, dummy-coding hierarchical level 1 = lower/ middle manager, 0 = other. We also decided to control for firm size, because meta-analytic evidence indicates that firm size can be considered to be a proxy for organizational resources which are related to promotions – even if the effect is small (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). It is thus imaginable that also the aspiration to such promotions, or to be more specific leadership aspiration, is related to firm size. Therefore we decided to control for firm size as done by Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, and Wiethoff (2010) by creating a dummy variable (1 = firm with  $\geq 5,000$  employees and 0 = firm with  $< 5,000$  employees). Europeans tend to be more accustomed to generous paid parental leaves (i.e., an important *time-based work life initiative*) than people from other parts of the

world (World Policy Center, 2014), which may influence their response to work-life initiatives. We therefore controlled for national background, dummy-coded 1 = European (incl. British) and 0 = other.

## Results

Means, standard deviations as well as intercorrelations for all variables can be found in Table 1, as well as reliabilities (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for the leadership aspiration and work life initiatives. Reliability for the leadership aspiration scale was very good ( $\alpha = .96$ ), while it was acceptable for the work life initiatives scale ( $\alpha = .68$ ). This difference in reliability is not surprising for two reasons. First, all other things being equal Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is a function of the number of items, which puts the 17-item leadership aspiration scale at an advantage over the 5-item work life initiatives scale. Second, the measurement items are different in nature in that each work life initiatives item targets a different type of work life initiatives, whereas the items of the leadership aspiration scale should be much more interchangeable in tapping the same psychological construct. Thus, even when work life initiative items should be correlated (i.e., as all reflecting the organization's focus on work life initiatives), they can be expected to have weaker intercorrelations than the leadership aspiration items.

### Hypothesis tests

**Leadership aspiration.** To test our two hypotheses regarding leadership aspiration, we executed a hierarchical regression analysis in which leadership aspiration was predicted by main effect terms (work life initiatives, gender, and the control variables) at step 1 and the interaction term (work life initiatives x gender) at step 2. According to Aiken and West (1991) the variable work life initiatives was centered by subtracting the mean from each score and both the interaction as well as the main effect term were based on this centered score. Results are displayed in Table 2. The  $R^2$  of the regression analysis changed from .178 (step 1) to .186 (step 2).

Supporting Hypothesis 1, step 1 showed significant effects for work life initiatives ( $b = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There were also some significant relationships for control variables, however, as they are not needed for the hypotheses testing, they are only displayed in Table 2 and not mentioned here. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the interaction term of work life initiatives x gender, being added at step 2, was significantly related to leadership aspiration ( $b = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ). According to Aiken and West (1991), we conducted simple slope analyses to test the direction of the interaction term. The analyses showed that work life initiatives were significantly positively related to leadership aspiration for women ( $b = .21$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as well as for men ( $b = .10$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, because the slope for women is steeper than the one for men, we can conclude, in line with Hypothesis 2, that work life initiatives are more important for women's leadership aspiration (see figure 1 for a visualization)<sup>1</sup>.

## Discussion

There still is an unequal division of life responsibilities between the sexes. As such women may experience career barriers that discourage their leadership aspiration. From this perspective, we proposed that work life initiatives may be more important in encouraging women's leadership aspiration than men's. The results of our study confirmed that indeed the influence of work life initiatives on leadership aspiration is stronger for women than for men as the interaction effect of gender and work life initiatives was positively related to leadership aspiration. We believe that this is a highly relevant and interesting focus. Although some important research has been done on aspiration (e.g., Hoobler et al., 2014; Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007), scholars so far have mostly focused on removing barriers to leadership

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<sup>1</sup> In a supplementary analysis we also explored whether the presence of dependent children was more negatively related to leadership aspiration for women than for men, following up on the insightful suggestion of an anonymous reviewer that this could be in line with our analysis. This interaction was not significant. We believe this does not argue against the issue of care for dependent children being more on the agenda for women, because women may also have reduced leadership aspiration due to anticipated child care (a variable we did not assess).

aspiration rather than focused on influences that could proactively stimulate women's leadership aspiration. Regarding potential barriers to leadership aspiration scholars have paid attention to both individual factors and to the requirements of the leadership role itself. Regarding individual factors, scholars have looked at factors such as self-efficacy (Hackett & Betz, 1981; Hoyt, 2012) as well as automatic negative personal gender stereotyping (Rudman & Phelan, 2010). Studying leadership role requirements, the focus was on women's association with the leader role and their fear to have insufficient time for their families (Lips, 2000, 2001) or to encounter relationship problems (Killeen et al., 2006). Yet, there seems to be a lack of understanding in the literature how the organizational environment in fact may stimulate women's leadership aspiration by dint of work life initiatives. Our findings regarding the impact of work life initiatives thus do have some relevant theoretical as well as practical implications.

### **Theoretical Implications**

We contend that the impact of work life initiatives is a highly interesting and relevant focus because it connects well with the notion that women still face a reality in which they have more domestic responsibilities than their male colleagues. Work life initiatives are targeted at smoothing the balance between the private and work life and may as such be particularly important in creating the conditions for women to aspire to leadership positions. It is important to mention that we also found a positive relationship between work life initiatives and men's leadership aspiration. This finding is in line with the fact that although gender differences in domestic responsibilities are distinct, "differences between the time that men and women spend on domestic and care work show a decreasing trend" (Moreno-Colom, 2015, p. 19). It is further expected that men's workplace behavior will undergo a further shift so that more men will be willing to invest more time in their families and therefore take time off work (Barnett, 2004). Today's adolescents, the future adults, agree that the responsibility

for the family should be a joint responsibility between the genders (Tinklin, Croxford, Ducklin, & Frame, 2005). Even when work life initiatives currently may be more important to women than to men, there thus is a clear case that they are not only catering to women's needs and that their universal value may grow in years to come.

Our findings regarding the positive impact on work life initiatives on leadership aspiration beg the question how such initiatives can be embedded within the organizational environment – what are the boundary conditions for such initiatives to be effective? This question is particularly important to answer in contexts, such as the UK contexts, in which there is the "right to request" in place, implying that companies need to offer and consider requests for flexible work arrangements from their employees (Huffington Post, 2014). Despite this employees' right to demand flexible work arrangements and the recognition of work life initiatives to be important also by HR executives (Morris et al., 2008), they are not yet universally accepted within organizations. Moreover, there is also a case to be made that "the presence of work-life initiatives is not enough to be effective" (Morris, 2008, p. 100) as "informal practices appear to stigmatize the use of these policies" (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013, p. 210). Still today the ideal employee is characterized by male attributes and as someone who does not have domestic responsibilities and always prioritizes work (Bailyn, 2006, Kelly et al., 2010). As a result, even with work life initiatives in place, people may be hesitant to use them. Kossek, Lewis, and Hammer (2009) warned that the use of work life initiatives can invite negative perceptions because it is a deviation from the image of the ideal worker who always prioritizes the job and thus by implication would not use such initiatives.

Thus, work life initiatives can in some cases also be considered to be a double edged sword, or put differently "flexibility as currently practiced may be reinforcing, as much as changing, the gender division of labor" (Rubery, Keizer, & Grimshaw, 2016, p. 247).

Whereas some studies show the positive impact of family-friendly initiatives on reduced sex



discrimination (Kim, Longacre, & Werner; 2016), other studies show negative effects associated with work life initiatives. In a qualitative case study Beck and Davis (2005) found employees using work life initiatives sometimes received disapproving or mocking comments despite them being a well-established program in the organization. Conducting a qualitative study within an Australian organization, McDonald, Bradley, and Brown (2008) further found that people using work life initiatives, such as taking parental leaves or working part-time, still face career penalties. Women may in particular be punished when using such initiatives. Although the “think manager, think male” paradigm is fading and people start to acknowledge the more communal, more feminine elements of leadership (Hoyt, 2010), meta-analytic evidence indicates that more people – particularly men – still attribute leadership to masculine attributes (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). If only women then make use of work life initiatives, they could in fact foster gender stereotypes (Vinkenburg, 2009). Moreover, women making use of work life initiatives may be stigmatized (Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014). They may be excluded from development opportunities (Holt & Lewis, 2001) or faced with a compulsory role change and accompanying loss of status (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010).

It is therefore essential to deeply embed work life initiatives within the organization as supportive organizational environments are known to foster resilience (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). Hence, such initiatives should not be regarded as means to help “non-ideal workers”, but rather as an effective tool to increase organizational effectiveness (Kossek et al., 2009). Put differently, they should be regarded as an important organizational development intervention (Kossek et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2011). In order to achieve such an embeddedness, it is essential to create an organizational culture that is supportive of the employment of such initiatives. As Harrington (2007, p. 13) put it: work life initiatives “are necessary, but not sufficient”. In order to render such programs successful, it is essential to “reduce flexibility and family structure bias” (Kossek et al., 2016, p. 239) and support a

cultural shift towards a more work-family integrative culture is needed. The organizational culture needs to change as otherwise women employing work life initiatives to cater to family demands “will continue to be at a competitive disadvantage in career advancement” (Mavin, 2001, p. 183). Meta-analytic evidence showed the general link between a family-friendly culture and a reduction in work family conflict (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2006). Further, Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) showed the positive link between such a culture and the usage of work life initiatives. Future research should therefore focus on how such a cultural shift towards a work-family culture can be undertaken and which steps are essential working towards the goal of increasing leadership aspiration as well as participation of women.

### **Practical Implications**

The question arising is, what do these theoretical implications mean for practice? Work life initiatives are organizational practices, and the direct practical implication of our findings is obvious: by implementing work life initiatives, organizations may encourage women’s leadership aspiration. And thus presumably contribute to increasing gender parity by closing the gender gap in leadership. This is in line with the World Economic Forum’s global gender gap report (2014), in which work life balance and the corresponding initiatives were identified as one of the six focus dimensions to increase gender parity. Within our study, we could show that various initiatives, such as education regarding work life initiatives, flexible work arrangements, leave of absences, onsite child care or financial assistance programs, are associated with enhanced leadership aspiration. More tentatively, however, we may suggest that some of the issues we raised in the Theoretical Implications section as important ways forward in research would also have important implications for practice – even when this currently comes with the caveat that stronger conclusions will have to await further research.

The more tentative suggestion inspired by our study is that it is important for the effectiveness of work life initiatives to create an environment in which work life initiatives are widely accepted. As discussed above, in order to improve the conditions for using work life initiatives, a change in the organizational culture towards a more family friendly culture is necessary. First of all, it is important that organizations “walk the talk” as currently companies offering initiatives are sometimes criticized to just “pay lip service” (Cross & Linehan, 2006, p. 34). Companies should stress towards all their stakeholders that work life initiatives depict a win-win rather than a zero sum solution (Vinkenburg, 2015). Not only can these initiatives be a win-win for employees themselves but also for the organizations as top managers agree that work life initiatives should be designed in a way that they “benefit both the employees and the organization” (Been, den Dulk, & van der Lippe, 2016).

In order to initiate such a change towards a work life friendly culture supervisors play a key role (cf., Smith & Gardner, 2007). Supervisors should be entitled to negotiate work life initiatives with their subordinates, they should be hold accountable for work life metrics, and they could potentially act as role models. Regarding the former, Major and Lauzun (2010) identified entitlement of supervisors to discuss and negotiate customized solutions with their direct reports how to improve work life balance, as a best practice. However, it is essential that supervisors do not only find solutions regarding the employment of suitable work life initiative but also ensure that they do not equate the employment of such initiatives with an automatic proactive withdrawal from power. This is particularly important when working with female direct reports.

Working mothers, sharing responsibilities with their partners, are generally perceived in a positive way (Vinkenburg, van Engen, Coffeng, & Dijkers, 2012) and as such women generally feel a greater entitlement for using work life initiatives. (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010; Lewis, 1997). Yet, they do not feel entitled simultaneously for equal career

opportunities (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010; Lewis, 1997). Put differently, many women feel that they have to choose between a career and making use of work life initiatives. However, as increasing female leadership aspiration is a very important goal of most organizations, supervisors and management should assure women that it is not a decision “either or” but that they can still progress while making use of work life initiatives. Therefore, direct supervisors, management as well as human resource employees should cooperate and develop alternative career paths to the top, incorporating e.g., part-time work, telework or leave of absences. Once more women reach the top, it may be an additional stimulus to the adoption of work life initiatives, as evidenced in positive relationships between the number of female managers within an organization and the level of adoption of work life initiatives (Dreher, 2003; Pasamar & Alegre, 2015).

Further, to ensure the success of the employment of work life initiatives, their impact should be measured. According to Kossek (2016) work life initiatives could and should be measured regarding their positive impact on the triple bottom line (society, employers, and employees). For organizations it is particularly reasonable to measure the impact of work life initiatives on the individual employee and the organization, the employer, as a whole. Therefore, it is advised to introduce key performance indicators (KPIs), measuring the impact of work life initiatives on an individual level (e.g., employee’s work family and family work conflict) as well as on an organizational level (e.g., reduction of terminations due to incongruence of work and private demands). Relevant KPIs measuring the impact of work life initiatives should be further used for the assessment of supervisors and management alike to increase their dedication to creating a work family balanced organizational environment. This advice is in line with McCarty Kilian et al.’s (2005) suggestion that managers should be held accountable for diversity metrics to embed the acceptance of work life initiatives and reduce potential negative effects. Moreover, supervisors are not only essential in terms of negotiating

work life initiatives with employees and being accountable for their success; supervisors employing work life initiatives themselves could act as role models for women. The positive impact of role models on women's leadership aspiration has been shown by various scholars (cf. Asgari, Dasgupta, & Stout, 2012; Ely, 1994; Hoyt & Simon, 2012). Also, supervisors who are parent themselves are perceived as more family supportive by subordinates who are also parents (Basuil, Manegold, & Casper, 2016).

Referring back to the previous discussion of the potential double edged sword character of work life initiatives, it is not only important that work life initiatives are accepted throughout and embedded within the organization. It is equally important that these initiatives are not designed in a gender-exclusive manner. Gender-specific initiatives for women do manifest normative beliefs about parenting and are as such less beneficial for women than flexible and customizable initiatives (Vinkenburg, van Engen & Peters, 2015). In line with this reasoning, a recent study by The Peterson Institute for International Economics and Ernst & Young (2016) showed that although paid maternity leave (a form of a *time-based initiative*) is linked to a greater number of female employees, it is equally associated with slower female career progression. In contrast, paid parental leaves (i.e., similar initiatives but in a gender-neutral form) are associated with women's leadership attainment. However also these parental leaves do feature a time threshold, if they exceed two years, they are associated with lower female employment numbers (World Economic Forum, 2015). Thus, designing work life initiatives in a gender-neutral manner while keeping in mind relevant thresholds is key for practitioners.

Not only is it important to design work life initiatives in a gender-neutral manner, it is equally important to focus on the varying needs for employees. Today non-work orientations are not one-dimensional (work vs. family life), but multidimensional, including the family, community and personal life dimension (e.g., hobbies or time for oneself) (Hall, Kossek,

Briscoe, Pichler, & Lee, 2013). Thus, as employees' needs differ it is important to "not purport a work-life balance solution" (Abstein & Spieth, 2014, p. 218) or to not "adopt a one-size fits all approach" (Kossek, 2016, p. 254). Organizations should work on adapting work life initiatives to cater to changing employees' needs with the ultimate aim of retaining employees within the organization as well as maintaining and growing their leadership aspiration. Unawareness of and inequality in the provision of work life initiatives have been identified as major hindrances in a study of a New Zealand company (Liddicoat, 2003). It is therefore important that awareness is ensured and that the access to work life initiatives is provided to all members of the organization – yet work life initiatives might have different configurations per function. Thus, the human resource department should develop and execute an effective communication and training strategy as well as create and provide an encompassing initiatives package – potentially customized to different functions.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Our study has some limitations that need to be mentioned. First and foremost our study is of correlational nature and we can therefore not make inferences about causality. To be able to draw inferences about causality between work life initiatives and leadership aspiration, field-experimental data is needed from a context in which the availability of work life initiatives can be experimentally varied.

We may also note that we used single source data, which is not ideal as compared with more objective company data on work life initiatives. At the same time we note that the primary problem with single source data is with percept-percept relationships. Our study, however, focuses on the interaction of gender (an objective variable) and work life initiatives (arguably a reasonably factual measure for people to report on), for which such concerns loom

less – especially because single source biases lead to the overestimation of main effects and not interaction effects (McClelland & Judd, 1993).

An additional issue worth mentioning is that we focused on the availability of work life initiatives and not also on their use. Whereas at first blush this may seem a trivial distinction because the support for our hypothesis may suggest that availability must be closely connected with use. It is possible, however, that the availability of work life initiatives communicates organizations' openness to work life issues and thus may encourage (women's) leadership aspiration. Even when employees do not currently use these initiatives, the message that their availability conveys about the organization's attitude (cf. organizational climate; Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013) might reduce worries about potential work life conflicts that might develop once a (higher) leadership position is attained. Future research separating the availability and use of work life initiatives would thus be worthwhile.

Further, it would be a highly interesting avenue of future research to look at more objective outcomes, such as leadership attainment. Although leadership aspiration and attainment are clearly linked (cf. Schoon & Polek, 2011; Tharenou, 2001), we should not equate these two constructs. There may be additional factors that are worthwhile examining as also women with same aspiration levels as men might still have more difficulty in eventually reaching leadership positions due to other important factors influencing leadership attainment. Thus, it would be highly interesting to distinguish between the general existence of such practices and the individual's usage of such initiatives and to inquire whether the individual's employment of work life initiatives has an impact on leadership attainment. Therefore, further longitudinal (field) studies on the impact of the usage of work life initiatives on women's leadership attainment should be conducted.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of augmenting the number of women leaders is unquestionable and targets such as having a 40% female executive board participation in the EU by 2020 have been set (European Commission, 2013). Our results depict a crucial step towards understanding how important work life initiatives are for leadership aspiration per se as we could show – as hypothesized – that there is a positive interaction between the availability of work life initiatives and leadership aspiration. Further, our results also show that there is a positive interaction effect of gender and work life initiatives, implying that women's leadership aspiration is more influenced by work life initiatives. Therefore, our findings highlight interesting avenues for both future research (such as e.g., studying the effect of different work life initiatives and their distinct impact on female leadership aspiration) and beneficial implications for practitioners who work towards facilitating the integration between the work and private life to ultimately increase women's leadership aspiration.



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Table 1

*Descriptive statistics and correlations*

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Leadership aspiration	3.04	0.90	(.96)							
2. Gender	n/a	n/a	.01							
3. Work life initiatives	1.87	1.50	.30**	.03	(.68)					
4. Organizational experience	10.88	9.09	-.06	-.15**	.05					
5. Work experience	22.16	11.85	-.20**	-.34**	-.10*	.47**				
6. Firm size	n/a	n/a	.02	-.01	.18**	.13*	-.03			
7. Hierarchical level	n/a	n/a	.18**	-.11*	.14**	.04	.03	.11*		
8. Cultural background	n/a	n/a	-.06	-.03	-.09	.08	.13*	-.15**	-.05	
9. Job description	n/a	n/a	.24**	-.14**	.11*	.06	.07	-.04	.27**	.04

*Note.* Gender (1 = female; 0 = male), firm size (1 =  $\geq 5,000$  employees, 0 =  $< 5,000$  employees), hierarchical level (1 = lower/middle manager; 0 = other), Job description (1 = Manager; 0 = other) and cultural background (1 = European, incl. British; 0 = other) are dummy-coded variables. Coefficients alpha for each scale are given in parentheses on the diagonal.

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 2

*Regression Results for Leadership Aspiration*

<b>Predictor</b>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Step 1</i>					
Constant	3.34	0.22		14.97	.000
Gender	-0.05	0.09	-.03	-0.57	.569
Work life initiatives	0.15	0.03	.25	5.26	.000
Organizational experience	0.00	0.01	.01	0.20	.839
Work experience	-0.02	0.00	-.20	-3.61	.000
Firm size	-0.07	0.09	-.04	-0.77	.440
Hierarchical level	0.20	0.10	.09	1.94	.053
Cultural background	-0.08	0.20	-.02	-0.39	.700
Job description	0.41	0.10	.20	4.09	.000
<i>Step 2</i>					
Constant	3.36	0.22		15.11	.000
Gender	-0.05	0.09	-.03	-0.58	.561
Work life initiatives	0.10	0.04	.16	2.41	.016
Organizational experience	0.00	0.01	.02	0.38	.705
Work experience	-0.02	0.00	-.21	-3.77	.000
Firm size	-0.09	0.09	-.04	-0.90	.368
Hierarchical level	0.22	0.10	.10	2.16	.032
Cultural background	-0.10	0.20	-.02	-0.51	.612
Job description	0.41	0.10	.20	4.11	.000
Gender x work life initiatives	0.11	0.06	.13	1.98	.048



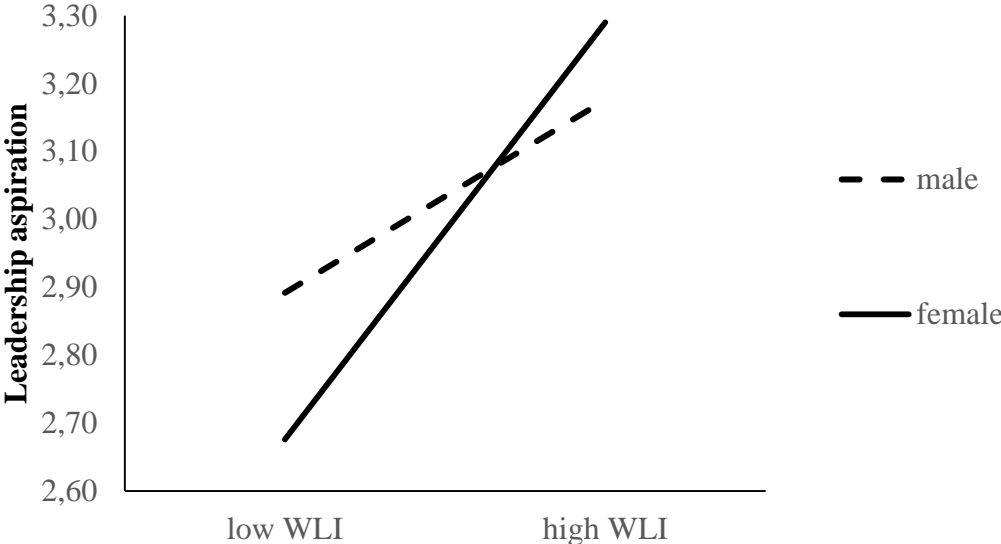


Figure 1. Simple slope analysis of leadership aspiration.

## Appendix

*Gender differences in demographics and control variables*

	Women			Men		
	Mean	SD	%	Mean	SD	%
<i>Demographics</i>						
<i>Experience</i>						
Age	40.42	10.46		47.23	10.17	
Work experience	18.17	10.88		26.11	11.47	
Organizational experience	9.56	8.42		12.18	9.54	
Job experience	6.52	5.71		7.91	6.70	
<i>Hierarchical position</i>						
Non-supervisor			43.5%			29.7%
First level management			25.0%			21.3%
Middle management			18.5%			27.7%
Upper management			7.5%			8.4%
Executive management			5.5%			12.9%
<i>Job description</i>						
Manager			19.5%			31.7%
Science			4.5%			3.0%
Health			8.0%			2.0%
Business			9.5%			7.4%
Teaching			10.5%			5.4%
IT			8.5%			14.4%
Law			5.5%			2.0%
Other			34.0%			34.2%
<i>Cultural background</i>						
European			95.0%			96.1%
North American			0.5%			0.0%
South American			0.5%			0.0%
African			0.5%			0.5%
Asian			3.0%			2.5%
Australian			0.5%			1.0%

*Measurements***Leadership aspiration** (5-point scale, 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)

Please indicate to which extent you agree with each statement:

- (1) I hope to become a leader in my career field.
- (2) When I am established in my career, I would like to manage other employees.
- (3) I do not plan on devoting energy to getting promoted in the organization or business I am working in. (reverse)
- (4) When I am established in my career, I would like to train others.
- (5) I hope to move up through any organization or business I work in.
- (6) Attaining leadership status in my career is not that important to me. (reverse)
- (7) I would like to obtain a (higher) leadership position.
- (8) I would like to be in a position of greater responsibility and influence in my department/organization.
- (9) My aspirations are very high in regard to professional recognition and achievement.
- (10) I have sought feedback on my job performance.
- (11) I have discussed my career prospects with someone with more experience in the department/organization.
- (12) I have engaged in career path planning.
- (13) I have updated my skills in order to be more competitive for promotion.
- (14) I have discussed my aspirations with a senior person in the department/organization.
- (15) I have volunteered for activities other than my day-to-day work tasks, such as working parties and selection panels.
- (16) I have volunteered for important assignments with the intent of helping to further my advancement possibilities.
- (17) I have requested to be considered for promotions.

**Work Life Initiatives** ((1) yes, (2) no, (3) I do not know)

Please indicate whether the company you work for provides the following work/ life initiatives

- (1) Information-based initiatives (e.g., education, training, seminars on work/ life initiatives)
- (2) Job-design initiatives (e.g., flexible work arrangements such as flexscheduling, telecommuting)
- (3) Time-based initiatives (e.g., paid/unpaid time-off, leave)
- (4) Direct-services-based initiatives (e.g., onsite child/elder care assistance)
- (5) Financial-based initiatives (e.g., financial assistance programs, such as flexible spending accounts, long-term disability insurance, tuition reimbursement)

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*Note.* Leadership aspiration scale adapted from Gray and O'Brien (2007); Tharenou and Terry (1998); Day and Allen (2004) – being itself adapted from London (1993) and Noe et al. (1990). Work life initiatives scale developed by Lobel and Kossek (1996).