

# PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
APRIL 2014

BROUGHT TO YOU BY



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**V E R N O N**  
RESEARCH GROUP

## INTRODUCTION

The inaugural Pathways to Leadership study, launched in early 2013, invited women from across the state of Iowa to share their perspectives and personal stories about female leadership. Our goal was to discover and share information about what factors hinder or help women in their paths toward leadership in all aspects of their lives. The study confirmed that Iowa has many strong women leaders in our communities, organizations, schools and workplaces. But the findings also reveal that much more can be done to support women in pursuing and serving in leadership roles. Investing in women's leadership can yield substantial returns: National research has documented that our economy and society as a whole benefit when more women are at the leadership table.

## TOP 10 PATHWAYS RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on Pathways study results, all organizations – companies, nonprofit agencies, government offices, educational institutions, and civic and religious groups – can encourage and enhance women's leadership by directing support and resources toward these 10 key areas:

- 1. Skill development, leadership opportunities, and mentoring to girls and young women**, starting in elementary school and continuing through college; the K-8 years are especially important, as is encouraging girls who may not be the extroverted “natural” leaders
- 2. Training** that builds women's work-specific and leadership skills
- 3. Mentor and peer support** through formal and informal networking opportunities, as well as training and support for mentors and mentees, making sure network opportunities are not gender-specific (e.g., corporate golf outings)
- 4. Leadership development programs** that create awareness of the value of both male and female leaders and include female strengths (e.g., collaboration and communication) as indicators of performance
- 5. Development and support initiatives** that encourage female leadership at the state and national levels in all types of organizations and institutions
- 6. Public relations and media efforts** that increase the amount and depth of stories featuring female leaders from all facets of our economy and communities
- 7. Work flexibility** that allows employees to balance family, work, and leadership roles, and engages women with young families so they can contribute in some way now and expand their roles later
- 8. Gender discrimination is not pervasive**, but it does still exist, especially for younger women and in the form of low expectations for female leaders
- 9. Diversity and leadership programs must reach out to women in lower and middle income brackets**, including women with lower educational levels and women of diverse ethnicity
- 10. Personal skills inventories** can help individual women strengthen their own leadership and assist other women along the way, e.g. through advocacy, mentorship, and leadership training

## ABOUT THE STUDY

The Pathways to Leadership study was launched at the IWLC Spring Conference in Coralville, Iowa, on April 23, 2013, by IWLC and Vernon Research Group. Data collection continued through August.

Personal invitations were sent via email to women serving in leadership roles across the state in business, education, religious institutions, civic organizations, government (elected and non-elected), economic development organizations, agricultural associations and more. We also connected with many professional, networking, and other women's and leadership groups, which then sent information to their members and invited their participation. A public relations effort spread the word in news media about the opportunity to participate. Women did not have to be currently serving in a leadership role to be part of the study.

The number of completed surveys was 724, with participants from all regions of the state. The study did skew slightly to an older, more educated, and upper income woman, but that also reflects those who predominantly serve in leadership roles today. Future studies will expand efforts to include more diversity in the study.

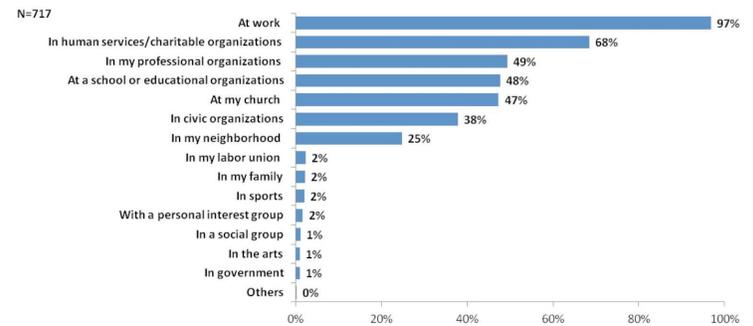
The full Pathways to Leadership survey results may be found at [www.iwlcleads.org](http://www.iwlcleads.org) or [www.vernonresearch.com](http://www.vernonresearch.com)

# THE PATHWAYS FINDINGS: 7 KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 1. Women have a strong start but there is more ground to travel.

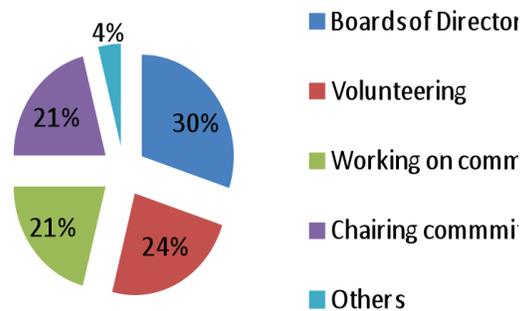
Women in Iowa are serving as leaders, with the average Pathways survey participant reporting having served on one to five committees, commissions, or boards, with formal leadership positions one to six times. This leadership has occurred in a number of areas, but predominantly in the workplace or in service organizations.

### WHERE DO YOU LEAD?



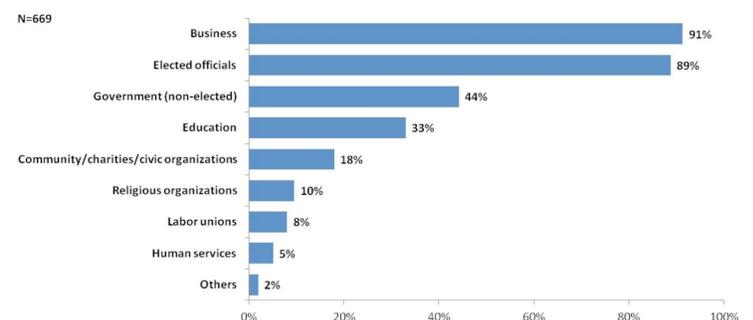
Female leadership occurs in a variety of ways, from volunteering to serving on an organization's board of directors. When asked where they have had the most impact or success outside of family life, women reported impact in all areas.

### WHERE HAVE YOU HAD THE MOST IMPACT?



Women overwhelmingly want to see an increase in female leadership in the state, with 93% saying they want to see more leadership positions in Iowa occupied by women. The key areas where they want to see more women lead include business and elected government positions.

### WHERE SHOULD THERE BE MORE WOMEN LEADERS?



While most women leaders are serving and succeeding at the local level, female leadership is significantly lower at the regional, state, and national levels, especially in civic, educational, and religious organizations.

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## 2. Female leaders bring special attributes.

Pathways participants consider many of the same characteristics important for leadership in both genders — vision, character, communication, competence, and relationship-building. They do recognize, however, that women bring a different perspective, with 93% saying they believe female leaders bring special talents. Some of the differences include:

- Females, especially, bring compassion, communication, collaboration, and a different perspective
- Female leaders are seen as more relationship-oriented and male leaders as more authoritarian

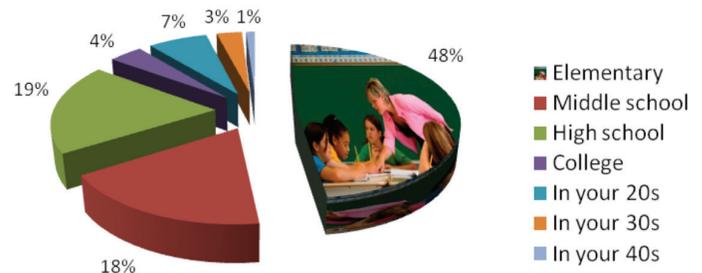
## 3. The seeds of leadership are sown in childhood.

One of the more revealing findings in the Pathways Study is that the great majority of participants reported taking on their first leadership role during the K-12 school years, with almost half stepping forward in elementary school.

Women who lead today were leaders in academic organizations, student government, art groups, and sports. In looking at participant demographics, two findings were significant:

- The higher the current educational level of women leaders, the earlier their first leadership roles
- In general, as household income increased, participation in leadership roles during the school years increased

FIRST LEADERSHIP ROLE



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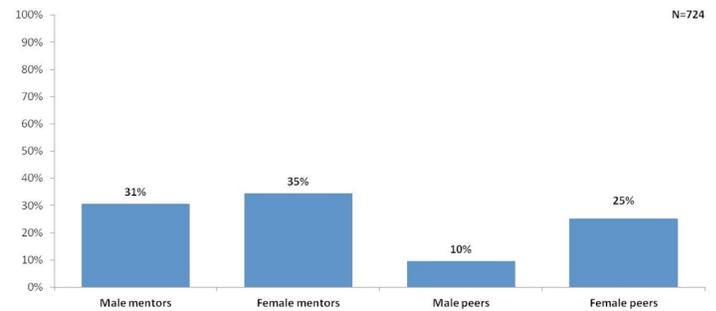
## 4. Female and male mentors smooth the path to leadership; male peers not as much.

Survey participants were asked about who had assisted them in their unpaid or paid career; specifically, male mentors, female mentors, male peers, and female peers. Some of the interesting differences and findings included:

- Female mentors were the most helpful overall and especially to younger women (under 35)
- Importance of male mentors peaks for women in the 35 to 44 age group
- Assistance of male peers is more helpful as women age, but, at the most, only 14% of women select this group as the most helpful
- Value of female peers is highest for women in the 55 to 64 age group

In open-ended comments, participants cited encouragement, advice, role modeling, providing opportunities, and building confidence as the most common forms of help and also noted the assistance of supervisors and family members in addition to mentors and peers.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING HAVE BEEN OF GREATEST ASSISTANCE TO YOU IN YOUR PAID OR UNPAID CAREER?



# THE PATHWAYS FINDINGS: 7 KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 5. Women face barriers to developing their leadership pathway.

Learning from other leaders (by observing, getting advice, or being mentored), learning from doing, and pursuing training or further education were the top strategies for developing leadership skills. Key for many women – especially those with children in the home – is work flexibility.

Barriers are both personal and institutional in nature, with only 11% reporting that they have encountered no barriers.

Some of the more interesting findings included:

- As women age, they are more likely, and then less likely, to find self-promotion a barrier
- Most women leaders rarely experience gender discrimination, although 18% of women aged 18-24 report experiencing it every day
- The lower the income, the more women will cite child care programs as helpful to thriving in leadership positions
- As women serve more in formal leadership positions, they are more likely to view female networking programs and the inclusion of gender diversity indicators in executives' performance reviews as helpful

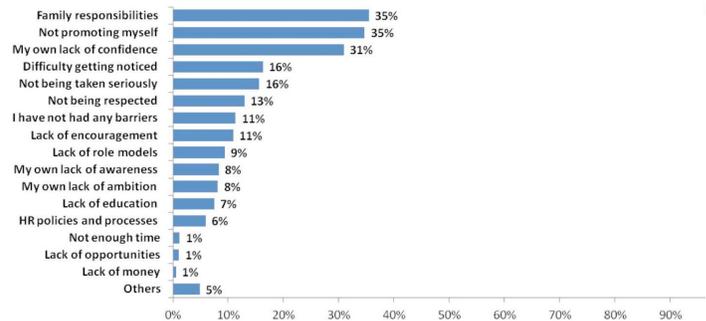
When asked why more women do not serve in leadership positions in Iowa, weak support from both women and men was noted, as well as lack of confidence and not being aware of opportunities.

In order to pursue leadership roles, women need support and encouragement in the workplace or organization, in the home, and in their own minds.

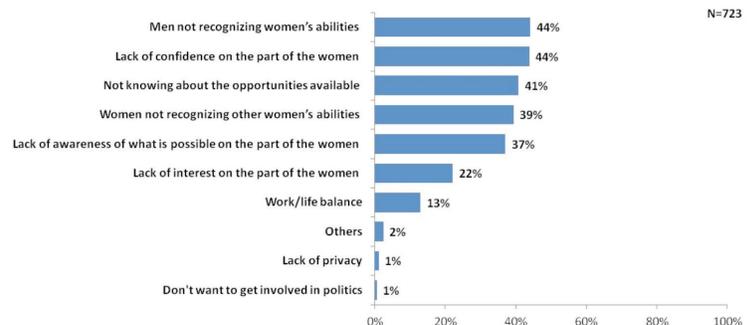
Examples of personal comments about factors women found helpful to leadership include:

- "Support from my colleagues, managers and my spouse."
- "My own confidence in my ability and my willingness to step forward as a leader."
- "Knowledge about what is available and the path to obtaining positions."
- "I believe that my own personal drive and skill development are the most important factors . . . it is up to me."

### WHAT HAVE BEEN THE SPECIFIC BARRIERS (UP TO THREE), IF ANY, IN YOUR LEADERSHIP PATHWAY?



### WHY DO YOU THINK THAT MORE WOMEN DO NOT SERVE IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN IOWA? PLEASE SELECT UP TO THREE.



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# THE PATHWAYS FINDINGS: 7 KEY TAKEAWAYS

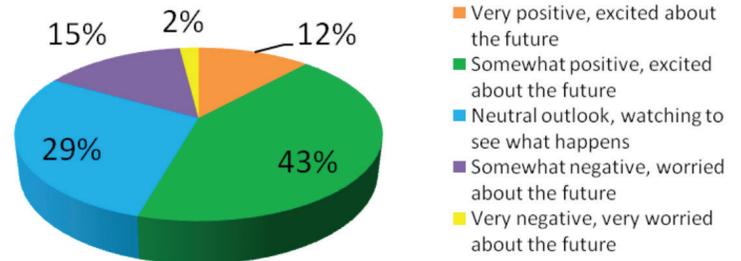
## 6. Women are positive or neutral about leadership opportunities in Iowa.

There were some differences by demographics. As income increased, participants were more positive in their outlook. The same trend occurred with an increase in past/current leadership roles.

Women are even more positive about their own leadership opportunities, with 62% either somewhat or very positive.

Why do women want to see more female leadership? Most participants cited equity (fairness) and the value of diverse perspectives in organizations, companies, and government. They also noted that increasing female leadership will strengthen organizations and the state, provide more female role models, and that women bring unique leadership skills to the table.

### OUTLOOK



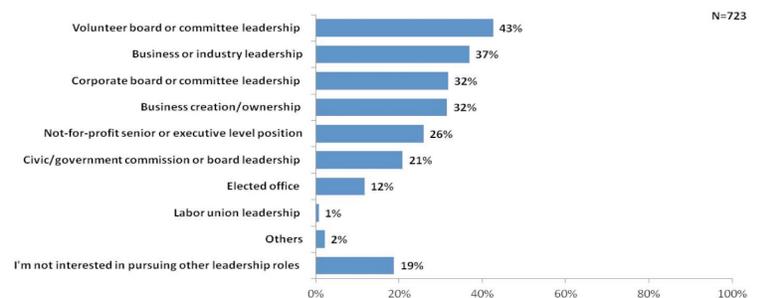
## 7. Women are willing to serve.

When asked what other leadership roles they were interested in pursuing, participants selected a wide variety of opportunities as appealing, with the greatest interest in business and volunteer board roles.

When asked what one change would have the greatest impact on creating pathways for women's leadership in Iowa, the most frequent answer was putting more women in leadership roles. Other key support factors cited included:

- Mentors
- Education and training
- Provide more opportunities
- Changing attitudes toward female leadership
- Starting earlier in life with encouraging and developing girls' leadership skills and experiences
- Flexible work environment
- More women helping women

### WHAT ONE CHANGE WOULD HAVE THE GREATEST IMPACT ON CREATING PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN IOWA?



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## IWLC

is the state's premier leadership organization for women, offering comprehensive resources and services to advance women's leadership in all aspects of their lives. Since 2007, IWLC – originally known as the Iowa Women's Leadership Conference – has staged events attracting more than 8,000 attendees from across the Midwest. IWLC is an IRC 501(c)(3) charitable organization and welcomes inquiries from grant makers, individual contributors, and other funding partners who share its passion for women's leadership. For more information about philanthropic support, corporate sponsorships, and opportunities for exhibitors, visit [www.iwlcleads.org](http://www.iwlcleads.org).

## VERNON RESEARCH GROUP

is a 27-year-old market research firm that conducts custom market research studies for companies, start-ups, non-profit organizations, and government agencies. Led by women, Vernon Research Group enjoys helping its clients answer key questions and apply the findings to sound decisions – from local to global in scope. For more information, visit [www.vernonresearch.com/](http://www.vernonresearch.com/).



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