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**KEEP MINDING THE GAP – GENDER-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN  
LEADERSHIP EXPECTATIONS AND PREFERENCES OF THE  
GENERATION Y**

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## **Abstract**

This study aims at refocusing attention to the current situation of the gender gap and female aspirations to acquire leadership positions in the Generation Y. Through an online survey, expectations and preferences towards leadership of recently graduated Millennials were investigated. Results revealed, despite no evident differences in qualification and background between gender in the examined cohort, the gender gap in terms of leadership still persists. While men and women feel equally prepared to take on a leadership position after graduation, they prefer different leadership styles and plan on leading differently. Both genders intend to take on leading positions. Yet, women aim lower than men and feel less supported by their companies. Therefore, companies need to start creating gender-neutral corporate cultures with a support system that empowers high potential female Millennials to thrive for a seat in the board room.

**Keywords:** *Millennials, Generations, Gender, Leadership*

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## 1. Introduction

By 2020, 50% of the active global workforce will consist of members of the Generation Y<sup>1</sup> (Catalyst, 2015), a generation that is said to be different from its predecessors in many ways. Also a generation that has, due to widely discussed differences, been analyzed and studied in an enormous amount of research papers, newspaper articles and online blogs. What is striking when studying previous research is that in this generation, at least when looking at the Western World, traditional gender roles tend to diminish (Burkhart, 2016 & Euro RSCG Worldwide, 2010). Members of the Millennial generation seem to have grown up to a certain gender equality, openness to diversity and acceptance for difference. When studying upper and middle class western European and American Millennials, in terms of background, knowledge and education differences, women are no longer inferior to men (Euro RSCG Worldwide, 2010). However, now that this cohort is entering the business world, a new reality might hit them. As in business and leadership, an area currently still dominated by older generations, the topic of gender roles is still a very important one that is vastly researched, but unfortunately still not resolved. The leadership ranks are still dominated by men (McKinsey&Company, 2015). Consultancy reports such as Deloitte's *Mind the gaps – 2015 Millennial Survey* or McKinsey's *Lean In: Women in the Workplace* report (2013) give overviews on the current situation, helping businesses to prepare and adapt. Books like "Lean In" from Facebook CFO Sheryl Sandberg (2013) or "Nice Girls Still Don't Get The Corner Office" from Lois P. Frankel (2014) try to encourage young women to stand up for themselves and lean into the opportunities businesses offer. Now it is to see whether the new generation taking over the work force will continue to

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<sup>1</sup> In the following also referred to as Millennials or Gen Y.

spread gender equality, or whether they defer to the established gender gap and accept unequal wages while leaving the top executive positions to men. The focus of this research paper will be to analyze whether the gender gap in recently graduated Millennials is still persistent, by investigating their expectations and preferences towards leadership, their preparation and ambition to reach the top management level as well as the support system they presume behind them.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature review will firstly cover a brief overview of sex role and gender theory in daily life as well as in the workplace, revealing its development by contrasting the peculiarities of all three generations currently in the workforce. Next, an analysis of previous studies on generational as well as gender differences in terms of leadership expectations, styles and preferences will be provided.

### **2.1. Gender and sex roles**

According to traditional gender role ideologies, a woman takes care of children, husband and home, while the man is out working to provide for the family - a nuclear family ideal (Treleaven, 2015). Women were expected to be caring, weak, easily influenceable, further back in time even believed to be less intelligent and at times unpredictable. Men, on the contrary, were supposed to be strong, powerful, and influencing. They were expected to provide and even decide for their wife and family (Connell, 2002). While in the past few decades huge steps have been made towards more balanced gender roles, still unequal wages and the need for women quotas in upper management in certain countries are only some of the indicators that the overall view on socially constructed gender norms has yet to reach the point of equality

(Treleaven, 2015). In trying to learn whether and why a gender gap in the Millennial generation is still persistent, it is essential to take a closer look at origin and influence of common Western World gender role ideologies.

According to Connell (2002) gender is a social construction, i.e. the common image of characteristic behavior of men and women. Hence, gender can be defined as a cultural construct rather than a biological phenomenon. Alice H. Eagly (1983) suggests that when analyzing the impact of gender, one should bear in mind the concept of *normative social influence* which is present in role-regulated contexts. *Normative social influence* describes the fact that people have an influence on the behavior of others through the expectations they have towards their behavior (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Such expectations result from social roles.

Only through investigating perceptions of gender norms, it is possible to understand the interdependence of societal change and perception of gender, as they influence and drive each other opening opportunities for change (Treleaven, 2015; Eagly, 1983). Such a change has taken place over the last couple of decades as women start aiming for higher status and power positions; therefore, the question about the current status of the gender gap seems necessary.

## 2.2.A generational overview of gender roles and the gender gap in the workplace

Previous research links the tendency towards more egalitarian gender views to generational change (Rindfuss, Brewster & Kavee, 1996). According to Howe and Straus (2000), members of the same generation partake in the similar beliefs, attitudes and behaviors due to specific incidents during defining years of childhood and

adolescence. If through generational change, the traditional gender norms turn into egalitarian ideologies the gender gap might slowly be closing as a consequence of typical characteristics and behavior of the Generation Y. Thus, a closer look at the three generations currently in the workforce may help to better understand the recent development of the gender gap and leadership preferences. It is important to remark, however, that generations are coined through their socio-cultural environment and may therefore differ greatly depending on the country the cohort grew up in (Howe and Straus, 2000). To not exceed the scope of this paper, a rather culture neutral overview will be provided in the following.

The three generations that make up the current workforce are the Baby Boomers, the Generation X and the Generation Y (see Table 1 for overview of generational divisions<sup>2</sup>).

<b>Generation</b>	<b>Age in 2016</b>	<b>Generation Range</b>
Generation Y	16 - 36	1980 - 2000
Generation X	37 - 51	1965 – 1979
Baby Boomer	52 - 70	1946 – 1964

**Table 1.** Generation ranges and current ages.

### ***Baby boomers***

Coming of age in a time when women’s rights movements began to implicate a change in women’s role, the Baby boomer generation is characterized by the rebellious youth of its members, who turned rather conservative as they grew older (Kodatt, 2009). Baby boomers are known to be hard workers, who favor structure, face-to-face meetings and team work. They are loyal to their company. Emancipation and equal rights were topics

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<sup>2</sup> Exact definitions of the range of birth rates of these birth cohorts vary greatly as transitions between generations are continuous and differ depending on background and socio-cultural environment (Burkhart, 2016). The ranges chosen in this research paper follow the majority of ranges in the literature cited.

mainly initiated by this generation. With many women fighting for their newly gained rights to more education and work opportunities, work was also often prioritized over family (ibid). Handling family and work at once forced Baby boomers to reinvent their own meaning of work-life balance, faced them with new kinds of stress, and ultimately led to new forms of families and dramatically increasing divorce rates (Roebuck et al, 2013). While the wage gap is still huge in this generation, the few very successful women in top executive positions belong to this generation (Oertel, 2014).

### ***Generation X***

Generation X children often grew up in families with two working parents or even single parents. Being raised by single working moms, they had to quickly become independent and take responsibility for themselves (Ericson, 2008; 2010). Due to such circumstances, both male and female Xers, want to be involved and like to take control. Problem-solving skills and goal-orientation characterize this generation. For their own families however, they are asking for greater work-life balance and flexibility to spend more time with their families than their Baby boomer parents did (Roebuck et al, 2013). While most Gen X women reenter the job after maternity leave, men tend to be more involved in family life, resulting in approximation of gender roles (Burkhart, 2016). More than any previous generation, the Generation X is characterized by tolerance of diversity, manifesting in liberal racial, sexual and gender restrictions (Ericson, 2010).

### ***Generation Y***

While there is an enormous amount of research on Millennials, gender roles are not a very popular topic among it. One reason for this might be the fact that traditional gender roles cease to exist in this generation. Growing up in the era of “post feminism”, Millennials in the US and Western World see men and women as equal (Euro RSCG



Worldwide, 2010). Burkhart (2016) describes the way Millennials deal with traditional roles as a *gender shift*. There is no longer a conventional role allocation and that has a tremendous influence on today's society. Attributable to the stronger position of women and the changing role of men apart from society, economy is also reshaping. According to Burkhart (2016) Millennials do no longer care whether they are led by a man or a woman as long as their leader is authentic and competent. Evidence provides the Prosumer report by Euro RSCG Worldwide (2010). They found that most members of the Gen Y can no longer imagine a world in which women matter less than men, had fewer rights or were less educated when compared to their own cohort. However, Millennials still feel that gender barriers endure, evident in situations where female Millennials seek the respect of older superiors, in terms of sexual harassment or when it comes to unequal payment (ibid).

### 2.3. The leadership gap: Leadership across generations and genders

#### ***Preferences and Expectations on Leadership – by Generations***

As the preceding chapter has shown, Generation Y differs from its former generations in many ways. Especially evident, however, become the differences in the work place. Millennials are very socially focused. They value creativity, focus on solutions, and team work (DeVaney, 2015). Yet, a range of articles on this young generation displays a much more negative picture. The HR consultancy firm Hudson (2014) was alarmed by the bad perception of the Generation Y that many of the older generations have, describing them as entitled and lazy. To adapt onboarding mechanisms and optimize cooperative work between generations, they rolled out a large scale study investigating the leadership traits of the three generations currently in the workplace. The findings reveal considerable leadership changes due to the generational shift. While their results

show that Millennials do not perform well in ‘traditional leadership’ traits such as ‘leading’, ‘decisive’, ‘motivating’ and ‘persuasive’, Baby boomer men perform as born traditional leaders with low focus on interpersonal traits (Hudson, 2014). Millennials prefer a more abstract and conceptual way of leading and neglect long-term strategic planning as they are aware of and open for changes, so Hudson (2014). The most striking finding of this study was the social-orientation of Millennials. In the survey results they showed high scores on ambition, optimism, and focus on people. Therefore, it was concluded that they will be rather relational leaders, trying to inspire their followers instead of persuading them by expressing their power (ibid). The Generation X has found to be in between the two generations, showing traits of traditional leadership such as persuasiveness as well as a socially progressiveness and people focus.

### ***Preferences and Expectations on Leadership – by Gender***

Deloitte (2015) found a quite surprising gender gap in the Millennial generation. The results of their research showed that there are significant differences between the ambition of wanting to lead and the skills acquired by higher education as well as the skills assumed to be needed to be a good leader. Deloitte (2015) found that more male than female Millennials desire C-suit positions, interestingly, both gender strived for a leadership position, however, women were more reluctant when asked if they wanted to pursue a most senior position. In terms of skills, men indicated to have better analytical, IT and leadership skills. Women, in contrast perceived themselves as stronger in ‘soft skills’ such as professionalism, academic knowledge, flexibility, and teamwork (ibid).

This is consistent with Eagly et al.’s (2003) findings of small differences between the leadership styles of men and women. While women were found to apply

*transformational leadership*, men preferred *transactional or laissez-faire leadership* styles. Transformational leadership is follower-focused, trying to motivate and respect the subordinate by explaining value and purpose as well as conveying optimism when outlining the goals to be reached. There is also a strong focus on mentoring and developing the employee (Eagly et al, 2003). Transactional focusses on correcting and rewarding respective behavior. Laissez-faire leadership stands for a hands-off approach where the leader lets the followers more or less work on their own without providing guidance (ibid). Such findings are also reflected in the McKinsey & Company report on *Gender Diversity in Top Management* (2013). Accordingly, women tend focus on ‘people development’, ‘expectations and rewards’ as well as acting as a ‘role model’, while men concentrate on ‘control and corrective behavior’, or ‘individualistic decision making’ (McKinsey&Company, 2013).

The outlined gender inequality in the corporate world opposes the findings of research on the gender debate in the Generation Y (Burkhart, 2016, Euro RSCG Worldwide, 2010). The fact that men and women of the Gen Y cohort feel equal in terms of what they are worth and capable of, implies a difference between genders in the aspiration to become a leader.

### ***Aspirational Leadership Gap***

The *2015 Lean In: Women in the workplace* report by McKinsey & Company strikingly states that “Corporate America is not on a path to gender equality” (p.3), not because women put off career advancement as they struggle to keep their family and work life at balance, but rather because companies aggravate women’s attempts to advance to senior level. Though, companies claim high commitment to gender diversity in leading positions, they seem to fail to introduce the culture and apply the measures necessary

for women to be able to make their way to the top (ibid). The results of the McKinsey study also reveal a *leadership ambition gap*, however, they state that regardless of the current position or level, women show less desire to be promoted to senior level than men. Interestingly though, men as well as women name avoiding a stressful lifestyle and fear of being unable to balance work and family responsibilities as reasons for not aspiring a top leading position. Such findings go in hand with Sheryl Sandberg (2013) who observed that women of the Baby boomer and X generation kept the possibility of having a family one day in their every career decision. The desire to accommodate a family in their career almost subconsciously forces them to hold back on opportunities for advancement early in their career. Through numerous little sacrifices they hinder themselves from being promoted to top levels (ibid).

### **3. Research questions and hypotheses**

The compilation of the previous research allows asking a number of open questions, first and foremost, whether *the gender as well as the leadership gap is still persistent in the Millennial generation*. If the Millennial generation is as different as discovered above, how does this cohort just having entered the workforce feel about leadership? How well have they been prepared for leading and how do they want to lead? The following hypotheses drawn from previous research and investigated in the course of this paper shall help to solve these questions.

H1: Female and male Millennials feel equally prepared to take on a leadership position after graduation.

H2: Female and male Millennials show preferences for different leadership styles.

H2a: Female Millennials focus more on transformational leadership styles.

H2b: Male Millennials focus more on transactional or laissez-faire leadership styles.

H3: Women are less prone to aspire the most senior position in their organization than men.

H4: Female Millennials feel they will be less supported by their company in reaching a top leading position than male Millennials.

## 4. Sample and Procedure

### *Sample*

A total of 242 participants took part in this study. Due to the specific target group requirements and the high rate of incomplete answers only a sample of 127 participants could be used for the analysis. Participation in the survey required being born between the years 1980-2000. Ideally, participants should be recent graduates with not more than 5 years of work experiences since completing their degree or at least one year of professional experience in their gap year between Bachelor's and Master's degree. The age range of the sample spans from 21 to 32 years, the oldest being born in 1984 and the youngest in 1995. The sample represents the view of a generational cohort from a total of 21 countries, the majority being from Germany (n = 75) and Portugal (n = 18). As for gender distribution, 54 male and 73 female Millennials responded in the survey. With the exception of 3, all participants have obtained a university degree (Bachelors n = 72, and Masters n = 51). Work experience ranges from less than one year to up to 5 years, 19 respondents have stated to have worked for at least one year between their bachelor's and master's degree. Seven participants stated to have more than 5 years of work experience; we refrain from excluding them as they seem to have worked during their

studies. The majority has gathered work experience in large scale, well established global businesses (n = 62) or medium-sized, less well known businesses (n = 46).

### ***Procedure***

The underlying research paper combines and in part replicates the research of three studies by the consultancy firms Deloitte (“The 2015 Deloitte Millennial survey”) and McKinsey & Company (“Women Matter 2013” & “Women in the Workplace 2015”). Hence, the questionnaire was built using a sample of questions from afore mentioned consultancy reports as well as additional questions (see Appendix 1). The survey was built online using the online software Qualtrics, it was distributed via various social media networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Xing. For the data analysis SPSS was used, all data could be analyzed by performing either an ANOVA test or crosstabs for a chi-square test.

## **5. Results**

Before testing the differences between male and female Millennials, it was important to ensure comparability of the sample. In order to see whether there were differences, the background of the sample was analyzed in terms of the *level of internality* measured in the number of languages spoken, *qualifications* measured through the highest educational degree achieved and *professionalism* measured in years of work experience. The results of a chi-square test confirmed the comparability of the sample, demonstrating that there is no relationship between gender and number of languages spoken  $\chi^2(7, N = 127) = 2.68, p = .91$ . Also, there are no significant differences between gender and the highest educational degree achieved  $\chi^2(2, N = 127) = 0.43, p = .81$ . The third part of the comparability test - the years of work experience - as well shows no

significant differences. Thus, it can be concluded that there is no relationship between gender and the number of years of work experience in this sample  $\chi^2 (5, N = 127) = 6.96, p = .22$ . Therefore, male and female Millennials were comparable in terms of qualifications, level of professionalism and internationality.

In order to test H1, which aims at demonstrating that female and male Millennials feel equally prepared to take on a leadership position after graduation, an ANOVA test was performed. An ANOVA reveals whether there are differences in how prepared men and women feel on average to achieve the overall goals of the organization with the skills gained in higher education. ANOVA results demonstrate that there are no differences between how prepared male (average = 44.76) and female (average = 41.53) feel in order to achieve the overall goals of the organization  $F (1,126) = 0.63, p = 0.43$ . Such results confirm that male and female feel equally prepared, therefore H1 is supported.

However, when being asked in which skills and attributes participants felt strongest after graduation results reveal the following. Women (35.6%) felt much better prepared in “*academic knowledge, intellectual ability and skills specific to course of studies*” than men (14.8%)  $\chi^2 (1, N = 127) = 6.85, p = .01$ . In terms of “*analytical skills*”, however, more men (35.2%) see their own strengths in this skill as compared to women (19.2%)  $\chi^2 (1, N = 127) = 4.14, p = .04$ . Also, “*Knowledge of IT and technology*” is perceived as a strength by 13.0% of men, but 0.0% of women which results in a highly significant chi-square test result of  $\chi^2 (1, N = 127) = 10.02, p < .002$ . 25.9 % of men also believe “*general business knowledge and work experience*” to be their strength, while only 4.1% of women felt strong in that field after graduation  $\chi^2 (1, N = 127) = 12.74, p < .001$ . In all other skills and attributes there are no significant differences found between genders as can be taken from Table 2. Concluding, despite men and women

feeling equally prepared, there are differences in what they consider the strongest attributes or most important skills that they have.

Skill	Male	Female	$\chi^2$	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Knowledge specific ideas/ techniques	13.0%	9.6%	0.36	1	0.55
Academic knowledge/ intellectual ability/ skills specific to course of study	14.8%	35.6%	6.85	1	0.01
Knowledge of IT and technology	13.0%	0.0%	10.02	1	0.002
Communication skills e.g. assertiveness, negotiating	14.8%	19.2%	0.41	1	0.52
Professionalism: time-keeping, hard work, discipline	42.6%	47.9%	0.36	1	0.55
General business knowledge, work experience	25.9%	4.1%	12.74	1	0.00
Financial, economic	13.0%	6.8%	1.36	1	0.24
Ability to think creatively and generate new ideas	22.2%	27.4%	0.44	1	0.51
Leadership	7.4%	11.0%	0.46	1	0.50
Personal traits, e.g. patience, maturity, integrity	27.8%	37.0%	1.19	1	0.28
Analytical skills	35.2%	19.2%	4.14	1	0.04
Flexibility, team working, working with others	38.9%	50.7%	1.74	1	0.19
Being entrepreneurial/ creating opportunities	1,9%	2,7%	0.11	1	0.745
Sales & Marketing	5.6%	6.8%	0.08	1	0.77
Ability to challenge or disrupt thinking	13.0%	19.2%	0.87	1	0.35

**Table 2.** Descriptive results of skills and attributes perceived as strongest after graduation.

To test H2 which states that female and male Millennials show preferences for different leadership styles, first, participants were asked to define a true leader by selecting one attribute from a list of options. The performance of a chi-square test indicates differences in the preferences between men and women  $\chi^2 (5, N = 127) = 12.23, p = .03$ . Striking are the differences in the two attributes, *interpersonal skills*, which is preferred by 34.2% of women as compared to 14.8% of men and *strategic thinker*, which is the



preferred leadership characteristic of 29.6% of men as compared to 17.8% of women. Nevertheless, quite high percentages of both men and women find that a true leader is *inspirational* (male = 29.6% and female = 28.8%) which offers ground to assume certain similarities in preferences. In addition, a second question was asked in order to verify the results. Participants had to select up to 3 options from a list of dimensions they would foster as a leader in order to improve organizational performance.

	Leadership focus	Male	Female	$\chi^2$	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Transformational Leadership style	People development	70.4%	76.7%	0.65	1	0.42
	Effective communication	57.4%	75.3%	4.57	1	0.03
	Intellectual stimulation	20.4%	17.8%	0.13	1	0.72
	Role model	18.5%	11.0%	1.46	1	0.23
	Inspiration	29.6%	31.5%	0.05	1	0.82
	Participative decision making	44.4%	45.2%	0.00	1	0.93
Transactional Leadership style	Expectations and rewards	25.9%	24.7%	0.03	1	0.87
	Individualistic decision making	3.7%	11.0%	2.25	1	0.13
	Control and corrective action	14.8%	2.7%	6.24	1	0.01

**Table 3.** Descriptive results of leadership dimensions sorted by transformational and transactional leadership styles.

As can be taken from Table 3, the results of the chi-square test partially confirm H2, as there are no significant differences in most of the dimensions. Nonetheless, two very important leadership dimensions *effective communication*  $\chi^2 (1, N = 127) = 4.57, p = .03$  and *control and corrective action*  $\chi^2 (1, N = 127) = 6.24, p = .01$  show highly significant differences. Thus, in combination with the previously analyzed results, H2 can be partially confirmed. With respect to H2a and H2b, both hypotheses are also partially supported. Female Millennials would focus on strengthening *effective communication*

(female = 75.3% and male = 57,4%) - a leadership trait that can be attributed to the *transformational leadership style* according to Eagly et al's (2003) definition. However, since other dimensions that characterize transformational leadership such as *intellectual stimulation* do not show significant differences between genders, H2a is only partially confirmed. At the same time, male Millennials indicate to focus more on strengthening *control and corrective action* (male = 14,8% and female = 2,7%), which can be assigned to transactional leadership. This is, however, only one characteristic out of several others, i.e. *individualistic decision making* in which no significant differences are found. Concluding, H2b can also only partially be confirmed.

In order to investigate whether H3 can be confirmed, meaning that women are less prone to aspire the most senior position in their organization than men, participants were asked to what they were hoping to achieve during their working life. They were given the choice between "Become a leader/most senior executive within my current organization", "Get to a senior position in my current organization, but not number 1" and "I don't want to work in a leading position.". Results of a chi-square test are highly significant  $\chi^2 (2, N = 127) = 14.04, p = .001$ . More women (68.5%) than men (38.9%) indicate that they want a leading position, yet, not 'number 1'. Strikingly however, more men (50%) as compared to women (19.2%) want to achieve a most senior position in their organization. These findings support H3. Along with the previous question, participants were asked again at a later point in the questionnaire whether they wanted to reach a top executive position in their future career. Results show that 74.1% of men want a top executive position in their future career while only 41.1% of women state the same. Interesting findings here are also that 21.9% of female neglect the prospect of a top executive position and 37.0% state they are undecided. A chi-square test was

performed to confirm the significance of these results and found them highly significant  $\chi^2 (2, N = 127) = 13.65, p = .001$ . Hence, H3 is supported by the results.

H4 proposes that female Millennials feel they will be less supported by their company in reaching a top leading position. First, participants were asked to rate the opportunities for women to advance in the organization in comparison to men. Results show that more men (79.6%) feel the opportunities are the same for both genders. Interestingly, still a high percentage of women (58.9%) feel they have the same opportunities. Nevertheless, a large percentage of women (37.0%) answers they believe to have fewer opportunities as compared to men who answer 'fewer' by 16.7%. A chi-square was run and supports H4 with significant results  $\chi^2 (2, N = 127) = 6.50, p = .04$ . Second, in order to see whether participants think they might face different stages of gender inhibiting their success, they were asked to state how they had experienced possible gender disadvantages and what they expect for the future. Findings in terms of how participants assess possible disadvantages of their gender at this point in time show no significant differences between gender  $\chi^2 (1, N = 127) = 0.20, p = .65$ . Both women (82.2%) and men (85.2%) state that gender has not been inhibiting their success up until now. However, most interestingly, these results change when being asked about their expectations for the future. For that question, more women (37.0%) believe that gender will prevent them from being successful. The chi-square test now shows significant differences  $\chi^2 (1, N = 127) = 6.31, p = .01$ . Altogether, results support H4.

## **6. Discussion**

This study aims at discovering differences and parallels in leadership expectations, preferences and aspirations of female and male members of the Generation Y. The

findings of this study make a great contribution to current and previous research on gender equality, generations and leadership. However, it is important to notice that in investigation on gender and generations, socio-cultural influences as well as biological structures may impact the behavior a sample greatly and should therefore be analyzed from a scientific psychological perspective (Eagly & Wood, 2013); hence, in the underlying case some interpretations of the results should be viewed carefully.

Recapitulating the findings of this paper, all hypotheses can be confirmed, with the exception of H2, as well as H2a and H2b which can only be partly confirmed as the results were not entirely significant in these cases. Taking a closer look at the results, an interesting picture unfolds. Despite no evident differences between gender in the examined cohort in terms of qualification, professionalism and internationality, it appears as if the gender gap in the corporate world and especially in terms of leadership is still persistent. Findings reveal that while both groups feel equally prepared to take on a leadership position after graduation, they prefer different leadership styles. Women as well as men intend to take on leading positions. Yet, the aspiration of women to reach a top executive position is much lower than of men. In addition, women believe as their career excels they can expect much less support of their company in reaching top leading positions than men. In the following, the findings will be discussed in a more detailed manner.

As previous research suggests, the two sexes have largely assimilated within the Generation Y. According to Burkhart (2010), gender differences in the examined generation greatly diminish. Euro RSCG Worldwide (2010) even sees traditional gender roles shifting in reverse direction were women start replacing the previously traditional role of men. Numbers of university alumni statistics support such a tendency showing

that women nowadays are often just as well or even better educated than men (Chamie, 2014). In terms of preparation provided by universities to enable candidates to take on a leadership position, an equal level of preparation of the sample at hand was expected. Interestingly, when asked to rate the skill set they gained in university in terms of how much it helps in achieving the overall goals of the organization there were no differences between genders. However, one concerning finding is that neither men nor women feel very well prepared. These findings are conforming those of the originating study by Deloitte (2015) which found that higher education taught only one-third of the presumably necessary amount of skills to achieve a company's goals. Since the educational background of this sample is very diverse, ranging from graduates of medicine, over education to business studies, it cannot be expected that an extensive education in leadership was acquired due to varying requirements in the respective fields. Nevertheless, these results should be alarming signals for universities to consider advancing their leadership related course content. Also, it should alert businesses that they will have to invest in further training of young professionals.

Moreover, interesting is that participants rated the skill set they feel they have acquired in university and presume as necessary in the organization in the same way. Yet, differences begin to show when being asked about those skills in specific. In contrast to Deloitte (2015), the majority of both groups assess their strengths in the same skills. Female Millennials only indicate *academic knowledge, intellectual ability and skills specific to course of studies* as their strengths. For gender typical female attributes such as *team work, time-keeping, patience and communication skills* results show no differences between genders. Following Sandberg's (2013) observations of women this matches the typical behavior pattern of women who are afraid of owning up to their

skills. Sandberg (2013) discovered that successful women are often perceived as threatening and hence less likeable, which leads women to keep their achievements and talents to themselves. Male Millennials, on the contrary, assess their strengths in commonly known male attributes according to traditional gender roles such as *analytical skills, knowledge of IT and technology* and *general business knowledge and work experience*. According to Sandberg (2013) this is acceptable and expected behavior of men. In line with the above mentioned finding, discoveries differ from those of Deloitte (2015). In terms of perception of *leadership* as a strong suit, as neither group assessed *leadership* as a personal strength acquired through university.

Given the assimilation of gender, it is an intriguing finding that female and male representatives of the Generation Y still prefer different leadership styles to a certain degree. The fact that both groups also highly appreciate when a leader is *inspirational*, matches the overall preferences of this generational cohort found in previous literature stating that Millennials value inspirational work environments (Burkhart, 2016). Also according to Deloitte (2015), which achieved similar results for this question, Millennials preferred a “social focus” in their leaders. However, a striking addition to Deloitte’s (2015) findings is that women in the present study prefer *interpersonal skills* while men value *strategic thinking* as an attribute of a true leader. Though there is a slight tendency towards diminishing gender roles, these findings confirm that traditional gender roles are still inherent in the nature of men and women of this birth cohort. *Interpersonal skills* are attributes related to caregiving which used to be a rather female feature, while *strategic thinking* used to be more important for providing for a family which was typical for the male role (Eagly, 1983). Such findings speak for a slower change of the mental model, and question Connell’s (2002) idea of a culturally, rather

than biologically defined gender. It is possible that gender roles are so deeply rooted in the nature of humans that it might never or might take much more time to become completely equal. Yet, according to Eagly and Wood (2013) the psychology of gender is always a mix of ‘nature’ (biological structures) and ‘nurture’ (socio-cultural influences).

Looking at the leadership dimensions the two groups focus on, further gender differences become obvious. Placing similar importance on the majority of dimensions speaks for an approximation of sexes. Clearly, men still have a tendency towards *transactional leadership styles* while women still prefer a more *transformational leadership style*. In this case the findings of the present paper are in line with findings of Eagly et al (2003). Their meta-analysis of several studies proves that such gender-specific leadership preferences are cross-generational rather than a new phenomenon of the Generation Y. Though, the focus on people, social impact and purpose are still highly important to this cohort. Surprisingly, such findings imply a much smaller difference between generations than previously assumed. Organizations should hence re-focus on not only accommodating leadership to new generations but also focus on the specific needs and preferences of gender.

Judging from the discovery of McKinsey & Company’s (2015) report on “Women in the Workplace” as well as the Deloitte’s (2015) “Millennial survey”, we assumed that women are less prone to aspire the most senior position in their organization than men. Deloitte’s (2015) findings revealed in general more men and women hoping to achieve ‘a senior position in their organization, but not number 1’ instead of a most senior position. In the later, the gap between male and female aspirations is much greater. These findings are replicated in the present study, which clearly shows that women are

satisfied with leading responsibility and do not foster a ‘number 1’ leading position. McKinsey & Company (2015) found similar tendencies in the U.S. disregarding generational differences “at every stage women are less eager than men to become a top executive, and this gap is the widest among women and men in senior management” (p.11). The present study confirms that women, when asked directly in general either do not want a top executive position at all in their future career or are still undecided. Possible reasons for this *aspiration gender gap* or *leadership ambition gap* exceed the scope of the underlying paper. However, judging from previous research, several interpretations can be drawn. Women might be fearing a stressful life or having to face the struggle to keep work and life at balance (McKinsey&Company, 2015) which is an essential life goal of Millennials (Burkhart, 2016). As described by Sandberg (2013) female Millennials might - just as previous generations - be sabotaging their own success by focusing too much on ways to accommodate a possible future family in their possible future career. It becomes evident that despite a new gender mind set, which is broadly inherent in members of the Generation Y, old fears led by traditional sex roles still seem to determine women’s future and career planning in every step of the way. In this light, we have to ask what companies can do to prevent this reaction of women. Also, this forces the debate on a women quota in top management to be re-opened again. If women do not actually want these positions, might such a quota then actually be more harmful than good for a company? Sandberg (2013) mentions missing role models or female mentors as a source of the problem why women shy from top leading positions. In these times of change and growing gender equality, young women need to slowly get used to the fact that they will not have many women to look up to and follow their path, but will have to be pioneers of their own. According to findings of the PwC



(2015) report on the Female Millennial, young women of this cohort are better educated, have a greater self-confidence and are more ambitious in terms of career development than any other generation before. In such a light the question arises as for why women in this sample state not to be interested in a top leading position. There is a possibility that women do not pursue 'number 1' leadership positions because they feel hindered to reach them or not enough supported which bridges to the final hypothesis H4, the assumption that women feel less supported by their company in reaching a top position.

One factor strongly related to Gen Y women's reluctance to aspire a seat in the board room might be their own perception of the support they can expect from the organizations. A compelling finding exposed that when men and women were asked in general whether women were offered the same opportunities for advancement in the company than men the majority of both genders agreed. Yet, a large number of women were sensing fewer opportunities in their future. This might be linked to the following two observations. While especially in an equally well educated and qualified generation, at entry level no differences in support of male and female candidates is perceived. It is possible that role of motherhood and the innate wish to accommodate both a family and a career do not have an influence on later perception of support of the organization. As afore mentioned by Sandberg (2013), this foreshadowing might cause women to aim lower early on.

### ***Implications for Practitioners***

The introduced findings allow for many implications for organizations. McKinsey & Company (2013) advise to start building a corporate culture that embraces gender

equality and a gender-neutral performance model that enables women to accommodate both a family and a high-level leading position. This culture should start by creating more awareness in men of the unequal support their female colleagues are receiving. Another measure includes levelling wages of women and men in equal positions. This will not only lead to an increase in motivation of women to thrive for top leading positions, it will also raise the acceptance of their male colleagues. Companies should also promote active mentoring and sponsorship of women, to help them gain more confidence by learning from the achievements of role models. Male mentors can be helpful as well. In the course of changing corporate cultures, high positioned men need to start recommending women into high level openings. Moreover, companies need to stop penalizing women by expecting “anytime anywhere” availability (McKinsey & Company, 2013). While Millennials, who are also referred to as digital natives, are open to working remotely, they highly value their free time and do not want to be available anytime. Companies will have to work with their affinity for technology and create more flexible work hours and spaces that allow for Millennials to build a work-life balance of their liking, which will help them integrate family plans into career plans early on. Women’s interpersonal skills and strength in building relationships could be used in a new model of split leadership positions. Being able to share a top leading position with another female colleague would enable both to accommodate a family life in their career and through close exchange of the two female leaders the organization would only profit.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

The current study has several limitations. First, previous research is rather focused on the situation in the United States, however, a generation’s identity is commonly shaped

by the incidents happening in its up-bringing; country of origin and culture play a crucial role in this matter. Yet, the underlying study was conducted in Europe with a mainly German and Portuguese sample. Hence, cultural aspects could not be considered in the interpretation. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons of small samples, as in this case, are not always able to demonstrate small differences as gender equality may differ in some of the societies tested (Eagly & Wood, 2013). Therefore, some nuances can get lost.

Due to the nature of the sample, we do not know whether a certain behavior is caused by characteristics of the generation or is due to a specific phase of human development. Millennials are only in the beginning of their careers therefore continuous studies will be necessary as the focus of this generation will change with age and life experience.

The present study contributes to previous research by detecting a halting development of gender equality that is hindering young women to pursue top leading positions. It was beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the reasons for the resistance of female Millennials in claiming their rights for such positions. Future research should administer to this question by interviewing highly educated women at the beginning of their professional career in order to learn the reason as for why they are open to pursue C-suite positions or not. Additionally, the current sample could be the target of a follow up study in a couple of years. This could reveal how an extended life and work experience contribute to their current intentions for their future career.

## **7. Conclusions**

Come the next decade, the Millennial generation will take over the global workforce and with them will bring winds of change for long-established work patterns and

leadership styles in the corporate world. A generation that is more diverse, more open-minded, more technology-savvy and celebrates gender egalitarian views more than any other generation before. The literature introduced in the underlying study has shown how gender roles have changed; and different generations have different perceptions of what is expected from women and men of their own age cohort. Yet, findings of this paper reveal that we might still be a long way from change. The examined cohort might still need more time and assistance to internalize new structures and block the old fears out. The objective gap may have been reduced, but when it comes to perceptions and expectations gender differences in the Generation Y still persist. In order to profit from ambitious female managers, organizations need to start driving change and understand the value of mixed board rooms. By committing to equal wages, career support and development of women and ultimately gender equality, companies have to start today to pave their ways to success in tomorrow's economy.

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## 9. Appendix

### Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study can be found in the additional document.