Bias and leadership aspirations: Exploring the interaction of gender and parental status in self-evaluations

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Abstract

This article aims to extend existing work on bias and leadership aspirations by investigating whether there are significant differences in self-evaluations when jointly considering gender and parental status. With a data subset from a survey of 866 women and 1372 men who are members of the leading Danish union for managers and leaders, we examine the relationship of gender and parental status with leadership aspirations. *Contra* theory-based expectations, our exploratory study's findings show little difference between mothers and women without children, whereas fathers report significantly higher leadership aspirations than men without children. Supplementary analysis indicates that lower aspirations are accompanied by lower self-evaluations of competence. Our findings thus suggest that men and women are differentially affected by combined gender and parenthood biases and that gendered social expectations for parents affect self-evaluations even in a national context characterized by high levels of gender equality before the law.

KEYWORDS: leadership aspirations, gender, parenthood, self-evaluations, bias

Introduction

A growing body of work takes an interest in gender bias and how such bias adversely affects women's careers in particular (Kossek, Su and Wu 2016). Gender bias can be defined as the personal beliefs one holds about differences in women's and men's skills and capabilities (Abraham 2020) and encompasses distinct subtypes of bias (e.g., selective perception, choice-supportive bias, bandwagon effect) that are explored separately in scholarly work. The negative effect of gender bias is particularly strong when women occupy or aspire to leadership roles (Bierema 2016; Doldor, Wyatt and Silvester 2019). Indeed, the archetypical leader remains male (Hoyt and Murphy 2016; Meriläinen, Tienari and Valtonen 2015), and masculinity is still perceived as a dominant feature of a leader across cultures (Koenig et al. 2011). Moreover, women who challenge this presumption can face adverse reactions when seeking power (Okimoto and Brescoll 2010; Rudman and Glick 2001). Overall, women are thus not considered fit for many leadership roles, which decreases the likelihood that they aspire to leadership (Ottsen 2018; Sánchez and Lehnert 2019) and have successful leadership careers (Watts 2009).

However, the dominant focus on gender bias alone limits our insights into how other demographic or biographic elements shape constraints and opportunities in the workplace. A subset of the academic literature considers how parental status relates to workplace outcomes. Some research in economics and labor relations investigates structural aspects, such as the *child penalty* and its impact on women's earnings and career progression (Kleven, Landais and Søgaard 2019) as well as the wage premiums of fathers (Fuller and Cooke 2018). Other streams in sociology, organization studies, and social psychology focus more on the role of bias about mothers for their workplace experience and career development (Berggren and Lauster 2014; Heilman and Okimoto 2008; Kmec 2011). Moreover, top positions are still perceived to require extensive work hours and constant availability, which is perceived to be poorly compatible with having a family (Padavic, Ely and Reid 2020). This is particularly true for mothers who tend to perform more care work than fathers and are associated with the caregiver role rather than the breadwinner role (Kmec 2011).

A large part of research on bias takes an interest in the deleterious effects of bias as something imposed on us by others (that we denounce or resist), which has consequences in terms of pay, hiring, and promotion decisions. However, we also know that bias can be internalized and that we may adopt certain behaviors due to stereotype threats, for example (Spencer, Logel and Davies 2016). We thus echo and engage with calls in the literature for more research on gender and parenthood biases, self-evaluations of competence, and aspirations for leadership roles and top positions (Fritz and Van Knippenberg 2018; Heilman 2001; Sánchez and Lehnert 2019). To contribute to research on the workings of bias in organizations, we extend existing insights into the interrelations of gender and parenthood in relation to leadership aspirations. We base our hypotheses on international research and test them on data collected in Denmark, which is internationally reputed for its gender egalitarianism.

Our analyses show that there is little difference between mothers and women without children but that fathers report significantly higher leadership aspirations than men without children. Moreover, lower aspirations seem to be accompanied by lower self-evaluations of competence for leadership roles. This exploratory study contributes to the literature on bias in organizations and the literature on gender and leadership by showing how bias about gender and parenthood affects the self-evaluations and leadership aspirations of different demographic groups in different ways. Thus, our findings suggest that the interrelation between gender and parental status may be more central for leadership than previously theorized and that internalized bias related to parenthood works alongside internalized gender bias.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

bias in self-evaluation: Bias is generally studied as something inflicted on certain out-groups based on assumptions and stereotypes about who they are and how they behave. However, bias is also something that affected individuals can integrate into their self-concept (i.e., internalized bias). Internalized bias relates to a stereotype threat; in this psychological state, the mere concern about being treated negatively based on the stereotype to which one has been assigned impairs personal performance in a way that unwittingly ends up confirming the stereotype (Spencer, Logel and Davies 2016). Moreover, experiments show that the risk of being judged negatively due to gender bias can elicit an unconscious, disruptive state that undermines women's leadership aspirations (Hoyt et al. 2010; Hoyt and Murphy 2016).

Bias, gender, and leadership: There is mounting evidence that women are interested in taking responsibility at work and that opportunities for achieving leadership positions tend to increase in cultures that emphasize gender equality (Rhode 2017; Wilton et al. 2019). However, working women often find themselves in situations where bias affects how their behavior, skills, and achievements are interpreted. Numerous studies show gender bias in recruitment, with male applicants being evaluated more positively than female applicants despite similar degrees and seniority (Castilla and Benard 2010; Isaac, Lee and Carnes 2009; Steinpreis, Anders and Ritzke 1999). More generally, we know that bias can have the effect that some occupations appear to be "suited for certain people and implausible to others" (Ashcraft 2013, 7-8) so that certain socially identified groups are perceived to be incompatible with a given occupation (Sønderlund, Morton and Ryan 2017). Societal norms for occupational identity affect perceived lack of fit with being a leader (Morgenroth et al. 2021). Women see other women's success at the top level as the exception rather than the rule; they account for the world around them to predict their success and define their career choice (Barbulescu and Bidwell 2013; McGinn and Milkman 2013).

Women do not match the ideal leader archetype (Meriläinen, Tienari and Valtonen 2015; Ottsen 2019), and this, in turn, may affect their self-evaluations (Becker, Ayman and Korabik 2002) and their leadership aspirations (Ottsen 2018).

Leadership and parenthood: While bias about women in leadership and the internalization of such bias are addressed by a sizable and a still-growing body of literature, there is limited understanding of how parental status—or parenthood bias—interacts with gender in relation to self-evaluations and leadership aspirations. Society exerts strong expectations on women concerning motherhood (Collins 2019; Eagly and Steffen 1984). Motherhood and caring for one's children are deemed central to a woman's identity, whereas the traditional expectation of the father is that of a provider or breadwinner (Bear and Glick 2017). Thus, the image of the ideal worker conflicts not only with gender but also with the image of the ideal mother (Reid 2015) as a *hyperfeminine* figure who focuses on care work. It has been documented now quite extensively that women are negatively affected by bias about motherhood in employment situations (Heilman and Okimoto 2008; Kmec 2011) in terms of compensation (O'Toole and D'aoust 2000), in their competence evaluations (Correll, Benard and Paik 2007), and their career development more generally (Berggren and Lauster 2014). As an example, one compelling field experiment demonstrates that compared to fathers with the same CV, mothers are deemed to be less committed, less competent, and deserving of lower salaries (Kmec 2011).

Mothers' aspirations for leadership may be negatively related to the internalized ideas they hold about leadership. Moreover, a series of external factors may factor into aspirations here (Sánchez and Lehnert 2019). As mentioned earlier, top positions are still perceived to require extended work hours and around-the-clock availability, which are poorly compatible with family life; in turn, this becomes a salient problem for women who do most of the household work and whose household work increases after having children (Padavic, Ely and Reid 2020). We thus hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Parental status interacts with gender such that mothers will self-report lower leadership aspirations than women without children.

Alongside the motherhood penalty discussed above, "fatherhood status combines with other markers of organizational privilege to produce larger fatherhood earnings bonuses" (Hodges and Budig 2010, 742; see also Fuller and Cooke 2018). Men do not face negative perceptions when they become fathers because the breadwinner figure is still masculine (Burgess 2013; Morgenroth, Ryan and Sønderlund 2021). Research suggests that there may be a *parent advantage* for both men and women in leadership yet with a more significant benefit to fathers (Morgenroth, Ryan and Sønderlund 2021). There is also some evidence that fathers requesting family leave are taken to signal low ambition (Rudman and Mescher 2013) and may have lowered career identity (Ladge et al. 2015), but that this negative effect is offset by perceived managerial support (Ladge et al. 2015). Moreover, male leaders tend to be celebrated for *leaning out* of work temporarily to take care of their children. At the same time, women are judged as *leaning in* too much when taking short leaves (Just and Remke 2019). Thus, fatherhood only reinforces the already positive correspondence between manhood and the ideal leadership figure (Meriläinen, Tienari and Valtonen 2015). Some studies even suggest that fathers would be more likely to seek responsibility in order to live up to expectations of being the primary income earner—assuming that positions with higher and extended responsibilities are compensated with higher salaries or bonuses (Borchorst and Siim 2008; Burgess 2013). Contrary to mothers and men without children, fathers may thus benefit from a positive bias toward fatherhood and derive positive effects of fatherhood in their work lives. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Parental status interacts with gender such that fathers will self-report higher leadership aspirations than men without children.

Methodology

Study context: A key element in implementing gender equality in Danish society has been high-functioning childcare institutions and paid parental leave. Such initiatives have made OECD highlight the Scandinavian model as an excellent solution to problems regarding family-work balance (Borchorst and Siim 2008). A visible gain from this model has been Danish women's participation in the labor force, which is among the highest in the world. However, when it comes to closing the gap between men and women in management and leadership roles, Denmark—where women occupy 27% of management and leadership positions—lags behind other Scandinavian countries, many Southern European countries, and the OECD mean of 32% (World Economic Forum 2020). This may partially be due to a highly gender-segregated labor market and a traditional perception of gender (Bloksgaard 2011). Denmark upholds a free choice of dividing maternal and paternal leave between parents, but Danish mothers still tend to be the primary caregivers during parental leave. In comparison, legislation on earmarked paternity leave has made for a more gender-equal division of leave in Norway, Sweden, and Iceland (Haagensen, Agerskov and Vestergaard 2017).

Moreover, despite Denmark's worldwide reputation for gender equality, Danes show low confidence in women's leadership aspirations compared with other Europeans. An EU survey found that 50% of Danes agree that women are not as interested in positions of responsibility in the workplace as men. In contrast, less than 20% of the participants shared this belief in Spain, Sweden, and France (European Commission 2012). Thus, the Danish context is characterized by a paradoxical combination of equality before the law, with highly developed policies and institutions related to childcare and parental leave, and a relatively conservative culture concerning gender roles at home and work.

Sample: A survey of careers and work-family balance of Danish leaders was conducted by the international research institute YouGov and shared with us for research purposes. Data were collected

online among members of the union *Lederne*. The union has more than 100,000 members in management positions, ranging from project management to executive-level leadership positions (Jørgensen 2009; Lederne 2020), in line with the name of the union. In Danish, *leder* refers both to persons occupying management positions (ledelse) and exercising leadership (lederskab). Unions in Denmark provide legal and counseling services to their members and negotiate compensation levels with employers, including employers in the public sector; they also usually offer attractively priced packages with unemployment insurance.

A total of 2,335 union members filled out the questionnaire (97 responses were incomplete), of which 84% were employed in the private sector, 9.4% were employed in the public sector, and 6.6% were self-employed; 1,250 respondents reported having children (M_{age} = 44.91, *SD* = 7.12), of which 35% were women (with a gender distribution of 431 women and 819 men); 1,050 respondents reported having no children (M_{age} = 51.15, *SD* = 9.54), of which 42% were women (with a gender distribution of 451 women and 634 men). The age distribution was similar for men and women, and 83% of all participants were within an age range of 35–59 years.

Dependent variables: We measured leadership aspirations with two variables: aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities and aspiration for top leadership responsibilities. These items relate to the survey questions about leadership aspirations. *Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities* is a measure of participants' ambition to ascend the hierarchy and extend their leadership duties. The question in the survey translates to: Would you like to have a job with greater leadership responsibilities? *Aspiration for top leadership responsibilities* is a measure of participants' ambition for an executive-level position. The related question in the survey was: Is it your ambition to become a top executive in your current workplace or elsewhere? This constitutes a variation of the previous item with a focus on top jobs. The items were rated on a five-point scale.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations appear in Table 1. Correlations followed expected directions. Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities and aspiration for top leadership responsibilities were moderately to strongly correlated (ρ = 0.45, *p*< 0.01), and both followed similar patterns of correlations with gender (ρ = -0.10, *p* < 0.01 and ρ = -0.14, *p* < 0.01, respectively) and parental status (ρ = 0.19, *p* < 0.01 and ρ = 0.11, *p* < 0.01, respectively). In addition to the control variables, age, marital status (married/cohabitating or single), educational level (ranging up to masters or a higher = 5, with a baseline of 0 = primary education), current leadership level (ranging up to 4 = CEO, with a baseline of 0 = no line responsibility), workplace sector (private or not), and region (Copenhagen or not), we also report the variables number of children and perceived competence for top leadership, which we employed in auxiliary analyses.

Several sets of analyses were performed to test the hypotheses. First, a series of t-tests was carried out to compare men and women and parents and non-parents. Both in terms of taking on greater leadership responsibilities and attaining top leadership positions, women (*M* = 2.64, *SD* = 0.05; *Mean* = 1.57, *SD* = 0.04, respectively) reported significantly lower leadership aspirations than men (*M* = 2.92, *SD* = 0.04; *Mean* = 1.93, SD = 0.04) (*t*(2236) = 4.56, *p* < 0.01 and *t*(2236) = 6.55, *p* < 0.01). Parents (*M* = 3.07, *SD* = 0.04 and *M* = 1.92, SD = 0.04) reported significantly higher leadership aspirations than non-parents (*M* = 2.53, *SD* = 0.04; *M* = 1.64, *SD* = 0.04) for both types of leadership aspirations (*t*(2236) = 9.18, *p* < 0.01; *t*(2236) = 5.31, *p* < 0.01, respectively). Considering gender and parental status together, the type of aspirations in question was relevant. In terms of greater leadership responsibilities, women with children (*M* = 2.77, *SD* = 0.07) reported higher aspirations than women without children (*M* = 2.52, *SD* = 0.07) (*t*(864) = 2.56, *p* < 0.01), as was also true of men with children (*M* = 3.23, *SD* = 0.05) compared to men without children (*M* = 2.53, SD = 0.06) (*t*(1370) = 9.48, *p* < 0.01). This offers preliminary

Table 1. Summary statistics and correlations

	Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities	2.81	1.41	1	5	1											
2	Aspiration for top leadership responsibilities	1.79	1.27	1	5	0.45	1										
3	Perceived competence for top leadership	2.52	1.25	1	5	0.32	0.52	1									
4	Gender (1 = woman, 0 = man)	0.38	0.48	0	1	-0.10	-0.14	-0.11	1								
5	Parental status (1 = parent; 0 = non-parent)	0.54	0.50	0	1	0.19	0.11	0.07	-0.07	1							
6	Number of children	0.95	1.05	0	5	0.19	0.11	0.08	-0.08	0.85	1						
7	Leadership level	0.93	0.85	0	3	0.05	0.12	0.16	-0.13	0.05	0.04	1					
8	Educational level	3.21	1.28	0	5	0.14	0.10	0.18	0.14	0.08	0.09	0.01	1				
9	Age	47.81	8.89	20	64	-0.33	-0.24	-0.10	-0.09	-0.35	-0.35	-0.03	-0.05	1			
10	Marital status (1 = married or cohabitating, 0 = single)	0.85	0.36	0	1	0.00	0.03	0.03	-0.12	0.11	0.13	0.06	0.03	0.03	1		
11	Sector (1 = public or self-employed, 0 = private)	0.16	0.37	0	1	-0.05	-0.01	0.05	0.11	-0.01	0.00	0.04	0.13	0.09	-0.05	1	
12	Region of employment (1 = capital region, 0 = other)	0.32	0.47	0	1	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.05	-0.03	-0.04	-0.04	0.13	-0.07	-0.09	-0.03	1

Note: N = 2170−2335; correlations of 0.06 and above are significant at $p < 0.01$

support for H2 but not for H1. In terms of top leadership, there were no significant differences between female parents (M = 1.60, SD = 0.05) and non-parents (M = 1.54, SD = 0.05) ($t(864)$ = 0.74, n.s.), failing to support H1. In support of H2, again, men with children (M = 2.10, SD = 0.05) reported higher aspirations for top leadership responsibilities compared both to men without children (M = 1.71, SD = 0.05) ($t(1370)$ = 5.43, $p < 0.01$) and women with children ($t(1186)$ = 6.24, $p < 0.01$). Figure 1 (Appendix) illustrates these findings.

Second, regression analyses were performed where we controlled for the confounding effects of age, marital status, educational level, current leadership level, workplace sector, and region. Table 2 summarizes the results of an ordinary least squares analysis of the two types of leadership aspirations (we found no indication of multicollinearity, as mean-variance inflation

factors ranged between 1.08 and 1.45, depending on the model). Models 1 and 4 include the control variables only, Models 2 and 5 add to this the main effects of gender and parental status, and Models 3 and 6 present the results of our hypothesis testing. As Models 3 and 6 show, women's leadership aspirations were lower than men's, both in terms of greater aspirations more broadly and in terms of top leadership aspirations (**β** = -0.21, p < 0.01; β = -0.26, p < 0.01). Meanwhile, parental status was positively related to leadership aspirations (β = 0.26, p < 0.01; β = 0.19, p < 0.01). As the interaction term Gender x Parental status shows, however, having children was associated with lower aspirations for women more so than men (**β** = -0.35, p < 0.01; β = -0.28, p < 0.01). Simple slope tests show that parental status did not matter as much for women (the effects were in the expected direction but not significant; dy/dx = -0.09, n.s.; dy/

dx = -0.09, n.s.), but that being a parent was related to higher aspirations men held for both types of leadership roles (dy/dx = 0.26, p < 0.01; and dy/dx = 0.19, p < 0.01). Figure 2, panels A and B in the Appendix illustrate these findings. Once again, these findings lend support to H2, but not H1.

Supplementary analyses

To further explore these effects, we replaced parental status with the number of children in a similar set of analyses. We do not report the results here (they are available upon request), but as Figure 2, panels C and D (Appendix) illustrate, there are no significant gender differences between non-parents and parents of three or more children; however, the gender differences are substantial for parents of one child and two children. This is true for both types of leadership aspirations. Also, the relationship between the number of children and aspirations seems to follow a U-shape for women, but an inverted U-shape for men, and levels off at three or more children.

Moreover, we conducted a supplementary analysis with the survey item *Perceived*

Table 2. OLS regression analysis of leadership aspirations

	Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities			Aspiration for top leadership responsibilities		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	b (se)	b (se)	b (se)	b (se)	b (se)	b (se)
Leadership level	0.08*	0.05	0.05	0.17***	0.14***	0.14***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Educational level	0.13***	0.15***	0.15***	0.09***	0.11***	0.11***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Age	0.03	0.02	0.01	-0.11***	-0.11***	-0.11***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Age-squared	-0.00**	-0.00*	-0.00*	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Marital status (1=married or cohabitating, 0=single)	0.01	-0.07	-0.06	0.12	0.05	0.05
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Sector (1 = public or self-employed, 0 = private)	-0.13	-0.07	-0.08	-0.01	0.05	0.05
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Region of employment (1 = capital region, 0 = other)	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.02
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Gender (1 = woman, 0 = man)		-0.40***	-0.21*		-0.41***	-0.26***
		(0.06)	(0.08)		(0.05)	(0.08)
Parental status (1 = parent; 0 = non-parent)		0.12	0.26***		0.07	0.19**
		(0.07)	(0.08)		(0.06)	(0.07)
Gender x Parental status			-0.35**			-0.28**
			(0.11)			(0.11)
Constant	3.00***	3.32***	3.31***	4.43***	4.65***	4.64***
	(0.59)	(0.60)	(0.60)	(0.55)	(0.56)	(0.56)
R-squared	0.13	0.15	0.15	0.08	0.10	0.11

Note: N = 2238; * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.00.

competence for top leadership. Following the literature, we expected self-evaluation of leadership aspirations to be influenced not only by objective lack of opportunity but also by social perception of normative fit to given professional roles, not least in terms of gender. *Perceived competence for top leadership* is a measure of how competent respondents assess to be as a match or fit for top jobs. The related question in the survey was: To what extent do you perceive yourself competent enough to be considered for a top executive position? This measure allowed us to investigate whether gender and parental status (both dichotomous variables in the following analysis) relate to differences in self-perceived competence as they do to differences in leadership aspirations.

Consistent with other regressions, the expected patterns were discovered for the outcome of perceived competence: overall, women (M = 2.35, SD = 0.04) perceived their competence to be lower than men did (M = 2.62, SD = 0.03) (t(2168) = 5.00, p < 0.01), and parents (M = 2.60, SD = 0.04) perceived their competence to be higher than non-parents did (M = 2.43, SD = 0.04) (t(2168) = 3.19, p < 0.01). Mothers (M = 2.35, SD = 0.06) and women without children (M = 2.35, SD = 0.06) (t(828) = 0.04, n.s.) did not perceive their competence any differently from each other, but fathers (M = 2.73, SD = 0.04) felt they were more competent than men without children (M = 2.48, SD = 0.05) (t(1338) = 3.66, p < 0.01). Furthermore, gender differences among parents (t(1153) = 5.18, p < 0.01) were larger than among non-parents (t(1013) = 1.64, p < 0.05).

Discussion

While we had hypothesized a difference in leadership aspirations between women with and without children, we did not find evidence for such differences in our sample. In contrast, our analyses lend support to the hypothesis that fathers hold higher aspirations than men without children. Overall, the findings of our exploratory study suggest that differences in leadership aspirations across gender categories and parental status are driven mainly by the higher aspirations of fathers.

These findings have several implications for research and practice and open avenues for future research.

First, in our findings, we see little difference between women without children and mothers, which is *contra* to our theory-based hypothesis. This is intriguing because it recasts the assumption that there is an *addition* of negative bias (gender + motherhood) that results in a difference between women and mothers (i.e., in terms of the heightened priority mothers would give to caregiving versus climbing the corporate ladder). An explanation could be related to the *specter of motherhood* (Thébaud and Taylor 2021), a term coined to describe the fact that women already take into account the future expectations of them as mothers—and thus the contradictions with particular career aspirations—before they become mothers. This means that women without children may self-assess based on their current and potential future life situations. This also aligns with studies showing that the potential for future pregnancy negatively affects women's hiring and promotion prospects (Becker, Fernandes and Weichselbaumer 2019), while effects of parenthood for men may only arise when they become fathers.

Our research thus adds to the body of work by showing that bias about gender (but not motherhood per se) negatively affects not only women's leadership career prospects (Bierema 2016; Doldor, Wyatt, and Silvester 2019) but also women's self-evaluations and leadership aspirations (Hoyt et al. 2010). Our conjecture that women internalize bias is reinforced by our supplementary analysis with a survey item related to perceived competence for leadership, and for which results were similar to our primary analyses. The additional analyses further implied that the effects we detected were not based solely on a *rational* interpretation of opportunities as observed in one's context (i.e., respondents were adapting their aspirations to observing leaders who shared their social identity). Instead, biases also extended to self-evaluations of one's competence in leadership roles. In other words, one can theoretically feel competent for a leadership role but not aspire to it if it seems unlikely to achieve it; but if a social

group displays systematic patterns across both aspiration and competence, this suggests some degree of internalized bias.

Thus, *observed* inequality is not sufficient to explain why women would self-evaluate lower and with similar patterns both for aspiration to leadership and leadership competence. This is consistent with the findings of Sánchez and Lehnert (2019), who find that competent women's leadership aspirations decrease as they acquire more work experience. This also complements previous work arguing that bias is not only applied to us by others but also pervades our self-evaluations (Hoyt and Murphy 2016). Furthermore, these findings are in line with other studies indicating that women's ambition regarding leadership responsibility is far from fixed, but rather a response to social and organizational contexts, such as stereotypes for occupational fit (Peters et al. 2012; Peters, Haslam and Ryan 2015), feedback on leadership (Steffens et al. 2018) and gendered cultural expectations for parental roles (Eagly and Steffen 1984; Kmec 2011).

In line with H2, we see a significant difference between men with and without children, with fathers reporting higher leadership aspirations. This could suggest that the *breadwinner* stereotype is activated when fatherhood is realized. However, as we do not work with panel data, it could also be the case that men who aspire to leadership roles are more likely to be fathers. The reader will have noted that men self-evaluate higher than women; this may suggest a possible *specter of fatherhood*, although showing in a different order of magnitude before and after men become parents. Finally, we note that our supplementary analysis shows minor differences between parents with three children or more. Future research could thus take an interest, potentially by employing qualitative methods, in the particulars of such families, including career patterns in the household and socioeconomic status (Hoyland et al. 2021).

While the results confirm the second theory-based hypothesis about differences between men with and without children, our findings can seem surprising in the context of Denmark, not least to readers to whom the Nordics are role models for gender equality. Even though Denmark was among the first countries globally to establish gender equality legislation (Borchorst et al. 2012), many Danes still have a surprisingly traditional perception of gender, and the Danish labor market is highly gender-segregated, both horizontally across occupations and vertically within occupations (Bloksgaard 2011). Denmark's unique combination of family-friendly policies and free choice of parental leave thus creates a particular blend of legal opportunities and societal pressures. This illustrates that gender norms and associated biases are potent and may be difficult and complex to change even in the most egalitarian societies (Koenig et al. 2011; Wood and Eagly 2002). Also, this aligns with the view that women's way to leadership as a labyrinth rather than as a simple glass ceiling (Eagly and Carli 2007).

We note that management and organization research tends to focus on women and motherhood; we hope for future research to focus more on men and fatherhood. In terms of practical implications, we suggest not only promoting careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics for women (Thébaud and Taylor 2021) but also helping men and boys be more reflexive about the reasons for their study choice (i.e., highlighting the influence of expected status and foreseeable income in line with future breadwinner expectations). Future work could also investigate how to mitigate both gender and parenthood bias in practice. We know that aspirations for leadership become more similar across genders when firms have more family-friendly policies (Fritz and van Knippenberg 2018), and there is also work suggesting that an increased focus on flexibility is key to increasing equality (Goldin 2014). However, we also know that there is a negative bias against individuals, including men, who use such flexibility (Rudman and Mescher 2013). In other words, while we can only support workplaces in developing tools and policies that make them more inclusive, there appears to be an even more profound need to change organizational cultures vis-a-vis the question of who is perceived as a leader, what they look like, and how they behave—including but not limited to work presence patterns.

Moreover, we acknowledge that since our sample is composed of managers and leaders who are members of a union that emphasizes these particular social identities, we may have an overrepresentation of women with some degree of aspiration to higher leadership responsibilities. Furthermore, only some members of the union chose to answer the survey, and respondents may have a potentially higher interest in the topic or higher aspirations compared to non-respondents. The potential range limitations here may explain why we failed to find significant differences between women with and without children. More generally, we acknowledge the limitations of surveying members of a union; however, we note that unionization is very high in Denmark, and about 70% of wage-earners are members of a union related to their occupation, industry, or education background. This is the case even though one can obtain unemployment insurance separately from union membership by joining an independent unemployment insurance fund. Furthermore, in line with the name of the union, members—and particularly those who responded—may be more likely to have (some) leadership aspirations compared to a broader sample of the working population. That said, we find it of value to explore such a sample precisely, as we would expect respondents to have reflected on the topic of leadership regardless of their current position. Overall, we believe we put forward a conservative test, ensuring that any differences we find are meaningful and speak to internalized bias even among individuals with high leadership aspirations. While we do not claim our findings to be statistically generalizable to the Danish workforce in general or to international contexts, we hope to add nuance to and extend existing theory about gender, parenthood, and leadership aspiration, and pave the way for future work (including in other contexts) on the topic. Finally, we should note that due to the structure of the survey data we use in this article, our exploratory study relied on only two items to assess leadership aspirations (and considered an additional item for perceived competence in a supplementary analysis). Future research should consider using more developed scales, such as the often used six-item scale developed by Gray and O'Brien (2007) or its extension to nine items by Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018).

Conclusion

In this study, based on the argument that internalized bias might account for differences in aspirations at work, we hypothesized about how gender and parental status relate to leadership aspirations and tested our hypotheses on the self-evaluations of members of the Danish union *Lederne*. We find that women with and without children self-evaluate similarly. We also find significant differences between men with and without children, with fathers reporting higher leadership aspirations. These findings give a finer-grained picture compared to examining the effects of gender and parenthood separately, where women are generally found to report lower aspirations than men, and parents report higher aspirations than non-parents.

As we pointed out in the discussion, further studies are needed to establish if the current results differ from patterns in other Scandinavian countries with a more gender-equal division of parental leave in practice. Moreover, it will be interesting to conduct similar studies outside of the Scandinavian setting and compare findings across societal and legal contexts. Our findings are consistent with the idea that perpetuating bias is something to which we all contribute, even when this has negative consequences for members of sociodemographic groups to which we belong. We thus hope that researchers and practitioners start paying increased attention to ways of mitigating bias in self-evaluation, perhaps starting with awareness raising.

Beyond self-evaluations of leadership aspirations, the focus of this study, it is also essential to conduct studies about the perceptions of recruiters and human resource professionals—professions where we find many women—about the leadership competencies and leadership potential of candidates across gender and parenthood status. Indeed, research shows that women

enforce bias against mothers, and perhaps even more strongly than men (Benard and Corell 2010). We thus concur with Kossek, Su, and Wu (2016), who argue t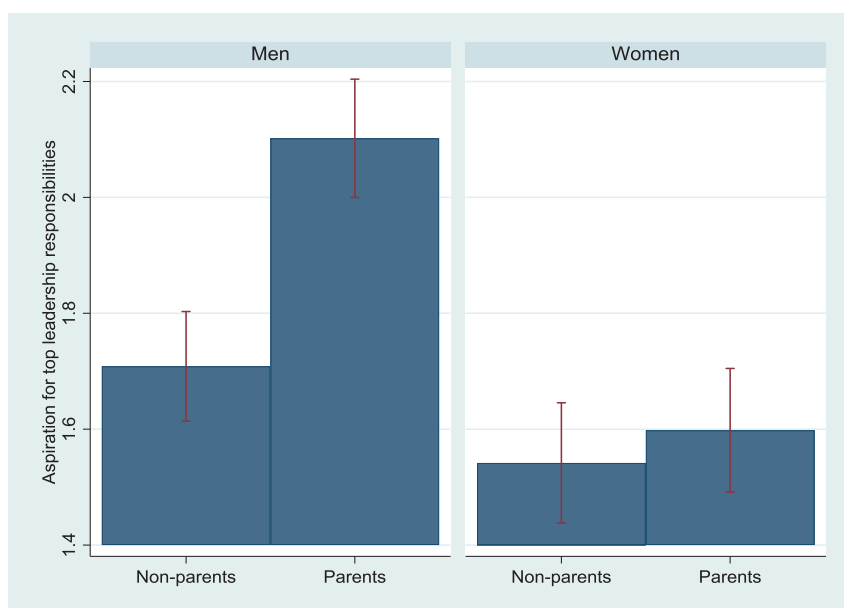hat, given the difficulty to disentangle bias fully, career preferences, and work-family explanations, changes in practice must focus simultaneously on changes in policy, workplace interventions, and open discussions of bias.

Appendix

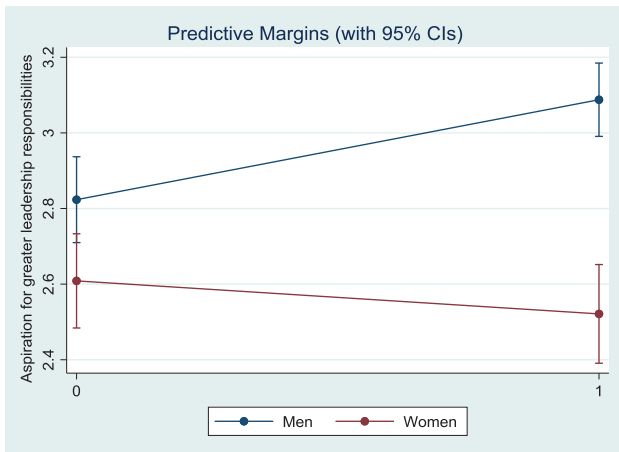**Figure 1. Leadership aspirations by gender and parental status**
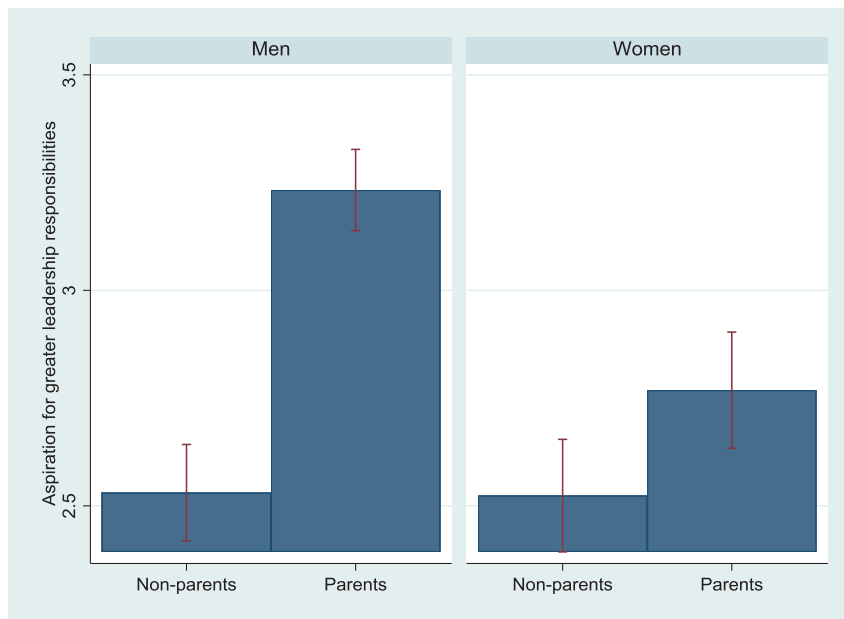
A. Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities

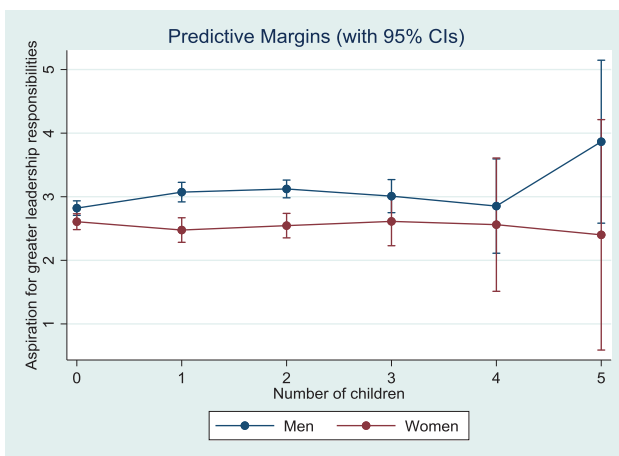B. Aspiration for top leadership responsibilities

Figure 2. Marginal effects of parental status (number of children) and gender on leadership aspirations
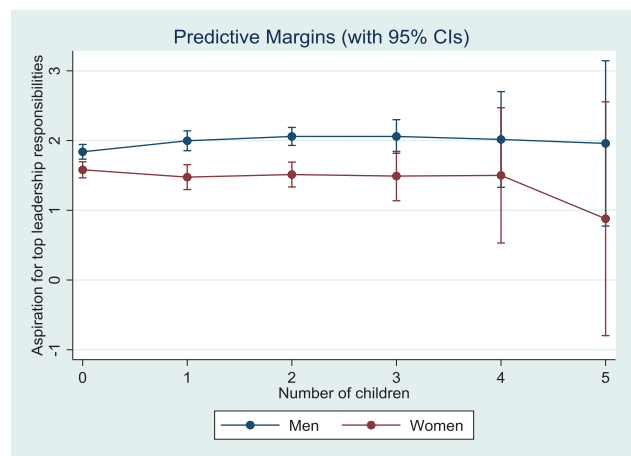
A. Parental status and aspiration for greater
leadership responsibilities
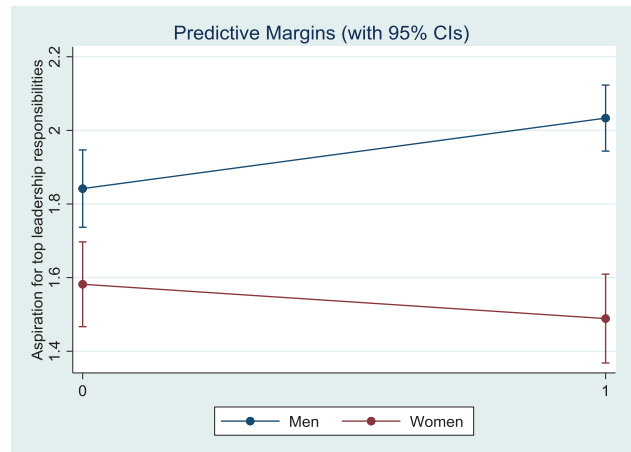
B. Parental status and aspiration for top
leadership responsibilities

C. Number of children and aspiration for greater
leadership responsibilities

D. Number of children and aspiration for top
leadership responsibilities

Note: Panels A and B plot results reported in Table 2 (Models 3 and 6, respectively). Panels C and D plot results not reported in the text (available upon request).

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