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The Malevolent Mask of Meritocracy in Perpetuating Gender Disparities within the Canadian Transit Industry

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ABSTRACT

Gender leadership and pay differentials continue to plague women employed in the male-dominated Canadian transit industry despite focusing on equal pay and gender equity strategies. We conducted a sequential mixed-method study of Canadian women within the transit industry to help elucidate the hidden contextual, social, and organizational factors contributing to persistent gender disparities. For the qualitative phase of the research, women in senior leadership positions ($n = 9$) participated in semi-structured interviews guided by and analyzed using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). The interview results informed the quantitative phase where women in various roles within the transit industry ($n = 50$) completed online surveys measuring experiences at work, performance evaluations, and opportunities for professional growth. Our results support the exacerbating role of meritocracy that helps explain continued constraints and barriers for women from attraction and retention to promotion and leadership. Women are pressured to conform and perform, often at the cost of authenticity, opportunities for advancement, and well-being to survive within meritocratic establishments in order to ascend into C-Suite jobs. The results of this study have practical implications for transit service organizations that are enacting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion strategic plans.

The attraction and retention of women in the transit industry is an international dilemma requiring research and evaluation (Godfrey & Bertini, 2019). As there is a dearth of women working in the transit industry, it follows that women in senior leadership positions in the transit industry are also lacking. The absence of women in leadership positions is a complex and long-standing issue beginning with fewer numbers of women enrolling in and graduating from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematical (STEM) programs (Kuchynka et al., 2018; Shi, 2018).

Women comprise half of the workforce and outpace male academic achievement in post-secondary school (McRae & Dias, 2014). Yet, despite academic outcomes, women continue to lag behind men in attaining work and being paid equally for the work. Canada has made some small gains; however, women continue to earn 89 cents for every dollar men earn. This gap is even greater for women who are racialized, Indigenous, living with a disability, or are new to Canada. Further, female executives make 56% less than male colleagues (The Canadian Women's Foundation, 2022). A recent analysis by a Canadian Law firm examined diversity practices in publicly traded Canadian businesses and found biases in the hiring and promotion of women to directorships and C-Suite roles (MacDougall et al., 2022). MacDougall and colleagues found that in 2020, 20% of publicly traded companies had no female directors, and 34% had no female executive officers. Of those surveyed, companies in male-dominated industries such as technology, life sciences, mining, oil and gas, clean technology, and technology had the fewest female executive officers. The transit industry incorporates all of these industries.

Within the workplace, gender gaps continue to widen with cascading effects as women progress through their careers. They often end up in token leadership positions regardless of equal qualifications and experience (Eagly & Carli, 2007). There are significantly fewer women working in male-dominated industries, and those who do, tend to experience discrimination in the workplace, aggravating further gender disparities (Basford et al., 2014; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fernandez-Mateo & Kaplan, 2018; Verniers & Vala, 2018). Systemic, institutional, and personal microaggressions are a form of oppression impacting women in terms of their perceived performance, reducing a sense of belonging and emotional well-being, increasing feelings of social isolation and, in some cases, results in trauma where discrimination caused job loss or bullying (Watson et al., 2018). Workplace sexism sets women up to fail when they do not conform to expected traditional gender roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women are stereotyped as less agentic, more risk-averse, and less able to handle senior leadership positions (Maxfield et al., 2010; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014).

Collectively, research to date emphasizes that the onus is on organizations to unveil and change the systems that enable patriarchy at work. Patriarchy subsists on worldview values such as meritocracy. Organizational policy, culture, and leadership processes are fortified with a meritocratic belief system; if one works hard, one will be rewarded with deserving promotions and compensation (Markovitis, 2019). Meritocracy is a choice where hard work levels the playing field; thus, if a woman works equally hard as a man, the doors to senior leadership should be equally open to them. If this premise were true, we would see more gender parity. Fundamentally, the problem with meritocratic ideology is that it ignores inherent privilege (Menand, 2019). Markovitis (2019) writes that meritocratic belief systems are pervasive in North American culture and are deeply "connected to income, education, and, through

education, to work, family, culture and even place, giving economic differences new dimensions of quality as well as quantity” (p. 50). Meritocracy hides patriarchal privilege and we have not yet fully uncovered the relationship between meritocracy and sexism in the workplace.

Background and Theoretical Framework

The Leaky STEM Pipeline

Gender imbalances begin prior to the workplace. Within the STEM fields, there are high rates of female attrition from programs and industries known as “the leaky pipeline” (Vitores & Gil-Juárez, 2016). Fewer women are entering and graduating from STEM disciplines, meaning less female talent is entering the workforce (Tran et al., 2019). In Canada and the United States, women surpass men with post-secondary enrollment and perform equally in mathematics and science in secondary school. Even though women outnumber men with college and university attainment, women remain underrepresented in STEM fields of study (Shi, 2018). There are fewer women entering STEM undergraduate programs and post-graduate programs, and subsequently, fewer women entering the industry (Vitores & Gil-Juárez, 2016). Research indicates that women are less likely to enroll in STEM fields for several reasons, including beliefs that: a) the college/university curriculum is unattractive; b) they will face stereotyping and bias in training and on the job; and c) they do not possess good enough math skills (Shi, 2018).

Our review found an array of studies that explained why women are not applying or staying in STEM fields. What was less clear, is whether universities have conducted institutional reviews of their STEM programs to understand recruitment and retention efforts and if they are consistent with the institution’s equity and diversity strategies. Higher educational research studies that can identify poorly designed and performative inclusion policies and strategies would be very helpful in uncovering hidden valves in the pipeline.

Sexism in the Workplace

Experiencing gender-based microaggressions or sexism in the workplace has a harmful effect on a person’s well-being (Miner-Rubino et al., 2009). Gender discrimination at work occurs when human resource decisions are based on gender rather than an individual’s qualifications or job performance (Basford et al., 2014). Benevolent sexism is expressed as explicitly positive attitudes and beliefs about women, which results in implicitly condescending attitudes towards women and paternalistic behaviour whereby women are ascribed to behave in traditional gender roles, protectiveness, and perceiving women as the weaker sex (Kuchynka et al., 2018). Scholars have argued that discrimination is not disappearing but is instead becoming more covert. Denial that discrimination exists stemming from sexism (i.e., modern sexism) becomes more difficult when explicitly expressed but easier to deny when implicitly communicated (Basford et al., 2014).

In male-dominated workplaces, women need to navigate the cultural environment. Doldor et al. (2013) conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with managers (five men and nine women) to uncover the impact of organizational politics on gender inequities in male-dominated industries. Doldor and colleagues found that female managers felt the male-dominated organizational culture was something to be reckoned with, whereas male managers did not feel

gender was relevant. The male managers stated that engaging in organizational politics had functional benefits for one's career and getting things done. On the other hand, female managers viewed it as part of their job to engage in politics to navigate the old-boys networks and golf club socials, deal with tokenism, and manage gender. Other women in the study discussed having to negotiate "macho culture" and deal with being assigned trivial roles in meetings like drafting agendas and picking the dinner menu. Other women felt it took them years to gain access to informal power structures in the organization that are held in socialization events such as playing golf. Several women interviewees explicitly discussed how engaging in organizational politics was agentic and self-serving.

Agentic behaviour in the workplace has been consistently linked to social role theory and gender gaps in political attitudes whereby males are described as self-interested, opportunistic, and power-grabbing compared to females, who are supposed to be communal and relationship-focused (Diekmann & Schneider, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kacmar et al., 2011). The issue with the expression of social role theory and gendered differences in political behaviour reinforces gendered stereotypes and subsequent benevolent sexism in the workplace, creating a cultural dilemma for female managers vying for status, power, and authority. Sexism, gender stereotypes, and discrimination, whether in the form of subtle microaggressions or organizational work culture favouring one sex over another, have significant consequences for women.

As demonstrated briefly here, sexism in the workplace continues to operate. There continues to be a dearth of research to provide evidence, data, metrics and outcomes demonstrating what effective strategies were put in place to deal with sexism. More importantly, we found a lack of business, management, and industry-focused literature on the transparent performance and evaluation of their equity and diversity strategic plans.

Structural Inequities in Organizational Policy and Pay Gaps

Work performance in both private and public sectors is rewarded with access to opportunities or promotions leading to senior leadership positions. How an organization compensates for performance has been found to be biased against women, especially in male-dominated industries. Performance evaluations may appear visibly equitable, especially if that compensation system is built on meritocratic ideology. Compensation systems built on meritocratic tenets are difficult to see for those with privilege who benefit from them (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

Biased compensation can also be tied to access to resources, networks, and opportunities. For example, Madden (2012) conducted a forensic financial analysis of two large brokerage firms in the United States and found that managers assigned women inferior accounts that impeded performance, translating to women earning 18 to 20 percent less than their male colleagues. On the surface, the account allocation system built on merit was seen as equitable, as an equal number of accounts were given to men and women; however, the analysis revealed that women were given inferior accounts that performed poorly over time. The poorer-performing accounts had a cumulative effect that constrained the women's annual evaluations. The assumption was the women were not working hard enough and were not earning enough sales to receive higher-performing client accounts the following year. The women were continually evaluated as historically lower performers despite the hard work and hours put into

their accounts. The biased non-random assignment of accounts was cumulative over time and compounded the gender pay gap.

Leadership

There are fewer women available in male-dominated workplaces, and of those who successfully navigate the structural barriers and sexism, fewer still make it to executive roles. Those who do, continue to experience prejudice and stereotypes where men do not, making it difficult for women to be perceived as effective leaders (Powell, 2011). Leadership has been traditionally operationalized by male-oriented leadership behaviours, which has led to an asymmetrical understanding of what effective leadership is (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell, 2011). Conceptualizations and understanding of leadership appear to be gendered in favour of males. Task-oriented leadership behaviours (i.e., agentic, command, and control) are associated with men, relationship-type collaborative leadership behaviours are associated with women, and these stereotypes undervalue women's capacities (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014).

Women are faced with the requirement to conform to male-oriented leadership models. Role Congruity Theory (RCT) holds that women will be positively evaluated when they behave consistently with their expected gender role stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, with traditional female stereotypes, women are described as being nurturing, relationship-focused, and communal, whereas men's social roles are described as being independent, assertive, and action-oriented. A meta-analysis of RCT showed that women in leadership positions who behave in ways that contradict traditional gender roles encounter significantly more stereotyping and disapproval, especially in contexts where: a) they work in male-dominated organizations; b) are employed in senior C-Suite positions versus middle management; and, c) work in high pressure, fast-paced environments where cognitive processing time is limited (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

According to RCT studies, women are expected to demonstrate superior levels of leadership by displaying competitiveness and toughness to succeed. However, when they do successfully ascend into C-Suite positions, these leadership behaviours are viewed as incongruent, and this can work against them, resulting in lower pay-for-performance bonuses (Kulich & Ryan, 2017), poorer quality leadership assignments (Ryan et al., 2007), and increased instances of discrimination (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014).

Research has also uncovered that when women are granted opportunities to lead, they are not always given fair leadership opportunities or assignments. In a series of experiments, Ryan et al. (2007) demonstrated that women are significantly more likely to receive leadership positions during more precarious times of company turbulence and poor performance. A "Glass Cliff" is defined as a leadership phenomenon where women are selectively placed in crisis situations (Ryan et al., 2011). This phenomenon is due to the stereotype of "think crisis – think female". Ryan et al. (2011) demonstrated that women were undeniably selected for glass cliff-type leadership positions when organizations were functioning poorly, and the roles the women were given were characterized as having a high risk of failure. The glass cliff phenomenon is similar to scapegoating, where women are set up to fail and success is unlikely (Doan, 2020; Ryan et al., 2011).

Lastly, fundamental to leadership is whether or not an aspiring leader has a mentor (Dickson et al., 2014); however, there is a general lack of female role models and mentors for women in

the transportation industry (Godfrey & Betrini, 2019). Without mentors and a strong support network, women may self-select out of seeking senior leadership positions as they see the role as too isolating, and they believe there will be increased discrimination (Fernandez-Mateo & Kaplan, 2018; Salvaj & Kuschel, 2020).

Purpose of the Present Study

To truly understand how and why there are disparities in pay and rank for women in the transit industry that keep them from ascending, it is simply not enough to state there are disparities and continue to record these disparities. We contribute to this gap in the literature by conducting an applied and pluralistic study to provide a clear industry-focused explanation of why gender disparities persist. Therefore, this novel study provides a North American contextual description of the social, cultural, and organizational phenomena of women working in senior leadership positions in the transit industry.

Method

Given the complexity of the research question, the literature reviewed here demonstrated that to understand why gender disparities persist within the Canadian transit industry, we needed to understand women's leadership journeys from their point of view. Our design consisted of a sequential mixed-method; interviews followed by a survey (Creswell, 2013). We conducted the interviews first to explore idiosyncratic lived experiences in depth and used the findings to inform the constructs of the survey.

Phase I: Interviews

Participants

We interviewed nine women in senior leadership roles within the Canadian transit industry recruited through convenience and snowball sampling to ensure that a wide representation of women across Canada was invited to participate in the interviews. A mass e-mail was sent out to members of a Canadian non-profit transit research organization inviting women in senior leadership positions to contact the researcher. The participants stated their current positions were as CEOs, Directors of Transit or Executive Vice Presidents. All who volunteered to be interviewed were included in the study. The women reported being in their current positions between two and thirteen years, with a median of six years. All women identified as White or Caucasian. The women were in their late 30s, 40s, or 50s. While we did not specifically ask for age, the participants offered their age during the interview to contextualize where they were in their careers, when they attended post-secondary school, and how they described their home life where relevant.

Procedure

In December 2020 and January 2021, virtual semi-structured interviews were held one-on-one. The semi-structured interview process was designed to be conversational and to minimize power differentials between the researcher and participant. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Each interview was transcribed into a Word document and sent to the participant for their review. The review of the transcripts allowed participants one more level

of consent to ensure they were comfortable with what they said, if the transcript looked accurate, and provided a final opportunity for consent to their data for the study. The transcribed files were redacted of all company information, as well as any personal names or possible identifying information about the participant, such as geographical location. Furthermore, the transcripts were assigned a number; only the interviewer knew the corresponding name and number to ensure confidentiality.

Qualitative research involves process, meaning, fieldwork, description, and inductive reasoning (Creswell, 2013). To analyze the interview data, we used Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). We transformed iterative, referent, everyday situations, words, and expressions into substantive themes and then connected the themes with existing theory (Charmaz, 2014). Connecting the themes in the data with theory creates new knowledge about the phenomenon and challenges the status quo (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Once each participant reviewed and provided final permission to use the data, the transcripts were loaded into ATLAS.ti qualitative software for analysis. The interview transcript data was coded and analyzed into 35 emergent themes. Axial coding was then performed to determine the relationships and connections between meaningful categories. Finally, we generated four areas of explanation leading us toward the development of the survey.

Phase II: Survey

Participants and Procedure

To provide a fulsome picture, deep as well as wide, to explore why there are fewer women in senior leadership positions and why they are paid lower, we surveyed individuals working in the Canadian transit industry. The online survey was open from June to October 2021 and was available to anyone employed by a Canadian transit organization. Potential participants were recruited via e-mail to all members of a Canadian Transit Research Organization. Fifty participants who identified as women completed the online survey. Ages ranged widely from 20 to 70; however, most women (34%) were in the 31-40 age group. The vast majority of women also self-identified as White/Caucasian.

Measures

Three scales were used to measure participants' experiences at work. All scales were scored using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) and were summed to create overall scores. The Microaggressions at Work Scale has 16 items (Owen et al., 2010). Higher scores indicate more experiences with sexism (i.e., microaggressions). Cronbach's alpha was high ($\alpha = .96$), indicating the scale was very reliable. Eight questions from the Meritocracy Scale were added together to create an overall scaled score (Castillo et al., 2021). Higher scores indicate more endorsement of meritocracy beliefs. Cronbach's alpha was moderate ($\alpha = .59$). The Organizational Politics at Work scale (Hochwarter et al., 2003) is comprised of six items rated. Higher total scores indicated participants worked in exceedingly competitive, politically charged, and stressful environments. This scale was highly consistent according to reliability analyses ($\alpha = .94$).

Three items were used to assess performance evaluations. Each item utilized a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). The first question asked participants about the performance appraisal process's objectivity, clarity, and transparency.

Higher scores on this question indicate less bias and subjectivity about how they were assessed. The second question asked if participants believed their superiors assessed them fairly. Higher scores indicate more perceived fairness. The third question asked if survey participants thought men and women received identical performance evaluations. Higher scores indicated performance evaluations were equitable.

Four items were used to measure opportunities for professional growth utilizing a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). First, we asked if participants felt they had experienced comfortable opportunities to negotiate salary, vacation, and benefits when hired or promoted. Higher scores on this question indicate that participants felt they were given comfortable opportunities to negotiate. Next, we asked if women are given equal opportunities to lead projects compared to men. Higher scores indicate the opportunities are seen as more equal. We then asked women about their networking opportunities compared to men. Higher scores indicate equal or better opportunities. Lastly, we asked if women felt they had more responsibilities and heavier workloads compared to the men they worked with. Higher scores indicated that they thought they were carrying more than men.

Results

Phase I: Interview Results

Participants discussed their experiences with post-secondary education, early work experiences in the field, and other relevant work experiences that contributed to their current position. Almost all the women interviewed had completed university degrees before they entered the transit industry. Just over half of the women with university degrees reported having degrees in STEM. The other half of women reported having degrees in political science or communications or had extensive operational transit work experience (see [Table 1](#) for a summary of quotations associated with the identified themes).

Table 1

Interview Themes and Supporting Quotations (n = 9)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Supporting Quotations</i>
<i>Experiences with Sexism (70 instances coded, all participants experienced (n = 9))</i>	<p>“A number of director positions were created, and I interviewed for two different positions, one in the bus area, one in the rail area. I was turned down for the one in the rail area because it was perceived that I didn’t have enough kind of raw railway field experience. I was given the bus position. And it was an equivalent position, but with slightly less profile” (Participant #11)</p> <p>“The position of Director was posted, and I had applied through the process and I wasn’t hearing anything back. They gave the job to my predecessor who happened to be a friend of a consultant who used to work at the city transit who was doing some work in this city. The general manager just gave him the job and he didn’t have to go through the whole recruitment process.” (Participant #5)</p>
<i>Challenging the Status Quo and Making Changes (31 instances coded, n = 6 participants experienced)</i>	<p>“We only have 20% female [operators] and I listen to a bunch of men talk about how we should treat women. They say, women are not gonna feel safe driving at night or oh, they won’t like the split shifts. So, we started doing career days for women where they could come and drive a bus. And it turned out that women don’t like to do things unless they know they can do it well. So that was a big barrier. If I give you a bus to drive, and we give you a little course to drive around and remove that barrier of thinking a bus is hard to drive, and then, boom! You are getting women to apply.” (Participant #7)</p> <p>“I think that women do have certain challenges and in never having other senior women to learn from I think that you end up getting a slightly biased help and advice, male-framed advice. That’s a disadvantage. The other thing that’s been amazing, from this fellowship program that I that I’m in, is that it is set at my level and they pick women at mid-career who are on a track to potentially getting into a c-suite position.” (Participant #10)</p> <p>“Now I do mentors informally. I spend a lot of time meeting with new grads and people, but I formally mentor under the Women for Climate program. And then there’s another program called Society of</p>

Canadian Women in Science and Technology that I also mentor. So it's there's two females that I mentor for those programs, and that's really important to me." (Participant #6)

"For the last 20 years in my career have been to golf, gone to pubs like and so you go...and it's probably not even what you wanna do, or fishing trips... all those types of things. If you don't go, you're excluded and you're not part of the team. And that's I've taken kind of a lot of personal ownership on that as a female leader where I'm trying to create more social activities that are not gender biased. So, for example, I mean we can't because of COVID, but our team we're trying to do a once a month go hiking together. Not everyone wants to drink or golf." (Participant #7)

Meritocracy
(122 instances coded, all participants, n = 9)

"The other day I was speaking to a panel, and I talked about how I actually think corporate culture and organizations have been for decades, centuries, have been set up to allow men to succeed. Like if you think about it... You know the work starts at 7. There's no time to pick your kids up from school, so there's no way for a woman to feel like they could actually succeed in the job, because everything comes right back to the policy around dress code or the way the hours are set up. It's almost like saying you fit into this structure, and you'll do well versus let's create a structure where women can work in that environment." (Participant #7)

"I mean, I'm [age]. I'm going to be [age] so I am not looking to be competitive and go back to 18-hour days. I'm happy with the 12-hour days I'm doing now." (Participant #3)

Pay Gaps
(14 instances coded, n = 7 participants experienced)

"I had come from the private sector, and you really don't know where you stand. And I do think my experience, at least personally, has been typical, which is, you know, not negotiating as hard as a guy in my starting in salary and things like that from when I was kind of earlier stage in my career and then you're disadvantaged throughout the rest of your tenure at that organization, right?" (Participant #10)

"You know, within the Transportation Department they only hired from within. So even when you have education, I couldn't even get to one of those jobs because back then that's how they hired for it." (Participant #5)

"I believe that even in my own career I've always been paid the lowest in whatever job I've always had compared to men. The way it's come across when I tried to negotiate salary is this kind of 'you should be grateful you're even getting this job to begin with.' And because you're a woman and you want so bad to break that next layer glass ceiling; you just accept it. I'm getting paid right now what the previous CEO made 12 years ago. I mean, it's at least it is always in my history, at least always being say 10%." (Participant #7)

Experiences with Sexism

All women interviewed reported at least one instance of sexism during their careers. In some cases, experiences with sexism translated into discrimination with promotions, access to opportunities, or recognition for good work. One participant stated how frustrating it was to watch her predecessor get a job without having to apply and compete for it.

Challenging the Status Quo and Making Changes

We found that many women in senior leadership positions deliberately made efforts to challenge the status quo and change the culture, policy, and practices to support women in the workplace. One woman spoke about how she addressed recruitment efforts toward women operators, several discussed the issue of not having women mentors, and others introduced team-building and networking events that were not male-biased.

Meritocracy

Several participants expressed meritocratic ideas and shared details about how hardworking they needed to be to succeed in the industry. Organizations that promote and expect employee performance that upholds the meritocratic work ethic are systemically creating structural

inequities for women. The expectations are impossible for women bearing the fact that, globally, 75% of unpaid work is still done by women, such as caring for the house, children, and extended family (Perez, 2019). Pay and opportunity gaps are further exasperated if women put in extra hours on salary because they feel they need to be seen as equal to or compete against men. All the women acknowledged meritocracy either explicitly as a barrier to equity or rationalized inequity as a function of meritocracy.

Pay Gaps

We asked women to discuss whether or not they believed there were pay disparities as a function of their gender. This study took place in Ontario, where public or government organizations publicly share pay bands for roles over \$100,000 per year, referred to as “the Sunshine List.” CEOs have no published pay scales for comparison purposes outside of governmental institutions. As can be seen in what the women said, the inequities exist less in published pay bands and more in recruitment, hiring, negotiation, and career growth opportunities.

Phase II: Survey Results

Demographics

In terms of educational attainment, most of the 50 women who answered the survey held advanced professional degrees. Participants were asked to provide us with their titles at their organizations. We recoded the 49 titles into five different role categories (see Table 2). Most participants stated they were employed in an officer type position such as a project manager or a team lead (see Table 3), and most worked in a large transit organization comprising of more than 1000 employees (see Table 4).

Table 2

Education (n = 50)

Highest Level of Education Attained	%
Some College/Associate’s Degree or University Degree	24
College or Degree/Diploma	28
Some Technical Trades training	2
Advanced Degree or Professional Degree or Professional Degree (Masters or Doctorate)	44
No response	2

Table 3

Professional Roles Held (n = 50)

Title/Category	Examples
CEO/Director (n = 9)	CEO, CEO/Principal, Owner, President, Director, Director of Transit
Executive (n = 8)	Managing Director, Vice President, Senior Vice President, Director of Marketing
Middle Management (n = 9)	Indicates a leadership role: Manager, Technical Director, Team Lead
Technical (n = 3)	Engineer, Researcher, Analyst, Data Scientist
Officer (n = 20)	Policy, Coordinator, Project Manager, Advisor, Sales, Specialist

Table 4

Size of Organization (n = 50)

Size of Organization	%
1000 or more employees	50
100 – 999 employees	20
21 – 100 employees	10
1 – 20 employees	20

Experiences at Work: Microaggressions, Meritocracy, and Organizational Politics

Upon review of the microaggressions at work frequency distribution, the data were spread relatively evenly across the range; however, a few women with very high scores indicated that they experienced more sexism than most. Overall, there was a moderate endorsement of meritocracy among the participants. On average, the participants' workplaces were not viewed as exceptionally negative or political.

Performance Evaluations

The first question asked participants about the performance appraisal process's objectivity, clarity, and transparency. Results indicated that the women in this study did not agree they were evaluated objectively in a clear and transparent manner. The second question asked if participants believed their superiors assessed them fairly. Participants did not believe their superiors evaluated them fairly on their strengths, competencies, or areas for improvement. The third question asked if survey participants thought men and women received identical performance evaluations. On average, women did not endorse the perception that performance evaluations between genders were equal.

Opportunities for Professional Growth

We asked if participants felt they had experienced comfortable opportunities to negotiate salary, vacation, and benefits when hired or promoted. Findings indicated negotiations were not perceived as particularly comfortable. Next, we asked if women are given equal opportunities to lead projects compared to men. The participants also rated this question low, indicating they do not feel they are given equal opportunities to work on or lead projects. Compared to their male colleagues, the participants in this survey felt they had similar opportunities to network. Last, we asked if women felt they had more responsibilities and heavier workloads compared to the men they worked with. Participants indicated this may be true sometimes or for some individuals.

In summary, it appears that performance evaluations, issues with negotiation, and opportunities to lead projects remain problematic for women working in the transit industry. There was more variability in perceptions about workloads and responsibilities perceived to be compared to men. However, interestingly, women appear unencumbered with respect to networking opportunities compared to their male counterparts.

Relationships Among the Variables (see Table 5)

Meritocracy appeared directly unrelated to all the variables except one. There was a significant correlation between the beliefs about meritocracy and perceptions that women have heavier workloads and more responsibilities than men in their workplace. There was a significant positive correlation between microaggressions and organizational politics. In a work environment that is rife with a competitive workplace culture and lacking in community, it may be fertile ground allowing sexism to flourish. Experiencing more microaggressions was also positively related to the belief that women have heavier workloads or more responsibilities.

There were significant, negative correlations between experiencing microaggressions and objective performance evaluations, fair performance evaluations, and the perception that men and women receive identical performance evaluations, can comfortably and effectively negotiate salary and benefits, and are given equitable opportunities for projects and opportunities to network. Without making causal statements, these correlational relationships indicate that women are experiencing sexism.

Perceptions about organizational politics were significantly and negatively related to the perception of receiving an objective evaluation, a fair evaluation, believing equal performance evaluation between genders, and feeling empowered to negotiate job salary and benefits. Organizational politics was not related to networking opportunities; however, it was significantly and positively correlated with the perception that women have heavier workloads and more responsibilities than men.

Consistent with the literature, the idea that the political climate inside an organization is strongly and positively related to experiencing microaggressions means that toxic or unproductive behaviour runs unchecked in the organization, creating further structural inequities for women in the workplace (Hochwarter et al., 2003). Sexist environments may perpetuate stereotypes where microaggressions occur. The high positive correlation between a politicized competitive work culture and microaggressions suggests that as politics and competition increase, microaggressions also increase. As these negative workplace experiences rise, women are less likely to believe they will get an objective and fair performance evaluation, are less likely to have opportunities to receive projects or lead projects compared to men, carry more responsibilities, work harder, and feel less efficacious negotiating pay when they are successful. These factors indicate a plausible explanation for women's continued leadership and pay disparities.

Table 5

Survey Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations (n = 50)

Domain	Variable	M (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
Experiences at work	1. Microaggressions	41.74 (15.02)	1	.09	.63**	-.27	-.31*	-.56**	-.28**	-.59**	-.01	.44**
	2. Meritocracy	21.36 (4.53)		1	.09	.001	.01	-.00	-.05	.14	.06	.29*
	3. Organizational politics	18.08 (6.99)			1	-.26	-.39**	-.53**	-.37**	-.60**	.11	.28*
Performance evaluation	4. Objectivity, clarity, transparency	2.32 (1.31)				1	.88**	.44**	.29*	.19	.11	-.01
	5. Fairness	2.28 (1.31)					1	.54**	.25	.32*	-.01	-.10
	6. Gender inequality	2.68 (1.23)						1	.47**	.63**	-.09	-.35*
Opportunities for professional growth	7. Opportunities to negotiate	2.68 (1.47)							1	.48**	.24	-.25
	8. Opportunities to lead	2.26 (1.45)								1	.06	-.25
	9. Opportunities to network	4.10 (0.92)									1	.034
	10. Heavier workloads	3.44 (1.21)										1

Note. Possible scale range for the microaggressions measure: 14–85. Possible scale range for the meritocracy measure: 9–31. Possible scale range for the organizational politics measure: 6–30. All other possible scale ranges: 1–5. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Discussion

Utilizing a mixed method of inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Charmaz, 2014) to investigate why and how gender disparity exists in the Canadian transit industry, we have elucidated a grounded theoretical model of the hidden effects of meritocracy. Consistent with the research literature, disparities are perpetuated by leaky STEM pipelines, experiences with sexism, and structural inequities in organizational policy. When we returned our findings to the literature, a common

thread emerged: The cumulative and pervasive effect of meritocracy underscores every element of the model to perpetuate disparities for women from industry entry to exit.

Not enough women are entering the STEM fields, leading to the Leaky STEM pipeline. This is exacerbated by the assimilation of women in STEM to the meritocratic ideology within the university environment, long before they enter the transit industry. Hing et al. (2011) argued that, in practice, meritocracy facilitates the status-quo privileging dominant groups because those in control set the standards for the evaluation processes. Those who support it “knowingly or unknowingly help to maintain and legitimize social inequity” (p. 433). Women who believe in modern sexism (i.e., the belief that women are treated fairly) are more likely to endorse meritocratic beliefs, which enables the very system that binds them (Hing et al., 2011). Thus, in STEM fields, meritocratic beliefs are prescriptive in terms of setting a standard for what ought to be (Madeira et al., 2019).

The work-life balance consequences of meritocracy are operating to further bias women from entering the field. If they do choose to enter the field, the patriarchal tradeoff becomes salient with the realization that the standard is not going to change. Either conform and deal with it or leave. Later, in the field, the conflict for work-life balance becomes a more considerable compromise with the onset of family responsibilities. The question then arises: Are women self-selecting not to attend STEM university programs because they believe that they do not have the mathematical skills to be extraordinarily competent in math and science (Shi, 2018), or are they self-selecting out of these programs because of the messaging about giving up all work-life balance? For those women who continue to follow their abilities and interests, the implicit willingness to conform to the meritocratic ideal of work ethic may continue to perpetuate these standards in the workplace. We contend that an indirect relationship between the meritocratic ideal and sexism in STEM exacerbates the leaky pipeline systemically. Conformity is the self-sustaining reality that implicitly supports an inequitable system promulgating sexism.

Our data show that as women ascend into different roles, they are experiencing exacerbating phenomena like glass-cliff appointments, impossible work-life-balance realities, and challenges with sexism, especially in highly competitive and politically charged workspaces. Women are less likely to have mentors, even though networking opportunities exist. More importantly, women perceive their performance as opaque, less fair, and different than men. Women also said they are less comfortable negotiating salaries and are paid less over time. The disparities in organizational policies and practices add up, even if they appear minimal or minor in nature. Many women in our study minimized a one or five percent pay differential. These pay gaps are implicit, substantial, systemic, and exponential when we look at these differences in pay over time. Working hard does not level the playing field if automatic and unseen advantages are awarded to men.

Other structural inequities include the work environment itself. Suppose the “male-based” unwritten policy is to work a minimum of 12 hours a day without considering the invisible work of women outside the office. In that case, it will continue to create asymmetries for women who feel they must compete with men to be offered vital professional growth opportunities. However, with the added effect of a stressful work environment that is highly politicized and competitive, women are faced with additional tradeoffs and lost possibilities. Our survey data showed that as perceptions of the organization's politicization increased, experiences of sexism

increased. When people are stressed, overworked, and overwhelmed, communication is lost, transparency suffers, and people will rely on assumptions, low-quality decision-making, and stereotypical thinking (Doldor et al., 2013; Kacmar et al., 2011).

As noted in our study, half the women interviewed had been handed a glass cliff placement or less-than-ideal opportunity based on stereotypical thinking and the meritocratic ideal. By all appearances, women are being given the same opportunities as men. Still, underneath the surface, these opportunities are not equal and serve to impair women's performance, especially under the scrutiny of performance evaluations designed on a male standard of meritocratic ideology (Doan & Jaber, 2021). Castilla (2015) demonstrated that workplaces that are not transparent or accountable are especially prone to biased decision-making in performance evaluations resulting in pay disparities for women and other minority groups. Men and women who believe in meritocracy also believe the world is just and fair, and rationalize hiring men over women to support the status quo (Hing et al., 2011). Madeira et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of meritocracy and discrimination, concluding that "to this end, activating in people's minds Meritocracy beliefs facilitates the access to stereotypical inferences and evaluations, which in turn, are used to neutralize gender-based discrimination perception in the workplace" (p.17). Therefore, stereotypical thinking, such as the belief that the organization is and should be meritocratic, translates into unseen structural inequities for women that can have both cascading and cumulative effects on opportunities, leadership, and pay.

Limitations and Future Research

In applied research, the ability to control environmental, historical, or contextual factors is low compared to experimental studies done in university laboratories. However, trading experimental control for realism for this study was necessary to truly understand why there are persistent gaps in leadership and pay for women. To do real-world research, we faced several challenges associated with conducting research during a global pandemic. These limitations are reflected in the number of participants we were able to interview and survey. We believe that nine participants were sufficient for this study in being able to understand the implicit factors explaining gender disparities. Through analysis, we found saturation and consistency of themes across participants confirming our qualitative sample size was acceptable.

Qualitative methodology is focused on exploring and understanding in-depth, complex human experiences. In terms of objectivity, the interpretations made by the researchers are predicated on whether or not they were able to approach the data with an open mind and follow the data in the direction it took them. Regarding reliability, one researcher coded, analyzed, and interpreted the data. We attempted to deal with these limitations by presenting a strong theoretical research framework upon which to base our interpretations.

Validity, veracity, and trustworthiness of the interpretation within a qualitative research paradigm can be described as the confidence the reader can have in the honesty and genuineness of the findings (Anderson, 2010; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this case, the researcher who conducted the interviews and analysis is a White woman who had real-world experience as a manager and director in both profit and non-profit organizations and worked in several male-dominated industries such as corrections and the Canadian military. It is possible that the experiences and identity of the researcher may have introduced some bias into the interpretation. We mitigated this risk by ensuring the findings resonated with the literature and

theoretical framework. We feel that this study triangulated previous research and added to the body of knowledge about why women continue to experience barriers in the workplace.

Quantitatively, we had a fairly low sample size that reduced the generalizability of our results. We utilized the interview data to inform the development of the survey. Future research should include larger samples to conduct intersectional or comparative analysis. That is, comparisons of participants from a multiple identity lens (e.g., racialized, living with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+). That being said, we increased the validity of our survey by selecting reliable and valid instruments to measure the phenomena of interest.

We believe that by conducting a sequential study, we increased the strength of the findings. Further, interviewing and surveying women working in the industry intensifies the value of the study. We recommend that future industry-specific research efforts include participants who work at multiple levels of the organization. Our sample featured women who were in senior and professional roles. We need to hear more voices from operators or those working in different capacities within the organization, such as construction, training, and maintenance, to get a better sense of career trajectories for all women. Lastly, further research could examine meritocracy as part of an organization's philosophy of work, criteria for evaluation, methodology for pay band calculations, designs for staff succession plans, recruiting, and training. Equity and inclusion action plans that incorporate these elements would be very fruitful next steps.

Implications

There are several recommendations for policymakers and leaders in the Canadian transit industry based on our findings. Primarily, we advocate for a focus on deconstructing and eliminating systemic inequities within the organization rather than wasting resources and time on "implicit bias" programs. Furthermore, many diversity programs that focus on changing attitudes do not work and have not translated into meaningful change since the 1930s (Kalev & Dobbin, 2020).

We also recommend that organizations deconstruct their leadership expectations, philosophies, and programs to ensure hidden privileges are made visible. White men have developed and intensely influenced the standard for preferred leadership behaviour (Belasen, 2017). Women lead differently than men, and the measurement stick for good leadership performance requires critical review (Doan & Jaber, 2021).

Organizations need to conduct gender equity audits or program evaluations of organizational policy and practices to eliminate unseen structural inequities for women. Equity audits can examine: a) attrition patterns – where are women exiting the organization and why? b) succession plans; c) performance review processes that ensure clear, objective, evidence-based criteria free from gendered feedback; d) job postings, job descriptions, and compensation plans that are devoid of stereotypical language; and e) establish mentorship programs for women by women. Women are more likely to push change if they are in the position to do so. Finally, CEOs that place explicit importance, vision, value, and resources on strategic plans with goals to address gender parity offer the best chance at making meaningful change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, supporters for gender equality in senior roles have typically focused on the “business case,” showing that companies with more women on their boards have better financial outcomes. The idea that women leaders are excellent for a company’s bottom line supports an economic argument for workplace equity policy. The rationale that women should be hired, retained, and leading companies in equal numbers is more than a business case argument; it is a social justice argument (Eagly, 2016).

Declarations

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