



**Women in Leadership**  
NATIONAL STUDY

# MISSIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

ACHIEVING INSTITUTIONAL  
GOALS AND MISSION

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### **The Mission**

How are women represented within senior leadership? What institutional, cultural and theological factors seem to encourage (or hinder) the use of women's gifts in leadership?

## The Vision

Why conduct a study on women in leadership among evangelical nonprofits? As with all projects of this scope, it began with a vision. In the fall of 2012 the Imago Dei Fund and Gordon College began conversations about how research might advance our understanding of women's leadership within the evangelical community. This conversation led to the development of the Women in Leadership National Study, which focuses on identifying best practices for ensuring the use of all gifts for the work of the Kingdom of God. Emily Nielsen Jones, co-founder and president of the Imago Dei Fund, explains her vision behind this study.

### **What motivated you and your organization to support this study?**

At the Imago Dei Fund, we had been engaging in the anti-trafficking movement for a few years and had developed a good network of Christian groups and organizations that we had begun to partner with in this global work of combating modern-day slavery and other humanitarian ills that fall heavily on girls and women. Over 80% of trafficking victims are girls and women and the effects of poverty fall disproportionately on girls and women.

We eventually decided to “go upstream,” as they say in philanthropy circles, and become more intentional in supporting and encouraging partner and potential partner organizations in their efforts to go beyond humanitarian work by creating subcultures that fully value and empower women to use their gifts at all levels of the organization.

### **How has this decision to go “upstream” changed the direction of the Imago Dei Fund? How did it change the way you do your grant-making?**

We have become bold and explicit in asking questions about practices around women's leadership in the organization, as we have

started to see incongruences between humanitarian aims and actual organizational practices. Many evangelical organizations, including those doing great work for girls and women in the world, have lagged behind other nonprofits in using women's gifts in leadership positions. By the Imago Dei Fund simply asking questions about the presence of women in leadership, we have discovered that many organizations want to use the gifts of everyone in their organizations and see this as central to preserving their Christian witness in the world but lack clear strategies to make it happen.

### **What do you hope the study will accomplish?**

We hope to be able to speak with some clarity about where we are in our journey to use the gifts of women, informed by rigorous research. We hope to put a spotlight on a set of best practices that are working in the field, so as to make incremental steps toward the full use of women's gifts in Christian organizations. And we desire to increase conversation and awareness of the need by humbly holding up a mirror to ourselves in order to identify potential blind spots that cause organizations to fall short of the ideal of full human equality of men and women as co-image bearers of God.



*Emily Nielsen Jones*  
Co-Founder & President of the Imago Dei Fund

## The Study

The Women in Leadership National Study consisted of three phases: a comprehensive study of more than 1,400 Christian organizations, a survey of leaders in a subset of these organizations, and finally, interviews with leadership teams of 14 organizations. This multi-layered approach examined different aspects of the gender dynamics within senior-level leadership of evangelical nonprofits and higher education institutions in the United States. The organizations in the study belonged to large umbrella evangelical groups. The primary umbrella group was the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA), an accreditation organization with over 1,800 evangelical nonprofit organizations as members. Additional umbrella groups included the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU), the Accord Network (an evangelical relief and development organization), and the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA).

The objective of Phase One was to provide a general comparative landscape for women in leadership within evangelical organizations: How does the evangelical community compare with other sectors in terms of the representation of women in senior-level leadership roles? To answer this question, 990 tax form data from 2010 were analyzed for 1,481 organizations. The organizations included 126 colleges and universities, as well as nonprofits in areas such as social services, discipleship/training, education, family ministries, and missions. Submissions of 990 forms require organizations to list the five highest paid employees who make over \$100,000 and all employees who make over \$150,000. In this stage of the study, information on more than 3,200 paid senior leaders was collected along with more than 15,000 individual board members.

In the second phase of the study, women and men who hold leadership positions were surveyed in a cross-section of the organizations in the study. Leaders of 450

organizations were approached, with a participation rate of 25% consisting of 674 leaders and leadership team members with broad representation across sectors. Survey respondents were asked to provide demographic information, to answer several questions pertaining to their denominational affiliation and that of their institutions, and to identify the theological traditions that had shaped them and the key leaders of their institutions. Respondents also answered questions regarding their views—and what they thought to be the views of their religious communities (churches) and of the key leaders of their institutions—on gender roles in the family, church, and society. Finally, they were asked to evaluate current opportunities at their respective institutions for women to be involved in leadership.

Based on the results of Phase One and Phase Two, nine nonprofits and five colleges were identified that performed above average with regard to a number of gender indicators. First, at least 20% of their board of directors and 20% of their paid leaders were women. These organizations also scored well (at 80% or above) with respect to leadership opportunities for women in the workplace. In all of these organizations, all respondents agreed that women and men should share leadership in society. Interviews were conducted with 88 leaders in total. At least five leaders were interviewed from all colleges, and six or more from each of the other nonprofits. These included the top leaders (CEO/President), all women at the second tier of leadership, a number of other men holding key leadership positions (Provost/Executive VP), and one to two board members. Most all interviews with paid leaders were conducted in person, and most board interviews via phone; interviews lasted between thirty and ninety minutes. The primary purpose of conducting these interviews was to identify best practices and to understand the kinds of institutional cultures that had facilitated the advancement of women into senior-level leadership positions.

# The Findings

## Phase One: The Lay of the Land

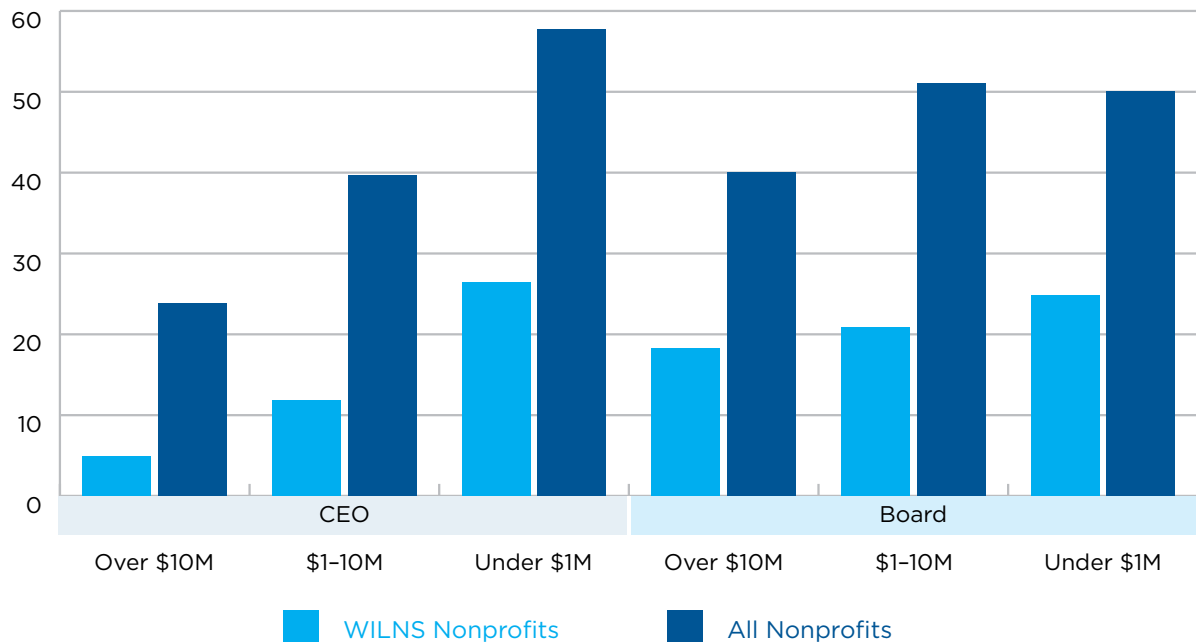
Unsurprisingly, women are found in lower percentages among the evangelical nonprofits and educational institutions than in the broader nonprofit world. Women in the nonprofit sector generally comprise close to half of all board members, and over a third of all CEOs. Evangelical organizations are at best doing half as well. Like nonprofits generally, women’s presence in leadership declines with the size of the organization. Figure 1 and Figure 2 compare organizations in our study with nonprofits and educational institutions more generally.

Of particular note are the especially low levels of women serving as top leaders. While evangelical organizations in our study generally had about half the percentages

of women serving as paid leaders and board members in comparison to other nonprofit organizations, their percentages of women serving as the top leader were exceptionally low. Only 5% of Christian colleges had women serving as presidents, and only 5% of large nonprofits (with budgets over \$10 million) had women serving as CEOs and presidents. Clearly, this is one of the key areas where women face obstacles in leadership.

These overall statistics hide a great deal of variation found among the organizations of the study. Almost a quarter of the organizations had no women serving on their boards while 8% had women comprise more than half their board. Several factors were associated with different levels of women in leadership. As is true in the nonprofit field generally, organizations with larger budgets often have less gender parity. Another factor

**Figure 1: Comparison of Female CEOs and Board Positions by Organizational Expenses**



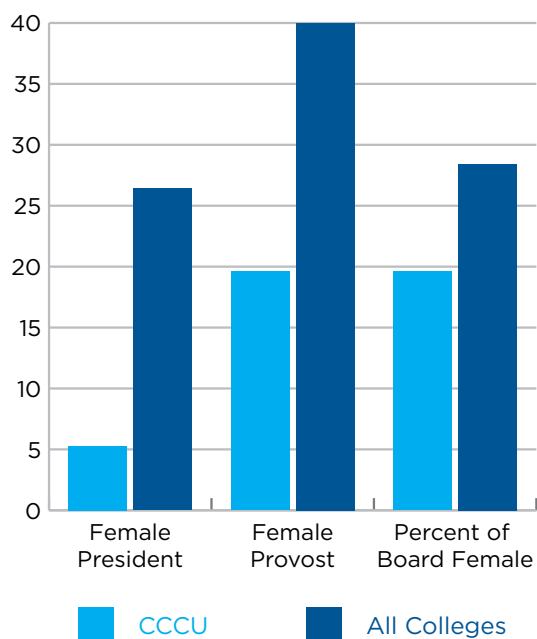
was sector or field—women are better represented in leadership positions in family-based ministries, but fare worse when it comes to mission and discipleship related agencies.

Finally, we also found that denominational affiliation was important. Religious tradition itself does not seem to be a predictor for the presence of women in leadership—women are found across all traditions. However, in terms of the organizations where women reach the highest level, institutions of higher education whose traditions emphasize the Holy Spirit distinguish themselves: Pentecostal, Holiness, Wesleyan, and Anabaptist. And of the colleges with a woman as president, all are part of denominations or traditions that ordain women; none were part of non-denominational or ecumenical institutions.

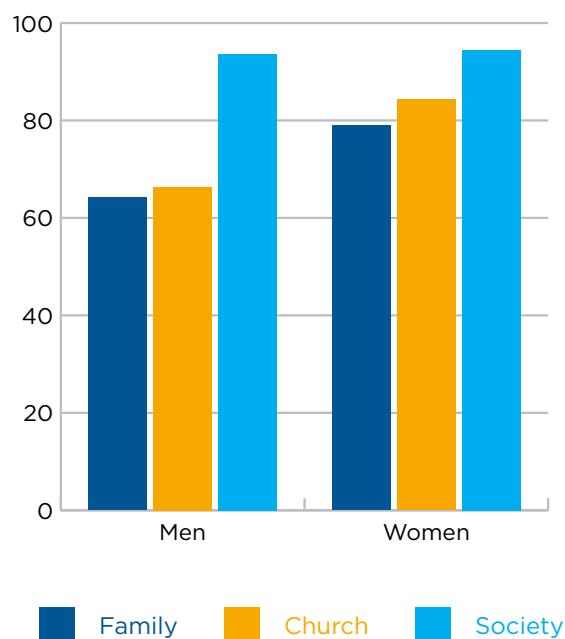
## Phase Two: Survey of Institutional Leaders

Phase Two attempted to capture the organizational leadership culture of organizations through a survey instrument. This survey was unique in that it was administered to both men and women who serve in leadership, as well as teams of leaders within organizations. In addition, the survey allowed for greater distinctions to be drawn than previous research: respondents were asked for their views on leadership roles for women in society, the church, and the family, instead of combining such spheres together. As shown in Figure 3, one of the significant findings of the survey was that 94% of the 674 female and male respondents affirmed that women and men should equally serve in leadership positions within society. Significantly more women than men believed that women should share

**Figure 2: Percentage of Women in Leadership within Colleges and Universities**



**Figure 3: Percentage of Men and Women Holding Egalitarian Views in Different Spheres**



**Table 1: Survey of nonprofit leaders' stance on women in church leadership compared to that of their church**

	Church and respondent affirm only men for church leadership	Church affirms both men and women for church leadership; respondent affirms only men	Church and respondent affirm both men and women for church leadership	Respondent affirms both men and women for church leadership; church affirms only men
<b>All Men</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>23%</b>
Nonprofit	33%	9%	36%	22%
Colleges	25%	4%	46%	23%
<b>All Women</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>28%</b>
Nonprofit	18%	1%	51%	30%
Colleges	11%	3%	58%	27%

leadership with men in the church and in the family. Both men and women within college settings also affirmed egalitarian stances towards women at higher levels than the sample as a whole.

Evangelical nonprofits exist at the boundary between church and society. They are not ecclesiastical organizations yet they have a faith-based mission. And for many of the nonprofit institutions and colleges within our sample, there is not a clearly stated position on women in leadership. In fact, we found in the survey that even as 94% of male leaders noted their support for women leading in society, a full 20% of women in our sample thought that their peers did not support their leadership. Women also evaluated their organizations as having fewer opportunities for women than for their male peers: men gave their organizations a score of about 80 on a scale of 100 for women in leadership, while women gave their organizations under a 70. In short, women are more uncertain about where their peers stand when it comes to their ability to lead.

Beyond the work environment, we also explored the church communities to which male and female leaders belong. To explore this intersection, leaders were asked to identify their views on women serving in leadership positions within the church in comparison to the views of the churches that they attend. Table 1 provides the breakdown of how personal beliefs about women's leadership in the church compare with those of the churches the respondents attend. A majority of men and women attend churches that hold views similar to their own. However, as revealed in Table 1, more than a third of the leaders that held egalitarian views of women in leadership did not attend churches where women could fill all leadership roles. This was true of male and female leaders. As we found in later interviews conducted with leaders, being in churches where such dissonance existed was often more costly—socially, emotionally, and spiritually—for women than men.



### Phase Three: Best Practices for Empowering Women and Men

Through interviews, informed by the institutional data and surveys of leaders, we attempted to identify consistent themes, experiences, and approaches that were tied to effectively moving women into leadership. Five areas emerged as central for Christian organizations if they hope to better attract, promote, and retain women in leadership, and contribute to a better gendered climate in the process.

**First, organizations need to be professional, and consider ways to increase flexibility.** At a basic level, this requires implementing policies and procedures that promote equality and reject discrimination. Enforcing anti-sexual discrimination and harassment policies, and creating policies around life-work balance and maternity leave are especially important. Alongside such policies, the strong support of senior leadership in crafting jobs that worked for leaders was central. For nonprofits that expect leaders to raise their own funding, policies that address the challenges of women and minorities to raise support were critical.

“We have been very aggressive in trying to communicate that if you are being treated differently because of your gender, we want to know that. We try to confront that.”  
-Male HR Director

**Second, there should be intentionality and investment in diversity initiatives.** While debated among universities and nonprofits, organizations that retain and attract women were often likely to have diversity initiatives as an intentional goal. This involved leadership development programs that target

women and minorities, creating teams and institutional structures to engage diversity, and holding oneself accountable to diversity markers. Leaders also discussed the value of engaging in diverse networks and actively recruiting women.

“We have to hire the very best we can hire. We need to make sure that the pool that we’re fishing in is diverse enough.”  
-Male executive

**Third, senior leaders need to be vocal and active about their support for women in leadership.** Survey data showed that people are often unclear about where the organization stands on women in leadership. Senior leaders can model positive relationships with women, inside and outside of the organization. They can use their platform to support women in leadership and put them in positions of power. Senior leaders who take a more collaborative approach within their own leadership style help create a more positive gender environment. Providing strong female role models also has important positive results for both men and women.

“He has been really clear and brings out Biblical examples of why women leading is okay, and he has been a huge advocate for women leading . . . He’s been very vocal about women being good leaders and why he values women in leadership.”  
-Female executive

**Fourth, organizations can invite discussion of internal and external barriers people face.**

Organizations can provide opportunities to marginalized communities to come together for additional support, and to recognize and address the various barriers encountered regularly by women (and especially women of color) in leadership. This includes both internal barriers and insecurities, as well as external barriers. There should also be increased training and education for all employees – both regarding how to support women, as well as the need to confront one’s own biases. Some of the central issues women discussed were men challenging their authority, questions about their competence, and frequent suspicions about sexuality.

“I think it’s just in the everyday stuff. It’s not the big stuff because the big stuff is no longer acceptable.”  
–*Female executive*

“The current team has both men and women and there is just a richer dynamic about thinking through all the aspects of an issue.”  
–*Female executive*

“I’m going to be very passionate about wherever God calls you to serve. That’s where you need to be, male or female. Wherever the Lord calls you, that’s where I want you to be.”  
–*Female board member*

**Fifth, organizations must stay focused on their mission and vision, and why gender diversity matters.**

Nonprofits must develop a robust theological understanding of gender and diversity, and not shy away (as many do) from engaging the importance of diversity to mission. Reasons and theologies for promoting gender diversity included a desire to allow God to move and work in all people, to encourage women in fully serving for the sake of the Gospel, and to shape an organization to more deeply resemble the kingdom of God. That is, addressing barriers that exist for women in leadership was about addressing barriers that restrict the movement of God in the lives of individuals and the organization.

## Actions You Can Take

### Increase Awareness of Gender Inequality

- Review statistics on women in leadership within the organization and broader sectors
- Share this report with colleagues and top leaders in your organization for discussion
- Listen to the challenges faced by women in leadership, recognizing those concerns will vary
- Increase conversation and discussion among all employees over issues of gender and race, with attention to both internal and external barriers

### Be Clear and Transparent in Communication

- Take a clear stance on women in leadership, and have this embedded within your vision/mission statement or core values
- Ensure the top leader is vocal about his/her support for women in leadership
- Develop a clear theological articulation of why diversity is important
- Place women leaders in visible leadership roles, inside and outside the organization

### Act Intentionally to Promote Increased Diversity

- Enforce high levels of professionalism (including anti-discrimination policies)
- Provide training on diversity and opportunities for learning
- Invest in leadership opportunities for women within the organization
- Adapt jobs to employee needs and create a culture of flexibility in policy and climate

### Hold Yourself Accountable to Diversity Markers

- Create a long-term strategic plan towards change
- Make diversity a board priority—increase women serving on the board and ask the board to evaluate diversity statistics
- Perform outside assessments and reviews, and be willing to change culture and practices
- Seek diverse networks for the recruitment of leaders, and insights toward change in the organization
- Be transparent about the status and progress of your organization

For more information, please see  
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