

Leading Through Complexity: Female Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health, and Sustainable Success



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Abstract

This article explores the paradox of female mental health and life satisfaction in the context of leadership and entrepreneurship. While women report higher stress levels and greater vulnerability to emotional exhaustion, they also consistently express higher life satisfaction than men. Drawing on recent research in psychology, neuroscience, and organizational studies, the article examines how this paradox may serve as an untapped strategic asset in business. Emotional intelligence, collaborative leadership, and values-driven resilience are presented not as secondary traits, but as core capacities for leading in today's complex, high-stakes environments. Importantly, the paper highlights the heightened mental health risks women face—particularly in leadership and entrepreneurial roles—and discusses how these challenges call for a shift toward cultures of wellbeing at both individual and organizational levels. A systems-level framework is proposed to support sustainable female leadership in business and entrepreneurship.

Introduction

The conversation around women's leadership has often focused on overcoming barriers—glass ceilings, funding gaps, and biased evaluations. However, a more nuanced and urgent question lies beneath the surface: how do women lead sustainably in a world that is both demanding and emotionally taxing? The answer begins with an observation that is both counterintuitive and empirically supported: women consistently report higher levels of stress than men—and yet, paradoxically, they also express greater life satisfaction. This paradox challenges conventional thinking about stress, burnout, and success. It invites us to explore not only the pressures that female leaders face, but also the unique psychological and emotional resources they bring to leadership. In doing so, we move beyond deficit-based frameworks and begin to recognize female leadership as a source of insight into more human-centered, emotionally intelligent models of organizational success.

The Global Reality: Women Feel More, Yet Thrive More

Before diving into female leadership and entrepreneurship specifically, let's examine what research tells us about women's mental health worldwide. The patterns are both concerning and fascinating.

Recent studies examining more than 100,000 people across over 100 countries consistently show that women report higher levels of stress than men (Gallup State of the Global Workplace, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). In the 2024 report, 43% of women—compared to 39% of men—reported experiencing stress during most of the previous day. From 2021 through 2023, women's reported stress levels remained consistently higher than those of men, averaging 46–47% each year, while the corresponding rate for men remained at 42%. Women were also more likely than men to report other negative emotions, such as anger and sadness.

The American Psychological Association confirms that women experience more severe stress than men (American Psychological Association, 2023). This is not merely a matter of self-reporting; the finding is also supported by medical statistics, which show that women suffer from depression almost twice as often as men: 5.5% versus 3.2% (Albert, 2015).

Neuroscientific research also confirms organic differences in brain changes between men and women under chronic stress. A study conducted at Oxford University using MRI imaging found that individuals suffering from professional burnout exhibited reduced gray matter thickness in specific brain regions and enlarged amygdalas, the brain's central alarm system. Critically, these structural changes were significantly more pronounced in women, suggesting a heightened neurological vulnerability to exhaustion in female professionals (Savic, Perski, & Osika, 2017).

Yet this is where the findings become particularly intriguing: despite reporting higher levels of stress, women consistently rate their life satisfaction higher than men.

According to the Gallup State of the Global Workplace reports, in 2024, 39% of women—compared to only 31% of men—rated their current life situation highly. This gender difference was also observed consistently in the 2021–2023 reports, indicating a stable pattern in self-assessed life satisfaction.

Findings from the World Happiness Report (2022), based on pooled data from 2017 to 2021, further confirm that women report higher life satisfaction than men across a wide range of countries and cultures (World Happiness Report, 2022).

This is not a statistical anomaly. The consistency of these results across independent research organizations and methodologies points to a robust gender difference in the way stress and satisfaction are subjectively experienced.

Why the Paradox Exists

Enhanced Emotional Processing

Research suggests that women may have a greater capacity for experiencing and processing a wide range of emotions—not only positive but also negative (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013; Thompson & Voyer, 2014; Goubet & Chrysikou, 2019). This emotional depth can increase vulnerability to stress but also enables richer experiences of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. Biological factors should also be considered: for example, the Mayo Clinic identifies cyclical hormonal changes as a risk factor for women's mental health across the lifespan (Mayo Clinic, 2019).

Social Permission to Feel

Cultural norms tend to grant women greater permission to acknowledge and express emotional experiences, while men may underreport both psychological distress and life satisfaction. This greater emotional

awareness may help explain the paradoxical coexistence of higher reported stress and higher life satisfaction among women.

Values-Congruence Model

The stress-satisfaction paradox may also reflect women's tendency toward values-driven decision-making. Research indicates that women are more likely than men to prioritize intrinsic values (relationships, personal growth, community contribution) over extrinsic ones (wealth, fame, image) (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005).

When professional roles align with intrinsic values—even if demanding—individuals report higher satisfaction despite increased stress. This suggests that women may be more willing to accept stressful situations that provide meaning and purpose, resulting in the observed paradox.

Role Expansion vs. Role Conflict Theory

Traditional role conflict theory would predict that managing multiple roles (professional, caregiving, community) leads to decreased wellbeing. However, role expansion theory suggests that multiple roles can provide diverse sources of meaning, social support, and identity validation (Barnett & Hyde, 2001).

For women who successfully navigate multiple roles, each domain may offer unique satisfactions that contribute to overall life satisfaction, even while creating additional stress. This theoretical perspective helps explain why the “multiple role burden” may paradoxically contribute to both stress and satisfaction.

What Makes It Harder for Female Leadership

When these baseline gender differences are placed within the high-pressure environment of leadership—and particularly entrepreneurship—the challenges intensify significantly. If women in the general

population already report elevated levels of stress, it stands to reason that female executives and entrepreneurs face exponentially greater pressures.

Entrepreneurial contexts, in particular, tend to amplify existing stressors in ways that are uniquely demanding: constant uncertainty around funding, market conditions, and business viability; round-the-clock responsibility for outcomes and employee wellbeing; financial risk that often involves personal or family assets; professional isolation, with few peers who fully understand these compounded challenges.

Further compounding these issues is the structural inequality in access to resources. Female entrepreneurs receive less than 3% of venture capital funding (Solal & Snellman, 2023), despite research showing that women-led companies often outperform male-led ones on key performance indicators (World Economic Forum, 2023). As a result, many women are forced to work harder to establish credibility and often rely on bootstrapping for longer periods, leading to greater financial strain and emotional load.

The Hidden Advantage: Why This Paradox Matters

We can suppose that with all these social and physiological prerequisites women have more emotional and social sensitivity which increases vulnerability to mental health risks, but also offers unique strengths for team work, integration and collaboration.

Here's what makes this paradox fascinating for business: the very traits that create higher stress for women may also be their strategic advantages in entrepreneurship and corporate life.

Emotional Intelligence as Business Asset

Women's capacity to experience and process complex emotions is not a weakness—it reflects a form of sophisticated emotional intelligence that supports stakeholder

relationships, customer insight, and team management.

For example, research by Woolley et al. (2010) introduced the concept of *collective intelligence*—a group's ability to perform a variety of tasks effectively. Their findings showed that teams with more women tended to perform better, largely due to higher average *social sensitivity*—the ability to read and respond to others' emotional cues. This trait, closely related to cognitive empathy, fosters psychological safety and inclusive team dynamics.

More broadly, emotional intelligence is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of leadership success. A systematic review confirms that emotionally intelligent leaders positively influence workplace behaviors, team cohesion, and business performance (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023).

The findings suggest that emotional intelligence, long undervalued in traditional leadership models, plays a critical role in driving group performance and enabling effective collective problem-solving. Empathy, in this context, functions as a strategic asset in collaborative and leadership environments.

The Strength of Empathic Leadership

A compelling example of modern female leadership is Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, widely recognized for her empathetic leadership style and effectiveness in times of crisis. Her approach has been studied through the lens of *Social Change Leadership*, a model that emphasizes non-hierarchical influence and positions leaders as catalysts for positive societal transformation (Van Wart et al., 2022).

During her tenure, Ardern prioritized initiatives aimed at reducing poverty and social inequality, protecting the environment, and advocating for youth and women's issues. Her leadership was marked

by empathy, resilience, and a strong sense of responsibility, qualities that earned global recognition and respect.

Ardern's story illustrates that leadership can be rooted in cooperation, inclusion, and collaboration rather than in competition or dominance. Her example continues to reshape the narrative around what effective, human-centered leadership can look like in the 21st century.

From Values to Value: The Strategic Impact of Female Leadership

Women leaders often maintain strong alignment between their work and personal values. This values-driven orientation has been associated with greater resilience, particularly during periods of uncertainty and pressure. Research also indicates that purpose-driven companies tend to grow more quickly, outperform the market, and demonstrate stronger stock performance (George et al., 2021).

In parallel, cultural norms tend to allow women greater freedom to express emotion, which supports more authentic leadership styles. In an era where both consumers and employees increasingly seek genuine and transparent leadership, this emotional accessibility has emerged as a potential advantage.

Organizational outcomes associated with increased female representation in leadership further support this perspective. According to the Ipsos Women's Forum Barometer (2021), the majority of respondents from G7 countries believed that expanding women's access to senior management positions would yield significant benefits. Seventy-eight percent expected enhanced innovation and diversity of thinking, and the same proportion believed company reputation would improve. Seventy-seven percent anticipated better working conditions and employee wellbeing, while 74 percent linked greater female representation to stronger talent

attraction. Seventy percent expected it to support overall business growth.

Performance data reinforces these views. A McKinsey & Company report (2020) found that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25 percent more likely to achieve above-average profitability than those in the bottom quartile. Moreover, firms with more than 30 percent women in senior leadership roles consistently outperformed those with lower levels of female representation.

Taken together, these insights point to a growing recognition that the paradox of women's leadership—combining emotional depth and resilience with strategic clarity—offers not only social and ethical value, but also untapped business potential.

From Insight to Action: Implications for Female Leadership

The book *Balancing on the Edge: Resilience Without Burnout* recounts the experience of a British entrepreneur who, driven by a profound sense of mission, became entirely immersed in building her startup. Over time, this intense dedication led to emotional exhaustion and a loss of meaning. Her recovery began when she shifted focus toward personal wellbeing and intentional self-care. As internal balance was restored, her business began to thrive—sales increased, and she scaled her company with renewed clarity and energy (Bezuglova, 2025).

This narrative exemplifies a broader principle: sustainable leadership is contingent upon the alignment of professional responsibilities with emotional and physical needs. Rather than emphasizing output alone, aligning leadership practices with internal resources may significantly enhance long-term performance and impact.

Supporting such leadership requires structural evolution within the business ecosystem. Instead of expecting women to adapt to legacy models of success—often rooted in overwork and emotional suppression—organizations, investors, and advisors must begin to treat emotional intelligence, resilience, and values-based decision-making as core strategic assets. Cultivating environments that allow female leaders to integrate personal wellbeing with professional ambition is essential for sustained innovation and business viability.

A multilevel approach to sustainable leadership, just as biologists adjust environmental conditions when a cell culture fails to thrive, organizational and societal systems must adapt to support the sustainability of human performance. The success of women leaders depends not solely on individual endurance but on the design of ecosystems that enable resilience, creativity, and wellbeing.

A comprehensive framework involves intervention at three interrelated levels:

Individual: The foundation of sustainable leadership lies in developing emotional intelligence, cultivating self-awareness, and maintaining a strong sense of purpose. Effective personal strategies include mindfulness, coaching, and journaling, along with practices that protect mental focus — such as setting healthy boundaries and reducing constant digital exposure. Physical wellbeing—through adequate rest, movement, and nourishment—is equally vital for supporting cognitive and emotional functioning. Purpose, in particular, provides a compass for navigating uncertainty and complexity.

Organizational: At the organizational level, the emphasis must shift from heroic individualism to systemic support. Wellbeing should be institutionalized not as a peripheral HR function but as a core strategic priority. This includes fostering

psychological safety, building emotionally intelligent leadership, and embedding care and recovery into performance norms. Leaders are increasingly called upon to act not only as decision-makers, but as facilitators of group dynamics and culture builders. Reframing leadership development in this light demands dedicated investment and cultural transformation.

Systemic: At the ecosystem level, structural and cultural shifts are required to normalize and reward sustainable leadership. Business leaders, investors, and educators must collectively recognize that wellbeing is a public priority with direct implications for performance and innovation. Embedding these principles into economic models, leadership education, and investment frameworks will enable a broader transition toward resilience-oriented, human-centered economies.

It is particularly important to recognize and amplify women's distinct leadership capacities—such as empathy, contextual awareness, and collaborative problem-solving. Authentic leadership, grounded in emotional intelligence and purpose, should not be an exception but an expectation in the future of work.

Conclusion

The future of business will increasingly depend on the integration of human wellbeing with performance excellence. Leaders who cultivate emotional intelligence, foster collaboration, and make decisions grounded in clear values are well positioned to guide this evolution. Many women bring particular strengths in these areas, contributing meaningfully to the development of more sustainable and inclusive leadership models.

Supporting this shift calls for coordinated efforts across the business ecosystem:

For investors: Adopt funding approaches that recognize the value of relationships,

cooperation, and long-term impact. For advisors and mentors: Support leadership styles that reflect authenticity, empathy, and inclusive thinking. For organizations: Create workplace cultures where emotional awareness, resilience, and social sensitivity are recognized as strategic assets.

Sustainable leadership is not defined by gender but by the capacity to meet complexity with clarity, connection, and purpose. As a broader range of leadership voices continues to shape the future of work, it is essential that systems and structures evolve to support their success.

Keywords:

Sustainable leadership, Emotional intelligence, Women in leadership, Human-centered business, Empathy, Collaboration, Inclusive leadership, Wellbeing at work

Acknowledgement

It is crucial to acknowledge that the patterns described in this article may not apply uniformly across all women. An intersectional approach reveals important variations:

Racial and Ethnic Considerations

Research indicates that the stress-satisfaction relationship varies significantly by race and ethnicity. For example, Black women entrepreneurs face additional stressors related to racial bias in funding and networking, potentially altering the stress-satisfaction dynamic (Jackson & Sanyal 2019).

Socioeconomic Factors Women facing economic necessity may experience stress without the compensating satisfaction that comes from values-aligned choices. Class-based differences in access to social support, healthcare, and stress-buffering resources likely moderate these relationships significantly.

Age and Life Stage Effects

The relationship between stress and satisfaction likely varies across women's lifespans. Young women establishing careers may experience this paradox differently than mid-career women balancing multiple responsibilities or senior women transitioning toward legacy-focused work.

These intersectional considerations suggest that while the general pattern of higher stress and higher satisfaction among women appears robust, the underlying mechanisms and practical implications may vary substantially across different groups of women.

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