

The Hidden Epidemic: Burnout Among Executive Women and Its Organizational Impact



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As more women ascend to executive leadership, a pressing and under-acknowledged challenge has emerged: burnout. Far from signaling personal weakness, this phenomenon reflects deep-rooted systemic inequities, unrealistic performance expectations, and invisible labor burdens. This article investigates the structural and cultural forces contributing to burnout among executive women—including perfectionism, the double burden of professional and caregiving responsibilities, and persistent gendered biases in organizational life. Furthermore, it illustrates the profound implications of burnout for organizational resilience, talent retention, and equity goals. The article concludes with evidence-based recommendations for cultivating sustainable leadership pathways for women, highlighting the imperative for systemic rather than superficial interventions.

Introduction: Progress with Price

The twenty-first century has ushered in an era of unprecedented advancement for women in leadership. From boardrooms to C-suites, women's representation is climbing. Yet beneath this outward trajectory lies a sobering reality: executive burnout. According to Deloitte's *Women @ Work: A Global Outlook* (2022), over 50% of women in leadership roles report feeling consistently burned out—outpacing their male counterparts in distress and disillusionment. While symbolic breakthroughs dominate headlines, the lived experience of many executive women is one of relentless pressure, emotional depletion, and systemic marginalization.

Burnout, as defined by the World Health Organization (2019), is a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. For executive women, this is compounded by the expectation to constantly outperform, the undervaluation of emotional labor, and workplace cultures that disregard the persistent demands of caregiving. This paper contextualizes the burnout epidemic among women executives, assesses its organizational ramifications, and offers a roadmap for sustainable, inclusive leadership.

Understanding the Roots of Executive Burnout

Executive women often operate within professional environments that demand near-perfection. Organizational cultures, whether overtly or implicitly, set higher bars for women, with expectations of consistent excellence and minimal margin for error. According to Catalyst (2020), women's contributions are more rigorously evaluated and less frequently recognized compared to those of their male peers. This dynamic fosters chronic overextension and heightens imposter syndrome, driving unsustainable work habits not out of ambition alone, but from a fear of being perceived as inadequate.

Compounding this pressure is the enduring "double bind" dilemma, where female leaders must walk a tightrope between assertiveness and likability. As Williams and Dempsey (2014) observe, women who project authority risk being labeled abrasive, while those who exhibit warmth may be seen as lacking competence. This constant recalibration of behavior imposes a significant emotional and cognitive toll. Moreover, women are often expected—explicitly or not—to perform emotional labor in the workplace: mentoring colleagues, managing team dynamics, and preserving organizational harmony. These roles, while valuable, are frequently invisible and unrewarded, further contributing to burnout (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey, 2021).

Outside the office, the demands do not diminish. Many executive women continue to serve as primary caregivers in their households. The Pew Research Center (2023) found that even among women in high-powered roles, the burden of unpaid domestic labor falls disproportionately on their shoulders. This "second shift" depletes time, energy, and emotional resources, eroding opportunities for rest and recovery. The result is a chronic imbalance that undermines both well-being and long-term professional sustainability.

Finally, representation—or the lack thereof—plays a crucial role. At the highest levels of leadership, women are often one of few, or the only, female voice at the table. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) termed this phenomenon "tokenism," and its effects remain deeply felt today. Being the "only one" intensifies scrutiny, magnifies mistakes, and places an unfair burden to represent all women. The resulting sense of isolation erodes psychological safety and increases the risk of disengagement and eventual burnout.

The Organizational Toll of Burnout

Burnout should not be dismissed as merely a personal health issue—it is a critical organizational liability with far-reaching consequences. When left unaddressed, it disrupts leadership continuity, weakens innovation capacity, and undermines long-term equity efforts.

One of the most immediate consequences is talent attrition. High-performing women who experience burnout are significantly more likely to step down from leadership roles or leave their organizations altogether. According to McKinsey & Company (2023), women leaders are leaving at unprecedented rates, with burnout cited as a key driver. The cost of replacing these individuals—both financially and strategically—is steep, requiring substantial investment in recruitment, onboarding, and the recovery of lost institutional knowledge.

Burnout also diminishes productivity and stifles innovation at the leadership level. Executives grappling with emotional exhaustion are less able to mentor emerging talent, develop visionary strategies, or make timely, effective decisions. The World Health Organization (2019) classifies burnout as an occupational phenomenon linked to chronic workplace stress, and its presence among leaders reduces team cohesion, agility, and overall organizational effectiveness.

Perhaps most concerning is the reversal of progress toward gender diversity and inclusion. When senior women depart, it signals to mid-career professionals that leadership may not be a sustainable or welcoming path. The LeanIn.Org and McKinsey (2021) report highlights how the exit of women in top roles has a cascading effect, deterring rising female talent and slowing progress on gender equity. This talent leakage not only stalls momentum but threatens to reverse years of intentional inclusion work.

Finally, unresolved burnout poses a significant reputational risk. In an era of digital transparency and social accountability, disillusioned leaders often take to public platforms to share their experiences. These disclosures—especially when tied to toxic culture or inequitable practices—can severely damage an organization's employer brand. Negative press and online reviews from former leaders can hinder recruitment, diminish employee trust, and deter prospective partnerships (Gallup, 2021).

In sum, burnout among executive women is not only a personal crisis—it is a systemic signal of deeper organizational dysfunction. Leaders who fail to respond risk not only losing top talent but also compromising the strategic, cultural, and reputational health of their institutions.

Strategies for Sustainable Leadership and Retention

Addressing burnout among executive women requires more than surface-level remedies such as meditation apps or wellness webinars. While these interventions may offer short-term relief, they fail to address the deeper organizational norms and structural inequities that sustain chronic stress. A more effective approach requires systemic, evidence-based strategies that transform how leadership is defined, supported, and sustained.

1. Redefine Leadership Through Outcome-Driven Performance Metrics

Leadership effectiveness must be decoupled from traditional indicators like physical presence or constant availability. The pervasive culture of presenteeism—where visibility is conflated with commitment—can disproportionately penalize women who must balance caregiving or set boundaries to preserve their well-being. Organizations should prioritize performance based on impact, innovation, and outcomes, enabling leaders to exercise autonomy and focus on strategic contributions (Sandberg & Thomas, 2022; Deloitte, 2022).

2. Build Equitable Mentorship and Sponsorship Pathways

Robust mentorship programs are essential for developing leadership pipelines. However, they must be complemented by formal sponsorship models in which influential leaders actively advocate for women's advancement. According to Hewlett et al. (2010), sponsorship plays a pivotal role in career progression because it involves public endorsement and access to high-stakes opportunities. These relationships are especially important for women navigating biased or exclusionary organizational structures.

3. Normalize Flexibility as a Leadership Standard

Flexible work arrangements must be accessible and acceptable

at all levels of the organization. When flexibility is available in theory but stigmatized in practice—particularly among executives—it sends a damaging signal that leadership is incompatible with caregiving or holistic well-being. Research by McKinsey & Company (2023) shows that flexibility is among the top factors women cite in determining their long-term career sustainability and retention.

4. Institutionalize Accountability Through Data-Driven Well-Being Measures

Employee wellness and engagement should be treated as strategic indicators of organizational performance. Regular assessments of burnout, disaggregated by gender and role, can surface systemic stressors and guide interventions. These findings should be incorporated into leadership evaluations and goal-setting frameworks. Holding managers accountable for team well-being has been shown to improve retention, inclusion, and morale (Gallup, 2021; LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2021).

5. Cultivate Peer Networks for Senior Women Leaders

Senior women frequently report feelings of isolation, especially when they are the “only one” in the room. Peer networks provide a space for connection, learning, and mutual support. Studies show that women who participate in such networks report higher satisfaction, resilience, and likelihood of remaining in leadership roles (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). These forums also foster collective agency and serve as incubators for shared solutions to persistent challenges in executive leadership.

Conclusion: From Survival to Sustainability

Burnout among executive women is not merely an individual affliction—it is a mirror held up to the systemic shortcomings of contemporary organizational life. It signals where equity work remains unfinished, where leadership paradigms must evolve, and where workplace cultures continue to reward exhaustion over effectiveness. When women at the highest levels are consistently pushed to the brink, it reflects not a failure of resilience, but a failure of systems that still define leadership in masculine, linear, and often exclusionary terms (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Williams & Dempsey, 2014).

Women should not have to choose between professional success and personal well-being. The notion that thriving in leadership must come at the cost of health, family, or identity is not only outdated—it is economically and ethically unsustainable. According to LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company (2021), women leaders are leaving organizations at higher rates due to a lack of flexibility, unmanageable workloads, and cultures that fail to value inclusion and well-being. These departures are not isolated—they represent systemic design flaws that disproportionately impact women and other historically marginalized groups.

The organizations that will lead in the decades ahead will not be those that simply promote women, but those that create the conditions for women to lead fully, authentically, and without depletion. Psychological safety, flexible work environments, and transparent leadership development pathways are no longer “nice-to-haves”—they are core requirements for retaining top talent and driving sustainable growth (Edmondson, 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2023).

For companies committed to long-term excellence, confronting executive burnout is not optional—it is a strategic imperative. Addressing this issue requires moving beyond temporary wellness trends and toward a reexamination of how leadership is cultivated, supported, and sustained. It involves embedding equity into decision-making, making care and flexibility visible in policy and practice, and holding leadership accountable for well-

being, not just performance (Gallup, 2021; Sandberg & Thomas, 2022).

Only by building workplaces where leadership is inclusive, humane, and sustainable can organizations fully benefit from the transformative power of women at the helm. The future of leadership will not be defined solely by strategy or scale—but by the capacity to humanize ambition, and to ensure that excellence does not require sacrifice, but support.

Biography: Dr. Ewa J. Kleczyk is a healthcare executive with extensive experience in healthcare research, analytics, and operations. She is a nationally recognized leader, published scholar, and Editor-in-Chief of the Universal Journal of 21st Century Women's Entrepreneurship, Leadership, Technology & Publishing (UJWEL). In addition, she is pursuing a Business Excellence Graduate Certificate at Columbia University, expanding her expertise in organizational leadership and innovation.

Dr. Kleczyk is a frequent speaker at premier academic and industry forums, including the Pharmaceutical Marketing Sciences Association (PMSA), Intellus Worldwide, the WomenTech Global Conference, and Harvard's Conference on Business and Economics. Widely published in peer-reviewed journals and academic volumes, she also serves on multiple editorial boards across healthcare, economics, and leadership disciplines.

Committed to advancing education and equitable healthcare access, she co-founded the Kleczyk-Strout Foundation, which supports community initiatives through advocacy, mentorship, and outreach. She also contributes her leadership through service on nonprofit boards and community councils, and by engaging audiences via podcasts and public forums.

Her contributions have earned her numerous honors, including the Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award by President Joe Biden, the WomenTech Data Science Award, and recognition among the Top 50 Women Leaders in Healthcare Technology. Originally from Wroclaw, Poland, Dr. Kleczyk earned her Ph.D. in Agricultural and Applied Economics from Virginia Tech and both her M.S. and B.A. degrees in Economics from the University of Maine.

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