Gillard J and Okonjo-Iweala N *Women and Leadership: Real Lives, Real Lessons*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021; 336 pp. ISBN 978-0262045742

*Women and Leadership: Real Lives, Real Lessons* is an urgent call to action, affirming that developing women in leadership is a moral imperative. This 12 chapter book examines the lives and experiences of prominent woman leaders from Chile, Liberia, Malawi, New Zealand, Norway, United Kingdom and the United States. Through asking thought-provoking questions such as: *Why is leadership gendered? How can we help women leaders put their experiences in a broader context? How hard is it for a woman to become a leader when she is battling subliminal male stereotypes of leadership?* the book addresses the structural barriers and obstacles (including conscious and unconscious biases) hindering women in leadership. The book also emphasizes new and emerging barriers associated with the glass labyrinth, the glass ceiling and the glass cliff. Finally, it offers practical steps and solutions toward achieving gender equality in leadership.

*Women and Leadership* commences by asking the reader to think about how many women leaders have held positions of highest political power; how many women have led the United Nations; how many women have governed the World Bank; how many women have held the office of President in countries such as the United States, France, Nigeria, Mexico or Japan. In all cases, the answer is an astonishing zero. “Only 57 countries out of the 193 nations that are members of the United Nations have ever had a woman hold the highest political office with executive power in their nation” (p. 19). The book highlights additional grim statistics: Of the 900+ individuals who won the Nobel Prize since 1901, only 53 have been women (p. 24); of the 3343 World Economic forum ministerial positions across 153 countries, only 21% were held by women (p. 22); in artificial intelligence, women make up only 26% of the workforce, 15% in engineering and 12% in cloud computing (p. 25); only 12% of people who decide where venture capital funding should be allocated are women (p. 25). The findings also reveal that though the United Nations adopted 17 sustainable development goals to be achieved by 2030, gender equality was not included, highlighting the lack of priority on gender issues such as education, healthcare and economic independence.

The heart of the book can be found in Chapter 3, where eight women in significant positions of leadership are interviewed, namely, *Ellen Johnson Sirleaf*, first and only woman to be elected as President of Liberia, *Michelle Bachelet*, first and only woman to be elected as President of Chile, *Christine Lagarde*, first woman to lead a global law firm and first woman elected to lead the International Monetary Fund, *Joyce Banda*, the first and only woman to be elected Vice President of Malawi, *Erna Solberg*, Prime Minister of Norway, *Jacinda Ardern*, Prime Minister of New Zealand, *Theresa May*, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and *Hillary Rodham Clinton*, first lady of the
United States, US Senator, Secretary of State and Presidential candidate. The results of the interview reveals: there is no one pathway to power, women must support one another in their pathways to success; having one’s own back is critical; men play a positive role in assisting women toward achieving leadership heights; self-doubt is part and parcel to leadership; every day is a day of possibilities; and finally, work in ways that support next generation leaders.

A key concept discussed in the book is the “you go girl hypothesis” derived from the notion that enabling women leaders begins at childhood, through nurturing and empowering environments. This includes encouraging both boys and girls to think equally about their potential future (p. 296). The authors indicate that of the eight women interviewed in the book, all were raised without barriers, which led them toward the path of leadership later in their lives.

Women’s physical appearance is also a central theme captured in the book and is illustrated through the example of clothes choices and hairstyles for women leaders in the public eye. The purpose of including this in the book is to illustrate how clothing is used as a means of bias about character and conduct. Unconscious bias shapes the way female leaders are perceived. Media further perpetuates this bias by confirming sexist stereotypes. Bias plays out in many forms, and “when it comes to women and leadership, people have prescriptive stereotypes in their head, not just descriptive ones” (p. 176). These biases are used to degrade women and relegate them to less powerful positions.

The chapter focusing on strength versus empathy in leadership is also noteworthy. The authors demonstrate how gender shapes perceptions by revealing that when male leaders are driven to tears, they are viewed as endearing, while women who shed tears are often deemed to be weak. Similarly, angry male leaders are considered strong, while angry women leaders are considered hysterical. To help the reader understand these views, the authors look to meta-data research on the qualities and traits of leaders and draw the conclusion that the traits considered to be critical to effective leadership are evolving. Interestingly, research shows that women are more likely to be transformational leaders, in terms of being supportive and encouraging, while men are more likely to be associated with transactional leadership, engaging in the compliance, correcting and disciplining of team members. According to management theory, by this analysis, women are considered to be the more effective leader of the two (p. 172). However, women continue to be underutilized and underrepresented in senior-decision making roles. There are two reasons for this. First, the obstacles that women face are largely societal and cultural. They act against women from the time they enter kindergarten, instilling in girls a belief they are less talented than their male peers – this persists into their work lives. They continue to be significantly underrepresented in high-earning STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math). At the university level, they represent 32% of graduates in mathematics, computer and information sciences, and just 20% of graduates in architecture, engineering and related technologies (Conference Board of Canada, 2018). Second, deeply rooted sexism and biases are at play, which permeates in attitudes, practices and systems. Critical self-assessment, reflection and gauging one’s own bias is the first step in dismantling these barriers.

The juggling act of motherhood and leadership is also explored. Motherhood is used to condemn women in leadership roles. On the one hand, women who have children are viewed incapable of doing their jobs, and on the other, if a woman leader does not have children, she is viewed as less than other women who have children. Thus, women in leadership is a double edge sword. Women supporting women therefore, also becomes an important focus of the book. The authors state, “not sincerely celebrating each other’s wins undermines our shared sense of victory” (p. 216). Overall, women feel supported by other women, but as they move up the echelons of success, this declines.
The authors remind us that “a woman is a mix of strengths and weaknesses, and the challenge is to support each other in a way that makes space for inevitable imperfections” (p. 233).

Although the book indicates that strides have been made, there is still much work to do. Some of the challenges presented in the book include: the constant sexist stereotypes; women of color uniquely enduring both racism and sexism, leading to significant barriers that make leadership roles more difficult to attain; and including men in the equation in achieving gender equality, encouraging men to call out sexism when they see it. Driving change requires decision-makers to be involved and act, and those with power to decide are still disproportionately men (p. 289). The research tells us that men can become powerful change agents and “are doubly advantaged in mobilizing followers to combat gender inequity” (Hardacre and Subašić, 2018) because “a male leader articulating anti-sexism messaging strikes more of a chord with both men and women” (p. 298). At this rate, the World Economic Forum has calculated that closing the gender gap will take 95 years (p. 25), that is, full gender equity is not expected until the year 2115.

The book concludes with offering lessons from various lived experiences to assist aspiring women leaders manage the risks and rewards of leadership. They include the following: there is no right way to be a woman leader, being true to oneself is the key; find a mentor and collaborate efforts to effectively address gender bias; debunk the false gender stereotypes and assumptions; be cognizant that structural barriers are real; be a supporter of systems and changes that aid gender equality; broaden your networks as they are critical during challenging times or in times of opportunity; and finally, work toward becoming the leader you wish to be, but know the obstacles ahead of you.

There are many strengths in this book. I appreciate how both authors situate themselves in their work, exposing their vulnerability in sharing their narratives and struggles. This personal element helps connect the reader. I also particularly like the admission that there is more to achieving diversity than simply having more women leaders and what active agency looks like. The strongest element of the book is the way it calls out sexism by naming it for what it is. The practical advice and insights make this book actionable and offers ideas about how leaders can be held accountable. Although the book presents a number of challenges toward achieving gender equality in leadership, the book does have an optimist feel, asserting that once women become aware of the gender barriers, they will no longer be blindsided by them.

While the book briefly touches on women of color being uniquely disadvantaged in leadership in terms of dual intersectionality of race and gender, it does not go far enough to dissect how this impacts the trajectory to leadership. I feel this was a missed opportunity and attention could have been given to what some of these barriers can look like and the strategies to overcome them. An additional shortfall was the profound statement that gender equality cannot be achieved without the support and inclusion of men, yet no men were interviewed or included in the research.

Women and Leadership: Real Lives, Real Lessons is a book about women and leadership; it is about who gets to hold and use power; and it is about the challenges women face in achieving gender equality in leadership. Gender is complex and nuanced. Through the accounts of lived experiences of eight women in politics and leadership, the book underscores the challenges aspiring leaders face in navigating pathways to success. But it also highlights accomplishments, possibilities and opportunities. Through stories of resilience, determination and inner strength, the book illustrates that change is possible. Thus, it serves as a useful guide for women, for leaders (seasoned and emerging), for academic researchers studying theoretical and empirical leadership research, and for graduate students wishing to critically engage with leadership literature and navigate changing power structures. As I reflect on my findings from the reading, I conclude with a statement that is both powerful and poetic, “A child represents another possibility for all humanity. This child might
become a leader who profoundly improves our world. Should that potential promise be thwarted just because we hold our prejudices too dear or we find the process of letting go too confronting? The answer to this question defines us and our future” (p. 301).

Shezadi Khushal
University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

ORCID iD
Shezadi Khushal © https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8142-3889

References
Conference Board of Canada (2018) Gender inequities persist in canadian post-secondary education and the workforce.
Hardacre SL and Subašić E (2018) Whose issue is it anyway? The effects of leader gender and equality message framing on men’s and women’s mobilization toward workplace gender equality. Frontiers in Psychology 9: 2497.

Author biography
Shezadi Khushal is a first year PhD Student in the Educational, Leadership, and Policy Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. She has spent the past two decades advocating for human rights. Through her commitment to the principles of equity, inclusivity, diversity, and justice, and in bridging the gap between education and human rights, Shezadi is working towards transforming educational policies which have historically excluded marginalized members of society.