

Exploring the ‘Double Bind’: The Unavoidable Dilemma

Women in the Workplace Series

“She’s decisive - that’s bossy.”

“She’s caring - that’s weak.”

“Just not right.”

(Catalyst, 2007)

This framing is not ancient history – it’s 2026. Women leaders are still caught in a double bind: penalised for being too tough or too soft, and often neither respected nor liked.

In 2025, AMS Women’s and Military ERGs hosted a conversation that brought the Double Bind into sharp, uncomfortable focus. The discussion laid bare how deeply traditional gender roles continue to shape the way women are perceived at work and at home. From stories of working mothers navigating impossible expectations to reflections on the invisible labour women still shoulder and the ongoing reality that, in many households, women are still not expected or encouraged to be the primary breadwinner, the panellists illuminated a truth we often gloss over. Despite progress, the assumptions that define “how women should lead” remain stubbornly fixed. That discussion became the *catalyst* for this article, a reminder that the Double Bind is not an abstract concept or a relic of the past, but a lived reality for women leaders today.

The Dilemma Defined

The concept originates from Catalyst’s [2007 report](#), *The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don’t*. The “double bind” refers to the conflicting expectations placed on women in leadership roles, where they are often perceived as “too soft” when displaying communal traits and “too tough” when exhibiting agentic traits, while rarely being seen as “just right.” Women also face a higher threshold for proving competence and, despite this, tend to receive less recognition than their male counterparts. Additionally, women leaders are frequently viewed as competent but struggle to be liked, creating a persistent tension between effectiveness and acceptance.

Under the Microscope: Numbers don't lie

Women CEOs:

Represent just 9.2% of CEOs globally yet face disproportionate scrutiny. They are 73% more likely to have articles mention their ambition compared to their male counterparts and are twice as likely to be described as both "too ambitious" and "lacking ambition."

(Russell Reynolds, 2025)

Authority Gap: 18% of women have been mistaken for a more junior role compared to 10% of men, highlighting ongoing biases in workplace perceptions.

(Financial Times, 2024)

Career Barriers: Over a third of women still see gender as a barrier to career progression. Factors such as household responsibilities, confidence issues, and workplace culture are inhibiting women from attaining top positions.

(Vodafone Research Study, 2025)

‘Women leaders who display decisive, authoritative qualities ... are deemed ‘not nice,’ whereas women with communal qualities are deemed ‘too nice.’ ... Women are damned if they do, damned if they don’t.’

Excerpt from Catalyst Report 2007

Why It Endures

The double bind persists not because women fail to lead effectively, but because deeply ingrained assumptions continue to shape how leadership is recognised and rewarded. Long-standing stereotypes - often captured in the idea of “think leader, think male” - mean that women are frequently assessed against a masculine model of leadership that was never designed with them in mind. At the same time, cultural expectations place an added emotional burden on women leaders, who are expected to be confident and decisive while also remaining warm, accommodating and likeable. This delicate balancing act is scrutinised far more closely than it is for men, leaving little room for women to simply lead without judgment.



Solutions in Action

Organisations are beginning to implement strategies to address the double bind:

Vodafone has committed to increasing gender diversity, aiming for 40% women in management roles by 2030. They have reached 36% and continue to drive progress through programs, policies, and leadership incentives.

Companies are adopting policies that support parents, carers and specific groups of women, aiming to create more inclusive cultures.

(Business in the Community, 2025)

ERGs: At AMS we have eleven Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), from AMS Women and the Black Employee Network to Social Mobility and Military. These ERGs give women a crucial platform to be heard, amplifying their voices, elevating their experiences and driving meaningful cultural change across the organisation.

It's time organisations reflect reality, not stereotypes.

To build more inclusive workplaces and advance gender equality, organisations can take practical steps to address bias, support women's career progression and create equitable opportunities.

At AMS, we embed these principles into our people practices, partnerships and culture.

- **Bias-Awareness Training:** Train all employees, especially managers, to recognise unconscious biases in decision-making, hiring, and promotions.
- **Standardised Hiring & Promotion Criteria:** Ensure clarity, transparency and fairness in talent assessment.
- **Bias-Free, Gender-Neutral Language:** Avoid gendered descriptors like "aggressive" vs "assertive" when assessing employees, and terms like "ninja" or "rockstar" that may appeal to one gender.
- **Inclusive Job Ads:** At AMS, we use our proprietary tool, **Job Ad Create, AMS One**, to make postings more gender-neutral and attractive to diverse candidates.
- **Formal Mentorship:** Pair high-potential women with senior leaders who can guide, advocate and support their development. This includes **mentoring programs to progress women into senior roles**, helping close the gender pay gap and build career confidence.
- **Diversity in Leadership:** Leaders must actively demonstrate commitment to equity, modelling inclusive behaviours and fostering environments where all voices are heard.
- **Flexible Working Hours:** Offer remote or hybrid options without penalising career progression. We also partner with initiatives like **Recruit for Spouses** to support flexible work arrangements for diverse talent.

The power of Employee Resource Groups

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) create trusted spaces where colleagues with shared experiences can connect, speak openly and influence meaningful cultural change. They help organisations hear underrepresented voices, highlight gaps and shape solutions that genuinely improve the employee experience. From 2025 through to the present, the AMS Women's ERG has been exceptionally active, driving a comprehensive programme of initiatives centred on inclusion, health, career development and social impact.

AMS Women's ERG Impact

Advocacy

Employee Resource Groups and Safe Space Sessions

We create spaces where women and other underrepresented groups can share experiences, build community and help influence meaningful cultural change across the organisation.

Our Women's ERG has hosted conversations on a wide range of topics, including:

- Uplifting Women and Transforming Tomorrow
- Divorce and New Beginnings
- Women's Health in the Workplace
- Breaking the Default: Rethinking Gender Roles

In addition to these themed sessions, we run bi-monthly open forums designed to encourage questions, peer connection and shared learning. Looking ahead, our 2026 programme includes increased awareness and education on key health topics such as Endometriosis.

Policy

Supporting Life Stages & Retention

Maternity Returners Review

We continue to assess how effectively we support colleagues through maternity leave and their transition back to work.

This includes:

- Ongoing analysis of return-to-work rates
- Identifying support gaps across the full maternity journey
- Early policy development aimed at strengthening retention and ensuring a smooth, consistent return experience

Accreditation

Commitment to Women's Health & Workplace Inclusion

In 2025, we strengthened our support for women's health through two key employer accreditations.

Menopause Friendly Employer (2025)

Recognised by Henpicked for building a supportive and informed workplace, supported by:

- Updated global policies
- Manager and employee training
- A global e-learning programme

Fertility Friendly Employer (2025)

Accredited by Fertility Matters at Work, reinforcing our commitment to colleagues navigating fertility treatment or family-planning.

Enhancements included:

- Paid time off for fertility-related appointments
- Broader family-planning support
- A global manager roadshow to build confidence and capability

Practical Support

Mentoring, Community & Skill-Building

Mentoring & Peer Networks

We offer practical, community-driven support to help colleagues grow and navigate key career and life moments.

This includes:

- Informal and structured mentoring connections within the ERG
- Knowledge-sharing sessions focused on career development and confidence building
- Peer-led support to help members manage both personal and professional transitions

Changing the Narrative Together

The Double Bind may be decades old in definition, but its impact is unmistakably present in the lived experiences of women today. The data, the stories and the voices shared through platforms like our ERGs all point to the same truth: progress is real, but so are the barriers. Challenging these constraints requires more than awareness; it demands consistent, collective action from organisations, leaders and individuals alike.

Instead of accepting inherited norms about who *should* lead and how, we must actively reshape the environments in which leadership is defined and practiced, creating space for women to lead authentically without penalty, contradiction or compromise. The work happening at AMS, from policy advancements to community-led initiatives, shows what is possible when inclusion is intentional and lived every day.

The Double Bind does not disappear on its own. But with transparency, advocacy and systems designed for equity rather than tradition, we can ensure the next generation of women leaders are defined not by stereotypes but by their strengths.

The opportunity and responsibility to drive that change sits with all of us.

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