The importance of women in the nonprofit industry cannot be overstated.

Throughout the past 30 years, women have made significant strides in the sector. In fact, women now fill the majority of nonprofit jobs. A recent study by the White House Project shows nearly 75 percent of all workers in the nonprofit industry are women.

Even with impressive gains over the past few years, women — especially those in leadership — still face issues unlike their male counterparts. This article is the first in a two-part series, examining some of the various challenges women leaders in the nonprofit industry are facing.

Leadership Bias
There is no question that women are strong leaders; their presence is clear in organizations throughout the nation. About two-thirds (65 percent) of nonprofits with budgets under $1 million are led by women (2014 BoardSource annual report).

Despite the large percentage of females heading up nonprofits, men still dominate the top leadership positions in large organizations. The same report says among groups with budgets of $10 million or more, only 37 percent of chief executives are women. Among the nation’s top-10 organizations, women comprise only 11.76 percent of leadership roles.

Some hiring professionals believe this underrepresentation is due to gender bias at the board level. Jan Masaoka, chief executive of the California Association of Nonprofits, says since boards are mostly men, they tend to choose leaders who are men.

This is supported by research (Spector and Jones, 2004), which shows that men have an initially higher level of trust for other men than for women. “Boards will often spend a lot of time on the desired profile of the type of person they want in terms of skills and professional background,” says Masaoka. “Then they’ll turn around and hire the people they like and they ignore the profile.”

Gender Roles
There has been great discussion regarding gender disparity in all sectors, including the nonprofit industry.

Women in volunteerism and philanthropy have deep roots. In 17th century churches, women were meeting community needs while men worked. Throughout the years, women in these “do-gooder” roles have been expected to balance these activities with the domestic responsibilities of raising children, supporting a husband, and overseeing the home (including cooking, cleaning, etc.). These stereotypes, though diminished, still exist in the workplace and influence leaders and employees. These models make the assumption that men are more dedicated to their careers, and are willing to spend longer hours at the office than women. They also assume (and perpetuate) the cultural expectation that women should care more about their families than their occupations.

Salary Gap
The Glass Ceiling — where professional women struggle to advance and be paid at the rate same as men — is alive and well in the nonprofit sector.

The 2014 GuideStar Nonprofit Compensation Report found that for the 14th year in a row, women were lagging behind their male counterparts. Female CEOs made 11 percent less on average at organizations with budgets of $250 thousand or less, and 23 percent less at organizations with budgets between $25 million and $50 million.

Quite simply, female leaders aren’t paid as much as men. This shows that the industry has a long way to go to meet gender equity in executive compensation.

Gender Traits
A final aspect of women in nonprofit leadership is tied to gender traits, or how the behaviors of men and women are viewed differently.

Women with strong personalities are often considered “pushy” or “controlling,” an assumption that is usually not made about their male counterparts. In fact, men may be rewarded for such behavior. In a Pepperdine University study of female executives, one woman said that successful women seem “soul-less” when trying to take charge.

One study (Eagly and Karau) found that men emerge as leaders based on their task oriented behaviors, whereas women, who tend to be more people oriented, are viewed as good social facilitators, but are not seen as leaders. For this reason, some women feel pressure to work more like men, showing less emotion and being more analytical.

Studying these issues must be a priority for all nonprofit stakeholders – leaders, board members, and funders.

Next month, we’ll continue our look at women in the nonprofit industry by interviewing seven local women who head up organizations, sharing their insights and perspectives.