Biases, and the stereotypes on which they are based, are a powerful obstacle for women seeking leadership positions. Researchers have found that stereotypes about leadership are decidedly masculine. Although people are less likely to have explicit biases today than in the past, implicit or unconscious bias remains powerful.

Most people have some implicit bias about gender and gender roles. Even people who strongly value gender equity and would prefer to see more women in leadership positions may find that their implicit biases work against their intentions.

HOW DO WE MEASURE IMPLICIT BIAS?

Implicit Association Tests are frequently used to investigate implicit biases. Developed in the 1990s by researchers at Project Implicit, the IAT measures the strength of mental associations between concepts, such as white and black, women and men, and so on. Participants are asked to categorize words or pictures that fall into these groups; when two concepts that are mentally associated are categorized together, the participant can categorize them more quickly.

HOW IS AAUW USING THE IAT?

Working with Project Implicit, AAUW built an IAT that investigates how people associate gender and leadership. The speed with which participants associate terms (male/leader and female/supporter vs. female/leader and male/supporter) provides an assessment of the implicit associations or biases that person holds. Participants receive information on the level and direction of any bias. The study is free and anonymous so that individuals can explore implicit bias in a safe setting. You can take the test on our website at www.aauw.org.
WHAT DO AAUW’S EARLY RESULTS SHOW?

AAUW posted the IAT on our website on February 10, 2016; after just 11 days, we had received more than 4,000 completed responses. This first sample drew from AAUW’s membership as well as from people who visited our website. Figure 1 shows mean IAT scores by gender and feminist identity. Higher scores indicate a stronger tendency to associate men and leadership as opposed to women and leadership. Negative scores (indicating associations in favor of women/leadership) did occur among individuals in all groups, but all groups showed a tendency to associate men and leadership more readily than women and leadership.

AAUW’s early respondents were mostly AAUW members, friends, and allies, who are not particularly representative of the general population. Overall, 86 percent of the early participants completing the AAUW IAT identified as feminist, 83 percent were women, and 40 percent were AAUW members. A recent study by Vanderbilt professor Cecilia Mo, in which she used a similar gender and leadership IAT but had a more representative sample of participants, found substantially greater levels of bias among both women and men than were found in the early AAUW IAT results (see figure 2).

Although our early respondents showed less bias than did respondents in a more representative sample, these results demonstrate that even people who identify as feminists still have a slight tendency — on average — to associate men with leadership. Regardless of our consciously held values, implicit biases can creep into our thinking and decision making.

AAUW is continuing our gender and leadership IAT study, and as we collect more data from a wider and more representative sample of the population, we plan to do more in-depth analysis of the data provided by our participants. Stay tuned for more AAUW research and news at www.aauw.org.