

Gearing Roles

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Good afternoon dear colleagues, fellow activists and students

I am grateful for the invitation to address the participants of this timely conference. I hope I can offer some thoughts to trigger a lively discussion.

In the next 15 minutes or so, **I will propose that de-gendering leadership is a categorical imperative for effective leadership.** I will then offer my views on strategies that may encourage better representation of women in positions of power, based on literature on leadership in business organisations. I believe business organisations provide a suitable empirical basis since we live in a world where business experience appears to be a desirable attribute for leadership in many institutional settings, including academia and politics.

Formal decision-making groups are everywhere, and they make decisions that govern every aspect of life, yet women are vastly underrepresented in these. First of all, let me register the recent surge of research on gender and leadership. A Web of Science search for articles in this area estimated approximately 4000 published articles between 1975 and 2016, 40% of which have publication dates after 2010. My search on Web of Science as of yesterday, resulted in more than 4000 publications since then. **This remarkable surge in academic interest reflects the public interest in the topic. It also implicitly represents the “hope” that a shift in the gender composition of leadership may bring socially desirable changes.** The perpetual question is why there aren't more women leaders when public opinion appears to favor more women in leadership roles.

I promised the organizers not to talk about barriers to women's leadership. I will keep my promise and try to focus on the strategies that may deliver the desired changes, but proposed strategies must address the root causes of this remarkable underrepresentation of women in leadership.

I would like to start by arguing that leadership is not a value-neutral construct. Is anyone who influences others, a leader? As one American poet has once noted, “A leader is someone with the power to project shadow or light” onto the world around him. Some leadership scholars limit leadership to those situations “when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality.” **If we define leadership as a value-based construct as such, then which values matter most for leadership and does gender play a role?**

During the opening of this conference, the participants were asked to write down the words that they associate with women's leadership. I noted them: fairness, egalitarianism, universalism, participation, participatory decision making, power sharing, supportive, justice, transparency, togetherness, inclusive, resilience, equity, cooperation.... One may argue that the association between these words and women leaders are based on the experiences of a small and biased sample- that is the participants of this conference. The association, however; is supported by surveys. Women leaders are rated to be more effective than men by their managers in 17 out of 19 competencies associated with leadership according to research published by HBR. The areas that women are reported to excel include attributes as noted by the conference participants, acting with resilience, developing others, collaboration, teamwork, building relations and displaying high integrity and honesty. If women are better fit to lead, why the change is so slow, and what strategies may change the status?

Even though the research offers multiple reasons why women do not ascend to leadership roles as the same rate as men do, stereotyping and prejudice remain fundamentally important. Stereotypes are sticky and supported by role segregation which continually reinvigorates stereotypical thinking and works against prejudice and discrimination. For example, researchers report that the threat of being stereotyped as incompetent lowers women's leadership performance and aspirations. Furthermore, longitudinal research shows that the self confidence levels of women in leadership are much lower than men. Women do become more self-confident than men over time and rate themselves as more effective leaders but only when they reach 60!

One line of research focuses on studying motives as antecedents of leadership. Accordingly, men are found to be motivated by power which is largely considered to be the great motivator of leadership. Women on the other hand are motivated by affiliation which is related to team performance. It was indeed remarkable that one of the distinguished speakers of the first day, Dean Prof. Subramaniam said she did not perceive herself as a leader. She added: *my mission was to make a difference for the people around me!*

If the organisational norms are not supportive of participatory leadership and collaboration, women are not motivated to pursue leadership roles. If they are appointed to leadership positions in such contexts, they are not effective as leaders. I will offer highlights from a selection of research which shows how leadership is gendered:

- When women hold powerful positions, they have a harder time than men eliciting respect and admiration (i.e., status) from subordinates since leadership is traditionally associated with men and masculine traits. Unless they can legitimize their role, relative illegitimacy leads to negative subordinate behavior and reduced cooperation. Organizational policies that lower subordinates' perceptions of power differentials may increase legitimacy for women in leadership roles.

- The belief that women are more emotional than men is one of the strongest gender stereotypes. Female leaders can be penalized for even minor or moderate displays of emotion, especially when the emotion conveys dominance (e.g., anger or pride), but being emotionally inexpressive may also result in penalties because unemotional women are seen as failing to fulfill their warm, communal role as women.
- Women in mixed-gender groups are twice as likely as women in single-gender groups to suffer from the gender stereotype effect, by shying away from leadership in areas that are gender-incompatible. The gender stereotype effect persists even for women in single-gender groups. Public feedback about a capable woman's performance significantly increases her willingness to lead.
- Work-life practices are frequently suggested as a strategy for improving women's representation in management. This is valuable, but the effect is not immediate (8 years lag) and does not operate in male dominant organizational contexts.
- Women leaders assimilate into male-dominated organizations by distancing themselves from junior women. The so-called queen bee behavior is a response to the discrimination and social identity threat that women may experience in male dominated organizations, and as such it is not a typically feminine response but part of a self-group distancing response that is also found in other marginalized groups.

These are some examples from the field studies. When the book *Lean In* became a global phenomenon, my reaction was DON'T! Think twice. Is it the right environment, is the role aligned with who you are, are you comfortable in your shoes or are you required to change them?

Reporting requirements, targets, and quotas have been implemented in several countries to increase female representation in leadership and they did work in improving the numbers. While this is desirable for paving the way for changing the stereotypes and the organisational norms, the improvements are marginal and insufficient to deliver the expected transformational benefits. Organisations can easily flip back to male dominant governance with a simple change at the top unless a culture of equity, participative decision making, deliberative democracy and supportive policies are embedded into the cultural fabric of the organisations through written policies, goals, targets, and reporting.

Let me give you an example from corporate boards. The legally imposed quotas for the representation of women on corporate boards resulted in a substantial increase in the percentage of female directors on boards. Boards are the highest decision-making body of companies, but the organisational leader is the CEO, the head of the execution. **While the percentage of women on boards has increased considerably over the years, the percentage of female CEOs has not changed at all.** In Turkey, for example, the percentage of women on boards changed from 12% to 17% in 8 years, but the percentage of female CEOs remained at 3%.

Representation does not necessarily translate into benefits either. Women who can make it to the top differ from the population of women. Research shows that this deviation is larger in societies with a higher gender gap. When women behave like men, the benefits of diversity may not materialize. The positive effect of increased representation of women on corporate boards is observed in countries where the gender gap in society is lower.

My conclusion is that achieving gender equality in leadership positions requires transformation at all levels and all spheres, and it can't be separated from eliminating all forms of discrimination and prejudice. **Men and women are and should be leaders. Men and women can be equally effective leaders provided that the leadership role is not gendered, and does not conflict with their self-identity.** Solidarity between men and women based on sharing a higher order identity and positioning men and women as agents of change towards a common cause may be more effective.

The He for She campaign has been very successful in mobilising men for gender equality as a social goal. The **social purpose** of the campaign is **not to put individual women in positions of power and influence but to mobilise collective action for social change.** Perhaps She for All is a more effective name for that change as women's resilience and solidarity are proven to be essential for mobilising collective changes.