

## Gender and Leadership: The Essentialist Debate

Historically women have struggled for equality, to not be essentially defined by their biology or the traits that society considers inherently female or feminine, but to be considered as equals in all regards. Leadership roles exemplify this challenge as women are still under-represented at the highest positions of power in politics, business and religious institutions.

Feminism and the struggle for women's rights has a long history. An early example comes from the Quaker movement in the 1650s. Margaret Fell was an important Quaker leader and organizer, and married George Fox, the founder of Quakerism. Their belief was in equality, that no hierarchical priest could be appointed, that all could minister the word, and this meant women as well. Fell wrote a public pamphlet called 'Women's Speaking Justified':

Those that speak against the power of the Lord speaking in a woman, simply by reason of her sex, or because she is a woman, not regarding the spirit ... such speak against Christ. (Margaret Fell, cited in Trevett, 1995: 57)

Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. It has been a long struggle for gender equality; if this awareness was available in the 1650s, our progress has been very slow!

### Essentialism

Essentialism is the view that the body provides the raw materials from which cultures craft their own interpretations and elaborations of gendered identities. Social construction is the view that gendered identities are formed as a result of cultural and psychosocial processes through which men and women are socialized into gender-specific constructions of how males and females are to act, think and feel (Tobman and Diamond, 2002: 37–8).

Lynne Segal in *Straight Sex: Retinking the Politics of Pleasure* (1997) finds that the female body is socially equated with passivity, receptivity and penetrability, and the male body with activity, directness, determination, impenetrability and so forth. Segal says that whilst these representations may be sexist and seem stupid we cannot ignore them, as they are inscribed onto us through social discourse, and they become part of the lived experience (Sullivan, 2003: 128). Contemporary feminist theorists claim that 'essentialism' hinders the progress toward liberation (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980). This argument is important in the leadership context as many perspectives presented on women in business take an essentialist stance. For example, Professor Lynda Gratton, as head of the Letman Brothers Centre for Women in Business, the first research centre dedicated to this issue in Europe, when interviewed said:

The sort of things women are good at – innovation, getting work done at the same time as getting on with people – are increasingly valuable as we move into a world in which flexibility and knowledge-sharing are a key ... women are good at networking, they just tend to network with people they like, men tend to network with more powerful people ... if we make organisations more humane, guess what? They suit women. (*Guardian*, 3 November 2006)

The problem with these essentializing statements is that they box women into fixed roles and traits and by implication men also. Essentializing gender is problematic because it is binary and reductionist – 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus' – creating a polarization between genders. The idea that 50% of a population have the same essential traits is frankly absurd. Feminists have long argued that fixed women's identities based on their reproductive roles, as mothers, nurturers and carers, have trapped them in social positions of limited freedom and power. It is very problematic then to claim that in the contemporary world these essentializing characteristics give women a leadership advantage. This view that women's natural traits and strengths, listening, caring, relational, are going to give them an advantage in the post-heroic leadership world of the 21st century is supported by Sally Haganon in her book *The Female Advantage* (1990) and Judy B. Rosener in her book *America's Competitive Secret: Women Managers* (1995).

Challenging this essentializing and binary viewpoint, Simone de Beauvoir's classic statement that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman' (1949/1972: 295) indicates that woman is as much socially constructed as biologically determined. Clearly biology plays a part in gender difference, but gender is also socially produced and performed, and as social attitudes change, perceptions of gender and roles change too. Judith Butler claims that there is no natural identity and no essence to gender. Gender is always in the process of becoming, never fixed. It is through repetitive individual and social performative acts that gender and identity become normalized (Butler, 1990). Arguing that women make better modern leaders because of their specific essentializing traits is therefore reductionist, keeping women in fixed stereotypes they have been struggling to liberate themselves from, and continuing to reproduce social norms that are no longer appropriate or fixed. As demonstrated from the following quote, these essentialist norms are also colour-blind and culturally situated, offering a hegemonic Westernized view. A woman's fixed identity immediately becomes problematic when location, ethnicity, culture and race are introduced:

In the Indian context, woman has not been so neatly defined: she is made up of many attributes, ... as both goddess and dangerous power (*shakti*), as virtuous wife and dangerous evil, both pure and impure in her embodiment, to be revered and worshipped but also to be controlled through direct regulation of her sexuality. (Thapan, 1997: 4)

This deconstruction of gender, sexuality and race fuelled by post-structuralist theory has created new insights but has also fragmented a notion of the universal. Thereby when we speak of women, who are we speaking of if there is no essential gender? How can women fight for equality and liberation if the concept of woman itself is in flux?

Women are making ground in the corporate world, and the 'Gap between salaries of men and women is at a record low' (*Guardian*, 27 October 2006). Walby (1997: 64) notes that

massive changes are taking place in women's employment and education which are transforming gender relations, for example, increasing their presence in professional and managerial positions in national and local government in the UK by 155%, science education and technology 72%, in literary arts and sports by 54%. (in Hulop and Linstead, 1999: 52)

### Yet a huge gap still exists:

The percentage of women on US corporate boards has been stuck at around 11–12% over the last decade. Boards must realize 'not just what women bring to the table when [on boards] but what is missing when not', said Gail Becker. ... Countries including Norway, Spain and France all have opted for quotas that require women to hold a certain percentage of corporate boards' seats (usually 40%) ...

'No company will remain competitive for long if it ignores half of its available labor pool', states the CED report. (Taylor, 2012)

When researching this chapter it became clear that whilst gender in leadership has a higher profile in academia and the media, the other diversity issues are still marginalized. Sexuality, class and race, for example, rarely figure in management and leadership literature, and leave a gaping hole in creating more humane and inclusive workplaces:

Whilst the glass ceiling has been cracked quite significantly with gender, for race the concrete ceiling has just been chipped ever so slightly. (Pewar, 2004: 7)