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# Characteristic and Agentic Qualities of Women Leaders amidst Global Crises:

## Lessons for Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter takes a deliberate step away from a personally narrative set of experiences to one which examines an eclectic mix of theoretical perspectives of direct relevance to the agentic characteristics of women in crisis situations generally and the COVID-19 pandemic in particular. It also explores barriers to the optimal functioning of the agentic qualities of women in practice, in relation to the context of policy,*

*culture, traditionalist legacy issues and more general issues of organisational structure and agency this affords them. In exploring the situational specificity of how educational leadership is delivered this makes possible the more nuanced influences of how signature pedagogies and disciplines shape a future narrative for women across Higher Education contexts and their capacity to influence other fields of practice amidst global crises. The chapter is written from the perspective of both men and women, for whom women's leadership and their characteristic mechanisms of delivering this leadership in practice, are pivotal to the success of the higher education institutions and the military within which they work and exert influence, both nationally and internationally.*

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, Citizenship, Contingency, Disciplines., Gender, Leadership, Policy, Reflection, Temporal, Transformation.

## INTRODUCTION

‘The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word ‘crisis’. One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger – but recognise the opportunity’

危机

*(John F Kennedy, 1917-1963)*

The resonance of Kennedy's words, amidst a global pandemic almost sixty years on from his own demise, serve to echo the sentiment of the optimism of humanity which will inevitably ensure the development of a new normality following the emergence of Coronavirus. We write this chapter as five authors representing our respective male and female genders and we have aimed to provide a collective insight into the theoretical perspectives impacting upon the capacity of women to demonstrate their agentic qualities amidst global crisis in Higher Education. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has ensured not only that the human race has dealt with a sudden and harsh reminder of its own position relative to the risks man lives with on an everyday basis, but also the opportunities to initiate and manage change that these bring (Peters et al, 2020). The existential crisis facing Higher Education Institutions as a direct consequence in 2020 has served as a lens through which other facets of ambiguity and contingency also influence meta-thinking concerning their strategic governance and operationalisation of policies in practice (Pellegrini et al, 2020). Facing ethical dilemmas, institutional leaders also have to grapple with compounding intraneous and extraneous variables which exacerbate the current crisis situations HEIs now face (Rapanta et al, 2020). In its entirety, this chapter also serves to deconstruct the characteristic and agentic qualities of women leaders amidst global crises, which are also reflected in the traits of women managing in more recognisable and relatable leadership roles in the context of Higher Education leadership (Thomas, 2020). The core acknowledgements that on a global level the impact of crises inevitably leads to a disproportionate impact on women, a lack of prioritisation of global impetus to address levels of gender inequality and the embedded role of gender equity in relation to human progression and development on a macro level is apparent (Power, 2020; WHO, 2020). This global perspective illuminates the inequalities that women educators face and the impact that this has on the broader scope of professional development through educational impact (Barba

and Iraizoz, 2020). Whilst situational specificity is significant in terms of the context of HE leadership, the universality of human experience underpinning them remains the connecting thread, which enables the deconstruction of meaning making in applied educational leadership experiences.

Whereas other chapters of the book have explored the stories of those women academic leaders and their personal experiences of their personal and professional lives, this chapter examines an eclectic mix of theoretical perspectives of direct relevance to the agentic characteristics of women in crisis situations. It also explores barriers to effective action in practice, all of which have had particular resonance during the COVID-19 pandemic. An examination of the policy and literature underpinning these turbulent times is essential in any consideration of how women might viably lead at an institutional, departmental and sector level. Exploring the situational specificity of where and how educational leadership is delivered is also of direct relevance to the cultural and historical legacy that still influences women's leadership capacities to date. As authors we represent both men and women, for whom women's leadership and their characteristic mechanisms of delivering this leadership in practice, are pivotal to the success of the higher education institutions and the military within which we work and exert influence, both nationally and internationally.

## **BACKGROUND**

The malalignment of the theoretical framework of HEI relative to the disciplinary perspectives of education has long been annotated as an issue for address (Barnett, 1990), however this was framed at a particularly politically volatile time as a means of highlighting larger ethical issues of concern, rather than crisis as an independent concept (Jandrić et al, 2020). The most recent challenge, presented by COVID-19, is to ensure that pedagogic practice across HEIs can adapt to new teaching and assessment methodologies, whilst at the same time ensuring an optimal quality and student experience for those joining academic programmes of study at HEIs (Rapanta et al, 2020) These experiences will potentially form the foundational bedrock which will ultimately underpin their future careers, lives and capacity for wider civic societal contributions.

Whereas the majority of HEIs across the globe work within specific methodological and management methodologies, the capacity for flexible adaptation, creativity and innovation in crisis, arguably manifests more commonly amongst women leaders than in their male counterparts (El-Besomey, 2020). The gender balance and diversity that women bring to executive leadership positions during times of crisis provides a correspondingly more diversified epistemic standpoint through which crises can be considered (Aldrich and Lotito, 2020). These often subtle but diverse differences in knowledge positionality serve to be more transformative than transactional and as such are often more contextually and situationally relevant to immediately pressing issues, offering a wider lens through which to present, frame and articulate considered solutions (Martinez-Leon et al, 2020). Crises impact upon the theoretical underpinnings of the institutional rationales, designs and operations of these contexts – within HEI and in parallel fields of praxis, where women have been witnessed at executive leadership levels, coping better and more appropriately than their male counterparts, almost as if facing a wartime battle (Benziman, 2020; Maas et al, 2020).

Media reports that women in leadership roles have greatly outperformed men in the strategic management of the implications of COVID-19 globally, have become an everyday source of interest and intrigue. The positive lauding of female prime ministers, presidents and politicians has also been counterbalanced by

accounts from women with more standard positions on career trajectories, for whom home working, home schooling and the attempted continuance of everyday norms amidst a global pandemic are, by their very nature, far more routine and mundane prospects (Whitty-Collins, 2020). On an even more negative and resonant note, the media have reported on the increased incidence and prevalence rates of domestic violence crimes committed against women, which further detail the challenges that some women (and their children) in 21<sup>st</sup> Century society also face (Wenham, Smith and Morgan, 2020).

## **ROOTING PROACTIVE RESPONSE IN CRISIS**

Crisis management of any variety necessitates a proactive response, rooted in complex ambiguity, which is non-conventional and is underpinned by active application of cognition, metacognition, and epistemic cognition to practice. In terms of temporal issues, response times can necessitate an immediacy of thinking and correspondingly rapid response, all of which may have potentially long term consequences, necessitating leaders to be both accountable and responsible for their actions. Parallel to this lies Mezirow's (2009, pp 18-32) Perspective Transformation Theory, posited by Mezirow, in relation to transformative learning as,

*"... the epistemology of how adults learn to reason for themselves - advance and assess reasons for making a judgement - rather than act on the assimilated beliefs, values, feelings and judgements of others..."*

In terms of overall cognitive processing in the contexts of crisis, how gender is of direct relevance is rooted in the increased capacity women have, relative to men, to think flexibly, adaptably and with compassion (Villiers, 2019). This is not to denigrate the gender attributable skill sets of male employees across HEIs but to acknowledge that how people problem solve and react can often have its basis in concepts which are adjuncts to, rather than facets of gender. Whereas men are geared towards objective problem solving in binary 'black and white' fashions as opposed to the capacity to think in shades of grey, which women more clearly demonstrate, what is clear, is that situation and context are the pivotal deciding variables in terms of the need for immediacy of action (Cahdriyana, et al, 2019). These problematic frames of reference, described by Mezirow in the context of education, serve to explain how humans monitor their problem solving capacities, once engaged in contexts and settings of complex ambiguity, where contingency planning comes to the fore (Mezirow, 2009).

## **DISRUPTIVE AMBIGUITY**

Within the context of disruptive ambiguity in crisis, the capacity for both critical reflection and critical reflexivity are paramount. Self-awareness features highly as one of the core aspects of being able to undertake either optimally and effective action, since how responsive behaviours may be viewed by others, and the interrelationship of this with the alternative perspective of others can be indicators of potential success in crisis management. Illuminating this awareness enables a further conceptual consideration of the gender delineation occurring naturally as a consequence of the agentic qualities and attributes of women in the context of crisis management. What is pivotal in these incidences is the capacity for and subsequent integration of tacit knowledge to practice, which stems from not only an extant evidence base but also experiential learning and wisdom, rather than any certainty or concretisation of new knowledge (Dewey, 1933). It is this which is transformational rather than transactional in terms of application and use in leadership praxis and aligns directly with the traditional gender traits of women and men in executive leadership positions, respectively. Through the advancement of the body of work in cognitive psychology

at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the understanding of epistemic assumptions, models such as ‘the reflective judgement model’ posited by King and Kitchener (2004) (see Table 1 below) lend themselves to adapted application in relation to gender delineation. Whilst all of these are evidence based from the extant literature, the issues of situational specificity and context are pivotal in any consideration of complex ambiguity in crisis, not least because of the relative certainty of knowledge within them.

**TABLE 1. A GENDER DELINEATION ADAPTATION OF THE KING AND KITCHENER (2004) REFLECTIVE JUDGEMENT MODEL**

| <b>THINKING<br/>STAGE</b>           | <b>POTENTIAL IMPACT ON AGENTIC QUALITIES</b>  |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Stage 1<br/>Pre-Reflective</b>   | Knowledge is absolute and concrete, no reason to ask why, I believe only what I have seen and thus know it to be true-single category belief system – exposure to diversity of thinking.  |
| <b>Stage 2<br/>Pre-Reflective</b>   | Knowledge is absolutely certain but not readily available to everyone, the right person in authority needs to be sought– some people hold right beliefs and some people hold wrong beliefs - similar to Perry’s dualism observed or taught by an authority figure.  |
| <b>Stage 3<br/>Pre-Reflective</b>   | Knowledge is assumed to be absolutely certain or temporarily uncertain and believe that absolute truth will be manifest in concrete data sometime in the future. Implicitly they maintain that ultimately all problems have solutions.  |
| <b>Stage 4<br/>Quasi-Reflective</b> | Knowledge is no longer certain, there is always a layer of ambiguity, limitations of the knower are acknowledged and without certainty knowledge cannot be validated. Well-structured problems such as arithmetic can be described completely, and ill-structured problems are afforded legitimacy at this stage. |
| <b>Stage 5<br/>Quasi-Reflective</b> | Knowledge is contextual and subjective, interpretations are different, so knowledge is different.   |

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <b>Stage 6<br/>Reflective</b> | Knowing is uncertain and knowledge must be understood in relation to the context from which it was derived. Knowledge is constructed through evaluation, comparing knowledge and opinions across contexts, an initial basis for forming judgement/solutions to ill-structured problems. |
| <b>Stage 7<br/>Reflective</b> | Knowing is uncertain and subject to interpretation and epistemically justifiable claims can be made about the best solution to the problem. Knowledge as an outcome and a process of evaluation. Re-evaluation, new methods of inquiry, or new perspectives become available over time. |

## **GENDER BASED CAPACITY FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY**

Axiologically, identifiably fixed and typically white male, middle aged, middle class mindsets have shaped the society within which corporate leadership operates, with global Higher Education Institutions being no exception. The perspectives these fixed mindsets are rooted in, stems not only from professional bias, but the constraints of cultures which seek to categorise, label and define men and women in relation to biology rather than their capacity to function as leaders, where gender is and ought to be regarded as matterless. What is evident is that the characteristic agentic qualities of both genders differ but what is equally clear is that these have been socially constructed over the course of lifetimes and it is a change in the fixed mindset of modern society that is gradually enabling recognition and acknowledgement of this. Sadly, whilst the COVID-19 pandemic may increase access to educational opportunities and potentially widen participation, the economic effects will have a greater negative impact, restricting even basic access to educational opportunity. In May 2020 the World Bank estimated that 60 million people at risk of being pushed into extreme poverty worldwide as a result of Covid; erasing all progress made to alleviate poverty over the past 3 years. This will likely adversely impact upon women in particular.

Tversky & Kahneman (1974) provided some of the first insights into how judgements under uncertainty, which primarily rely on three heuristics are made. The first, is the probability or likelihood of something, the second is the plausibility of it occurring at all and finally the capacity to develop dual process thinking. Considering all three in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has necessitated an instinctual and emotional response, which fits into Tversky and Kahneman's definitive System 1 thinking, whereas System 2 has a tendency to engage logic and systematic thinking. The agentic qualities of women and men, although attributable to societal construction correspond with these Systems of duality. What enables coping in crisis situations, is not actually an innate capacity to cope, but the recognition and address of complex ambiguity. Where the agentic qualities of women are an advantage here, is that they have a tendency for relationality and transformation as opposed to the functionalism and transactional approaches traditionally adopted by men.

## **WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Despite HEI's making formal recognition of barriers to women reaching senior management positions across their organisational hierarchies, their executives have done relatively little to address issues of structure and agency in relation to antiquated practices that perpetuate these identified inequities (O'Connor, 2020). The situational and contextual backdrops which influence these inequities globally are, of course, largely defined by subcultures and contexts at macro, micro and meso levels – the ecological perspectives of where change has been lost in translation in an effort to quite often tokenistically address gender inequity in the workplace are often clearly tangible (Grimson and Grimson, 2019). However authentic approaches to tackling the provision of opportunities for women are rooted too, in wider societal actions and agencies which women respond to prior to and in the early development of establishing a professional identity. The perpetuation of an underrepresentation of women in senior management positions within the labour market generally, and the higher education senior leadership market specifically, is an issue for address. The commonality of issues surrounding women in HEI leadership positions within and between diverse countries, is widely reported as something which transcends cultural barriers and contextual specificities. What unites the relative framing and positioning of these roles is the inflexibility of organisational infrastructures to accommodate diversity beyond feminist tokenism, which contributes directly to a lack of accessibility to leadership roles for women. This is a historical legacy characterised predominantly by dated approaches to the integration of women into the labour market at executive leadership levels (O'Connor, 2019). Remuneration levels are all too often aligned with this inequity and what is evident is that whereas globally the majority of institutions are making moves to close the gender pay gap, they are doing relatively little to change the infrastructure and support for potential women leaders, which impacts on the degree of opportunity afforded to them during their career trajectories (Heymann et al, 2019; Taylor et al, 2017). These career trajectories, by virtue of biological function, are still inevitably interrupted by maternity leave and caring responsibilities to a larger extent than the careers of their male counterparts. Equality and diversity initiatives at national levels in the UK, now ensure that the majority of organisations are designated the status of equal opportunities employers, which have seen the rise of initiatives such as the Athena Swann mark emblazoned across HEI provider websites, reflecting their articulated capacity to advocate and support equal opportunities in the workplace. Whether this impacts authentically on these wider issues of structures and agency is something only long term evaluation will reveal.

Whilst equality proofing quality initiatives serve well in the identification of the impact of policies which have unintentionally negative impacts on women in practice, one key challenge is being able to identify and filter out the factors underpinning them. In the context of wider professional practice measures these can potentially serve to identify unintended policy impacts but serve neither to identify mechanisms to monitor or reverse the ongoing masculinisation of HEI provision. It ought to be expected that those countries which implement these policy initiatives (e.g., UK, New Zealand, Australia and Sweden) have a greater degree of success in their levels of equal opportunity for women in HEIs but the published research evidence actually points to countries such as Turkey, Portugal and Cyprus having better success rates despite having no formal nationally applied gender based equality initiatives in formal operation (Tanova et al, 2008; Reay, 2004).

## **INFLUENCES OF NEOLIBERALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Neoliberalism has had an extraordinary impact on the structure and agency of HEIs, with the commodification of education necessitating a new wave of managerialism which has been equally



entrenched with misogyny as an integral part of the realms of traditional academia (Meyers, 2013). Characterised by a culture of often toxic masculinity, the tangible and lasting impact, which actively disadvantages women leaders, is well reported in the existing published evidence base surrounding this issue (Canaan and Shumar, 2008). On a global level, this impact varies in relation to the extent of the emergence of managerialism in HEIs, where female academic presence is predominant in humanities and those disciplines perceived as 'soft' in comparison to their overtly male led empirical science disciplines. The interrelationship with poor opportunities for external research funding across these female dominated academic disciplines has provided a now historically visible delineation between the genders, with the motivational climate for progression being negatively affected since there is little to no opportunity for the development and integration of creativity and imagination (Bagilhole, 2019).

). This has not only had an impact at a disciplinary level for women, it also directly impacts on their future likelihood of being able to gain full professorships, a pathway which is more often than not necessary to gain an academic senior management position in reputable and credible HEIs. Since the relative number of women operating at professorial level is significantly different across countries, and particularly in countries such as Ireland, which has the least proportion of women employed at either professorial or associate professorial levels, then it is also still evident that these women have least opportunity for promotion to executive roles in HEIs (Bailes and Guthery, 2020). As an adjunct to these statistics, is the fact that women also are far more likely to shoulder additional responsibilities in relation to caring for children, elderly relatives. This, alongside having to continually make a stand against the gender stereotyping which characterises 21<sup>st</sup> Century HEI workplaces paints a picture, which to some women leaders can be perceived as overwhelming and not worth the additional effort needed to challenge them. By continually instilling and reinforcing this culture into the contexts and settings of where women work in academia, these women often also begin to recognise that the gate keeping which prevents their progression in organisations, also ensures that their perception of a career trajectory at professorial level and consequently in executive management is fundamentally illusory to them (ibid, 2008).

To move beyond the tokenism that characterises male hegemony in HEIs globally, a key issue for address is the minimal representation of women within senior management positions. The challenges faced by women who do venture into these positions often serves to further highlight the extent of male domination at senior management level that exists within these HEIs. This tokenism has also ensured that women are not in positions where they can actively challenge either toxic masculinity or the supplementary structure and agency that prevail in today's HEI workplaces and which continue to resonate in the context of HEI women leadership (Wheaton and Kezar, 2019).

## **SIGNATURE PEDAGOGICAL DRIVERS OF GENDER EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The longevity of male dominance in particular disciplinary subjects such as mathematics, science and engineering has done little to positively enhance the quality and duration of HEI women leaders' career trajectories. An evidence based insight into this reveals a clear deficit of female professors across these disciplines, which bears witness to the corresponding longevity and history of education locally, nationally and globally. One of the first steps to deconstructing this inequality is, as the STEM initiative in the UK has focused upon, to encourage equity and new awareness of careers available in traditionally male dominated professions (Fitzgerald, 2020). Where gendered organisational culture and processes are evident in favour with male employees, it is apparent from the literature that, conformity is also more widely valued than attributes of creativity, and, as a by-product, innovation. This has been both historically and

contemporaneously apparent in the body of literature available but amidst crisis with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, has never been more relevant. In HEIs which have demonstrably lower levels of women at senior executive levels across their organisations, this brings into question the purist epistemic assumptions which are clearly non diverse and non-aspirational in terms of equality, diversity and as a consequence creativity. The exponential reach afforded by a clear capacity for a diverse workforce, not merely constructed of ideological representation, but one of operationalised knowledge and skill, is immeasurable and has been clearly evidenced by the progression of parallel fields of practice (Evidence Here). As an active consequence of these dilemmas which have pervaded organisations for the best part of half a century, issues of gatekeeping, the impact of gendered cultures and infrastructures policies and initiatives are at last beginning to feature mechanisms of moving forward positively but they also indicate the extreme way to go that organisations have to correct these systemic imbalances. What is clear is that if central policy does not change to reflect these needs, the governments, which also reflect an imbalance in the representation of women in executive roles, will persist in influencing the macro levels of society at which meso and micro levels are then by default poised to remain indefinitely.

## **WOMEN IN RESEARCH**

The role of scientific disciplines acquires unique gravitas during periods of social upheaval and crisis. During the global pandemic of Covid 19, the scientific output and productivity of female scholars has been disproportionately affected in a negative way. This has led to a loss of female scientific expertise in the public realm (Gabster et al. 2020). The role of women within Science at times of crisis have often been undervalued, with the assumption that men in science are associated with agentic qualities, whereas women scholars are assumed to represent a more communal perspective. Research has suggested that “men are stereotyped as agentic and women are stereotyped as communal. Therefore, perceived importance of agentic versus communal traits for success in science may contribute to subtle gender biases in science. Perceptions of science faculty may be especially important to investigate due to their positions as role models, exemplars, and gatekeepers” (Ramsey 2017:6).

Women have long been underrepresented in research, accounting for around 31% of co-authors on scientific papers between 2008 and 2017, according to an unpublished analysis. This spring, concerns on social media started to surface that this gap may be widening (Zimmer 2020). Women comprise roughly 70% of the health workforce globally, and represent more than 50% of medical graduates in many countries. However, women and gender minorities remain underrepresented in medical leadership (Gabster et al. 2020). If one looks at academic appointments the impact upon women is even more glaring, with only 22% of full professors in American medical schools and 23% in Europe being women (Association of American Medical Colleges 2015/16, European Commission 2016). This disparity becomes even more glaring in relation to women of colour, as only 0.5% of full professors in American medical schools are Black women (Association of American Medical Colleges 2015/16). Early data indicates that COVID-19 has had a substantial impact upon women scholar's publication rates. Andersen and colleagues (2020) made a comparison between the authorship of 1179 medical COVID-19 papers with 37 531 papers from the same journals in 2019. At 30%, 28%, and 22%, women's contributions of overall, first, and last authorship in COVID-19 papers reduced by 16%, 23%, and 16%, respectively. This emphasizes the fact that women are typically the principal caregivers, and this extra burden during the Covid 19 pandemic has had rippling

negative effects upon female academic productivity. Women scientists reported a 5 percent larger decline in time spent on research than their male colleagues. Mothers were at an even greater disadvantage. Scientists with at least one child under five worked 17 percent less on research when variations between professions were equalized. Those women with more than one child reported losing an additional 3 percent of time spent on research (Layne 2020). Early data on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on scientific-publishing output suggest that women researchers, especially those at early-career stages, have been hit the hardest (Gewin 2020). As nations globally instituted isolation measures, submissions to preprint servers, such as arXiv, rose more quickly for male authors than for female authors. Female authors have accounted for only one-third of all authors on published Covid 19 papers since January 2020 (Gewin 2020). In addition, this increased burden of caregiving during the Covid 19 pandemic may be placing female researchers' positions at risk. For example, a report published in May 2020 found that in Australia, female scientists who are 1.5 times more likely to be in casual or short-term contract jobs, are more likely to lose jobs, paid hours and career opportunities than are their male counterparts. (Rapid Research Information Forum May 2020).

Of particular concern is the apparent discordance between the underrepresentation of female scientists in academic institutions and the media, and the global leadership roles that women have played in successfully containing the spread of Covid 19. In terms of the Covid 19 pandemic, the gender bias has impacted the selection and evaluation of scientific experts and leaders during times of crisis (Gabster et al 2020). Women constitute just 24% of COVID-19 experts quoted in the media and 24.3% of national task forces analyzed (n=24) (Rajan et al. 2020). However, countries with female leaders have some of the best COVID-19 outcomes (Hassan and O'Grady 2020). An interesting recent study matched female-led countries against those with male leaders based on COVID-relevant demographic and social variables. Using a constructed dataset for 194 countries, a variety of socio-demographic variables are used to match nearest neighbours. The findings show that COVID-outcomes are systematically better in countries led by women and, to some extent, this may be explained by the proactive and coordinated policy responses adopted by them (Garikipati and Kambhampati 2020).

They show that it is, in fact, '*leadership*' that drives differences in initial COVID outcomes. Statistically, female-led countries (as of publication), moved more quickly to lockdown and had fewer COVID fatalities than comparable, male-led countries (Garikipati and Kambhampati 2020). The scholars explain this greater female success in containing the Coronavirus resulted from two principle reasons- women leaders are more 'risk-averse', and women leaders demonstrated clear and decisive communications with the public in an empathetic manner (Garikipati and Kambhampati 2020). It is an interesting observation that while females are routinely underrepresented amongst scientific disciplines, they have had the greatest success in containing the coronavirus during the pandemic. This has very important implications for academic and research institutions and scientific granting agencies, as well as media constructions of female academics in future. Perhaps the most important implication is the value of female scholars and scientists as members of Public Health task forces and governing bodies in the face of pandemic crisis.

## **TRADITIONALIST LEGACIES**

Research has been conducted which conclusively identifies that senior managers of HEI organisations believe or hold assumptions that women, from a signature pedagogy perspective, are far more likely to work in the context of disciplines such as the social sciences, arts and humanities - those often termed 'soft subjects' or those which are responsible in health and medical care in the remit of 'caring' such as nursing

(Dilnot, 2018; Henderson et al, 2018). They also perceived that empirical sciences due to the cultural necessity of maintaining the status quo of daily operations would potentially be interrupted by career breaks and the accommodation of caring responsibilities. In contrast to this perspective though, remains the fact that women's choice of study during school and university years also demonstrates that relatively few wish to study subjects such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics and as the current initiatives in UK educational settings indicate, this has become an identified area for redress in terms of changing the misconceptions that girls have about academic study in the post-compulsory sector (Lannelli and Duta, 2018). At a macro level, the labour market dictates the value of subject disciplines by leaders of global societies, where the representation of women leadership is also comparatively low. Reflective of this, is the fact that a corresponding hierarchy of subjects and disciplines exist, which is positively reinforced by the masculine perspectives driving their need. As a consequence of this, fewer women follow maths, technology and sciences in preferences to the arts, humanities and social sciences. Aligned with the capacity for maximal earning capacity in the labour market are the opportunities to work in disciplines of these empirical studies, hence widening the gap between men and women in the potential to gain highly paid roles. Again, the redress of this balance would serve to close the gender income gap which characterises global economies. Research also highlights that those disciplines with which women more readily engage, also contribute widely to the development of the skill sets which men are known to lack. Gender segregation in the early stages of student learning at school can be regarded as a key cause of the gender gap, both economically and in terms of leadership opportunity that women experience throughout their academic careers. Where these are of greatest concern is in relation to the concepts of citizenship, which HEIs often claim to incorporate as an integral part of their organisational strength across global communities. Within this context, diversity and equality are two issues upon which capacity for citizenship and capacity for active civic reach, can hinge.

## **POLITICS**

The delineating features of women who have dominated as successful political leaders, both historically and contemporaneously, can be aligned with the agentic qualities associated with the concept of stereotypical gender stereotyping. The two most typical examples are Baroness Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel respectively. What these distinguished women reveal, upon analysis is a capacity for both the transactional autocratic style characterised by professional positionality and a task oriented approach, usually associated with male hegemony alongside an equally desirable skill set which is linked not only with strategic success but also social justice in a truly transformative sense. The transformative leadership usually associated with successful female leadership echoes and reinforces the theoretical perspectives of Mezirow. This capacity for remaining person centred alongside the strength and resilience associated with making decisions which are not always palatable for a wider collective benefit remains at the heart of realising that organisational factors such as gender comparison, situation, context and hierarchy are all important moderators of leadership style in practice. All of these agentic qualities are still confounded with the concept of gender.

The active delineation of leadership from management is important. It was perhaps best operationally defined for the context of HEIs by Gardner (1995), when he defined it, accounting for both task and relationship dimensionality, as

‘The ability to influence, either directly or indirectly, the behaviour, thoughts and actions of a significant number of individuals’

Since temporality, situation and context are inherently dynamic and altered at any given point, it can be stated that there is no such thing as definably perfect leadership. It is optimal leadership and not management which is the greatest determinant of organisational success. This was a key mechanism for solving both public and private sector challenges, often many of which are politically underpinned in the context of HEI settings.

In times of societal crisis, the words of Fitzgerald (2003) resonate harshly in the culture and climate of today's HEI organisations, when the assertion 'Conceptualisations of leadership without full account of both gender and ethnicity are futile'. Recent impacting factors on how we consider all leaders, not merely on the basis of their gender, add an extra dimension to how best crisis ought to be managed and how long held assumptions and pre-suppositions can be actively challenged in practice.

Critical to this is the capacity for self-reflection and the desire to implement critical reflexivity at the heart of crisis environments. Mezirow's now seminal work on transformative learning can be seen as the keystone that enables all people to be seen as more than simply a collection of qualifications and experience, towards knowing people who know themselves. This is arguably one of the few mechanisms of being able to claim true and authentic approaches to the leadership and management of self, alongside organisations and institutions whose infrastructures serve to permeate wider society as an integral part of their civic contribution to society.

## **DEBUNKING THE DEFICIT MODEL MYTH**

Within the current literature it is well established that the skills that leading in the context of HEIs entails are not actually gendered at all. These skills are centred around the capacity and capability for endurance in relation to hard work, strategic vision, evidence of reputational impact in research, the courage to manage in the context of taking measured risk and the resilience and integrity to operationalise what is necessary for success. From an axiological standpoint, it is more often the case that the value placed upon what women leaders do, stems from the value of the disciplinary perspectives from which they emerge, rather than any overt judgement surrounding gender. Within the context of male senior management there are far more likely to be male academics from traditionally masculine subjects such as science and engineering, whereas, due to the historical legacies and patterns of humanities and caring professions, women are far less likely to have worked with and alongside them.

New public governance of organisations has meant that a strategic revamp of the majority of organisational structuring has taken place across HEIs globally, however whilst these have shifted things predominantly towards a consumer led market perspective, the impact on the gendered leadership in HEIs has arguably been only vaguely considered. As a consequence, these axiological standpoints are often little more than tokenism in relation to the practical application of values based strategic vision to practice. Arguably the best starting point for axiological underpinnings to be addressed, lies at the heart of organisational structures and cultures, which enable the authentic agency of women to flourish and to be genuinely valued. Since core values lie at the credibility of every HEI across the globe, these remain ongoing areas for address and further research.

Women leaders are far more likely to express a capacity for collective and relationship behavioural approaches in practice, than male leaders, who are more likely to adopt purely transactional leadership strategies and operationalise these in practice. As a consequence of this approach, women are often deemed to be less effective since their capacity to deal with complex ambiguity often entails detailed critical

thinking as opposed to the binary decision making associated with transactional approaches. This is wholly dependent on the situational specificity of organisational contexts, which ultimately provides a platform for leadership execution and the ethos evident within it, in relation to differing leadership styles and approaches.

## **PYRAMIDAL ORGANISATIONAL HIERARCHIES AND GENDER CONSTRAINT**

The formal administration structures of HEIs have altered little in a century. Still featuring a pyramidal structure where women notoriously occupy the bottom rung of the organisational hierarchy, remains a typical profile for the majority of global HEIs. In European and American HEIs, initiatives aimed specifically at addressing gender equity in education, are thriving, which aim to provide transformational leadership opportunities and development for women. These provide bespoke training, education and progression pathways for those who wish to further their academic career trajectories but are limited in availability and opportunity to access them is often lacking in equity of opportunity. The central issue of capacity for women leaders in HEIs is not actually the number of women in HEIs across the globe but rather the positions they occupy, which tend to be traditionally clustered at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy with minimal degrees of representation at higher levels. As a consequence, women rarely progress to the level of Dean, but do occupy their subordinate positions as Associate Deans, Directors or Pro Vice Chancellors, rather than linchpin positions at the top. This is a source of blocking women's access to powerful positions and thus exerting a vision for the next generation of female leaders. Perhaps the greatest danger in this dynamic is the sheer invisibility of organisational and gender based bias, which serves to block female progression. As a key aspect of social justice and equity in action, as both process and goal this is a fundamental area for address across the globe where untapped potential and the provision of opportunity warrant redress (McNair, Bensimon, and Malcom-Piqueux, 2020; Okoli et al, 2020).

Men are far more likely to attribute the underrepresentation or lack of women in executive level positions to the breaks they necessarily take in relation to family caring responsibilities, career interruptions due to pregnancy and their comparative and relative lack of research impact in HEI praxis. In contrast women's perceptions of the same experience are littered with reports of actively overt and covertly demonstrated workplace discrimination, fuelled by the basis of their gender. Unlike the successes of Merkel and Thatcher in a political setting, where transformative learning is valued, the opposite has been found to be largely true in the context of HEI settings, where the higher women climb within the organisational hierarchy, the more they assume the character traits represented by male leaders, where they become deliberately and overly transactional (Allen and Flood, 2018). As a direct consequence of this, they progressively develop the same perspectives, that recruitment on the basis of gender is something that ought to be tokenistic rather than something actually addressed in HEI professional practice. These deficit models are potentially damaging, but even more so where this is often unintentionally reinforced by members of their own gender as a consequence of the cultural normalisation of gender stereotyping (Teelken and Deem, 2013). Göransson, et al (2008) stated that gendered organisational cultures are in turn linked to gendered knowledge, which means the naturally occurring agentic qualities with which women are wired to lead, are often masked by the bureaucracy and culture of organisations, rather than anything else. As a consequence, the hegemonic and often toxic masculinity which drives organisations pervades into the wider cultural climate and becomes entrenched and difficult to address. At the heart of addressing these issues is the nature of recruitment and the nature of actively retaining women through to the point where they have visibly recognisable opportunities to apply for promotion or at least seek a career trajectory reflective of their capacity and capability. This is apparent across many professional disciplines out with the context of Higher

Education (Hayes and Graham 2020; Bellini et al, 2019). The nature of women's participation is also an issue, since they need the basis of equity and inclusivity to participate on an equal footing with their male counterparts. Those pragmatic issues which serve as barriers to this, are often found in the institutional operational policies within which all staff are required to work, regardless of academic or professional discipline (Cardel et al, 2020).

## **ACTIVE PARTICIPATION VERSUS VISIBLE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER**

The agentic qualities that women do bring to the context of executive leadership within the context of HEIs are based around their capacity for creativity and as a direct consequence the bridge to innovation that this secures (Lipton, 2015). They are also widely reported as enhancing capacity for effective communication and an authentic approach to dealing with both the professional and personal needs of others.

Perhaps dwelling overly on long held debates of both the metaphorical glass ceiling and glass escalator ought to be diminished by the consideration of women, who whilst largely atypical of female representativeness across HEIs, provide important lessons surrounding the agentic qualities which have underpinned their success (Arriaga, Stanley and Lindsey, 2020). Presenting these women as exemplars, however runs two distinct risks which have important implications for professional practice (Jameson, 2019). Firstly, the situations and contexts within which all women operate as leaders are largely unique and therefore the opportunity to emulate success is limited and secondly, women who are unable to transfer approaches into the context of their own workplace have an increased potential to perceive they will fail. Actually, in relation to the concept of failure, there are far wider independent variables and contextual issues at play, which correspondingly align with the far wider cultural challenges of organisational norms (Benslimane and Moustaghfir, 2020). One of the most insightful set of perspectives are those presented by Syed (2019) whose perspectives on the need for accuracy rather than creativity in the progressive development of change on major world issues such as feminism. His debate that during COVID-19 some leaders have demonstrated a clear capacity to pivot between leadership styles via the integration of both diverse views and binary decision making processes. Reconciling the perceived tension that arises when seeking to increase diversity within established meritocracies remains a pivotal debate in any consideration of women and their opportunities to use innate agency within crisis. Doubtless this will prevail, although the pandemic has provided a forum for the illumination of not just exceptional women from the higher echelons of society but all those coping in more everyday settings of the home, the office and beyond.

## **CONCLUSION**

The scope and parameters of this chapter did not permit a consideration of all issues that all women face, rather this chapter has provided an insight into the agentic roles of women leaders in global crises, which have ensured their credibility and dependability in times of greatest challenge to the context of Higher Education (HE) leadership across the world. A collective insight into the roles of women leaders within the COVID-19 pandemic has featured widely in the international press, where multi-agency perspectives on their actions and reactions have been largely positive (Trent, 2020). Belying this media frenzy, however, lies a far deeper debate in just how representative these women leaders are of those working within diverse HE leadership contexts and settings and indeed how far transferable their situational skills of leadership actually are (Henley and Roy, 2020).

The individual positionality of all women is equally important to those who operate as strategic heads of state and whose lives are largely characterised by the privilege of hierarchical positions and the status accompanying them (Bright, Acosta and Parker, 2020; Inman, 2020)). This chapter aims to provide an insight into the existing evidence base of how women leaders in Higher Education during a global pandemic, such as COVID-19, cope in reality. Not only does this illuminate the reality of concepts such as emotional labour, mental health and wellbeing and authenticity, it also serves to delineate the personhood of women from the professional roles they occupy across our global societies, within the situational specificity of Higher Education (Tshivhase, 2020).

Perhaps what is most notable about the attention women receive, either amidst global crises or directly after them, is the consistency in their leadership styles, which as this chapter illustrates, positions them as some of those most capable of reconciling the fine balance between being able to make honest and authentic decisions under extreme pressure, yet exacting them with a degree of agility, empathy and compassion, which ensures application in practice is possible. Communication and the capacity to articulate strategic planning and awareness raising has underpinned the success and agentic qualities of women who have successfully demonstrated themselves to be optimal leaders throughout history. It is arguable that these attributes and leadership traits have absolutely nothing to do with gender but rather their innate sense of value for the lives of all and their position relative to this. The women highlighted in this chapter have not become great leaders because of their gender, but rather they have successfully overcome the epistemic biases of others which would usually culturally and contextually constrain them, whether intentionally or simply by virtue of the structure and agency afforded to them by global society. Being able to understand the complex and multifaceted agency that all leaders bring to the context of successful crisis management will ensure that women leadership becomes an aspect of society, that far from them being judged on the basis of gender alone, they can be celebrated for their astute intelligence and credibility as people who care, people who can communicate and perhaps most importantly of all, people with courage.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Ambiguity:** the quality of being open to more than one interpretation due to vagueness, inexactness or a degree of obscurity.

**Citizenship:** The sense of subjective identity, belonging and reciprocal relationship that exists between an individual and their community, society or nationality.

**Contingency:** A planned capability or provision to deal with an unforeseen event or circumstance which would impact on an existing capacity for action.

**Discipline:** Is the named field of study or branch of knowledge used to delineate particular fields of academic practice across different subjects.

**Gender:** Refers to the two sexes (male and female) with reference to sociocultural difference rather than biological status. It is acknowledged that individual choice enables individuals to identify as male, female or a non-specific gender.

**Leadership:** Is the process of leading, guiding or directing the the action of others – either at an institutional, collective group or individual level.

**Policy:** Is a course of principled action proposed and/or formally adopted by an institution, collective group or individual.

**Reflection:** A process of critical thinking or contemplation on a particular area for serious thought or consideration.

**Temporal:** Pertains to time, in the sense of currency or time-related impact of human actions and interactions.

**Transformation:** An alteration or a marked change in perspective thinking, form, nature, or appearance







