

Gender should be on the agenda of business schools



As business and management educators we have a role to develop greater awareness and appreciation of diversity in society and our workplaces. Gender should be on the agenda of business schools. Gender-inclusive organisations and gender-inclusive management and leadership should be non-negotiable. Business schools have ethical, social and economic imperatives for integrating gender inclusivity into their cultures and curricula.

The silence in curricula about how gender continues to influence individuals' aspirations and how others use your gender as a reason to hinder your aspirations – has to be broken. The young people we work with as educators are the business and organisational leaders of tomorrow. They are citizens and leaders of our society. Yet we are not doing enough to educate them about the persistence of stereotypes in hindering women's aspirations and progress.

If we cannot 'see' women leaders and managers in our everyday lives then women in these roles remain invisible, unusual, and progress towards gender equality in the UK will continue to be slow. Since 2014, with colleagues Valerie Stead and Jannine Williams, we have had the support of the ESRC to investigate how women professionals and leaders are misrepresented across all forms of media; from broadsheet newspapers to television programmes and social media. The research was initiated due to the media's critical role in society and its influence in shaping workplace realities.

Media representations of women leaders and managers are often absent or gendered, sexualised and evidenced by contradiction. For example, on the one hand we see the championing of women leaders, and on the other a media focus on women's hair, makeup, clothes, children, weight etc. , calling into question their presence and competence.

Our research has involved diverse and innovative methods: 1) eight separate research events across the UK, including an international conference and an event in the House of Commons hosted by Ruth Cadbury, MP; the gathering of ethnographic data, including group discussions; 2) textual and visual examinations of media outputs that profile women political leaders; 3) interview discussions with media producers.

Significant findings

- The media have a *contradictory* approach to women leaders. Advantages attributed to women such as a tendency to be risk-averse, are also described as disadvantageous; if women are perceived to be risk-averse they cannot fulfil the leadership ideal of being a risk-taker. Similarly, while women may be seen as successful in adopting masculine leadership characteristics, they are often portrayed as being unable to maintain them;
- Women's leadership is *glamorized, fetishized, and sexualized*. For example, following the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), where blame for the crisis was placed on hubristic men leaders, the profile of women leaders undoubtedly rose. Yet, while the media celebrate these women, they focus on their female characteristics.

Photographed in glamorous clothing and highlighting their looks and 'feminine' qualities in visual and narrative presentations, we witness a distancing of women leaders from the ideals associated with 'good' leadership;

- Women leaders remain *constrained by their appearance* – the sexualisation of women leaders' bodies is normalised and women's leadership power is diluted;
- The media constructs women leaders' presence as *postfeminist* – as if arguments for gender equality have been won.

A salient illustration of this can be seen in Hilary Clinton's new book, and Harvard University [research](#) into media bias against Hillary Clinton during the last presidential campaign.

Time to get our house in order – what can business schools do?

We have been arguing for gender on the agenda since 1999 in business schools. We tried again in 2004. Ruth Simpson has been calling for gender awareness in the MBA programme since 1996, in 2000, 2005 and 2006. Yet here we are – calling for it again.

Is the time right for gender inclusivity in 2018? Have we reached a tipping point in Western society when sexual harassment and sexual abuse are being outed so that gender and gender inclusivity discussions can be visible and normative in business and management education?

Will the Athena Swan Charter led by the Equality Challenge Unit be incentive enough for business schools to get their house in order?

We offer some ways of starting the gender conversation:

- Agree senior management commitment to becoming gender aware – beyond accreditations;
- Agree that all-men shortlists and all-men selection panels for academic appointments and promotion rounds are no longer acceptable – we need to work harder to attract women candidates and involve women academics in appointments;
- Scrutinize the gender balance of membership in the main decision making bodies and committees and challenge imbalances;
- Become aware of gendered media representations and 'call these' out with colleagues and students;
- Check out the imagery of leadership and management on the physical and symbolic walls of business schools and in prospectuses, textbooks, case studies and websites etc.;
- Conceptualise gender-inclusive leadership and management in teaching, research and executive development;
- Consciously draw upon *both* men and women leaders and managers in teaching and research;
- Integrate successful women leaders and managers into invited speakers' programmes, company visits etc.;
- Men and women academics can champion gender-inclusive leadership and management – this is both a social justice and an economic issue.



Notes:

- *Research team: Professor Carole Elliott (Roehampton), Dr. Valerie Stead (Lancaster), Professor Sharon Mavin (Newcastle), Dr. Jannine Williams, (Bradford). ESRC funding ES/M001792/1.*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
- *Featured image credit: Photo by [World Literature Today](#), under a [CC-BY-NC-2.0](#) licence*
- *When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our [Comment Policy](#).*



Sharon Mavin is Professor of Leadership and Organization Studies and Director of Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle University, UK. Sharon is an international gender in management and leadership [scholar](#), a Fellow of the British Academy of Management, Chair of the CABS Diversity Committee and the UFHRD and an Associate Editor of *International Journal of Management Reviews*. She is co-researcher on an ESRC Seminar Series *Gendered Media Mis(s)Representations of Women Leaders and Professionals* and her further research interests are in women leaders' experiences and relationships with other women, female misogyny, doing gender, dirty work, identity, vulnerability, and leadership. She has published in journals such as *Human Relations*, *Gender, Work & Organization*, *British Journal of Management*, *Organization*, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* and *Gender and Management: An International Journal*. Email: sharon.mavin@newcastle.ac.uk



Carole Elliott is Professor of Human Resource Development at Roehampton Business School, University of Roehampton, UK. Carole is an international gender in management and leadership [scholar](#). She is the editor-in-chief of *Human Resource Development International*, a former board member of the *Academy of HRD*, Academic Fellow of the *CIPD*, and Fellow of the *Leadership Trust Foundation*. She is the Principal Investigator on an ESRC Seminar Series *Gendered Media Mis(s)Representations of Women Professionals and Leaders* and her further research interests are in women leaders' learning experiences, gender and diversity in management learning, and critical HRD. She has published in journals such as *Organization Studies*, *Management Learning*, *International Small Business Journal*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *Human Resource Development International* and *Gender and Management: An International Journal*. Email: carole.elliott@roehampton.ac.uk