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Women and Leadership: Glass mirror - An internal “glass ceiling”?

Frequently featuring in the news, leading business magazines and financial newspapers, women’s leadership presence or absence makes headlines.

Content, and imagery-rich, the story of women trying to make it to the top has attracted a wealth of “obstacle” symbolism. Examples such as the “labyrinth” representing women’s long-winded path of twists and turns to leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and “glass cliffs” (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) describing the precarious leadership positions offered to women in times of crisis, suggest an external symbolic topography of barriers. The glass ceiling (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986), perhaps the most widely known metaphor of hindered female advancement, is no different: the ceiling is an obstacle that is solid, impenetrable, concrete, allowing female leaders to watch their competitors move up yet remaining invisible to others.

Taking advantage of the “invisible quality” of the original glass ceiling metaphor, it will be argued that the topography missed so far in eradicating female leadership barriers, (and ironically so if Freud is considered), is the internal psychological one. Resonating with the theme of the current conference, it will be argued that the invisible wall/ glass ceiling that might hold the key to our understanding is in reality an internal glass mirror, that colludes with the external “glass ceiling”. The metaphor here is of a glass mirror, that obstructs. The female leader looks in the mirror and comes into contact with an image of self that inhibits her from progressing. The image is not real nor objective, not a mirroring of external reality—so to speak. Rather it is a mirror that reflects internal images of identity, relationship to power and subjectivity, embodied existence and desire constructing a specific sense of “female leader self” and consequently affecting the thoughts, feelings and actions of these women.

For the purposes of this paper proposal and as the internal “glass mirror” concept is vast and encompasses a multitude of possible projections and introjections, I will focus on the ideas of “otherness” as theorized by Luce Irigaray (Irigaray, 1977; Whitford, 2014) and of female subjectivity based on Jessica Benjamin’s work (Benjamin, 1988), linking back to female leadership and obstruction in advancement (Fotaki, 2011; Oseen, 1997; Vachhani, 2012). This will be a conceptual paper as the research component is at the moment in progress.

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