

Leeanda Smith raises significant questions about the impediments, caused by gender stereotypes and gender based power balances, placed before women when accessing leadership positions, within the teaching profession and the wider society. She explains why it is time to re-evaluate matters related to women and leadership . . .

The culture of education systems and their management structures, the wages, working conditions and organisational practices transmit strong messages about the value placed on the contribution and participation of women. It is educationally important for students to see their teachers in a range of roles, across all curriculum subjects and in all leadership positions. The reinforcement of gender stereotypes, and, therefore, gender based power imbalances, by a lack of representation of women in senior leadership roles, and within all subject areas, cannot be ignored.

The NSW Department of Education Annual Report (2018, pp. 79-81) identifies just over 82 per cent of teachers in primary schools and 60 percent in high schools are women. The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) data shows that in 2019 these numbers are consistent in all regions across the state. However, this proportion is not reflected in leadership positions where just over 66 per cent of principals in primary schools are women and high schools are yet to achieve 50 per cent representation. Based on the numbers reported, even though there are fewer men in teaching, there is a higher proportional representation for men in leadership positions. That means around 30 percent of men in primary schools are in Assistant Principal, Deputy Principal and Principal positions compared to just under 18 percent of women and high schools see almost 25 percent of men compared to just under 13 percent of women.

NSW Public Schools – Representation of women					
Position	Female/ total teachers in category	male	% of women in the position	Women total	Proportional Representation in Leadership
Primary School (PS)					
Teacher (CRT)	17178/ 20378	3200	84.3%	PS 82.7% (CRT, AP, DP, Pr) 21818/ 26398	Women 17.6%
Assistant Principal (AP)	2908/ 3616	708	80.4%		4640/26398
Deputy Principal (DP)	613/ 718	105	85.4%		Men 30.1%
Principal (all categories)	1119/ 1686	567	66.4%		1380/4580
High School (HS)					
Teacher (CRT)	10444/ 17058	6614	61.2%	HS 60.2% (CRT, HT, DP, Pr) 13268/ 22025	Women 12.8%
Head Teacher (HT)	2220/ 3796	1576	58.5%		2824/22025
Deputy Principal (DP)	394/ 737	343	53.5%		Men 24.5%
Principal (all categories)	210/ 434	224	48.4%		2143/8757

Source: The NSW Department of Education Annual Report (2018)



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According to the NSW Department of Education Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (2018-2022) “*Gender diversity in senior leadership helps improve problem solving and collaboration and leads to higher organisational performance. Our aim is to maintain a gender balance at senior leadership levels. This will involve understanding the leadership pipeline and any structural barriers in place that may be impacting disproportionately on women’s progression into leadership roles*”. The strategy also identifies targets of 50 percent of ‘senior leadership’ roles (P3 and above) to be held by women and to increase the representation of women in senior leadership roles to 60 percent by 2025.

Recognising structural barriers

Australia is not performing well when it comes to gender equity. The World Economic Forum’s 2020 *Global Gender Gap Index* ranks Australia 44th out of 153 countries (New Zealand ranks 6th). Australia has dropped 5 places in 2 years. According to the Forum’s report, gender parity has a fundamental bearing on whether or not economies and societies thrive. It should be no surprise that Australia is ranked number 1 for educational attainment, a ranking which has not changed since 2006. Educational attainment refers to the overall access to education and the capacity of a country to educate women and men equally in literacy and numeracy. Despite this, Australia’s overall ranking, as well as the ranking on labour force participation and female representation in leadership, has worsened (Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees’ Association [SDA], 2020 p. 1). If obtaining an education is not the issue, the key factors contributing to the worsening gap are most likely structural barriers and discrimination. The report also found that career and work interruptions are responsible for 21% of the proportion of the gender pay gap which is the largest changing factor increasing from 9% in 2007. (SDA, 2020 p. 1)

This is related to the way domestic and care work were not included in the early economic models because activities like raising children and feeding the family weren’t seen to create tangible goods that could be bought, traded or sold. The early economists decided that such undertakings didn’t contribute to prosperity (Marcal 2015, p.30). That decision has had a sustained impact on the creation of, value placed on, and wages within, industries where there are more women. As Katrine Marcal points out the question of how it could be possible to combine family with work outside the home isn’t a complaint from the privileged female elite that wants to ‘have it all’, rather it is an enormous challenge that affects entire economies and populations (2015, p. 195).

Women continue to have majority representation in the category of part-time work. In NSW public schools just over 88 per cent (17,425) of teachers who were in part-time employment in 2018 were women. The Department (2018) also reported that 61,834 staff (84.7 per cent of whom were women) accessed ‘flexible’ work options including part-time, job sharing, leave without pay and varying flexible hour arrangements. The report further identifies that 51,582 staff (78.5 per cent of whom were women) took short term absences for family and community responsibilities.

Structural bias means that it is often harder for those working part-time to obtain relieving in higher duties opportunities and advertised positions, and in many cases it takes much longer to obtain promotions. Women often refer to the ‘motherhood penalty’ to describe some of these barriers. Women have always worked but the rigid ways organisational leadership is defined, jobs are structured and rewarded, and expectations reinforced about who will do the domestic work contribute to these obstacles (Fox, 2017, p. 189).

Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) form of corporate feminism (i.e. asking women to "lean in") is far easier than demanding that we fundamentally change the way organisations operate: who they operate for; and how we reward and approach work. The ideals on which Sandberg's view trade, such as personal development and focusing on individual success stories, do not provide the solution. Encouraging women to just be more confident and assertive implies that the barriers they are facing will then simply disappear. Rather we should 'lean out' and challenge the structural inequality by examining the organisations that women are struggling to gain promotions within (Foster, 2015 p. 20-21).

With the 'Merit Selection' employment and promotion procedures in NSW schools it's not lack of talent, ability, or scarcity of potential candidates that prevents women's full participation. Instead, it is the actual structures and processes that need to be changed to remove the barriers (conscious and unconscious) to participation and progression into leadership positions for women. Identifying structural barriers is about ensuring that there is a legitimate organisational improvement not just for women, but ultimately for all employees (Fox, 2017, p. 185).

Castilla & Benard(2010) studied the 'paradox of meritocracy' where the managers in an organisational culture that promotes meritocracy may, ironically, show greater bias in favour of men over equally performing women. The resulting criteria for appointments, particularly at senior levels, reveal they have often been modelled on past incumbents. In many cases there's a good statistical chance that any such incumbent will have been a man, and so another man can appear to be the best match. It's hardly meritocracy if significant parts of the population are prevented from accessing these opportunities and as Vicky Pryce (2015, p.149) cautions don't assume that others are not as good simply because they have not applied for those positions.

One strategy to redress this bias is to implement quotas and this is often a highly contested solution. However, in 'Accidental Feminists' Jane Caro pointedly remarks, to the opponents to quotas for women, that men have benefited from 100 percent quotas and every incursion women have made has had to be fought for against this 100 percent male quota (Caro, 2019, p. 212). Quotas, intelligently applied, are a way to make serious and lasting progress by ensuring greater diversity at all decision making levels (Pryce, 2015, p.125). Quotas can facilitate genuine career progression, succession planning and retention of skilled employees over their career (Pryce, 2015, 128).

Defining and redefining leadership

"One of the criticisms I've faced over the years is that I'm not aggressive enough or assertive enough, or somehow because I'm empathetic, it means I'm weak. I totally rebel against that. I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong." Jacinda Ardern (2018)

Professor Mary Beard lamented in 'Women and Power' (2017, p.86) that you cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male. That means changing that structure, and changing the way we think about power, is essential. Beard points out that power must be decoupled from public prestige. It means thinking collaboratively, about the power of followers not just of leaders and thinking about power as "an attribute or even a verb ('to power'), not as a possession". Sadly, the mental and cultural template for a powerful person, a leader, remains resolutely male (Beard, 2017, p. 53) and more often

than not, women are still perceived as belonging outside power. This is illustrated by the shared metaphors we use such as 'storming the citadel' or 'smashing the glass ceiling' which underline that female exteriority. Beard, like Caro, articulates the ways in which women seeking leadership are treated as taking something to which they are not entitled (Beard, 2017).

Fear and resentment build when there are challenges to a strong sense of entitlement to, and ownership of, a role (Fox, 2017, p.160). Many of those who resist attempts to tackle the status quo strongly believe that the system works just fine, particularly if they have fared reasonably well in it. 'Privilege is invisible to those who have it', as US gender academic Michael Kimmel says in his TED Talk (2015) '*Why Gender Equality Is Good for Everyone*'. This is a powerful talk and definitely worth watching.

Catherine Fox points out that scrutiny of leadership models is long overdue and dismantling the 'remedial model' for women leads us to challenge the pervasive belief that stereotypical masculine behaviour should be the standard for all (Fox, 2017, p. 6). Mentoring features heavily in this model, and though it has its uses, it is often promoted as a 'fix all' for women to achieve leadership positions. Fox asserts mentoring is based on a deficit model that aims to equip women with skills they are assumed to be lacking. Most mentoring programs don't challenge the male model but help to prop up existing norms (about what it takes to be successful) by reinforcing traditional, male dominated power structures and "in-groups", rather than transforming them (Fox, 2017, p. 124). It is about a short agenda with a focus on individuals, compared to the much harder and longer agenda of tackling who has power and how that reproduces inequality.

Leading and Leadership

"You don't inspire your teammates by showing them how amazing you are. You inspire them by showing them how amazing they are." Robyn Benincasa (2012)

As Kathy Deacon wrote in '*Lead but Let Others Come First*' (JPL, 2020), dispersing leadership amongst staff provides opportunities for individuals and teams of teachers to utilise their skills and expertise to the full. Redefining leadership is about building a culture where team members feel safe, that doesn't indulge in blame-shifting or in-fighting and where leaders are not expected to know everything. The best leaders are confident in their abilities but modest and supportive, open to advice and seek out capable people to build successful partnerships, and ensure team members feel valued and appreciated (Rizvi, 2017, p. 210-11).

It is important to avoid becoming an over-controlling 'manager' who believes that all of the work has to be done in a particular way because it is a direct reflection on their ability as a manager. The over-controlling manager does not see that employee stress, or reactionary behaviour, might be caused by their own management style (Clarke, 2005, p. 263).

There is a fundamental responsibility to carefully examine our cultural assumptions about women's relationship with power and leadership. Flexible work, childcare, mentoring and all of the practical things are importantly enabling but they are only part of what needs to be done if we want to give women their place inside power, as leaders. For that we have to be able to understand how, and why, we think as we do. (Beard, 2017, p.57). To be effective, to make a difference in the world, to be taken



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seriously, together as much as individually, then picking at the threads to unravel the stereotypes is important, and calling out all acts of sexism is crucial (Fox, 2017, p.193).

In challenging traditional models of leadership more women will recognise the contribution, to what they've achieved, of their own talents rather than ascribing it to 'luck' (Rizvi, 2017, p. 6). Jamila Rizvi encourages us to use whatever power and influence we have to advocate for a fairer, more equitable and inclusive workplace for everyone not just the people who are exactly like us because "that is what sets a leader apart from a manager, and a person of integrity apart in an unjust world." (Rizvi, 2017,p. 216).

Ultimately leadership should not be a rigid, top down, hierarchical mode that demands compliance. Genuine leadership happens at all levels and in all directions. Good leaders understand the importance of diversity in decision making, seeking out talented people, striving for equity, and being collaborative and inclusive. It is imperative that for society to progress, women are active participants where decisions are being made.

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Leeanda Smith was elected as the NSW Teachers Federation's Women's Coordinator in August 2017.

Prior to this she has been the Organiser for St George, Eastern Suburbs and Canterbury-Bankstown Teachers Associations.

Leeanda is a Primary K-6 teacher who began teaching in 1994 in Campbelltown. She has held the roles of Federation Representative, Women's Contact and Relieving Assistant Principal in schools. She was a Councillor for and the Secretary of Camden-Campbelltown Teachers Association. Leeanda was a Federation Project Officer and Relief Officer in 2006 prior to her election as a City Organiser.