



Women's Leadership: an essentialist concept?

Women's Leadership: ¿un concepto esencialista?

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Abstract

In recent years, leadership developed by women has played an important role, and has become one of the central issues of the European political and economic agenda. The progressive increase in the number of women who occupy power positions has allowed the incorporation of the "Women's Leadership" concept into the Business Management Literature to respond to a new audience: women managers. Thus we need to critically ask ourselves about the way the Business Management Literature uses this concept. If it makes an essentialist use of this term, we need to highlight the danger of this essentialism by proposing another term: "Female Leadership". In fact in many cases, "Women's Leadership" is used without reflecting if the proposed woman leader model contributes to the feminist struggle, or if it perpetuates asymmetrical power structures. It is normally used to hide a leadership model based on a traditional and conservative notion of femininity, which perpetuates the inequality gender, and which we think is better reflected in the term "Female Leadership". For this reason, the main purpose of this communication is to study the "Women's Leadership" concept in the Business Management Literature. We compare it to the "Female Leadership" concept, which is completely different. We believe that in this last term it is appropriate to name the leadership promoted by the Business Management Literature because it reveals the essentialism of the Femininity used by it. In summary, our main objective is to highlight the conservative use of this term (Women's Leadership) in the managerial literature, and how this fact affects the egalitarian struggle started by feminism.

Keywords: Women's leadership, Female leadership, Femininity, Business Management Literature.

Resumen

En los últimos años, el liderazgo de las mujeres ha ocupado un papel protagonista convirtiéndose en un tema central de la agenda económica y política europea. El progresivo aumento de mujeres en cargos de poder ha provocado que el concepto "Women's Leadership" sea utilizado cada vez más en la literatura gerencial dirigida a mujeres, con el fin de dirigirse a un nuevo público: las directivas. Este panorama nos invita a preguntarnos críticamente acerca del uso que se está haciendo del concepto "Women's Leadership". Si se está haciendo un uso esencialista de este concepto, necesitaremos señalar el peligro de este esencialismo, proponiendo el uso de otro término: "Female Leadership". De hecho, en la mayor parte de los casos, "Women's Leadership" es usado sin concretar si el tipo de mujer líder propuesto contribuye a la lucha feminista o perpetúa unas estructuras sociales asimétricas. Por esta razón, el objetivo principal de esta comunicación es estudiar el concepto "Women's Leadership" en el seno de la literatura gerencial para mujeres. Lo compararemos con el concepto "Female leadership", que consideramos es completamente diferente. Consideramos que este último término es más apropiado para mencionar el tipo de liderazgo propuesto en la literatura gerencial para mujeres porque revela el carácter esencialista del modelo tradicional de feminidad sobre el que se basan. Resumiendo, nuestro objetivo es señalar el uso conservador del concepto "Women's Leadership" en la literatura gerencial para mujeres, y cómo esto afecta a la lucha por la igualdad desarrollada desde el feminismo.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo de mujeres, Liderazgo femenino, Feminidad, Literatura gerencial.

INTRODUCTION

Access of women to public positions is a long and hard process because of structural gender inequality. Power is far from being equally divided between women and men. The thing is that the association of the public sphere with men makes it more difficult for women to access this space (Caballero and Reverter, 2008). Indeed the very few women who actually access the business world are also marked by the stigma of masculinity. Thus women who work in the public sphere are constantly monitored by society and the media. If they act according to what is socially expected of them (being good mothers, wives, etc.), they have no possibility of accessing the business world because their care responsibilities do not allow them to occupy these positions. Yet if they act according to the traditional corporate management model, they are accused of being like men and not paying attention to their families. This schizophrenic situation is what the anthropologist Marcela Lagarde names "generic syncretism" (*sincretismo genérico*), which implies that contemporary women are traditional and modern at the same time: "modern women are convened to be citizens with (limited) rights and with high personal, social and political responsibilities" (Lagarde, 2000: 33). Being a woman and occupying a socially relevant position imply being constantly criticized.

However, the global economic crisis has challenged the traditional corporate governance model, a model based on pursuit of profit that ignores the importance of people's welfare. This model has been traditionally built on a male bias. So if managers are used to being identified as white western men, nowadays the company is open to other profiles, such as professional women. In line with this, the Business Management Literature has historically contributed to build an image of excellent leadership with male stereotypes. Nevertheless given the rise in different leadership types, this literature has adapted to the growing number of women leaders by creating a specific literature for them. Now the Business Excellence Discourse seems to incorporate gender as an important issue.

From our point of view, we consider it necessary to analyze the discourse of this new literature because the values from which it has been built could determine what kind of leadership is being taught to professional women. I mean, we need to know if it is a critical transformative leadership which goes beyond femininity and masculinity; or if it is a discourse that promotes Gender Inequality based on exclusionary gender roles. In summary, we need to know if the Business Management Literature discourse promotes women's equality or inequality in the company. To meet our goal, we must focus on understanding what we mean when we talk about the Business Management Literature.

THE BUSINESS MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

To define the Business Management Literature, we resort to the work of Spanish sociologists Carlos J. Fernández and Luís E. Alonso. They stress the importance of thinking critically about this literature because of its power and importance in building the "excellent management" notion in companies (Fernández, 2007). Hence it is important to

state that this discourse represents the ideology of those who hold power in business organizations (business owners, managers, executives, etc.). As mentioned before, public and corporate power has historically been in men's hands. So from our point of view, these books probably reproduce the meanings of excellent business from a male-centered perspective.

This literature defines a company's image which is communicated to society. Normally it focuses on management gurus' works, who occupy a prestigious position in the business world. Usually they are men with a long-standing history in the business world who have presented case studies as examples to imitate. The moral values of management discourse are vital for shaping the management model that companies demand today, based on the "flexibility, horizontal hierarchies of command, working in teams, network organization, outsourcing, etc." (Alonso and Fernández, 2011: 1137). So the Business Management Literature includes a set of ideas of the traditional economic thought and determines the management practice of modern business organizations. Such books can be found in bookstores, malls and airports in the "business books" category, which define a working philosophy (Alonso and Fernández, 2006: 128) rather than specific actions. Traditionally, these books have targeted men managers, but today this reality has expanded. Thus the gradual increase of women present in business schools and leadership positions has opened up a new market niche for this literature: professional women. This has enhanced the use of the Women's Leadership concept. For this reason, we need to know what kind of woman is being promoted according to this term, and what notion of gender roles is being taught to professional women in companies.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP OR FEMALE LEADERSHIP?

As we announced in the title of this communication, our main goal is to mention some potentials and risks that lie in using the "Women's Leadership" concept in the business world through the Business Management Literature for women. To start with, it should be noted that these books often use the term Women's Leadership to refer to a specific model of leadership based on traditional femininity (care, cooperation, intuition, empathy, etc.). From our critical position, we believe that the use of this term (and not the Female Leadership concept) is a strategy to hide the essentialist character of these books' discourse on women leaders. If the "Female Leadership" concept were the predominant concept, it would be clear that the kind of leader which they promote is a feminine woman, a traditional notion of being a woman, and that which perpetuates an unequal situation between women and men.

If we look more closely at the values of the works in this literature (behind the Women's leadership concept), we see that they understand women in biological terms. That is, they understand that capacities such as empathy or intuition belong naturally to women. Therefore, we believe that if this is the woman leader they want to promote, they should at least name it clearly. So it would be more appropriate to consider the kind of leadership being promoted through the Business Management Literature as Female Leadership. So the true meaning of this literature is to perpetuate essentialist

leadership based on femininity. Yet we all know that being a woman does not necessarily imply being feminine or female. Therefore, being a woman leader does not necessarily imply being more intuitive or empathic. In our opinion, the radical difference between the two terms is that the term Female highlights the femininity of women leaders, and it makes the true purpose of this literature clear. However, the Women concept does not assume that being a woman leader implies they are more or less feminine, and provide us with the opportunity of having a heterogeneous notion of leadership developed for women.

From feminist philosophy, defending the existence of the leadership that is naturally associated with women is a risk because it perpetuates an essentialist view of women and men. Faced with this idea, we need to highlight the importance of a constructivist vision of gender. Here we remember Simone de Beauvoir's famous idea in *The Second Sex* (1949): "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". This is a key idea of feminism: no-one is born as women or men; we build our gender in society. So we consider that any leadership style can be developed by anyone, regardless of them being men or women. Consequently in this literature, gender is understood as something that is given to us at birth. Yet thanks to Judith Butler (1993), we understand in the work *Bodies that matter* that gender is performative. So gender is a phenomenon that is produced and reproduced all the time, "a discursive corporal and performative practice through the subject acquires social intelligibility and politic recognition" (Preciado, 2008: 88). Statements of gender apparently describe a reality, but they are performative acts that impose and reproduce a social convention. Hence the Business Management Literature for Women reproduces a social convention: a feminine woman leader. All this leads to the redefinition of the gender notion, which states that gender identity is not substantial, but an effect of invoking conventions of femininity and masculinity. Hence this literature acts to reproduce traditional gender conventions. The idea that gender is something done may affect the search for suitable managers, and so women's management literature highlights performative femininity of women in companies. Statements like those set out below prompt a vision of women as loving beings who serve and care for their families, who are co-operative, intuitive, etc.:

"Inside every woman there is a small part that longs to be a Cinderella, waiting for Prince Charming to come and to provide a life of luxury and tranquility" (Chu, 2009: 99).

"As affects communication, women speak more from the heart and men speak more from head. Women talk and men report" (Majarín, 2011: 114).

"Intuition is one of the most powerful tools that women have. To use it, you have to listen, not just with your ears but also with your heart" (Evans, 2001: 143).

"Integrative tactics (asking questions, listening, sharing information, and trying to find solutions that satisfy the needs of both sides) differ dramatically from the competitive tactics (staking out extreme positions, bluffing, resisting concessions) that can be effective in classic distributive (one-issue) negotiations. Perhaps most important, integrative" (Babcock and Laschever, 2003: 167).

We know that all these features exist in both women and men. Therefore, the Business Management Literature

assumes that only women are able to develop these skills, or they are naturally predisposed to do so. What if a professional woman is not feminine in traditional terms? We cannot perpetuate the exclusionary gender roles through this literature. This fact highlights the potential of the "Female Leadership" concept to criticize the reality of the Business Management Literature for women; it is a critical exercise that we perform from the feminist theory.

RISKS OF AN ESSENTIALIST USE OF THE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP CONCEPT IN THE BUSINESS MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

From what we have already mentioned, we can approach the risks of these books. First, there is a tendency to reproduce self-help principles, like placing emphasis on self-esteem. This fact places the responsibility of social gender issues not on institutions, but on individual women. A constant reference is made to the need to increase women's self-esteem by statements like "Love Yourself!". Nevertheless, we know that the obstacles that stop women accessing leadership positions are not self-esteem issues, but the result of unequal structures. The low self-esteem of women as a group is not a problem of individuals, but is a collective issue. It is noteworthy that these works have a strong tendency to place the obstacles that allow promotion inside women, and to also leave aside the material and symbolic structures that pose huge obstacles. At the same time, emphasis is placed on talent and individual merits, as the next statement indicates: "For women, it is not enough to ask for professional equality, we cannot say: I am a woman and, therefore, I deserve to be treated in the same way. Whether you are male or female, you need to earn respect" (Chu, 2009: 57). As we see it, it ignores the glass ceiling reality by placing the responsibility of women's promotion on their merits. Yet, indeed, their merits are undervalued in traditional selection systems.

We also find the discourse of women entrepreneurship and self-employment. Here we find a strong discourse of self-occupation, which is very much valid in the current economic recession. Entrepreneurship is considered a good solution for women's unemployment. Nevertheless, we understand that it serves to legitimize inequality in the business world because it creates the idea that those women who do not work do so because they do not want to work. They could become their own bosses if they developed their own businesses. Hence this is no critical discourse that highlights the less favorable conditions of women to access resources for their own business projects. In summary, the self-employment discourse places the responsibility of two social issues into individual women's hands: women's unemployment and women's lack of representation in leadership positions. Consequently, individualizing women's problems in the company is a setback for the feminist struggle, and it makes structural inequalities stronger.

We have approached this literature from a feminist position. We understand that each phenomenon has its own risks and potentials. Thus we believe it is important to not criminalize this type of literature, but to recognize some of its potential. First, the fact that this literature appears is the answer to the growing importance of women in business. It offers us an opportunity to recognize broader diversity in

companies. This implies the fact that an entire line dedicated to publishing about professional women is a step to make the presence of women in companies visible. Second, and in relation to this, we understand that if there diversity in companies, then it is because Gender Equality has probably emerged. Third, recognition of differentiated leadership for men and women can stress the femininity model as something historically devalued in the public sphere. Carol Gilligan (1982) stated in her work *In a different voice* that women have a different moral development because they have lived different experiences to men because of their gender. Therefore, it could be understood that capabilities such as intuition, empathy, reticulated communication, etc., which are considered “feminine”, are now apparently demanded by companies.

CONCLUSION

From our point of view, the Business Management Literature for Women perpetuates an essentialist view of women and men behind the apparently neutral “Women’s Leadership” concept. Behind this concept, the traditional notion of femininity is stressed by creating a unique way to become leaders for women. This reality can be a setback for the struggle for equality in the workplace as gender roles can be perpetuated in an unequal and exclusionary way. To summarize, we believe that our Female Leadership concept proposal in the Business Management Literature allows us to inform about the promotion of individualization of inequality, which is made by this literature type. The “Women’s Leadership” term is risky for the feminist struggle since women leaders who enhance capabilities uncritically, and which are considered feminine, is advisable. The Female Leadership term advises a critical reality of this model of woman leader promoted by the Business Management Literature. Nowadays it is necessary to rethink the traditional notions of femininity and masculinity because gender is a multiple heterogeneous issue.

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