



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

A publication by Neela Bettridge Ltd

Is the question of women as leadership figures gaining ever more traction?

Flicking through my free copy of *Time Out London* on the tube the other day, a quote on the contents page jumped out at me. It was the actor Gemma Arterton: “You can be fun and gross, have an intelligent voice *and* be working-class”. The explainer beneath it ran: “Gemma Arterton on no longer having to be ‘prissy’ about feminism.” In other words, here was an actor ‘representing’ women as a whole in her interview. I don’t know whether Arterton saw her words that way – but even if she didn’t, the journalist did. Or the editor did. Or the editor knew that the public might.

That same morning, I also saw in my newsfeed that the TV series *Girls* [is ending](#). Much of the coverage of this story focused on Lena Dunham, the show’s creator, and on what she and the show had meant, what cultural significance it had had. Dunham’s handwritten farewell note (she posted a photo of it on Instagram) included the lines: “Give any woman six years to create and she will SOAR. Women’s stories deserve to be told. We demand opportunity.”

The question of women as leadership figures is, it seems to me, becoming

entwined more richly into our pop-cultural discourse than ever before – the urgent opportunity of the question, the energy of it, the thrill, complexity and challenge of it.

Of course, one of the reasons that the subject is gaining ever more traction is precisely because there is such challenge around it too. The show's creators have suggested that *Girls* is finishing because the characters aren't girls anymore – they're women.

And of course *that* transition brings a whole new set of obstacles...

Women in leadership: getting to the heart of the matter

The WIL concept can, if we're not careful, seem to be synonymous with the image of the glass ceiling. As if the struggle for sexual parity is confined to skyscraper boardrooms.

Ironically – given the pain of bumping up against that glass ceiling – we might focus on this issue because it's the lesser of two evils. Actually make that “of many evils”. Perhaps it's comforting to think like this: “If we can just get that last thing straight, the sexual equality job is done.”

Of course, it doesn't take much reflection to remember that this is not true. But few recent stories have brought it home with such sickening impact as [this one](#).

You could spend a long time finding things to be dismayed about here, by a situation where 13 men have this kind of say over how women care for their bodies. But I've done that now, and I'd like to come to you with a slightly more positive spin.

The glaring fact that this situation is abhorrently wrong is because women have a relationship to our bodies that few (no?) men can understand. Same goes for women understanding men's bodies (though mothers might have

something to say about that). This physical difference – let's strip sexism out of the equation for just a moment – is one fundamental reason why women's experiences are so very different from men's.

And isn't it an absurdity that this difference of experience is not better represented in the boardroom?

A female CEO for Uber? Please, only for the right reasons

Women are not counterbalances to men. Not dampeners or limitation devices. We are not here to muffle men's trumpets, to modify the overbearing blaring of male volume. Women in leadership are not mothers to man-child executives. We do not follow round with a mop and bucket, clearing up over-enthusiastic expressions of boys being boys. We do not want to help make locker room banter OK.

There. I just thought this needed saying. For while I'm sure many of the calls have come in the right spirit, alarm bells rang for me when I saw all the clamour for Uber to take on a female CEO, as if she would be an anti-sexism fix. Send a car for Sandberg! She'll burst in, spray her can of sexual-pesticide around and sort out the company's ills in one swift burst of sexism spring cleaning.

I've no doubt that Sandberg or any number of other female CEOs would do a fantastic job at Uber – but that's not because they would be the anti-Kalanick. Expecting that would undermine the new boss from the start. There has been an appallingly sexist culture afflicting Uber, but it is society – not Sandberg – who must fix it.

Women in leadership: do women really get more effective as they get older? And why I don't think it matters either way

With my women in leadership cap on, I recently came across an article that grabbed my attention with its suggestion that [women get more effective as they get older](#). The thinking goes that women keep feeling the pressure to prove themselves in a way that men do not. And second, whereas men tend to stop asking for feedback once they reach a certain level of seniority, women do not.

These might be true. But what I *really* took from the article was its recognition that, in its surveys, women did better on 12 out of 16 key leadership competencies – and those competencies were far from being the clichéd ‘nurturing’ ones like collaborating and developing relationships with others. No, women won out on aspects such as ‘getting results’, too.

Now, I see no sense at all in promoting male-versus-female leadership talent competitions. The distinctions in performance on these 16 competencies were not so great that any of them made me think ‘That’s categorically about what

sex you are born!'. If you ask me, many of these differences are about people being individuals rather than male or female. For me, where such stats are useful is in eroding caricatures (eg the nurturing female leader) rather than as tools to support rigid gender definitions. Rather than 'Look, women are better at these skills and stronger in these kinds of roles than men', it should be 'Look at all this grey. Look how little difference there is. Now please can you explain the pay gap?' Would you agree with this analysis?

The law is a (jack)ass

When Mr Bumble in *Oliver Twist* affirmed that the “law is an ass”, we can be pretty sure he was talking about a jackass (male) rather than a female jenny-ass. As [this story](#) brought home so disappointingly, women in the legal profession are still a long way from securing equal rights and pay as men.

The figures in the article are worth repeating: 61% of UK law graduates are women yet women account for just 28% of private practice partner roles. The gender pay gap is 30% compared to the UK average of 19%.

As the article makes plain, certain initiatives *are* improving things. Flexible working is just starting to gain the respect it demands, for one thing. Some women, meanwhile, are founding their own practices, such as Sarah Goulbourne’s [Gunnercooke](#), which aims for a healthier approach to working that doesn’t discriminate against women.

Yet this going-it-alone is not going to fix the malaise. The onus must now surely be on those male 68% to show themselves not to be asses – nor stubborn mules for that matter – by getting behind diversity and working practice modernization.

The danger of promoting those “fundamental” differences between men and women

I noticed two stories recently – in the very same day – that illustrate the variety of the fronts on which women are fighting for parity. But they each also evidenced something else that gave me pause for thought.

First came [this piece](#) about the founder of [Girls Who Code](#). All positive stuff. But, of course, the media – understandably – can’t yet write about these matters without mentioning [former Google engineer James Damore](#), who implied that biological and psychological differences between men and women explains the disparity in their tech industry fortunes.

Next up pops [this article](#) about the RAF. The featured bigwig’s assertion about women’s “emotional intelligence” might ultimately have broadly positive consequences in this instance.

But all the same, his comments represents another example of that frequently expressed notion: this idea that women are more emotionally weighted than men. I’m not saying that fundamental differences between men and women do not exist, but seeing black and white where there are acres of grey is dangerous. Hard-and-fast thinking – in any walk of life – can readily be used

to back up some pretty objectionable practices.

Leadership post-Weinstein

The wave after wave of revelations following the Harvey Weinstein scandal has been overwhelming. And I don't use that word lightly – I've actually found myself catching my breath on occasion. It's as if a dam has broken. But, right now, I'm writing principally with my women in leadership hat on. From that perspective, a few things come to mind.

1. There's a lot going on that doesn't get talked about

Has there been a conspiracy of silence? Or has silence been imposed? Either way, it is part of a leader's role to foster honesty, transparency and dialogue within the workplace. I'd suggest that this scandal places even more of an onus on us to strive for that honesty and transparency, in all its forms and at every level of business. And perhaps female executives now have additional incentive to lead the way.

2. Even leaders need leaders

First it was one or two, then a dozen, and now it seems that each new day brings a new story of sexual harassment to light. But even though some of these revelations have come from strong women with powerful leadership qualities, they still needed someone else to take a stand first, someone to take the lead. Even leaders need leaders.

3. The definition of wellness and resilience in the workplace just changed

Resilience as a leader is crucial. But resilience does not extend to putting up with sexual harassment. And into the category of common wellness hazards, I think we can now add sexual harassment. Workplace wellbeing and team wellbeing are incompatible with harassment.

Why women should take that foreign secondment

The challenges for women in leadership are wide-ranging, but I must admit I'd not given this one much thought: secondments and placements abroad.

As [this article](#) points out, high-flying men are frequently offered the opportunity to stretch and further their careers with a stint at their firm's overseas office. The image of the male relocating his family for the good of their future is so familiar as to be almost cliché.

But so *unfamiliar* as to be almost unheard-of is the opposite. How often do we hear of female executives taking up foreign posts and bring their families along for the ride. One's head might even jump to the question: Well, what would her husband think about that?

Women leaders simply must take these opportunities, for themselves and to change that culture. Nothing stretches and individual quite like being stretched in an unfamiliar land, with different languages and cultural norms. You grow as a person and you grow as a leader. And you set the scene for other female executives to do the same.



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