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Book Review - Women in leadership: contextual dynamics and boundaries

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Abstract

Leadership scenarios and paradoxes - past, present and future - form the basis of Karin Klenke's analysis of women in leadership. The book sets out to explore the paradoxical nature of women's leadership in male-dominated contexts, paradoxes women leaders are confronted with, as well as the paradox of change versus the persistence of the status quo. Contexts with a 'paradoxical nature'- temporally and spatially - are at the forefront. These 'contexts' for women's leadership range from remarkable female leaders, today and historically, in politics, organisational structures, information technology (IT), the media, sports, the military, religion and spirituality, science, higher education and the arts. The chapters are initiated with a vignette of one or more female leaders (e.g. Condoleezza Rice, Lindsey Vonn, Ada E. Yonath, Marin Alsop and Angela Merkel) to form a frame of reference for each chapter's particular context.

Keywords

book, review, women, leadership, dynamics, boundaries, contextual

Disciplines

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BOOK REVIEW

Women in leadership: contextual dynamics and boundaries, by Karin Klenke Bingley, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011, 301 pp., \$74.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-85724-561-8

Leadership scenarios and paradoxes – past, present and future – form the basis of Karin Klenke’s analysis of women in leadership. The book sets out to explore the paradoxical nature of women’s leadership in male-dominated contexts, paradoxes women leaders are confronted with, as well as the paradox of change versus the persistence of the *status quo*. Contexts with a ‘paradoxical nature’ – temporally and spatially – are at the forefront. These ‘contexts’ for women’s leadership range from remarkable female leaders, today and historically, in politics, organisational structures, information technology (IT), the media, sports, the military, religion and spirituality, science, higher education and the arts. The chapters are initiated with a vignette of one or more female leaders (e.g. Condoleezza Rice, Lindsey Vonn, Ada E. Yonath, Marin Alsop and Angela Merkel) to form a frame of reference for each chapter’s particular context.

Chapter 1 provides a good theoretical introduction to issues surrounding gender, culture and place in the context of leadership. Differences between leader-centric and follower-centric leadership theories are explored. Terms such as the ‘glass-ceiling’, ‘glass-escalator’, ‘glass-wall’ and ‘glass-cliff’ are explained. Different levels of ‘context’ are defined, such as social context (job, technology, industry, etc.), general cultural context (organisational culture, national culture, etc.) and historical, institutional context (education, socialisation, etc.). The concept of ‘doing gender’ is discussed, and perceived gender differences in leadership styles are problematised to highlight that ‘gender is often the first prism through which women leaders are evaluated’ (19). These themes are extended in the final two chapters, which discuss the skills required for cross-cultural leadership, as well as the implications of various leadership styles in different spatial and temporal cultures globally.

Intellectually engaging points in the book include discussions on, for example, how ‘[i]n corporate America, gender is a business issue, not a women’s issue, since the underrepresentation of women in senior executive positions has an impact on the bottom line’ (81). This aligns with the highlighted problematic nature of gender-based quotas, which implies that it is impossible for women to be both competent and ‘a quota woman’ simultaneously. According to Klenke (68), the implementation of quota systems to increase the number of women on corporate boards perpetuates, rather than solves, the gender paradox. The paradoxical nature of the opportunities provided by IT is discussed in Chapter 5. Whilst women’s groups are breaking down barriers, exclusions and silences through the Internet, Klenke (98) calls attention to the cultural biases women face within high-tech companies and the IT world in general, which due to their more insidious nature are more difficult to fight than ‘the blatant sexism of years gone by’. Another interesting point is Klenke’s prediction of women as the winners of the current global financial

recession, as it is accelerating the end of the era of male dominance through the predominant loss of jobs in male-dominated professions in the USA (236).

Whilst 'Women in Leadership' covers much ground it nevertheless falls short, as a whole, of the aims outlined at the beginning. I am not convinced that Chapter 2 achieves the author's aim of a context setting 'historical journey chronicling women's achievements and competence as leaders' (xii). The historical narratives do not tie in well with the 'contexts' of the following chapters, and the chapter therefore seems out of place in the book overall. Readers are alerted to the Anglo-centric flavour of the book from the outset (xii) but it would be more accurate to frame the book as US-centric, as it is scenarios, contexts and characters from the USA that dominate throughout the book. The more I read, the more frustrated I became with the monotone and repetitive 101-textbook style of writing, and the lack of integration of the opening vignettes into the nuts and bolts of each chapter.

Although I do not disagree with most of Klenke's arguments *per se*, her line of argument for the entrenchment of gender inequality in Western societies is repetitive throughout the book and in many instances reinforces age-old gender stereotyping. For example, the claim that '[w]omen in the military face several challenges and social issues their male counterparts do not face such as pregnancy, sexual harassment, the need to leave children at home, and manage dispersed, networked families' (152–3) is faulty (with the exception of pregnancy!). Only a few pages earlier the readers are introduced to Captain Holly A. Graf who was dismissed from the US Navy due to a leadership style that was both verbally and physically abusive to her female *and* male crew. This line of argument is paradoxical with the intertwined and reciprocal relationship of gender and culture emphasised in Chapter 1 to justify the supposed treatment of gender as culture because when 'gender-centric perspectives on leadership predominate [it] result[s] in male-dominated theories and research' (15). Although 'Women in Leadership' provides insight into many interesting scenarios and paradoxes, it ultimately falls short of its promising aims because it fails to tackle a key problem within feminist critiques: the inability to achieve gender neutrality within a society (i.e. the Western world) that at its core remains predominantly patriarchal. Calls for equal rights for women and men thus become a call for equal rights in a man's world – an inherently problematic argument that 'Women in Leadership' fails to truly negotiate.

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