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### **Introduction to Special Issue: Women and Leadership in Public Relations**

Leadership and women in public relations is not on the mainstream research agenda. For example, a systematic literature review conducted in 2019 analysed 223 papers on women in public relations from a period between 1982 until 2019, discovering a large focus on women's experiences in their careers, such as the glass ceiling, pay gap and other gender-related barriers. Only very few studies specifically tackled leadership and in that, these papers mainly focused on how women lead (Topić et al, 2020), which has been a focus of scholarly inquiry on women and leadership since pioneering studies into this issue (Aldoory, 1998; Aldoory & Toth, 2004). This is not to say that leadership in public relations is a largely unexplored area in general terms. For example, The Plank Center in the United States conducts globally renowned research into leadership in public relations and also collects information on public relations and leadership scholarship. But, when Plank's list of articles and book chapters on leadership is reviewed (The Plank Center, n.d.) then a gap in women's experiences again shows.

This is changing, however, with more scholars expressing interest in this area. For example, a recent book by U.S. scholars Juan Meng and Marlene Neill (who are also authors of two articles in this issue) tackles women and leadership with a focus on ethics and breaking into leadership positions (Meng & Neill, 2021). In Europe, the EUPRERA project on 'Women in Public Relations' looked specifically into leadership (along with lived experiences and office culture), and findings showed inequalities and barriers women face.

For example, in a study on women and leadership in public relations in England, Topić (2020) found that women struggle to progress to leadership positions and when they do, they face a Catch-22: When women are too soft they are not seen as managerial material but when they are tough then they are labelled as ‘bitches,’ the term also being mentioned among interviewees who do not hold managerial positions. The findings in the same study also showed that women who spent time with boys embraced (stereotypically) masculine characteristics such as toughness, assertiveness and directness, and these women progressed to leadership positions more easily. Socialisation influences managerial preferences, so women who grew up socialising with girls usually prefer working for women managers, whereas women who grew up socialising with boys prefer working for men, with both groups of women disapproving of masculine women.

In a Croatian study, Polić and Holy (2020) found that women who grew up with fathers and masculine mothers embraced masculine leadership styles, whereas women who grew up socialising with mothers or with both parents embraced feminine leadership styles; both groups preferred working for men with early experiences being linked to spending time with parents rather than peer groups as it was shown in an English case study (Topić, 2020). However, in Greece, women demonstrated the so-called “gyno-androus” leadership characterised by both masculine (self-confidence, planning and decisiveness) and feminine (emotional intelligence and empathy) traits, and also tend to support egalitarian and supportive leadership to prove their competencies (Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2021). These findings and the diversity of conclusions, along with different cultural contexts in which the studies were conducted, show the complexity of leadership and distinctive issues women face, justifying further research into this issue.

The research studies cited above, however, mainly draw from the work of Aldoory (1998) and Aldoory and Toth (2004), given their pioneering status in European research, and

thus look at how women lead and what barriers women face, focusing on cultural masculinities, particularly on masculine women and their career progressions using the concept of blokishness. The latter concept is applied to public relations from journalism studies (Mills, 2014; Gallagher, 2012) and looks at role models and how women lead from the perspective of 'what kind of women get promoted,' arguing that only women who embrace masculine characteristics succeed in leadership positions. What is more, most existing studies generally focus on approaching research into women and leadership from the point of women's career progression and barriers, also drawing from the Velvet Ghetto study (Cline et al, 1986) that remains relevant up to today.

Since those studies that focus on leadership mostly do so from the perspective of how women lead, this special issue of the *Journal of Public Relations Research* moves forward and looks at various aspects of leadership and women by looking at what skills are needed for women to progress to leadership positions, how to effectively lead, experiences of women in leadership programmes, and the impact of external factors on work satisfaction and career prospects including leadership. In addition, the issue also focuses on race and diversity among women's experiences, thus contributing to further knowledge in the field and opening up prospects for further scholarly inquiries.

The special issue particularly looks at barriers women face, however, this is done from the position of not just describing the barriers but also asking where is this coming from and offering possible solutions for addressing this omnipresent issue. Two Plank scholars, Marlene S. Neill and Juan Meng argue in a first paper that this can be addressed by looking at competencies, skills and abilities needed to become a leader (Women in Public Relations: Ascribed and Avowed Leadership Identities and Expectations). They also argue that leadership traits are not something one is born with but something that can be acquired through experiences and professional development, thus seeing leadership as a social

construct. It has indeed been argued that women and men lead differently (Aldoory, 1998; Aldoory & Toth, 2004) and that leadership styles come from socialisation and early experiences with women facing barriers also due to organisational culture largely set on masculinities and what works for men (Topić, 2020).

Nevertheless, Juan Meng and Marlene S. Neill, in their second article in the issue (Inclusive Leadership and Women in Public Relations: Defining the Meaning, Functions, and Relationships), which serves as a sequel to their first article, also call for inclusive leadership bearing in mind diversity. Diversity is indeed an issue in public relations and communications, and research shows that women of diverse origins suffer dual discrimination based both on their gender and race, and racism generally pervades both public relations practice and academia (CIPR, 2020; Munshi & Edwards, 2011; Sha, 2021). As Meng and Neill argued, inclusive leadership can reduce differences between staff and ensure everyone is treated with respect and have their voices heard. As data in their first article has also clearly shown, it is often women of different origins who feel unheard, unsupported and unappreciated; thus the call for inclusive leadership seems justified as well as much needed.

What this issue generally shows is that women continually face barriers in ascending to leadership positions whether this is because of gender, race or lack of skills, but also because programmes that are meant to support women often fail to recognise structural barriers that women face. The latter is the argument introduced by Stephanie Madden and Abby Levenshus (Broadening the Umbrella of Women's Leadership and Public Relations: An Ethnographic Case Study of a Women's Political Leadership Development Program), who explored women leaders in political public relations. The authors argue that these failures often result in women leaving ambition to progress to leadership positions (in this case, to become an elected official) because these programmes only make them even more

aware of difficulties they will face once they achieve leadership positions, thus showing that training offered to women needs to be tailored not only to their needs, but also to societal situations in which women face numerous barriers, gender being just one of them, and all barriers (gender, class, race) being grounded in stereotypes and expected roles that disproportionately affect women.

For example, it has been known since research on the experiences of women secretaries in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States that women are treated as ‘other’ in offices run and dominated by men. Some authors argued that, “there was never a question that women would be able to move up the company ladder in the way men could, since it remained unfathomable for male executives to place women alongside them in managerial jobs (...) Men were allowed to think of themselves as middle-class so long as women, from their perspective, remained something like the office proletariat, took office jobs to help their families until they married” (Saval, 2015, p. 77-78). Some of these stereotypes remain today, with family and caregiving being the main obstacles for women’s advancement due to social expectations that women will look after their families.

However, the question is, since women face various societal barriers deriving from gender, class and race, stereotypes, and unrealistic and unfair societal expectations, and since much training and policies have failed, what can we do to understand issues women face?

In the final paper, Ángeles Moreno, Cristina Fuentes-Lara and Ralph Tench (A theory of integrated gendered work evaluation [IGWE]): A gender analysis of the unequal race for leadership through work evaluation of satisfaction and stress in Europe) try to offer a solution to this problem by arguing that we need to also study stress and satisfaction of practitioners as a factor that influences progression to leadership positions. In other words, the authors argue that it is not just organisational barriers and masculinities in an organisation that affect

women's progression but these external barriers such as family and caring responsibilities, which cause stress and then impact work satisfaction and create career barriers. Thus, addressing stress and work satisfaction not only helps women but a warning about this problem creates an incentive for organisations to engage more deeply and meaningfully with their staff, because dissatisfaction affects reputation and staff retention.

Therefore, central themes that emerge from this issue are that women continue to face barriers deriving from their gender but also from their race, the latter being particularly severe with some women reporting they are tokenised and/or have to educate others on what it means to be "diverse," knowledge one would assume everyone should know in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but this being far from the reality (see the first article by Neill and Meng). However, this special issue takes the challenge of inequality further and offers some concrete solutions such as increasing training for women to acquire the necessary skills to become leaders and by calling for leadership to be inclusive and welcoming of all women regardless of their distinctive origin and personalities. As such, the special issue complements and extends existing research that centres on emphasising differences in how women lead (Aldoory, 1998; Aldoory & Toth, 2004) and structural barriers women face because of (masculine) organisational culture (Topić, 2020) by confirming and extending this research and offering new data and concrete proposals to tackle inequality of women going forward.

The research presented in this special issue also calls for particular scholarly attention to diversity and the issue of race because practitioners report issues regarding their race, with which they face dual discrimination and lack of support and career progression opportunities. In addition to that, all studies continue to acknowledge issues and barriers women face when trying to advance to leadership positions, thus demonstrating that research into women in public relations is still much needed, and articles in this issue offer a variety of methodologies and concepts that can be used in further research and activism to improve the position of

women. What is more, the special issue shows that both quantitative and qualitative methodologies can result in original findings and meaningful proposals for solutions to address women's inequality. This is relevant because some authors argued that research on women should be mainly qualitative because qualitative inquiry is inherent to feminist research (Hozic & True).

However, a large-scale survey conducted by Neill and Meng enabled unpacking that women need skills and competencies to progress to leadership positions and that women face diversity issues. Equally, a large-scale survey by Moreno, Fuentes-Lara, and Tench also identified stress resulting from societal inequalities and expectations imposed on women as a result of why women also cannot progress to leadership positions. At the same time, qualitative research by Meng and Neill enabled a new and original theoretical framework of the inclusive leadership model by gaining an in-depth understanding of issues women face in the organisational world. Documentation, observation and interviews combined, in a study by Stephanie Madden and Abby Levenshus, also revealed that leadership programmes often fail to empower women because of the lack of understanding and recognition of structural barriers women face, thus leading to a situation that programmes fail because women withdraw from them and abandon ambitions to progress to higher positions. Therefore, diversity of research methodologies as presented in this special issue offers some new insights that enable further application and extension of these studies.

Future research should continue to document barriers due to their omnipresence as well as assess results, quality and suitability of programmes offered to women to examine whether these programmes fail not just in politics, as with a case study in this issue, but generally. If this is the case, the questions that will open is who designs these programmes, how, and with what intentions. In addition to that, in a recent book on feminism in public relations, Aldoory and Toth (2021) called for using a socio-economic model to analyse



women's position in public relations, which alongside barriers include analysing the political economy in which public relations operates and also focusing research on five levels of influence (practitioner, organizational, professional, media and ideological). This special issue of the *Journal of Public Relations Research* was organised before this innovative book was published, and the articles in the issue sit at the intersection of practitioner and organizational levels of influence. Therefore, further research could look at all-encompassing levels of influence on women in progressing to leadership by looking also at the professional, media and ideological influences to women.

In the case of the latter, Aldoory and Toth (2021) correctly argue that public relations mainly exists in the context of capitalism, and this opens up a set of questions that can be explored further. For example, ecofeminist research has been arguing for decades that there is an intertwined relationship between capitalism and patriarchy and that all societal structures are deeply entrenched into masculinity, which has a particularly negative impact on women, indigenous communities and the environment as a whole (d'Eaubonne, [1990]1997; Salleh, 2001; Waldron, 2003; Sydee & Beder, 2001; Topić, 2021), thus opening a question of whether women's equality in general and also in public relations, is even possible in the current state of affairs? Can we seek equality in masculine organisations or do we need a whole new organisational system? What is particularly lacking in public relations scholarship, including in terms of leadership, is interdisciplinary research using human resources management approaches such as recruitment policies, progressions policies and how DEI policies, which most organisations nowadays have, get bypassed and perpetuate privilege, thus impeding progress for women as well as ethnic practitioners of all genders. This research would answer some of the questions that Aldoory and Toth (2021) eloquently asked, particularly relating to the notion of political economy and how recruitment policies work.

This special issue remains incomplete in regards to the diversity of case studies and remains U.S.-centric, which is not surprising given that most of the public relations research on women generally gets produced by U.S.-based scholars (Topić et al, 2020). However, the methodologies used and case studies presented in this issue open up a possibility to further research in other contexts due to their inclusiveness in methodologies and general approach, which can be taken forward in other case studies conducted elsewhere in the world.

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