

The beginning of 2021 is a brilliant time for the topic of women in leadership. Luckily it has already been a focus for many organisations, and yes, it was long overdue anyway – but it has not been tackled strongly enough so far. What if we needed other changes; changes in our world, changes in our system, changes in the way we need to live and work in order to create real shifts? Hello 2021, you are what we have been waiting for!!

Movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and behavioural changes driven by the LGBTQ+ community pushed us to get us in touch with the injustices driven by our unconscious biases, privileges, and unaddressed history. Discussions on gender equity have highlighted the importance of actively supporting women in leadership. But why, so many years after the feminist movement, do we still see a disproportionately lower number of women leaders, particularly in the top ranks, of organisations and governments?



And why, after so many years for fighting for gender equity, have we seen 2020 to be so negative for women? The Global Economic Forum has confirmed that 2020 has impacted women the most: many women have stepped out of the workforce altogether; most job losses were jobs held by women; and the burden of lockdown childcare has disproportionately fallen on women. It feels like we went many steps backwards when we are in fact aiming to further women in leadership.

I believe that the events of the past year have shaken our work, our families, our society, our lives sufficiently to provide a base for 're-thinking' and 're-dreaming' how we work and live. What a good point in time it is to re-ignite a different drive regarding women leaders! I believe, in the words of a famous 2019 campaign, that NOW IS HER TIME. If these words were true in 2019, they are infinitely truer in 2021! **Now REALLY is her time.**

What can we do to use the momentum of our current time to make sure we have powerful, amazing woman leaders who will literally change the world?

We need to change societal norms and values

We need to become more aware of just how much we stereotype women and men in society, and what we are raised to believe about ourselves. Women are still often raised to be 'kind, helpful, beautiful and pleasant'. Some speak of women being trained to be nurturing, kind, humble, and look after others. While these are positive qualities for both men and women, they prevent girls from being encouraged to be powerful, successful, or 'too loud'. A good sense-check is the question: "how do we feel about confident women? Do we trust and like them?". Research has shown that the more successful and confident a man is, the more we trust him. With women it is the opposite! Why? There is a direct link with how we have been socialised and what we deem to be acceptable and fitting to a particular gender identity.

However, not only women are socialised and 'caged' in a particular way. One of my favourite writers, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, puts it beautifully:

"The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than how we are."

What if men were not socialised to be the ones who 'have to pay', 'hold the door open', and show strength but no vulnerability?

Even in societies where socialisation is less gender-stereotypical, women who believe and are raised to believe they can 'have it all' often find out later that this is not the case. Women MBA students at Harvard are just as ambitious as men about their career - contrary to what some might believe! However, they do become more disappointed later, as their careers do not take off in the way their male peers' careers do.

This can be linked to traditional views of women and men, and policies supporting them. It becomes visible when comparing how national policies determine maternity/ paternity/ parental leave. Even the name 'parental' leave vs. 'maternity' leave sends a message!

It goes further than that. How do we stereotype men and women in their lives, particularly when it comes to caregiving? Men to this day are more strongly seen as providers, women more strongly as caregivers. But why is career more strongly valued than caregiving anyway? And why is a 'career man' often seen as more attractive than a 'stay at home dad'?! (Yes, fellow women: we are culprits in this too!)

The above are just a few examples of how societal norms and values ultimately impact the number of women leaders in a particular society. We have a lot of work to do!

We need to change organisations

We work with many organisations, and some of them have developed women leaders for years. One thing is important to consider: once women have children, it changes everything. Usually, women and men are on par in terms of their career progression. However, having a child proves to be a pivotal moment in a woman's career and usually creates 'the maternal wall': women stop themselves and do not apply for certain positions as they do not know if and how they can have both a career and children. Within organisations, leaders start assuming that a woman might not be interested in certain projects/ travel/ senior roles anymore. And in most societies, childcare still rests much more heavily on a woman than a man, enabling the man to progress more smoothly up the ladder.

Much effort has been put into creating policies and structures that further gender equity, looking at recruitment, talent development, tracking gender-specific data, promotions, flexible work hours, and other structural elements.

But in addition to this, it is our minds and hearts that need to shift!

We need to examine what skills we attribute to women. Speaking about women as great leaders because they bring 'warmth, team spirit, nurturing' into teams is lovely. But it's not helping women progress fully! It's helping women to reach middle management and then get stuck.

- Could we acknowledge these ‘feminine’ qualities, but add that women can also be hugely capable in their profession, great strategic thinkers, innovative and show at least as many overall leadership strengths as men?
- Could we allow women and men to structure their work to allow for integration of work and life – and assume that all genders, parents, and non-parents would like this? Could we create workplaces that are humane enough to allow time for responsibilities outside the home, for all?

As we witnessed during 2020, we have lives, we have pets, we have kids, we have homes – and sometimes there is a lot to juggle. Let’s use the momentum of our current forced work-life integration to allow for optimal performance incorporating flexibility, healthy boundaries, and sharing the load within families?

With the changes, uncertainties and complexities of today’s world, many qualities we are traditionally seeing as ‘feminine’ are becoming more valued overall. Apart from women usually scoring equally strongly or higher on lists of leadership traits, we need to re-create a narrative of what good leadership qualities are for everybody and include those we used to attribute to women: Compassion, gentleness, vulnerability, collaboration are qualities both men and women can, and should, embody and live in the workplace.

On a recent woman in leadership programme, a woman said to me “I don’t want to come across as a feminist”, to which I responded, “what is wrong with being a feminist?!”- it was a breakthrough moment for the whole group. How have we allowed the notion of fighting for women’s rights, for gender equity, to be something negative, something crazy? I know what we should see as negative and crazy instead: jokes about ‘running like a girl’! A famous marketing campaign in 2014 asked adults to ‘run like a girl’, then asked little girls the same. The results were shocking: running like a girl had at some point in people’s lives become something negative! Unfortunately, we have not come very far since then.

Women need to dare to change

In all the work I’ve done regarding women in leadership, the work I feel most passionate about is working directly with women. Women themselves have a lot of work to do, too!

In a recent workshop with women leaders, we were told by a few participants that they had ‘woken up’ – to their reality, to their own power, and to the work that still needs to be done! Whilst this was great, I was asking myself: how come many are not yet in touch with this? And how come that I, a company Director, mother of two and experienced, successful professional, still fall into traps of stopping myself from dreaming big, enjoying a healthy work-life balance, fully sharing responsibilities at home, and showing myself without being self-deprecating or apologetic?

The fact is we are so impacted by our own beliefs, behaviours and mindsets which have been shaped by societal norms and reinforced by unconscious bias at work, that these norms are hard to shift.

- Why do we attribute our successes to others, or to luck – and not ourselves?
- How come we only apply for positions when we have fulfilled all criteria, whereas men tend to apply when they fulfil about 70%?
- Why do we negotiate our salaries less strongly than men?
- How come many of us ‘leave before we leave’, when planning to have a family?

- Why do we lack the belief that we can have it all: a career, a family, a strong and equal partnership?
- How come we judge strong, confident women, and have reactions such as “somehow I don’t trust her... she is so entitled... I can’t put my finger on it...”**

Women have been ‘tamed’ to be self-doubting, quiet, and apologetic. When women show up differently, loud, strong, courageous, we are tempted to ‘put her back in her cage’. This creates women who downplay their accomplishments, power, and strength; women who end statements with question marks, apologise, and behave so that they are liked and accepted.

My favourite quote by Glennon Doyle:

“Every time you pretend to be less than you are, you steal permission from another woman to exist fully.”

For women to believe that we can, and should, lead organisations, not only to live to our full power, but also make our contribution and mark in the world of work, much has to happen:

We need to seriously question what it means to be a ‘woman’ in society. We need to look at our organisations closely, see how they prevent or support women to advance and be able to work in a way that allows for work-life integration. And if our organisations prevent this, we need to speak up! We need to recognise the inner gremlins that are stopping us as women, we need to re-create our self-belief, work, and life, using the momentum of the current times!

With everything being so ‘uprooted’ and changed in our world at this point, what better time to re-think and re-work this, too? This is why - ***now is REALLY her time.***

*This article is inspired by many authors and beautiful thinkers and activists. It has drawn wisdom from Sheryl Sandberg: *Lean In*; Joan Williams: *What works for women at work*, 2016 | Mary-Ann Slaughter: *Unfinished business*, 2015 | TED Talk: “Can we have it all?”, 2014; Glennon Doyle: *Untamed*; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Why everyone should be a feminist*; and many other amazing authors and thinkers on the topic of *Women in Leadership*!*

**The title is cheekily adapted from an Adidas campaign with Pharrell Williams in 2019 | **thank you Glennon Doyle for this eye-opening moment.*

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