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Lost Leaders: Women in the Global Academy (0066)

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Abstract

Drawing on data gathered from British Council seminars *Absent Talent: Women in Research and Academic Leadership in* Hong Kong (September, 2012), Tokyo (January, 2013) and Dubai (March, 2013) this paper discusses diverse academic women's experiences and explanations for women's under-representation as knowledge leaders and producers in the global academy. Participants from East Asian and Middle East and North African (MENA) regions shared experiences and identified desires for future action in the form of a *Manifesto for Change* (Forestier, 2013). The paper combines empirical data on enablers, impediments and attractions with consideration of debates on women's exclusions and disqualifications from academic leadership and knowledge production. Invoking Berlant's (2012) construct of cruel optimism, a key question is whether women are desiring, dismissing or being disqualified from senior leadership positions in the global academy.

Paper

Career Progression: Cruel Optimism?

While the global academy is characterised by hypermodernism the archaism of male-dominated leadership remains (Morley, 2011, 2012, 2013). Few countries have achieved Sweden's success of forty-three per cent female vice-chancellors (She Figures, 2009). In most countries, gender escapes organisational logic in relation to leadership, and the logic of reciprocity implied in meritocracy is disrupted when it comes to identifying women as potential leaders. This could be evidence of democratic deficit, distributive injustice, and structural prejudices. There are questions about who self-

identifies or is identified by existing power elites, as having leadership legitimacy? One explanation is that women's capital is devalued, misrecognised and disqualified in current reward, recruitment and promotions practices (Rees, 2011). The problem may also reside in wider cultural scripts for leaders that coalesce or collide with normative gender performances. If leadership is associated with particular forms of masculinity, women leaders represent contextual discontinuity, interruptive in their shock quality.

Women are also reflexively scanning leadership and dismissing it as a career option (Morley, 2013a), not equating it with vertical career success, but more as restriction of creativity inducing conventionality and conformity to norms and values that are alien and alienating (Haake, 2009). Berlant (2011) described the relation in which one depends on objects that block the very thriving that motivates our attachment in the first place as 'cruel optimism'. Women's relationship with leadership can be a form of cruel optimism in so far as desiring it seldom leads to its attainment. While some women do enter and flourish, for others, aspirations to lead differently in today's managerialised global academy can also be a form of cruel optimism.

Speaking Out

In preparation for British Council seminars *Absent Talent: Women in Research and Academic Leadership* in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Dubai, forty questionnaires were circulated to academic women in Australia, China, Egypt, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Turkey and twenty were returned. The sample included vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, deans, research directors, mid and early career academic women. Questions included what makes leadership attractive/ unattractive to women, and what enables/ impedes women to enter leadership positions. This group is referred to as *respondents*.

Panel discussions and paper presentations were also analysed. In Hong Kong, panelists comprised six senior women from Australia, China, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Thailand. In Tokyo, panelists comprised three senior academic women from Japan, Thailand and the UK and papers were presented from the Philippines, Malaysia and Japan. In Dubai, papers were presented from senior women from Egypt, Hong Kong, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, and Turkey. This group is referred to as *discussants*. There were twenty-two seminar participants in Hong Kong, twenty-five in Tokyo and twenty-five in Dubai. This group is referred to as *participants*. A total of seventy-two *respondents, discussants* and *participants* in three seminars contributed to these data. From this small sample, a range of insightful observations was collected.

What's Going Wrong?

Gendered divisions of labour within and beyond the academy were frequently cited. Leadership itself was hierarchicalised with women allowed entry into less prestigious, inward-looking roles. A Chinese respondent suggested that women work in:

> *Low professional titles, low-level management and administrative positions, most of them are responsible for student affairs.*

A question was whether women's under-representation was the result of discrimination or whether women make affective and material calculations regarding the costliness of attachment to leadership aspirations? Many women in this sample discussed gaining influence. However, leadership was frequently constructed as loss - loss of status and self-esteem in the case of unsuccessful applications, but loss of independence, research time and well-being when applications were successful. A Hong Kong respondent saw the neo-liberalised and male-dominated, managerialised academy as an unattractive space:

> *The boys' club issue, also massification and internationalisation of the sector together with reduction in funding by government means roles*

have changed and are more challenging in terms of time and skills - business management, fund raising, marketing.

Some leadership values as well as the long hours' culture were unattractive. Working with resistance and recalcitrance, colonising colleagues' subjectivities towards the goals of the managerially inspired discourses in the competitive prestige economy involve material and affective workloads that result in unliveable lives (Butler, 2004).

A cultural climate, or hidden curriculum, resulting in organisational and cultural norms that depress women's aspirations and career orientations was widely noted. A structural observation related to the incompatibility of women's caring responsibilities with the temporalities and rhythms of academia (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). A Japanese respondent saw the gendered division of labour in wider society as a major barrier:

> *A woman in Japan has to take care of her children, as well as both her parents, and sometimes even her husband's parents, besides the domestic duties on daily life. They do not have enough time to concentrate on doing research. And the percentage female university teachers in Japan who do not marry is 47.5 per cent.*

A Turkish respondent highlighted availability of affordable domestic services in many countries discussed, suggesting other explanations for women's absences e.g. women constructed as defective men, characterised by deficit and defined by lack. A Moroccan respondent described how women's potential is depressed because:

> *The state policy seems to favour a macho vision of society…This discourages women and makes them have less ambition.*

Women cited socio-cultural practices that impeded their progress in public domains. A Chinese respondent reported:

> *A saying that 'people can be classified into three categories: male, female, and female PhD'.*

The educated woman was the third sex because she was unclassifiable in cultural and age-appropriate norms. The message that higher educated women are unmarriageable was also reported by the Japanese discussant:

> *Young women don't want to go to the University of Tokyo because their parents say that if you go to the University of Tokyo you won't be able to get married, you won't be able to be happy. So being conventional implies that OK there is less risk. We have to encourage women to take the risk.*

The equation of happiness with traditional choices and de-traditionalisation with unhappiness is evocative of Ahmed's arguments (2010) about regulatory functions of happiness concepts. Leadership is transgression, with social and affective consequences. It can be a sign of upward mobility, influence and power, but also a normative fantasy about what constitutes success, and its current conditions and limitations in the global academy mean that many women do not construct leadership as an object of desire.

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