Women's Leadership Development Programs: Lessons Learned and New Frontiers

By

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The quest to develop talent across all workforce segments coupled with the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in organizations across the globe has led to increasing demand for women's leadership development programs (WLDPs) over recent years. This special issue, entitled *Women's Leadership Development Programs: Lessons Learned and New Frontiers*, considers the use of these programs to foster transformational change at the individual level (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002, 2003; Anderson et al., 2008; Debebe, 2011) and at organizational levels (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Fletcher, 2004; Bilimoria et al., 2008; Bilimoria & Liang, 2012). In this introductory article, we begin with a discussion of transformational learning and change at the individual and organizational levels and go on to highlight five key themes in the literature on women's leadership programs, identifying some of the questions and issues that motivated this special issue. We then provide a description of each paper included in the special issue before concluding with some thoughts on fruitful directions for future research on women's leadership programs.

Transformational Learning and Organizational Change Individual Level.

Transformational learning and change takes place at both the individual and organizational level. At both levels, it involves deep change and discontinuity with past patterns. While interdependent, individual and organizational transformation take place through varying mechanisms and processes. In this section we briefly describe these.

Individual Level

Mezirow (2000) describes transformational learning as a "movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing (a) dominant narrative" (p. 19). The concept of reified structures refers to the deep cognitive structures through which we perceive, organize, interpret, and act on cues from the environment. Mezirow (2000) also uses the synonymous terms of frames of reference or habits of mind. Other similar constructs include schemas, prisms, lens, worldview, and the like (Marshak, 2006). These cognitive structures are developed in socialization experiences and constitute taken-for-granted shared knowledge that makes mutual understanding and coordination among individuals in society possible (Heritage, 1981). Dominant narrative refers to the idea that these reified structures help to sustain a social order that is based on an institutionalized, therefore dominant, cultural, historical, and social experience and practice. As part of the socialization process individuals acquire schemas that define roles and guide actions in predictable ways to maintain the status quo. An example that is relevant here is how women and men draw on gender schemas to engage in practices that sustain a gendered organizational culture (Valian, 1998, Ainsworth et al., 2014, Husso & Hirvonen, 2012). The final concept, reformulating, has to do with the process and outcome of transformational learning that can result in movement or change in reified structures.

Mezirow (1991) identified three stages in the transformational learning process: encountering a disorienting dilemma, meaning making, and achieving transformative insight. A disorienting dilemma occurs when a disconfirming event interrupts an individual's habitual thought pattern and she recognizes that her way of thinking, feeling, and acting produce undesirable outcomes. This awareness creates disorientation because, while a new direction is not easily apparent, going back to old ways is no longer tolerable. In meaning making, individuals seek new information and knowledge from various texts and theory, conversations, and observation to address the dilemma. Eventually, a coherent idea emerges resolving the disorientation, giving the individual a new sense of direction and purpose. This is the third stage of transformative learning, achieving transformative insight. Even if it may be some time before an individual is willing to act on new insights, the transformative insight affects future perception, thought, and feeling (Clark, 1993). Based on a study of a women's leadership program within a global agricultural research consortium, Debebe (2011) added a fourth stage of transformational learning: connecting insight to real world practice. At some point, an individual is ready to act on these new perceptions, linking their insights to adaptations in their behavior. This process is iterative, with a refining and maturation of new behavior patterns over time.

Transformational learning cannot be anticipated or guaranteed; it unfolds when an individual feels safe, and is willing to put down his or her psychological defenses (Mezirow, 1991; Edmondson, 1999). Donald Winnicott (1989), a pediatrician and psychoanalyst, proposed that when an individual feels safe there is a subtle cognitive shift that occurs called a transitional state. A transitional state is characterized by an interruption of habitual patterns of perceiving, thinking, and acting, receptivity to new information, and readiness for movement. Although subtle and delicate this state is essential if an individual is to undergo transformational learning. Winnicott

(1989) also suggested that safety is created in a holding environment, a space that is bounded physically, materially, and socially to buffer learners from the pressures and the contradictions of the environment. A holding environment is a holistic space in that all of its elements—people, physical space, artifacts, and norms—work together to support an individual's learning at each step in their developmental journey. Finally a holding environment provides transitional objects, calming, relational entities that the learner attaches to in situations of uncertainty. Although Winnicott (1989) focused on mother-infant relationships, the mother's activities are applicable to learning throughout life (Winnicott, 1989; Miller, 1986).

Leadership development programs have the potential of fostering transformational change by creating learner awareness of problematic habitual patterns and providing a safe space for envisioning and practicing alternative patterns. If these changes are sustained after the leadership development program, the new patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving mature and contribute to increased leadership effectiveness (Wexley & Baldwin, 1986; Velsor et al., 1998).

Organizational Level

Organizational transformation can be episodic or continuous (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Episodic change is static and short-term following the sequence of unfreezing-transitioning-refreezing. In contrast, continual change is long-term and involves continual learning and adaptation. Continual learning follows an alternate cyclical change sequence of freezing-rebalancing-unfreezing. Successful organizational transformation for gender equity involves implementation of long-term, multi-level, simultaneous and comprehensive structural and cultural change processes that embed programmatic interventions (including WLDPs and concurrent leadership development of managers and executives throughout the organization), research and

evaluation to drive and support organizational transformation, and institutionalization of successful change initiatives (Bilimoria et al., 2008; Bilimoria & Liang, 2012). Structural change efforts focus on policies and institutionalized work practices. Targets of structural change include: recruitment processes, advancement mechanisms, job titles, work schedules, policies, and the physical environment. Work/life balance policy changes such as flex-time and child care provisions are also examples of structural change. Efforts to change organizational culture for gender equity focus on organizational assumptions and norms that perpetuate gender inequality, including those that exclude and denigrate women. In Bilimoria & Liang's (2012) model, this includes efforts to change individual mindsets, norms of work unit functioning, and patterns of interaction. In each case, cultural change efforts seek to surface, challenge, and produce change in the gendered assumptions that shape how people think, feel, and act in interactions, in teams, and departments/divisions. Genuine organizational transformation requires simultaneous change in both structural and cultural domains. For instance, gender equity cannot be achieved in workplaces where workers fail to take advantage of newly instituted work/life initiatives for fear that doing so might lead to their being labeled as unproductive and uncommitted workers. Finally, research and evaluation should support the transformation through ongoing study of how the organization is implementing changes, offering diagnoses of progress relative to the goal of gender equity, and generating recommendations to support continual change. Research can also be used to track key indicators and monitor change.

Orlikowski's (1996) work lends support to this comprehensive and long term view of organizational transformation and change. In particular, her research suggests that structural changes and cultural changes go hand-in-hand and evolve over time. That is, the incorporation of structural change requires that individuals adapt the changes to their local contexts, experiment

with new ways of doing things, and respond to unanticipated breakdowns and contingencies. These situated implementation processes also bring shifts in how people feel, think and act. Because change at both structural and cultural levels co-occur over time and are translated in situated action, it is particularly important to use research proactively to track how changes are being implemented, diagnose whether the intended outcome of gender equity is being realized or whether gendered structures are being reproduced, and propose useful recommendations.

Systemic institutional transformation initiatives have the potential to bring about deep changes in the gendered structures, work processes, and work practices of organizations (Bilimoria et al., 2008; Bilimoria & Liang, 2012). Several programmatic tools must be concurrently employed to achieve systemic change, including: mentoring programs, work assignments, leadership development, unconscious bias education, professional development, networking, accountability of managers, and many others. In this special issue we focus specifically on the intentional role of WLDPs in contributing to gender equity related organizational transformation. Next we turn to five themes pertaining to WLDPs that are critical to individual and organizational level transformational learning and change for gender equity.

Women's Leadership Development Programs: Key Themes

A growing body of work explores issues related to WLDPs. We highlight five themes that we believe are critical. While some of these have received attention in previous writings, others have not. However, all of them are important pieces in constructing a comprehensive conception of how WLDPs can be employed to achieve transformational change in individuals and organizations to foster leadership development among women (and men). These themes are as follows: sex-

composition of leadership programs, intersectionality in WLDPs, theory and design of WLPs, evaluation of WLDPs, and the importance of embedding WLDPs in organizations.

Theme One: Sex-Composition of Leadership Programs

To address the question of whether the sex composition of leadership programs is important to fostering transformational learning among learners, we need to understand the gendered nature of organizations and the implications for women's leadership. Although gender is often considered a property of individuals, feminist sociologists argue that it is a set of socially constructed ideas, beliefs and expectations about the roles of women and men that serve as a basis of social organization (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Acker, 2006; Ely & Padavic, 2007). From the time of birth, females are socialized to develop feminine orientations and enact feminine roles while males are socialized to develop masculine orientations and roles (Lorber, 1994; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000; Ely & Padavic, 2007). Furthermore, masculinity and femininity are hierarchically organized categories based on the dominance of the former over the latter, thereby serving as a basis for reproducing inequality between men and women (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1986; Lorber, 1994).

Rather, gender is an influence process that takes place in social interactions (Yukl, 2012). In most cultures, the idea of leadership equates to maleness and is manifested through masculine behaviors such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness (Eagly, 1987; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Thus when men enact masculine behaviors their actions are congruent with the cultural expectations of men, and their influence attempts are generally seen as legitimate. However, when women enact the behaviors associated with leadership, they encounter a double bind. Specifically, when women observe societal gender role expectations and exhibit feminine behaviors, they are seen as weak, but when they observe organizational role expectations

and exhibit masculine behaviors, they risk being seen as aggressive (Eagly, 1987; Carli & Eagly, 2007; Catalyst, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2013). In this double bind, any course of action can result in negative evaluations of women's leadership capacity (Spender, 1982; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000).

The issue of whether the sex composition of leadership programs – mixed-sex or single-sex—matters arises from the recognition that leadership development programs for women must address the double bind problem. Some research related to this question suggests that gendered pressures persist in mixed sex settings and this in turn inhibits safety for women and suppresses their capacity to explore the gendered aspects of their leadership experiences (Vinnicombe & Singh 2002, 2003; Debebe, 2011; Ely et. al., 2011). For example, in a majority male mixed-sex leadership program Tanton (1992) found that both males and females denied gender differences. The result was that women dismissed their lived experiences in an effort to be taken seriously. In contrast, in gender-balanced groups, men and women discussed gender and their differing experiences but many of the women in this group said that they did not feel comfortable speaking openly about their gendered experiences (Tanton, 1992). Thus, Tanton's (1992) study suggests that gender pressure can seep into mixed sex settings inhibiting safety and curtailing the process of transformational learning.

While mixed sex programs undoubtedly have their place in women's leadership development, it has been observed that their strength lies in integrating women into the organizational network. However, since leadership development efforts should ultimately effect deep change in individual thought and action, mixed-sex programs need to be complemented by women-only programs (Ely et al., 2011). Participants in women-only programs tend to have overwhelmingly positive evaluations of their experiences, citing changes such as greater confidence, sense of agency, expanded networks, skill development, and self-awareness (Willis &

Daisely, 1997; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002, 2003; Debebe, 2011). Research suggests that women's leadership programs are conducive to transformational learning by creating a safe environment that buffers participants from gender pressure (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002, 2003; Clarke, 2011; Debebe, 2011; Ely et al., 2011). There are at least two contributing factors: the single-sex nature of these programs (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002, 2003; Debebe, 2011; Ely et al., 2011) and gender-sensitive teaching and learning practices (Debebe, 2011). With respect to the former, women's programs are sometimes the only places where participants feel that their gendered experiences are affirmed (Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995; Debebe, 2011; Vinnicombe et al., 2013). This often makes a significant impression on participants and is an invitation for them to share aspects of their experience that they might otherwise hide for fear of rejection. With respect to the latter, gender sensitive teaching and learning practices are congruent with women's preferred relational learning styles, putting women learners at ease. These two conditions contribute to psychological safety in women-only programs, allowing participants to lower their defenses, share their experiences, and benefit from the support and experience of other women to work through their leadership challenges.

Theme Two: Intersectionality in Women's Leadership Programs

While women's programs have advantages over mixed sex programs in fostering transformational learning for women, some researchers suggest that by prioritizing gender over other identities women's programs may unwittingly limit women's leadership development (Plantega, 2004; Debebe & Reinert, 2013). This critique is premised on the intersectional theoretical perspective which posits that the intertwined social categories of race, class, and gender, produce a dominant organizational culture and structure that rationalizes and normalizes

the life experiences of white middle class heterosexual men (Acker, 2012). While other social identity categories such as age, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, disability status and others may also be important, Acker (2006) points out that these categories are not as deeply embedded in organizing processes as are gender, race and class. Nevertheless, she also acknowledges that the incorporation of social categories into organizing processes is on-going as organizations respond to rapidly changing cultural, political, and economic trends.

An intersectional theoretical perspective allows offers three ideas which are particularly relevant to this special issue on WLDPs. First, women's leadership experiences are not just influenced by gender but also by race, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, and other social identities. The salience of social identities is influenced by the organizational context – not just the overall culture of the organization but also the more specific unit and team cultures within which an individual is embedded. Finally, individuals typically occupy both dominant and subordinate social identities simultaneously (Plantega, 2004; Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2012). Thus, because some social identities are culturally privileged and others are culturally subordinated, women leaders may find themselves in the paradoxical situation of being simultaneously enabled and restricted (Plantega, 2004, Debebe & Reinert, 2014).

Thus, some researchers argue that WLDPs need to adopt an intersectional perspective so as to enable women leaders to holistically examine the complexities and nuances of their leadership dilemmas. Presently, there is a dearth of empirical and theoretical work that helps us understand how intersectional dynamics might shape women's leadership experiences. However, there are a few empirical examples that provide insight into how intersecting identities influence interactions at work, and these examples are suggestive of the various and surprising ways that multiple identities shape women's leadership experiences. For instance, Atewologun, et al.

(forthcoming) conducted a study of "identity heightening experiences" of senior black and Asian male and female professionals in the U.K. One interaction, between two black women in a manager-subordinate relationship demonstrated how gender and ethnic identities foster connections between leader and follower. In this example, these shared identities contributed to the manager feeling affirmed in her leadership role as a "senior black woman" and the subordinate feeling invited into a relationship with the manager. Another example, offered by Debebe & Reinert (2014) suggests that when an individual's dominant and subordinate identities are simultaneously activated it can sometimes lead to internal conflict, subordination of sensibilities stemming from subordinate experience, and amplification and conformity to the discourses and practices associated with the dominant identity. In essence, Debebe and Reinert (2014) apply Sen's (2006) idea of miniaturization to argue that internal identity-based conflicts are very common in organizations and place enormous pressure on individuals to choose between identities rather than make choices based on their values and the needs of the situation. These examples show that when the interaction of multiple identities are taken into account, the full complexity of women's leadership experiences and dilemmas can be revealed. Women are able to contend with not just how their leadership is influenced by gender, but other subordinate identities as well as dominant ones. This can produce a much more dynamic and powerful learning experience than a focus on just gender identity.

In sum, an intersectional lens assumes that while participants in women's programs may experience gendered pressure in similar ways there will also be important differences among them stemming from other social identities. Thus, an intersectional perspective not only provides space for the differing experiences of various subgroups of women to be heard, but also for intra-group differences to be acknowledged. In addition, an intersectional perspective relieves the pressure to

conform to a supposed unitary group experience based on any single identity dimension and allows participants to explore their experiences and make choices from the point of view of their values and situations. The crucial question for this special issue is how can we build on the strengths of women's programs to foster transformational learning by adopting an intersectional perspective? To do this, many questions need to be addressed, including: is it possible to create safety in a women's program designed to honor women's multiple identities? If so, how is safety created and sustained? What teaching and learning practices foster transformational learning in the context of differences of experience among women learners?

Theme 3: Theory and Design of WLDPs

WLDPs have evolved over time from a focus on personal development and an acknowledgment of women's different ways of learning (Sinclair, 1995, 1997) and different work experiences to a much greater focus on talent management as a company-led initiative (Vinnicombe et al., 2013). However, they remain a controversial issue with some evidence of stigmatization and a reluctance of some women to attend (Devillard et al., 2012). We are now familiar with career models which examine women's (rather than men's) experiences of the workplace, often situated within their broader life experiences (Powell & Mainiero, 1992; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Such models facilitate understanding of the factors affecting women's leadership development. In line with this deeper understanding of women's careers, we focus on three theoretical perspectives that inform the design of WLDPs—transformational learning (Debebe, 2011), the role of leader identity construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ely et al., 2011), and context-specific development of women's leadership presence (O'Neil et al., 2015).

First, utilizing a transformational learning perspective, Debebe (2011) showed that leadership development involves gaining awareness of the unhelpful habitual patterns of thinking and acting that contribute to leadership difficulties, accessing resources that affirm the learner's gendered experiences, and achieving breakthrough insights to guide future practice. As discussed above, Debebe's (2011) findings extended Mezirow's (1999) portrayal of transformational learning in WLDPs as moving through the stages of identifying a dilemma, making meaning from data gathered from numerous sources such as theory, conversations and observations, achieving a transformative insight and a stated commitment to change, and linking insights gleaned in the leadership development classroom to subsequent real-life practice with an emphasis on sustaining relationships. Creating a safe environment is essential in any learning situation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), and in WLDPs this occurs not only through the provision of an all-women setting but also through gender-sensitive teaching and learning practices (Debebe, 2011). The synergistic combination of these two factors creates safety, which, in turn, facilitates the sharing of gendered challenges faced in everyday working lives and the affirmation of those experiences in a supportive manner.

A second theoretical perspective points to the socially constructed nature of the influence process in leadership, which is established at three levels: individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Individual internalization pertains to whether and the extent to which an individual has incorporated the concept of "leader" into his or her self-concept. Relational recognition refers to the nature of the role-based assumptions and beliefs that people bring into their interactions regarding who should exercise influence. Finally, collective endorsement refers to how the individuals are perceived and the roles they are expected to assume within the wider social context as either followers or leaders. DeRue

and Ashford (2010) suggest that leadership is established at these three levels through an underlying process of claiming and granting a leadership identity in a relationship. As Ely et al. (2011) suggest, the successful establishment of a leadership relationship produces positive spirals of influence. The process is recursive and mutually reinforcing at the three levels (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In order to claim a leadership role, an individual must have a self-concept as a leader in a particular relationship. The influence process begins when an individual seeks to claim a leadership role. If the potential follower regards the influence attempt to be "legitimate," then he/she will respond affirmatively, claiming a follower identity and granting the leader identity. A negative spiral can also ensue in the process of claiming and granting a leader role (Ely et al., 2011). Negative spirals occur where individuals do not receive validation for their leadership claims and this in turn erodes their leader self-concept (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In these situations, followers often perceive the would-be leader's claim as illegitimate based on their leader prototype.

As described above, contradictory role expectations for women based in societal and organizational norms, place women leaders in a double-bind situation wherein any course of action can result in negative evaluations and rejection of women's leadership claims (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). Furthermore, an intersectional perspective would logically suggest that the dynamic of claiming and granting a leadership role might actually be far more complicated than envisioned in the double-bind scenario. Other social identity categories also may come into play, as well organizational hierarchies. All this points to the importance of designing WLDPs that are sensitive to the way in which social identity dynamics enter into and complicate women's capacity to claim a leader role. These programs would need to prioritize identity work (Ely et al., 2011). As defined by Snow and Anderson (1987), identity work refers to "the range of activities individuals

engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities, that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow & Anderson, p. 1348). Similarly, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) define identity work as a continual project of "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising (identity) constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence or distinctiveness" (p. 1165). Identity work is often motivated by the desire to maintain self-worth and dignity in relationship with others (Snow & Anderson, 1987). The ability to exercise agency and experience oneself as efficacious is a central component of self-worth (references needed). Thus, identity work in leadership development can be motivated by a desire to be not only a passive recipient of influence but a socially validated and active shaper of one's environment.

WLDPs reinforce the need for attention to both structural and institutional change and creating agency in women as they construct and internalize a leader identity, establish their sense of purpose and determine how to share that with others (Ely et al., 2011). A transformational learning perspective on women's programs gives us insight into how women build a leader identity by clarifying their values and developing new ways of perceiving, thinking and acting to pursue their goals. This perspective suggests that for women (and possibly for men) successfully claiming a leader role requires learning how to navigate not only gender, but the complex personal and situational contingencies presented by a leadership challenge.

A third theoretical framing with implications for the design of WLDPs explicitly situates women's leadership development as the integration of key contextual factors affecting women's leadership (challenging organizational cultures and politics, work-life integration demands, and life/career stages) and women's leadership presence (O'Neil et al., 2015). These authors define women's leadership presence as the combination of a woman's unique voice, style of engagement, and positive contributions—composed of her self-confidence (overall sense of self-assurance),

self-efficacy (belief in one's leadership capability and ability to achieve), influence (transformational, communal, and often indirect and tempered strategies to lead change), and authenticity (daily actions consistent with one's values, beliefs and vision).

By focusing on the whole-life and context-specific situations faced by women leaders while concurrently acknowledging the gendered nature of the characteristics and behaviors expected of leaders, WLDPs facilitate women's transformational learning, performance, leadership development and advancement potential by targeting participants' strengthened perceptions of self-confidence, self-efficacy, influence, and authenticity. With a renewed sense of values and purpose, feedback and support mechanisms that reinforce self-confidence, and enhanced sense of self-efficacy, agency and empowerment about their influence in leading organizational change, participants in WLDPs are enabled to overcome challenging workplace contexts, manage their work-life responsibilities with recognition of their differing career-life stages, and perceive themselves as agents of change to lead in the development of more equitable workplaces for all.

Theme 4: Evaluation of WLDPs

The evaluation of the outcomes of WLDPs remains a critical issue and of course will vary by the nature of the program. WLDPs may be aimed at personal leadership development, such as courses or modules within degree granting management education programs or open enrollment executive education programs. Other WLDPs are aimed at organizational development with a dual focus on women's leadership development and broader organizational learning and change. In the case of the latter type of program, measures of impact must reflect the interrelated aspects of transformation at both the individual and organizational levels.

In the case of women's personal leadership development programs, at present evaluation all too often relies solely on ratings of participant satisfaction at the end of the program, sometimes pejoratively referred to as "happy sheets". Such ratings forms gather participants' immediate experiences of the program in terms of relevance of the material and engagement with the faculty. While participants may be asked about what learnings they will take back to their organizations, no longer-term evaluation occurs to check whether such learning has been implemented. Arguably, unless participants have had the opportunity to reflect on and talk through how they intend to apply their learnings and the likely problems and resistances they may encounter as women leaders introducing organizational or team change, the program could possibly lead to women participants experiencing personal tension and negative outcomes upon re-entry.

Potential methodologies for reflection and processing of program learnings for implementation in organizational settings include the use of personalized coaching with professional coaches (Vinnicombe et al., 2013) as well as autoethnographic methodologies where small groups of women participants regularly engage in reflection, dialogue and peer coaching. While such activities often are built into the duration of the program, it is our recommendation that they should be extended additionally beyond the content-intensive portion of the program, involving regularly scheduled touchpoints for a period of time beyond the actual learning event so that participants engaged in implementation may be better supported. Evaluation of enduring program impact on individual leadership development may be facilitated at these meetings. In sum, we encourage directors of WLDPs to develop more robust and systematic methods of measuring longer-term impacts of their programs, beyond participant satisfaction ratings completed at program end.

Customized women's leadership programs (specific to a single organization) are more complex and require a number of feedback loops between the participants, their individual managers and sponsors, the leaders (and often the human resources personnel) of the sponsoring organization, and the program providers to gauge the impact on both the women participants and the organization. Often the focus for the organization is the delivery of the WLD program and there seems a reluctance to invest time and money in follow up. A possible solution to this problem that we recommend is for providers to move away from the delivery of a standard program in the management education classroom to a more blended program where learning and leadership development is partially situated in the participants' own work environments through their natural day-to-day projects and work relationships. In such programming, classroom interaction may be potentially blended with cross-functional, stretch, team projects that serve the dual purposes of expanding program participants' knowledge of organizational operations by taking them out of their normal work environments and responsibilities (and also thereby increasing their visibility) as well as providing new business ideas of value to the organization. Additionally embedded programming may involve assignments that require participants to broaden their internal networks by connecting with senior executives across the organization, as well as to create new and strengthen existing mentoring and sponsoring relationships. The value of embedded programs for women's leadership development is described further in Theme 5 below.

Theme 5: Embedding WLDPs in Organizations

A deep concern about WLDPs is that they just 'fix the women' and do not change their male-dominated workplaces where the structures, processes and practices all too often disadvantage women. The best way of ensuring that women's leadership development is effective

is by embedding it in the organization's business needs with top management support via customized corporate programs. Initial research and development work involves interviewing the targeted women participants (usually high potential women) as well as other senior women in the organization about their experiences at work, focusing on the specific issues they encounter as women leaders. Additional interviews and focus groups with their male peers and bosses help to contextualize the data obtained from the women leaders in the organization. Further data from human resources on processes like performance rankings, salary equity, and rates of attrition and promotion help to clarify the bigger picture. This steers the program providers to identify and prioritize the issues facing the targeted women participants and to appreciate the roles played by the participants, their bosses and other senior executives, as well as the processes, procedures, and practices in the workplace in understanding how to improve the situation.

High quality customized WLDPs ensure links back to the organization via senior male and female director speaker slots, professional coaching, executive sponsorship, and structured feedback sessions to top management on the issues raised during the program (all anonymized to protect the participants). In many cases the issues are not generic but relate to particular countries or sectors of the business and this feedback allows management to take focused action to remedy the situation. It is important for program directors to communicate from the start that women participants attend these programs not just as keen individual learners, but also as key champions of change for their organizations. There will always be a need for WLDPs as a means of personal development, but embedding these programs within organizations offers the potential for much greater institutional change which is sustainable in the longer term.

A particularly comprehensive organizational transformation methodology employing an embedded focus on the leadership and professional development of women faculty in science and

engineering disciplines has been fostered by the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE program in U.S. higher education (Bilimoria et al., 2008 and Bilimoria & Liang, 2012 for an analysis of 19 leading universities' gender equity change projects). More than 150 universities across the U.S. have now received direct funding or indirect support (through partnerships for application, innovation and dissemination) from ADVANCE to improve women's recruitment, advancement, retention and leadership in science and engineering. These projects include a dual emphasis on equipping women faculty to better navigate the academic pipeline through leadership development, networking, coaching and mentoring programs as well as simultaneously implementing culture-change initiatives such as training and educating department chairs and deans (women participants' middle and upper managers) about implicit gender bias, leadership development coaching of department chairs, conducting faculty climate (engagement) surveys to improve micro (departmental) climates, establishing organization-wide networks and advisory councils on women and minorities, instituting family-friendly and academic career flexibility policies, enacting child-care initiatives, and targeting the increase of women in leadership positions (Bilimoria & Liang, 2014).

The Articles Included in Special Issue

The three papers included in this special issue inform some of the themes described above. Each of these papers is described briefly below.

Paper 1: Inclusive Leadership Development: Drawing from Pedagogies of Women's and General Leadership Development Programs

The first paper by Keimei Sugiyama, Kevin Cavanagh, Chantal van Esch, Diana Bilimoria and Cara Brown explores the pedagogical assumptions underlying both general leadership development programs (GLDPs) for attendees of both genders and those aimed at women only (WLDPs). Using website descriptions of both kinds of programs from universities/business schools on the 2014 *Financial Times* ranking of open enrolment executive education programs, these publicly available data were analyzed to understand any differences in the conceptual portrayal of leadership and the associated focus on skills development. Informing the theme of theory and design of WLDPs described above, the study's findings indicate contrasting perspectives between GLDPs and WLDPs. Overall, program descriptions indicate a greater focus on relational approaches to leadership than previously shown in the literature. However WLDPs have a greater emphasis on active engagement in co-creation of learning and provide developmental support involving the sharing of experiences, which are features of a more transformative pedagogical approach. In contrast, GLDPs continue to focus to a greater extent on the transmission of knowledge and creation of networks for business gain along with traditional masculine views of leadership. Recognizing the need to foster a stronger integration of these approaches, the authors present a pedagogical framework for inclusive leadership development which draws on a feminist pedagogical understanding of separate knowing and connected knowing. Within this framework, identity work and an emphasis on relational practice within inclusive leadership includes awareness of self and others aligned with the needs to distinguish oneself and yet to foster a sense of belongingness. The paper therefore provides empirical data

which has clear implications for the evolution of women's leadership development theory and practice, demonstrating a clear argument for the use of women-only programs.

Paper 2: From a Politics of Dilemmas to a Politics of Paradoxes: Feminism, Pedagogy, and Women's Leadership for Social Change

The paper by Ronit Kark, Ruth Preser, and Tanya Zion-Waldoks draws on theories of paradox and critical feminist theory to propose a critical feminist pedagogy of paradoxes. A paradoxical orientation, involving the embrace and engagement with complexity and contradictions, is contrasted with a dilemma orientation in which trade-offs are resolved with either/or thinking and decisions. While the former produces breakthroughs and movement, the latter creates stuckness, reproducing unproductive routines. The authors argue that not only is a paradox framework essential in managerial practice more generally, it is particularly crucial to the pursuit of gender equity where skill is required to navigate embedded dualities, competing demands, complexity, ambiguity, and contradictions. As discussed above, because women leaders encounter contradictory expectations and dualities based in multiple social categories, a paradoxical perspective offers an intriguing lens for designing women's programs. The authors also draw on, a critical feminist perspective, emphasizing the importance of resolving paradox through a commitment to social justice, a goal that requires skill with interrupting habitual, inequality-reproducing, discourses. The paper synthesizes these ideas and applies them to the context of a year-long graduate gender-studies course. One contribution is the paper's description and analysis of participants' struggles to shift from dilemma to paradoxical thinking and action in their work. Another contribution is the paper's description of two principles—focus on multiple identities and identity tensions and multiple ways of knowing and acting—that guided their design

of the course. These two principles raise many questions and offer useful insights related to the theme of intersectionality discussed above, and can inform future research and theorizing about design safe spaces for multiple identities in women's leadership programs.

Paper 3: Network-Based Leadership Development: A Guiding Framework and Resources for Management Educators

In this article Kristin Cullen-Lester, Meredith Woehler, and Phil Willburn address the importance of increasing social capital through the use of networks (Burt & Ronchi, 2007), focusing on developing the skills associated with building and using networks effectively. The three-step framework highlights misconceptions held by individuals about networking, factors which contribute to an effective network and specific networking strategies for achieving work and career goals for both women and men. In discussing the challenges associated with networking they point out those which are particularly salient for women and/or impact women more than men. The consistent focus on gender differences reinforces the importance of providing development opportunities which are specifically relevant to women and men, as well as raising the awareness and understanding of all. This helps minimize the gender biases inherent in systemic organizational practices, consistent with the organizational transformation approach discussed above. The authors provide a wealth of useful resources in the form of recommended readings and activities related to the three-step framework for incorporating network content into leadership development programs (and other courses including undergraduate, postgraduate and executive education). The paper draws on empirical work to assess the effectiveness of networking strategies in achieving the most common goals of improving work effectiveness, increasing strategic influence, and progressing in one's career. The issue of the double bind experienced by women

leaders is discussed, and interestingly, although women and men use some different networking strategies (and some were used in equal percentages), there was no indication of any difference in their assessment of the effectiveness of a strategy they had practiced. The article concludes with a discussion about the sex composition of leadership programs, debating the pros and cons of delivering networking and other content in women only or mixed programs.

Observations and Thoughts for Future Research

By viewing women's leadership programs through a transformational learning lens at the individual and organizational levels we hope to provide a conceptual approach whose aim is to guide thinking and practice that has the potential of bringing about deep and meaningful change for gender equity. This perspective is a departure from the piecemeal and disconnected gender diversity, equity and inclusion efforts frequently undertaken in organizations. We feel that a comprehensive approach that addresses individual and organizational transformation has real potential for moving the agenda of gender equity forward in meaningful ways. The three papers in this special issue have addressed only a few key themes of interest in the women's leadership literatures from this perspective. However, the multi-level framing is rich and suggestive of many other issues that need to be tackled to build knowledge and guide practice to realize the potential of women's leadership programs. This special issue is a small step in that direction but we hope that it will motivate more research. Below we offer a few thoughts on what we see as promising directions for future research in three areas: the evaluation of WLDP outcomes, the adoption of an intersectionality perspective, and the role of men in women's leadership development. The articles

included in the special issue did not specifically address these important aspects, yet we believe that future WLDPs will be better informed by research on these topics.

We encourage research on the variety of WLDPs offered, particularly in terms of their most effective designs and practices. Future research must inform and enable the improved evaluation of WLDP outcomes, particularly for programs embedded in larger organizational transformation efforts. In this regard, we welcome theoretical frameworks and case study examples that shine a light on how follow-up evaluation of WLDPs may be conducted and the dimensions along which such longer-term and embedded evaluation may be carried out.

We encourage research and development of WLDPs that adopts an intersectionality perspective. As discussed above, an intersectionality perspective expands the social categories of interest from gender to include other identity-based dimensions. In particular, we need more studies that look closely at women's leadership experiences from an intersectional perspective. As already suggested, women's leadership experiences cannot be fully understood through a gender lens alone. This is true not just for women of color, but for white women as well. The intersecting of multiple identities in context shapes women's leadership experiences. Therefore, we need empirical research that utilizes an intersectional perspective to more fully and deeply describe the wide range of experiences that women have in exercising leadership. Second, the notion of intersectionality broadens the categories from those with which we are most familiar with in the U.S. context—gender, race/ethnicity, and class. In particular, we feel it is important to include other social identity categories such as sexual orientation, age, religion, nationality, and disability status in WLDPs. Other identity dimensions that are of social significance particularly for women leaders, such as weight and appearance, may also be of relevance. In light of this, more work is need to explore how these categories are embedded within organizational structure and practice,

and the implications for women's leadership experiences and leadership development in formal programs.

An intersectional theoretical lens also has implications for the design and delivery of women's leadership programs. As discussed women's leadership programs have two crucial advantages for women: shared gendered experiences at work and in life more broadly, and gender-sensitive teaching methods that honor women's relational modes of learning. These two conditions have been found to contribute to creating safety for women learners, and this in turn makes transformational learning more likely. Therefore, a key question is how can women's programs build on these strengths to create learning spaces that are felt safe by participants to explore the role of intersecting identities in their leadership experiences? This is a deceptively simple question for it may seem that the commonality of gender is sufficient to create an atmosphere in which women's experiences can be fully discussed. However, as research on creating alliances among diverse women shows, faultlines can emerge around non-gendered social identities, potentially undermining safety for learners. Thus, more research is needed to understand the practices necessary for creating safe spaces that honor women's multiple social identities and varied leadership selves.

Finally, we encourage further research that examines the role of men (Simmons, 1996; Burke & Major, 2014) in the leadership and career development of women. How can women's learning and development be best supported by men in the management education classroom and in organizations? How can men be integrated in women-only programs, maintaining the safe space qualities of such programs while bringing in their experiences, as well as their mentoring and sponsorship roles? How can mixed-sex leadership development programs enable women's and men's individual transformational learning and catalyze their organizational level leadership of

gender equity change? We hope that future research addresses the questions and suggestions raised in the sections above to inform the theory, design and conduct of the next generation of women's leadership development programs.

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