

## The problematic persistence of gender reflexivity in women's leadership development

One of the most notable features of human resource development (HRD), of which leadership development is a sub-field, is that there has been little attempt to identify and delineate different periods of practice or to focus on how different practices come into being (Author, 2022; Clark et al, 2018).<sup>i</sup> Periodization, as Jordanova (2014) notes, is a fundamental task of historical research and is used to establish or revise periods of practice, theory, or development with the aim of problematising current explanations (Author, 2022). Research within HRD that draws on historical reasoning is concerned with context i.e., the interaction between periodization and narrative, rather than chronologies on their own that tend to produce teleological and linear explanations (Wadhvani and Decker, 2017; Author, 2022). Whilst it is outwith the scope of this paper to provide a detailed periodization of women's leadership development, it *is* situated historically, and I treat its current practice and theory as having some problematic features and accommodations because of its historical positioning.

The 'histories' of leadership development in HRD are delivered by the vehicle of a literature review. Day et al's (2014) account, for example, of the advances in leadership development research and theory (more so than practice) identified 1990 as the point at which leadership development emerged in the academic literature as distinct from leadership theory. However, such reviews do not routinely interrogate *why* the chosen year is significant, or what the literature leadership development theory emerged from. Where leadership development theories and approaches develop from is the emergence of the view that leadership was distinct from management throughout the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., through the

work of Zaleznik, 1977; Watson, 1983; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Kotter, 2008, Bass and Stodgill, 1990), its popularisation in publications such as the Harvard Business Review, and the growth of leadership development as a field.

The demise of the role of the manager in socio-cultural scripts was a consequence of the advent of financialisation in the late 1980s. As Hansen (2014) observes, narratives of heroic CEOs in business and finance turned around the assumption that managers were the helpers of the social state. Making CEOs into leaders was a necessary condition of the explosion in executive remuneration, and the idea of leadership in turn was further legitimized and promoted in socio-cultural narratives by academic academics (Hansen, 2014). Leadership development research continues to embed the narrative of the difference between management and leadership e.g., leadership as risk taking, innovation, passion, and vision as opposed to management's risk minimisation, administration, maintenance, and rationality. Being a manager is primarily, according to Day (2000, p. 582) "the application of proven solutions to known problems". Leadership development is necessarily – because of the unquestioned assumption that organisations are facing unprecedented challenges, a fast rate of change, global competition, and that survival will be transformation and a qualitative break with the past (DeRue and Myers, 2014) – a process that builds an individual's capacity to generate new solutions to *unknown* problems (Day, 2000). The goal of leadership development is primarily to equip the proto leader with the intra-personal competencies of self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation, that are taken as a proxy for 'readiness'. The historical specificity and the performativity of the current leadership development narrative, and the socio-economic conditions in which it gained ascendancy and supports in

turn, is missing from most of our conversations. Discussions about design and theory are preferred.

Expenditure on leadership development activities has grown from a \$45 billion industry in the US in 2007 (Day, 2011) to an estimated annual spend of \$366 worldwide in 2019 (Forbes, 2019). Growth that can only be explained in relation to the shift to the competition state (Hansen, 2014). Leadership development is big business, and the marketplace of providers is a crowded one. Differentiation is a core strategy in creating a defensible market niche, of which women's leadership development is one. Both general i.e., designed for men, and women's, leadership development programmes incorporate a self-awareness element that is identified (Day, 2011) as core to leadership capacity. But the degree to which self-awareness is the focus of the programme differs greatly. Women's leadership development programmes focus on the experience of gender— both externally and internally — as a necessary step in women's insight into their position in organisations and their own learning and transformation (Debebe, 2011).

The warrant for the emphasis on self-assessment and presentation of the self is drawn from social identity theory rather than feminist theory (e.g., Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb, 2011), and its pedagogy is based in transformational learning (e.g., Debebe 2009, 2011). However, in this paper I argue the way that gender reflexivity is deployed in support of self-awareness of the gendered self, and of transformation, is problematic. In the first section, I outline the approach to identity work that many women's leadership development programmes take. I

then argue that to use gender reflexivity as a self-development tool skews reflexivity so that change is always expected of the self and not the environment. In the remaining section, the constraining effects of corporate feminism are explored before concluding that the current theoretical basis of women's leadership development is, even when deployed critically, unlikely to support structural change.

### Women's Leadership Development programmes

In a crowded (and lucrative) marketplace differentiation is key to attracting attention to your product. As mentioned in the introductory comments, differentiation is achieved for women's leadership programmes – especially those that are women only - by contrasting their aims and content to that of 'general' programmes i.e., programmes designed with masculine experiences as the default. General programmes are dismissed as not meeting the distinctive needs of women (Brue and Brue, 2016), because they are based on masculinist notions of agentic and transactional leadership (Sugiyama et al, 2016), and/or because they do not address women's double bind in leadership (O'Neil et al, 2015). The double bind is where women are caught between competing expectations in the work setting where they are simultaneously required to be competent and assertive (in line with organisational norms) and nice and nurturing (in line with societal gender norms). In performing one 'correctly' they are judged negatively from the other norm e.g., where being nice is to leave a woman open to charges of not being tough enough for a leadership role, but where being assertive will be interpreted as aggression (O'Neil et al, 2015).

In their typology of women's leadership learning, Stead and Elliott (2013) outlined three main approaches taken in practice – a self-positioning approach (pursued through identity work and self-awareness), an approach based on the development of social capital (networking), and an approach based on disruption (performing gender differently and transgressively). Sugiyama et al's (2016) survey established that the bulk of women's leadership programmes followed the self-positioning approach. On general programmes the emphasis was on the leader's role in driving business performance, practical or business knowledge, networking for business gain, wellness, and general self-awareness. On women's leadership programmes greater emphasis was placed on the leader's role in managing inter-relational performance, leadership transition support, relationship building, the unique barriers faced by women, authentic qualities for leadership, and developing the mindset to better fit leadership roles (Sugiyama et al, 2016). General leadership development programmes, despite the rhetoric that the emphasis is on personal readiness rather than skills acquisition still incorporate a sizeable amount of material that is skills based. Women's leadership development rejects the approach whereby women are taught skills that men are assumed to have acquired as a matter of course as a 'fix the women' approach (Phillips and Grandy, 2018). Instead, leadership development for women is designed on the presumption that women's needs cannot be met by general programmes, that they fail to take women's experiences into account, and are counter-productive if they train women to assume traditional male behaviours as leaders (Phillips and Grandy, 2018; Brue and Brue, 2016). The solution, and contribution of women's leadership development programmes within this logic and market, is to define women's leadership presence as a combination of an individual woman's unique

voice, style of engagement, and positive contribution, which is then further broken down into self-confidence, self-efficacy, and authenticity (O'Neil et al, 2015).

The published aims of 'self-positioning' women's leadership development programmes have not deviated noticeably from the outcomes that emphasise self-confidence, self-efficacy, and authenticity (with awareness of the double-bind) in the last 20 years. For example, a programme designed by Vinnicombe and Singh (2002) offered the opportunity to clarify attitudes and feelings about themselves in relation to work roles and personal roles; review their experiences of managerial life; examine their managerial styles; study the concept of politics and power; become proactive in managing their careers, and to do so 'in a safe environment in which they can test their own experiences against the experiences of other women' (Vinnicombe and Singh, 2002, 300). The Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme, advertised in 2022, echoes the focus on the gendered self – the programme "is structured around three main themes: self-acceptance, self-management, and self-development. Through challenging the workplace gender biases that female leaders face, you'll explore the skills needed to lead, influence, negotiate, and navigate difficult scenarios" ([www.getsmarter.com](http://www.getsmarter.com)). It is similar to a curriculum that was also advocated by Ely, Ibarra and Kolb in 2011, which included 360-degree feedback, leadership networking, negotiating, leading change, and career transitions. Even where standard leadership skills and tools are included in the programme, making women aware of unconscious biases and the double bind are seen as pre-requisite for being able to *use* those tools (Madsen and Andrade, 2018; Ely et al, 2011) when women return to the workplace.

Women's leadership development programmes position themselves as individually and organisationally transformative (although the evidence presented for the latter is thin). Women's leadership development is positioned as just one part of wider structural changes that are needed to transform organisations in a way that make them more gender equal i.e., amended recruitment practices, advancement mechanisms, job titles, work schedules, policies, the physical environment, as well as the familiar refrain that these measures will require senior management support (Debebe et al, 2017). The emphasis on identity work as providing the engine of organisational change is embedded in the scholarship on women's leadership development. Debebe (2011), for example, suggests that deep individual change is necessary for fundamental organizational change and that even if structural conditions changed for the better, women may still be held back by unexamined and internalized gendered messages. However deep and fundamental the personal transformation might be, if the organisation has not changed then the organisation cannot reap the benefits of the programme. But if the woman has experienced transformational learning, then it will not be possible for her to return to former ways of seeing and doing (or of unseeing the double bind) (Debebe, 2009). But the only way out of the double-bind is to pay attention to authenticity and context (O'Neil et al, 2015; Debebe et al, 2017) rather than lobby for structural changes in the workplace.

In suggesting that the path to leadership for women is almost exclusively one of self-knowledge and gender reflexivity, Phillips and Grandy (2018) acknowledge the risk that

women are being taught to internalise responsibility for their success without the acknowledgement of the overwhelming effect of the systems and practices that reinforce masculine advantage. Although it may not be the *intention* of such training, the way that gender reflexivity is deployed is likely to result in the erasure of social and collective justice issues, and the inability to move beyond the identification of personal barriers to success (Selzer et al, 2017) within a very limited type of corporate feminism.

### Reflexivity and gender reflexivity

In the previous section, I suggested that the 'self-positioning' (Stead and Elliott, 2013) form of women's leadership programme, which focuses on variations of self-acceptance, self-management, and self-development used gender reflexivity in a way that robbed it of its potential to bring about change. Alvesson and Willmott (1996) and Cunliffe (2002, 2003) were amongst the first to suggest that critical reflection was the method by which facilitators of training and development could engage managers and raise consciousness of the capitalist constraints operating on them (see Author, 2017). Others in the critical HRD field, mainly women, looked to feminist theory to understand how they – and the learners – were 'doing' HRD and 'doing' gender in developmental settings (Metcalf, 2008; Perriton, 1999; Hughes, 2004; Sinclair, 2005; Swan, 2005). From an awareness of our own performative embodiment as educators and trainers it is only a short conceptual step to recommending reflexivity as a way that learners should approach their own performative embodiment of themselves in the workplace.



Yet, reflexivity as used in the field of HRD, and reflexivity as understood as a critical disruption in thinking in sociology are different. Reflexivity as a tool used in developmental settings has come to mean a form of deep reflection that provides insights to the individual as to how they behave. In HRD reflexivity is that reflection is focused inward and most often connected to improving professional or personal performance (see Schön, 1987), whereas reflexivity is – within sociological theory – the requirement to reflect on the social conditions of existence (e.g., Beck et al, 1994; Lash, 1993). It is the difference between reflecting on your behaviour and recognising it as self-limiting, perhaps even seeing it as a product of social conditioning, and doing the same but, in addition, interrogating the prevailing socio-political and economic shaping of those social conditioning narratives. Reflexivity is outward facing, focused on prevailing social norms and expectations, and is a necessary component of individual agency and change (Adkins, 2003). For reflexivity to achieve change, it is not enough to recognise that there are social norms in play without understanding the conditions under which they are produced and maintained. To reflexivity we can also add a specific form that focuses on gender relations i.e., gender reflexivity.

Gender reflexivity has, in some readings, been associated with the detraditionalization of gender. In the late 1990s, feminists turned to the work of Bourdieu to frame gender and to mobilise reflexivity within feminism. Bourdieu posited that social inequalities such as those associated with gender are established via the exercise of power on the bodies and actions of individuals. The individual's complicity with their bodily disciplining is termed *symbolic*

*violence*, and how the social shapes and constrains the individual is via the *habitus*, a system of durable dispositions that enable institutions (in the broadest sense) to do their work (McNay, 1999). Even at the time that Bordieuan feminism was most influential, there were concerns that for all *habitus* had an explanatory power regarding how our bodies become imprinted with societal norms, it did not provide a route to change (Chambers, 2005). Awareness of the gendered *habitus* alone i.e., the acknowledgement of the double bind, was not sufficient to trigger transformational change. This failure is a significant issue for women's leadership programmes that use gender reflexivity to argue that it is part of wider organizational change dynamics. Bourdieu envisaged two methods by which social change could arise. The first was through recognising the *habitus*, bringing it to consciousness, and then resisting the social structures to which it corresponds (Chambers, 2005). The second route to change was by encountering a disjunction between *habitus* and field e.g., through encounters with others and situations in which our own norms are questioned or can no longer hold (Chambers, 2005). Going out into the world to *diffract* gender, rather than reflect on it, as articulated by Donna Haraway (Metcalf, 2008) is aligned to this idea of disjunction - and would fit the third of Stead and Elliott's typology of leadership development for women.

The disjunction between the *habitus*, the field, and institutions in which women find themselves subject to the symbolic violence of gender, creates a 'space of action' (Carroll and Levy, 2010, p. 211) and this is where women's leadership development programmes operate. Leadership development, conceived of as a space of action (Carroll and Levy, 2010; Petriglieri, 2011), is now expressed theoretically almost entirely in terms of identity work. Some - following on from the feminist interest in gender reflexivity - see this identity work in terms

of identity *regulation*, whilst others continue to (optimistically) conceive of the work in terms of identity *construction*. Caza et al's (2018) review of how identity work is conceived of in organisations and occupations suggests four modes of identity work grouped under headings of where they occur: cognitive (thoughts), discursive (talk), physical (symbols), and behavioural (actions) (p. 891). Their comprehensive coverage establishes the extent to which identity work now functions as a core concept in organisations and its research paradigms – from institutional logic, through strategy, employee performance, organisational performance, to health and safety. The review, as well as providing a high-level conceptual analysis of identity work, also observes that the choice of a particular identity lens in theoretical (and, by implication, practice) is mainly a means of influencing others who subscribe to the same approach within the same disciplinary boundaries (Caza et al, 2018).

The leadership development 'space of action' is constructed as one where the individual as subject *decides* e.g., decides to accept dominant discourses, to negate the dominant discourse, or replace the dominant discourse (Carroll and Levy, 2010). The individual that chooses – either in the sense of responsibility for their judgements, or their orientation to dominant discourses – still does so in the context of constraints, but these constraints are acknowledged rather than being the focus of action. *If* the intention is to create structural change, then 'self-acceptance, self-management, and self-development' ([www.getsmarter.com](http://www.getsmarter.com)) would need women's experience of disjuncture to shift the 'space of action' to organisational change. But although the allied structural changes that would be necessary for women to advance within organisations are recognised e.g., the previously mentioned amended recruitment practices, advancement mechanisms, job titles, work

schedules etc, lobbying for structural change is not the planned outcome of women's leadership development training. Leadership development programmes that are rooted in the 'what kind of person to be' questions rarely have outcomes that focus on 'what to do' (Carroll and Levy, 2010). The identity project is an individual one, remains gendered, and places women's leadership development firmly back within the realm of a corporate feminism that is devoid of a larger structural critique (Fodor et al, 2019; Prügl, 2015).

### Women's leadership development within corporate feminism

In the previous section I argued that gender reflexivity was an insecure base for personal and organizational transformation. The lived experience of disjuncture e.g., the double-bind, is not sufficient to leverage change. The gendered habitus of a workplace is not a singular field in which women are able to 'understand the game'. Gendered norms work across all fields in subtly different ways. Although aspects of the habitus will be experienced as different the 'genderedness' of it will remain (Chambers, 2005, p 342). This, in turn, creates a significant problem for the outcomes of programmes that are based on gender reflexivity, where the gendered habitus is revealed and acknowledged, but offers no significant guidance as to what to do past this first step of recognition. Consciousness raising might bring about a feeling of solidarity and power within the institution of the development programme itself, but gender reflexivity inevitably becomes individualised and yet another way of ensuring the individual bears the responsibility (and consequences) of their judgements and actions (Soh et al, 2022) in the workplace.

The obvious counter to the practice of gender reflexivity that focuses on internal change is to suggest that a *feminist* response is required. But feminism is its own contested space: corporate, intersectional, queer, radical, are all feminisms that are circulating in society and social media (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017). That space is also defined by the current neoliberal consumer culture, where contemporary feminism is equated with messages about self-making, self-love, and self-care (see also Mavin and Grandy, 2019). The bar is relatively low in terms of what is considered 'feminist' in the consumer culture in that anything not overtly degrading or demeaning to women can be labelled such. These self-care forms of feminist messages are mostly aimed at privileged white women (Banet-Wesier and Portwood-Stacer, 2017), or those who aspire to influencer status within a consumer culture. The combined effect of these popular messages, and the desire to occupy the middle ground in respect of identity, allows some (predominantly) white women to see themselves as agents with a degree of control in how – and on what terms – they negotiate both gender and capitalism (Banet-Wesier and Portwood-Stacer, 2017) and is responsible for the amplification of women like Sheryl Sandberg (see Annis, 2016; Prügl, 2015). Feminism is seen to have been 'corporately seduced' to produce a type of hegemonic feminism that is reflected in women such as Hilary Clinton and Condoleeza Rice (Mavin and Grandy, 2019) as well Sheryl Sandberg. A feminism that focuses on personal responsibility and changing attitudes through capacity building is particularly prevalent when 'fostering individual aspirations and entrepreneurial identities' (Prügl, 2015, p. 620) within organisations.

As a result, it is not possible to critique women's leadership development as non-feminist because the aims of many of the programmes, and their underlying assumptions about women's unique contribution, *are* feminist within the logic of the current culture. Women only programmes, for example, are often justified on the basis that women have distinct learning needs – where instructors and other participants act as midwives to support the sharing of experiences, facilitate self-discovery, and affirm each other's gendered experiences of the workplace and work-life balance (Debebe, 2011). Shorn of the intention to critique institutions and societies as responsible for symbolic violence against women, some elements of the traditional – and formerly suspect - performances of gender are re-admitted as feminist acts e.g., self-body-care (Mavin and Grandy, 2019). Although, in Mavin and Grandy's case, they take the view that since women are faced with impossible demands with respect to the successful performance of gender in corporate settings, women might as well make use of the performative resources available to them (2019). However, being trained in conscious embodiment is largely restricted to established elite women who can access leadership development programmes that address the physical act of leadership as a literal performance. For example, the women's leadership programme offered by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) in the UK offers women the opportunity to learn how to embody status, resilience, and gravitas; manage energy and stress levels, adapt physical and vocal presence, and hold physical space – starting at £3300 +VAT ([www.radabusiness.com](http://www.radabusiness.com)).

Outside of the management and leadership literature, there are still trenchant criticisms of the assumption that it is possible for individuals to find solutions to structural problems via discourses of empowerment, choice, and self-responsibility. In this view, women's leadership

development – when it focuses on the self (confidence, development, care, knowledge, responsibility) – is a tired invocation of the idea that by exercising a set of behavioural and instrumental DIY changes, women can overcome inequality (Gill and Orgad, 2017). The ‘incitement of confidence’ is a gendered technology of the self and serves as cultural scaffolding for the regulation of women (Gill and Orgad, 2017, p. 12). Confidence is a one size fits all solution, ignoring the wide range of differences between and among women and their individual contexts. Moreover, confidence is deeply classed and identifies the ‘other’ of this moderate and/or corporate feminism, where self-doubt is considered the toxic state that needs to be address (Gill and Orgad, 2017) rather than gender relations in the workplace.

#### How do we get out of this place?

In the introduction to this paper, I argued that it was necessary to see leadership development as an identifiable historical period in human resource development practice concomitant with financial capitalism and the reification of leadership. Framing leadership development as a historical period is, however, difficult when speaking from within the period rather than being able to look back to a previous set of practices, now replaced. As long as we have the figure of the individual leader then even critical, or gender sensitive, leadership development (e.g., Bridgman et al, 2016; Cunliffe, 2009; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015) will deploy reflexivity in conservative ways. Even when the idea of the individual and heroic leader is critiqued (e.g., Day, 2011; DeRue and Myers, 2014) the solution is not to question the need for ‘leadership’ but instead to argue for more senior leadership support, or integrative theory, so we can

identify where better leadership training is needed. Perhaps even more problematically from the perspective of leadership development, leadership is increasingly presented as a form of secular state of grace. University modules on leadership ask students to engage with various theories of leadership and to reflect on their own mundane, everyday experiences of 'being a leader', or where they failed to 'show leadership'. For the idea of the heroic CEO to remain valid (and so very well-rewarded) in the current period, it appears the cultural bar for 'leadership' in wider society is set as depressingly low as that as 'feminist' (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017). If leadership is everywhere, then leadership development also needs to be continuous and contextual and, therefore, *not needed* for those who already have the cultural and socio-economic capital to be acknowledged as leaders i.e., elite, white men.

In the case of women's leadership development, the acknowledgement of the structural barriers that impede women in the workplace (even those that have 'done the work' of leadership identity) has not yet led to the questioning of the stand-alone model of women's leadership development. Selzer et al (2017) observe that the ways to overcome structural barriers is policy-oriented change such as flexible working, not personal change. The environment in which most women work is problematic from a gender perspective – whether the problem is one of too few role models and advocates, organisational practices that are indirectly discriminatory, suboptimal networks, or the assumptions underlying performance demands (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011). And if, as mentioned already in this paper, there is a need to see women's leadership development as part of a raft of HR measures such as amended recruitment practices, advancement mechanisms, job titles, work schedules, policies, and the physical environment (Debebe et al, 2017), then Bierema (2017, as cited in



Madsen and Andrade, 2018) reminds us that this is minor tinkering – the real work required is in creating new organizational structures and transforming gendered society.

Stuck, as we are, in a recursive loop of reflexivity as leadership development for as long as individualism is the unit of reward, any recent advances in leadership development represent more tinkering. The restricted ability for individuals to physically travel and to gather in classroom settings because of COVID-19 accelerated a trend to mixed, or wholly online, delivery of developmental interventions. Outside of academia, those organisations that service the \$366 bn industry of leadership development are already pitching updated justifications for the leadership training spend. Sounding Board, one of the many coaching providers operating online, have produced a white paper (Sounding Board, 2022) that suggests that leadership development is the counter to the gender-based stressors women have experienced in the pandemic, i.e., greater responsibility for household chores, home schooling, increased workload, and wellbeing effects. Although more systems-based HR responses are suggested such as not penalising women applicants for ‘pandemic gaps’ on CVs, and facilitating flexible working, the main recommendation is – unsurprisingly – that coaching is the answer. Although, as expected, the business case (Author, 2009) for diversity and training women is covered, the performance evaluation criteria for the aspirant woman leader at the end of the coaching intervention are still expressed in terms of ‘empathy, compassion, and communication’ (Sounding Board, 2022, p. 10).

Coaching is not a radical shift in women’s leadership development. In common with therapeutic encounters with counsellors/coaches, aspirant women leaders may share narratives of emotional distress with their coaches, but the aim of verbalization of discourses and identities are ways that emotions become functionalized for the organization and not the

self (Graf, 2012). The coaching conversation still moves the individual in the direction of an internalized ideal. The approval of identities within narratives is generated within those familiar “socio-cultural expectations about the appropriateness or availability of particular behaviours, norms or values” (Graf, 2012, p. 31). A sense of failure, Swan (2017) suggests, is critical to coaching in that it sells the idea that the individual (woman) is never quite good enough, and that there is a feminized self that is in danger of losing its ability to mimic white male behaviour and therefore slip out of control. The therapeutic habitus (Graf, 2012) is part of the organizational field, but again, it is an awareness of the discourse in use that is the heart of the critique of coaching interventions (Swan, 2017). The ideal is also likely to be white. The model of leadership that we are socialised to reach for in our internal identity work is gendered, classed, and racialized in the sense that being able to claim an appropriate form of psychological capital is how the white middle class defines for others what success and leadership looks like in the workplace (Swan, 2017).

## Conclusions

The persistence of the gender reflexivity model of women’s leadership is unsurprising given the persistence of an individualised, heroic model of leadership cultivated by financial capitalism. What *is* more surprising is the lack of acknowledgement that leadership development practice is – in its purported role of creating a talent pipeline – dependent on that model, despite both mainstream *and* critical approaches to leadership using reflexivity as the vehicle for achievement and resistance. We seem to have forgotten Vince’s (1996)

observation that all educational contexts (and by inference, programmes) replicate external social power relations within their own internal processes.

It is difficult to imagine a world in which an inwardly focused gender reflexivity triumphs as a feminist route to structural change. Feminism is as much a social and historical construction as gender itself, and its use of theory changes along with contemporary social movements (Prügl, 2015) in the historical period in which it is invoked. In the current period, feminism is an *opportunist* and individualistic space, rather than one where change is achieved by pushing back against the structural (Prügl, 2015). Within leadership development theory based on transformational learning, individual change is seen as the incremental engine of organizational change (Debebe, 2009,2011). In this sense, leadership development is following another trend within management studies, which is increasingly interested in exploring 'micro' solutions to the structural issues and processes that define our current historical period e.g., micro-emancipation (Spicer et al, 2009), micro-engagement (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015), micro-processes (Reay et al, 2006), micro-strategies (Johnson et al, 2003).

Opportunism is also evident in the global growth in leadership development programmes (Forbes, 2019). There is a commercial reliance, and logic, to selling self-improvement to women in the corporate sector. One of the reasons that the 'self-acceptance, self-management, and self-development' model of women's leadership development is ubiquitous (across price points and customer segments) is because the methods are freely

available, or available at a small cost, and validated in popular culture e.g., the ever-present 'personality' tests or communication style quizzes on social media sites. Women typically occupy weak positions in networks of influence in organisations. Without patronage (i.e., official, or unofficial, coaching and mentoring) women often find themselves directed to training programmes in the belief that these programmes can recreate, or compensate for, the sorts of strong ties externally that men enjoy internally. Women who work in smaller enterprises, are – because of the low cost of entry into the training market offered by a gender reflexive pedagogy - just as likely to receive this form of development as those formally sponsored by their organizations to join higher prestige organised programmes. And, despite classroom-based development appears increasingly anachronistic in the COVID-19 context, the move to coaching online does little to overcome the structural problems that remain and prevent women's full involvement in leadership activity. Nor does the online coaching market look to be operating in terms of price-point, access, and workplace support, any way differently to the existing leadership programmes.

Gender reflexivity is problematic in respect of its plasticity as a concept (simultaneously occupying the space of a feminist pedagogy, critical theory, change management methodology, developmental for women). But it also – given its allyship of corporate feminism - legitimating the role of corporations as *producers* of knowledge on general equality (Fodor et al, 2019), as opposed to consumers of it. Not only is this problematic in respect of the conservatism inherent in corporate feminism but it also promulgates western priorities and ideas across global workplaces (see also Boussebaa and Brown, 2017). The 'stalling' of feminism looks to be both an aim and a side-effect of the mainstreaming of gender

equality in organisations whilst being seen as modernising and legitimate (see Fodor et al, 2019). Women's leadership development shares the same space as gender mainstreaming in appearing progressive whilst reinforcing conservative outcomes in respect of structural change. In terms of theory, the field is badly in need of some frame-breaking research (Vogel et al, 2021), which could usefully pay greater attention to intersectionality, embodiment and gender, and feminist critique. But without first breaking the material conditions that create the socio-cultural scripts (Hansen, 2014) that has us collectively in thrall of business leaders, we are destined to use gender reflexivity to self-soothe women who fail to progress rather than see any change to the structural barriers facing them.

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<sup>i</sup> Critical management scholars have been more willing to assign periods to the study of organisations e.g., Knights and Willmott (1989, 1990), Alvesson and Willmott (2002), Collinson (2003) who followed political economists such as Jessop (2002) in talking about Fordist and post-Fordist states, the resultant anxiety that impacts on identity formation, and the shifts in identity work required from workers because of the transition. Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) characterisation of the shift as a postmodern aesthetic (p. 623) may be somewhat overstated when viewed from a position of 20 years later but the openness of some fields of management studies to periodization can be contrasted to that of human resource development, nonetheless.