

Why The Future is Feminine

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In 2015, *The New York Times* published an article chronicling the resurgence of the slogan “the future is female.” Coined for Labyris Books, a women’s bookstore in New York City, photographer Liza Cowan snapped a photo of her then-girlfriend wearing a shirt with the phrase on it in 1975 (Meltzer, 2015). Exactly 40 years later, the photo was uncovered from obscurity and posted on a popular feminist Instagram page, causing an influx of printing the phrase onto shirts, sweatshirts, and other pieces of clothing. Many feminists proudly shared their shirts on social media, recontextualizing “the future is female” to fit their respective agendas. While the phrase is a source of empowerment originally designated for women, I suggest to replace “female” with “feminine” to disassociate its meaning from biological sex. This allows it to encompass men, women, and those in between who act in a manner considered “feminine” and subsequently “lesser” in modern society. Corporate women, like Facebook COO and hesitant feminist Sheryl Sandberg, maintain that gender equality can be achieved if more women were not afraid to embody bold “masculine” traits, whereas other feminists, including Roxanne Gay, argue that women do not have to “lead like men” (Gay, 2015). As if to substantiate Gay’s argument, John Gerzema penned a *Harvard Business Review* article, “Feminine Values Can Give Tomorrow’s Leaders an Edge,” that delineated the positive redrawing of femininity’s relationship with leadership. Despite the societal aversion of femininity, especially in the workplace, evidence suggests that changing attitudes are paving the way for an overall acceptance of feminine attributes, particularly in leadership positions.

Negative connotations with femininity in leadership roles stem from leaders being defined within an outdated binary. To be worthy of leading, one must be assertive, dominant, and

determined, all of which are traits considered innate to men. Consequently, according to Catalyst.org, “women currently hold 24 (4.6%) of CEO positions at [the Standard & Poor’s 500] companies” (“Women in S&P 500 Companies”, 2016). The reasoning behind this could be speculated, but some proposals are rooted in unabashed sexism. Billionaire Paul Tudor Jones (as cited in the *Huffington Post*) remarks that “women can’t be top traders because they’re less focused and ambitious at work than their male...colleagues” (Gregoire, 2013). The tirade continues by referring to babies as “focus-killers,” and describing motherhood as the demise of a woman’s career. Jones’s belief that women are incapable of working in trade due to their maternal instinct and lack of ambition reflects the ideologies that confine all women to the role of homemaker. Of the two ends of the gender spectrum, women are considered to be more greatly influenced by biological factors like innate maternal instinct. Although the Bureau of Labor Statistics accounts that 70.8% of mothers are in the workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015), with the Pew Center establishing that 40% of working mothers were “either the sole or primary source of income for the family” in 2013 (Wang, Parker, & Taylor, 2013), feminine women are expected to utilize their gender to maintain the home and submissively support their presumably male partners. It is not that women lack the ambition to achieve success; in some cases, they simply do not know that there are other options. From birth, women and girls are told that they must grow into an ideal woman that is impossible to attain. In spite of this, Sheryl Sandberg, author of *Lean In: What Would You Do If You Weren’t Afraid?*, encourages women to reject their grooming, asserting, “Aggressive and hard-charging women violate unwritten rules about acceptable social conduct. Men are continually applauded for being ambitious and powerful and successful, but women who display these same traits often pay a social penalty” (2013, p. 648). While Sandberg yields that women are encumbered by expectations of their

behavior, she enforces that acting “aggressive and hard-charging” (2013, p. 648) is needed to ascend the corporate ladder. Her definition of ambition is therefore inherently masculine. Furthermore, Sandberg does not reaffirm that choosing to subscribe to her advice will not determine a woman’s womanhood. Within this context, womanhood is not necessarily a woman’s femininity; it is her autonomy to define what being a woman means to her, no matter how she performs her gender.

Moreover, psychology professor Joan C. Chrisler addresses the gender performance component in her article, “Womanhood Is Not as Easy as It Seems: Femininity Requires Both Achievement and Restraint.” According to Chrisler’s research, “Career women who delay childbearing and others who prefer to not have children at all are often disliked and referred to as cold and selfish, traits that go against the feminine gender role and thus suggest that women who display them are not ‘real’ women” (2013, p. 118). Women are condemned for acting in a way not in accordance with their “biology”, yet those who do act within their “biology” are doubly dismissed when filling leadership positions. Chrisler explains, “women and girls...have lower social status than boys and men in most places in the world, included the United States, which has relatively few women in top leadership roles in government, business, and academia and whose popular culture routinely objectifies, and even humiliates, girls and women...” (2013, p. 119). Indeed, her analysis demonstrates why women like Sandberg are led to believe that the only way to elevate their social status is to shoulder the consequences of acting more masculine. Alternatively, the scholarly journal *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* examines the correlation, if any, between feminine appearance and perceived credibility as a scientist. The results, recorded by Sarah Bachefsky, found that the of the participants established in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) field, those deemed feminine in performance or even in a

physiological manner like bone structure were judged as less likely to be scientists at all (Bachefsky, Westall, Park & Judd, 2016, p. 99). The research concludes, “even when evaluating only women for a position or conscientiously combating gender bias, feminine women may nevertheless evoke more negative judgments” (Bachefsky et al., 2016, p. 107). Factors outside of a feminine person’s control will be what determines their capabilities to society. Physiological attributes and biological sex reinforce the pressure on women due to their biology. As women are perceived as the “kinder, gentler sex” (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011, p. 617), it could be argued that feminine women experience tension between their gender performance and leadership. However, a meta-analysis by researchers from various universities concludes that “‘role incongruity’ between women and the perceived demands of leadership” is a result of biased societal evaluations (Koenig et al., 2011, p. 616). Those that deem a woman unfit for a leadership position are often not judging her based on her abilities. If a woman has a feminine appearance, she is less likely to be considered capable of filling a leadership position. Therefore, she may be rejected for the role before she has the chance to be properly assessed.

However, all hope is not lost. As society continues to evolve, narrow-minded biases are likely to disband once populations desire different solutions to present issues. Such is reflected in Gerzema’s study. His findings are that, of the 64,000 people surveyed, at least 66% responded that “the world would be a better place if men thought more like women” (2013). Gerzema observes, “57% revealed their dissatisfaction with men in their country, including 79% of Japanese and South Koreans and more than [66%] of people in Indonesia, Mexico, U.K and the United States” (2013). Further, Gerzema prompts half of the surveyors to categorize certain characteristics with masculinity, femininity, or neither while the other half ranks the same traits based on their importance to leadership. The consensus gravitated toward the more “feminine”

traits when deciding what traits were essential to leading in what Gerzema refers to as “an increasingly social, interdependent, and transparent world” (2013). The top five traits that the ideal modern leader exhibits are expressiveness, possessing foresight, decisiveness, loyalty, and reasonability. With the exception of decisiveness, the remaining four characteristics are examples of feminine traits. Populations worldwide want to engage with transformational leaders, or leaders who nurture their following to enact change (Vernon, 2015). The compassionate nature of a position like this understandably requires a feminine touch. Moreover, a Spanish article in *The Psychology Record* supplements Gerzema’s argument. According to research, femininity’s emphasis on communion and acute emotional intelligence “are highly correlated with transformational leadership” (Lopez-Zafra, Garcia-Retamero, & Martos, 2012, p. 106). Accordingly, because of traditional gender roles, female participants scored higher on the scale than male participants. Nevertheless, feminine behavior can be utilized by all genders to approach leadership within a progressive framework.

The increased representation of femininity in the workforce tests and even further proves Gerzema’s argument. Accordingly, an entry in *The Leadership Quarterly* also proposes that “changes in organizations’ economic, demographic, technological and cultural environments” (Kark, Waismel-Manior, & Shamir, 2012, p. 621) have caused many to question traditional leadership values. Research conducted for the article show that if someone in a management position balances nurturing communal values with assertive, also known as agentic, values, their leadership effectiveness and employee identification increases (Kark et. al, 2012, p. 621). Another study, “Are (male) Leaders ‘Feminine’ Enough?” published in *Gender in Management*, reveals that male managers are less likely to perform with relevant communal influences because of their lack of identifying with expressive traits, which consequently declines their

transformational leadership potential (Gartizia, & Engen, 2012, p. 306). Though this discovery does not necessarily champion femininity, it dispels the taboo of performing it in the workplace. Similarly, men could also experience the benefits of approaching leadership differently.

Likewise, other jobs within the blue-collar labor force are beginning to distinguish the effectiveness of work produced by the binary genders. For example, the National Center for Women and Policing reports “Female officers tend to utilize a style of policing that relies more on communication skills than physical force. By using tactics and techniques that de-escalate potentially violent situations, female officers often successfully resolve situations that might otherwise lead to allegations of excessive force” (The National Center for Women and Policing, 2002). In addition, statistical data claims, “Female officers in large agencies are named in only 5% of citizen complaints for excessive force and even smaller 2% of sustained allegations of excessive force” (The National Center for Women and Policing, 2002). This illustrates the effectiveness of having a holistic approach to authority. Due to using skills like communication and compassion, policewomen are less inclined than policemen to abuse their power, which lessens the need for excessive force and increases trust between civilians and law enforcement. Within three major police departments in the U.S., women comprise 17.4% of their sworn personnel (The National Center for Women and Policing, 2002), yet male officers account for “98.0% of the sustained allegations for excessive force, far in excess of their representation of 82.6% among sworn personnel” (The National Center for Women and Policing, 2002). There may be critics who discredit the merit of these numbers because female police officers are so drastically underrepresented. However, this misconception is refuted by evaluating the ratio. Even for the small portion of women in the police force, their statistics for use of excessive force remains immensely lower than what would be expected. In light of these findings, use of the

communal style of leadership demonstrates positive correlation with effectiveness. If this behavior becomes normalized within the workforce, it is implied that women and other feminine people may be able to deconstruct the stigma against leadership and their gender expression.

Moving forward, the workplace has begun to liberate women and others through androgyny, or a cultural blend of traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics (Kark et al.'s, 2012, p. 621). Returning to Kark et al.'s research, both male and female participants in their study reached highest effectiveness when balancing communal and agentic leadership styles. It may be problematic that managers cannot be overtly feminine, or even overtly masculine, but it is a step in the right direction. Feminist Roxanne Gay believes that reevaluating the values associated with leadership should not be merely be an issue of "girls versus guys" (2015). She offers a counterargument to Sandberg that points out the narrow scope of Sandberg's leadership definition. In an article for *Fortune*, Gay writes, "consider this a way of thinking about how to more embrace the diversity of personality types in the workplace. There is value in bold, loud leadership but more workplaces need to recognize there is more than one way for employees to contribute effectively" (2015). Once societal biases are set aside, all genders and their respective behaviors and expressions will be able to thrive in professional settings. It seems that the only natural solution is adopting androgyny, a happy medium of masculinity and femininity that does not fit neatly into either category. It extracts the strengths of both expressions, such as perceptiveness, openness to feedback, self-disclosure and self-conception when doing "hard work" (Maheshwari, & Kumar, 2008, p. 43-45). In fact, even a study with only male participants showed greater effectiveness if they were more androgynously minded (Maheshwari, & Kumar, 2008, p. 45). Moreover, a more recent article about androgyny connects its characteristics with giving women a more equal standing in the workplace (Powell, & Butterfield, 2015, p. 70) with

their male co-workers. Accepting femininity, even in increments, has shown drastic improvement in work performance and effectiveness. To reiterate, eliminating the taboo of femininity will allow women to strike a balance between their aspirations and identity while allowing men to reconnect with their expressive side without shame.

The prospect of the future being feminine may seem to be the dawning of female domination. However, when considering it in the nuanced perspective of workplace equality, femininity can be utilized in a manner outside of the roles generally subscribed to feminine individuals. Research supports that by re-evaluating leadership positions to accommodate more feminine influences, the workplace may see increased effectiveness and overall acceptance of a broad range of gender expressions. I implore leaders to embrace the idea and allow it to empower them in the name of liberation for all.

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