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WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN LEADERSHIP ROLES: INCREASING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF LEADERSHIP

BY

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Women's Experience in Leadership Roles: Increasing our Understanding of Leadership

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Abstract

Sinclair (1998) argues that the absence of attention that has been given to women in leadership roles is reflected in the ways leadership concepts have been defined in both organisations and in research. Through increasing our understanding of women's leadership experience, that is paying attention to their experience, more inclusive descriptions of leadership are possible. Taking a feminist perspective and a phenomenological approach, this paper reports on the findings of research that is seeking to understand the essence of women's experience in leadership roles in selected Australian universities.

Semi-structured in depth-interviews were conducted with thirty-four women in recognised leadership roles in eleven different universities in three states and one territory. One of the interesting findings is the level of consistency in the women's stories across levels, types of institutions (sandstone, technology or new universities) and locations. With how it feels to be a woman leader as a central core, four super-categories have been identified that relate to women's experience in leadership roles. They are 'stepping through the door' which explains the processes by which women enter leadership positions, that is, what is the trigger; 'sitting in the chair' which focuses on doing the job but recognises the integral aspects of being a woman; 'interpreting the role' which focuses on the choices women make in relation to their enactment of leadership; and 'having friends and foes' which focuses on how women are supported as leaders.

Many describe their careers as 'accidental' in that they have not necessarily planned their career. Rather they have undertaken leadership roles because of the intrinsic value of the job and the difference they can make, criteria they apply generally when considering a job. However, once in a leadership role the women are quite deliberate regarding what work they will undertake, the ways they will undertake it, what they see as the major focus of the role and the impacts that being a woman has had on their career and their experience in a leadership role.

Key words: women's experience, leadership, universities, accidental careers.

Introduction

Although there has be an increased representation of women within universities, in part a result of equal opportunity policy and practices, gender equality has not been reached and universities continue to operate as highly gendered organizations (Eveline 2004; Fogelberg et al. 1999; Currie, Thiele & Harris 2002). Women remain under represented in leadership roles in Australian universities with less than 16 percent above the level of senior lecturer (Todd & Bird 2000). It has been suggested that this under representation could be due at least in part to the negative experiences of women in leadership roles (Meyenn & Parker 1996; Kolodny 1998). Bagilhole for example, notes that her "latest career as an academic has resulted in me yet again experiencing an occupation geared to and kept almost exclusively for men" (Bagilhole 2002:5).

Research conducted in the mid 1990s in universities in Australia and the Netherlands reported that many men believed that women had been unfairly advantaged by equal opportunity policies particularly in relation to hiring practices (Bacchi 1996; Wajcman 1999). Eveline also speaks of men's concerns and criticism of affirmative action for women (Eveline 2004). Eveline and Hayden   (Eveline & Hayden 1999) point out however that *"the woman who leads the corporation, the political party, the public service, the university or the legal profession remains the exception rather than the rule".* However, anecdotal evidence suggests that women leaders in universities, particularly some of the first women vice chancellors at Australian universities, had negative experiences that appeared to relate to their gender rather than any sense of their effectiveness or otherwise as a leader.

This paper reports on research that was interested in exploring women's experience in leadership roles, given that there had been some increase in numbers (Todd & Bird 2000) albeit relatively small, to see if the experience had improved for women leaders. If the experience has improved, what then explains the absence of women in senior roles if the experience is negative does this explain at least in part women's relative continued absence in

leadership roles in Australian universities? What was it like to be a leader now in an Australian university? The research question therefore that drove the research process was: W*hat is the experience of women in leadership roles in selected Australian universities?* This was supported by objectives that sought:

- To explore women's experience in leadership roles in an industry sector to determine the essence of the experience
- To determine if current organisational descriptors adequately describe women's experience in leadership roles
- To develop if necessary a new set of organisational descriptors to describe women's leadership experience leading to a more inclusive understanding of leadership experiences of both women and men

Organisational descriptors are defined for purposes of this study as the language used in organisations to describe behaviour that is common and expected and describes what is acceptable and what is not (Ely & Meyerson 2000). For example, the naming of sexual harassment has drawn attention to a predominantly male form of behaviour towards women in organisations, a form which has been described as "a particular expression of a more general phenomenon, the denigration and humiliation of women" (Bacchi 1999). By describing and naming the phenomenon feminist theorists emphasised that women collectively experienced the phenomenon, it was not a personal interaction but an imposition on women because they are women (Reskin 1991; Bacchi 1999; Acker 1991).

It is important to ensure that organisational language or descriptors include the experience of all of the organisational players if shared meanings are to be developed. Of equal importance is the need for organisational descriptors to accurately reflect the experience of various groups within the organisation rather than the development of descriptors that only reflect the experience of the dominant group(Ely & Meyerson 2000). Thus how women experience leadership and the language they use to reflect that experience is part of the

leadership story of organisations as well as women's story of their leadership experience.

Women in leadership roles

Women have successfully gained senior leadership roles in organisations. However as the work of Rosener, Alimo-Metcalfe and Stanford has shown, women managers tend to have completely different conceptions of leadership from men. They found that some women find the competitive, individualistic climates of many workplaces alienating and in order to be successful they are forced to behave in ways that go against their natural inclinations (in (Doyle & Hind 1998)). Reskin suggests that "men resist allowing women and men to work together *as equals* because doing so undermines differentiation and hence male dominance" (Reskin 1991).

Researching women in leadership roles has been hampered by the lack of women occupying these positions (Carless 1998). Sinclair sees the absence of attention that has been given to women in leadership roles as a reflection of the way leadership concepts have been defined in organizations and theorized in research. The absence of women she sees as a problem of invisibility, women's leadership remaining unrecognised in the "largely male constructed canon of leadership theory" (Sinclair 1998). Sinclair argues for the need to reappraise leadership through both a gender and a sexuality lens in order that "new insights and fresh purpose" may be uncovered (ibid 1998:1).

Responding in part to Sinclair's challenge, taking a feminist perspective and a phenomenological approach, this paper reports on the findings of research that is seeking to understand the essence of women's experience in leadership roles in selected Australian universities. Through increasing our understanding of women's leadership experience, that is paying particular attention to their experience, more inclusive descriptions of the full range of leadership experiences are possible.

Research Method

Seeking to understand women's experience from their perspective firmly places the research within the constructivist paradigm where the existence of multiple realities of the phenomenon being studied, in this case leadership, is expected. In exploring women's experience of leadership a phenomenological approach was taken (Moustakes 1994; Moran 2000; Creswell 1998) to understand the essence of the experience. Moustakes (ibid: 41) states that phenomenology is the "first method of knowledge because it begins with "things themselves".

The phenomenon being explored was leadership from the perspective of the women who experience it by being in certain organisational roles in Australian universities. These roles, generally described by universities as leadership roles, had responsibility for allocation of resources, that is, they carried both staffing and financial accountabilities. The decisions made by women in these roles have the potential to impact on the career and working life of others in a more direct way than for example leading a research team where people may come together for the term of the research project or because of shared interests. Therefore women in these roles can be expected to experience leadership in terms of their own view of leadership, their role as a leader and to reflect on how others perceive them as a leader and as a woman leader.

The research design for this project met both Creswell (Creswell 2003) and von Eckartsbergs' (Moustakes 1994) expectations regarding the major procedural issues for phenomological research. It was interested in how the participants experienced the phenomenon of leadership, in other words the "participant's 'life-world'"(Yates 2004:157). The research question had both "social meaning and personal significance" (Moustakes 1994:104). In addition feminist perspectives (Jaggar & Young 1998; Olesen 1994; Olesen 2003) influenced the research design, the data collection and the analysis. Creswell notes that feminist research approaches seek to establish non-exploitative relationships between the researcher and the participant and undertake research that has the potential to be transformative (ibid).

Taking Klein's view that "women are at the *center* of the study and they are neither compared to nor measured against normative (male) standards" (Klein 1983:95) meant that for this research being aware that women's experience is often interpreted in relation to men's experience. That is, women's experiences are described as similar to or different from, with an underlying usually unchallenged and unstated assumption that men's experience is how it should be. Therefore from the dominant masculine perspective understanding and interpreting women's experience does not necessarily contribute to new knowledge rather women's experience is explained in terms that show it to be deviant from that 'norm'. Through this research which involves "listening to women and giving them a voice" (Bagilhole 2002:5) it is hoped that new knowledge and understanding about leadership and how women experience it will result. For the analysis of data it means following the phenomenological practice of bracketing existing expectations and assumptions regarding how leadership 'should' be experienced so that the women's voices are heard and it is the story of their experience that is told.

A criterion sampling approach (Creswell 1998) was used to identify academic women who held formal organisational positions that had responsibility for human and financial resources. Twenty-seven in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken across three states during a nine-day period, the remaining interviews took place in Western Australia. All the interviews were recorded and all participants covered the same areas during the conversation

The interview questions focussed on how the women experienced leadership, seeking information on events such as a typical day, how they saw their gender impacting on their career and in their current role and the giving and getting of support. The data analysis sought to give a general description of the phenomenon that would lead to a better understanding or "phenomenological nod" (Morse 1994:131) where women can recognise the experience of leadership in universities as one they have had or could have had.

Tesch's (Tesch 1990) eight steps for analysis of unstructured data were used as a framework for the analysis process. This ensured a systematic approach to analysing the textual data. Within Tesch's framework, and using a feminist perspective and a phenomenological approach individual statements relating to the experience of the phenomenon were first detailed (codes) before moving to meanings (categories) and clusters of meanings (super categories) (Creswell 1998).

Findings

The interviews were coded into thirty-nine categories. For example, *how I see my career*; *why in this role*; *having responsibilities for others*; *leadership; where I get support* etc. Further coding within the major categories resulted in close to three hundred separate codes that supported the categories. The codes were named to reflect the participants meaning. For example, the category of *why in this role* has twenty-seven codes including: *I was asked*; *it was made clear I should do it*, *I wanted to make a difference; and it was time to make a change.*

The categories were conceptualised as four super categories shown in Figure 1 below, to explain women's experience in leadership roles. They are: 'Stepping', which explains the process by which women enter leadership positions; 'Settling' which focuses on doing the job and recognises the integral aspects of being a woman; 'Strengthening' which focuses on the particular aspects the women see as important to their enactment of leadership; and finally 'Sustaining' which focuses on how women are supported and give support in their role as leaders. This takes place around a central core of how it feels to be a woman in a leadership role.

**Figure 1: Women's experience in leadership roles**
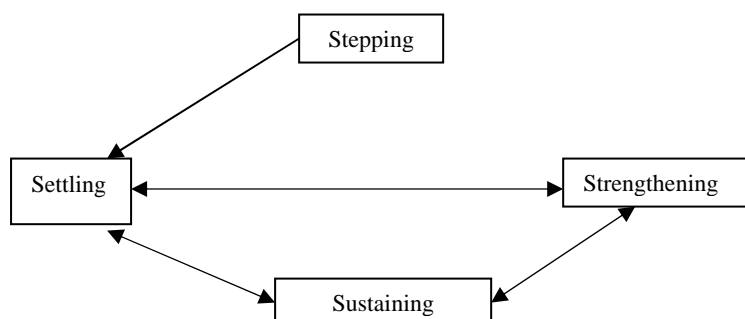
Comments by the participants provide supporting evidence for the super categories and are indicative of the range of comments made by the women. They are shown in italics, the double forward slash (//) indicate different respondents speaking about the same issue.

Stepping

For women to enter leadership there is a trigger that encourages them to consider stepping through the door and into a leadership role. The trigger alone is not sufficient for women to make the decision to undertake a leadership role. A number of motivating factors have also been identified that the women consider before deciding whether or not to make a career move which results in them being in a leadership role. These include being able to make a difference, interesting work, doing the right thing (by the institution) and for some the status that went with the position (that is it was a professorial appointment as well). Stepping into leadership is shown in Figure 2 below

Figure 2: Stepping into leadership
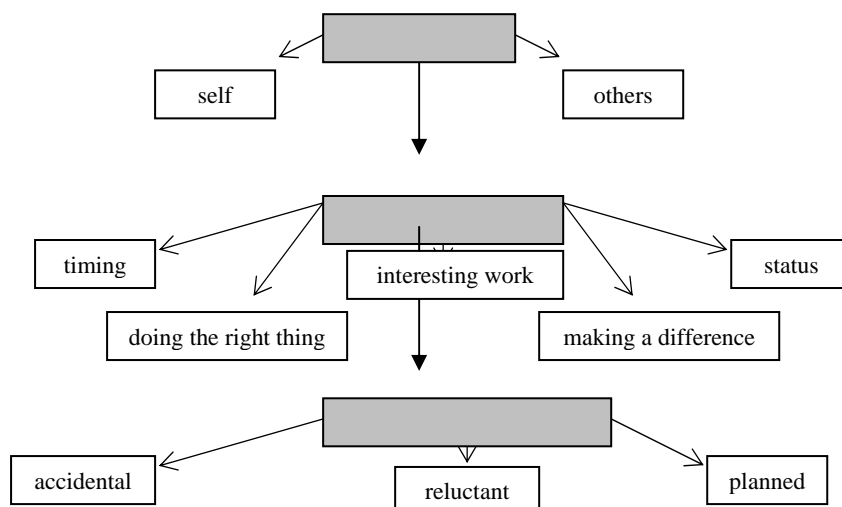
Some women trigger their own entry into leadership roles deciding it is time for the next challenge or that they should be recognised for the work they are currently doing. For the remaining the women who participated in this research it is others who are the trigger

> *// my friends convinced me and I applied // I suppose I was asked to do it, the staff asked me to consider it // I was sitting in the staff room with some colleagues, my female colleagues and they said aren't you going to apply for that position //.*

Some are given an offer that is difficult to refuse

> *// I'll give you twenty- four hours to say yes or no* [the Dean telling her that he wanted her to be a Head of School] *// the Vice Chancellor asked me if I would do it for a year … incidentally again I went in a crisis //.*

The career move, which encouraged the women into leadership roles, was for a number of the women accidental and although some had planned their career rarely did this involve articulating a move into a leadership role.

> *// so in a way I was preparing all the time // it's not something I ever planned, its just something that emerged // I think you develop passions and you know things that you really care about and you want to keep working on, across different jobs and you begin to develop skill sets that transfer so what you take on differs incredibly // well its been very accidental… I feel it has been very haphazard // and it was interesting and I sort of drifted into things really // I guess almost by accident // to some extent you end up in these positions as a sort of accident // I honestly see my career as being pretty much a total accident//.*

Settling

Once the women had been appointed to a leadership role they were faced with a number of choices. Very few were external appointments, so for most

the experience was one of moving from colleague to leader within a framework that could potentially see the majority of them back as a colleague at the end of three years. They had to determine what they would do whilst in the role and then what style they would adopt and/or develop as a leader. For some this decision was framed in terms of not wanting to act like the previous leader or other leaders they had observed but not admired.

Some they felt very positively about 'Settling', seeing the role as providing them with the chance to make a difference. There was an element of surprise in finding it wasn't as daunting as expected.

> // but having taken it on I was surprised at how empowering it was for me and how much of a difference I could make // what I have discovered which is amazing, I would have described myself as a coward but compared to most of the boys I'm a risk taker //

Some women commented there was a difference in the way women approached the job

> men know it is a game and they are making their move to get on, women are trying to do the job . . . I would say sometimes men slide their way up the tree and women sit there and get the job done.

Being a woman impacted on the way they did the job and how others saw them. Even if they tried to ignore their gender they were reminded by others of the impact that being a woman in a leadership role has and how it impacts on being accepted as a leader in their own right.

> I think men somehow find it much easier to be absolutely rude to a female manager// I don't think like them and theirs is the dominant mode. They set the tone, they set the kind of competitive bullyboy models and then I have to negotiate survival to get what I want in a game where I didn't write the rules. And the rules aren't built for my body shape; I meant that as a metaphor. So I operate in a world where I didn't write the rules.

The issue of sexual harassment remained a concern for some women

you get sexual harassment in the environment and you have to put on some silicone or something to protect yourself from it or teflon to protect yourself and you have to deal with things, you've got to be more aggressive than is probably your nature, you've got to be tougher, you play hard ball when you would rather not

Strengthening

Being in a leadership role for the participants is more than developing their style of leadership or undertaking a range of tasks that the particular university sees as appropriate for the role. There is an interpretation of the role that is an important aspect of their leadership, which leads to a focus on certain aspects that would not be found in job descriptions. For example, there is a strong commitment to treating staff fairly particularly in relation to workload. The women wanted to provide opportunities for staff to develop and to ensure that junior academics, which were more likely to be women, were not exploited. For some this meant challenging long standing arrangements within the department which they were not only prepared to do but in a number of instances made it their priority.
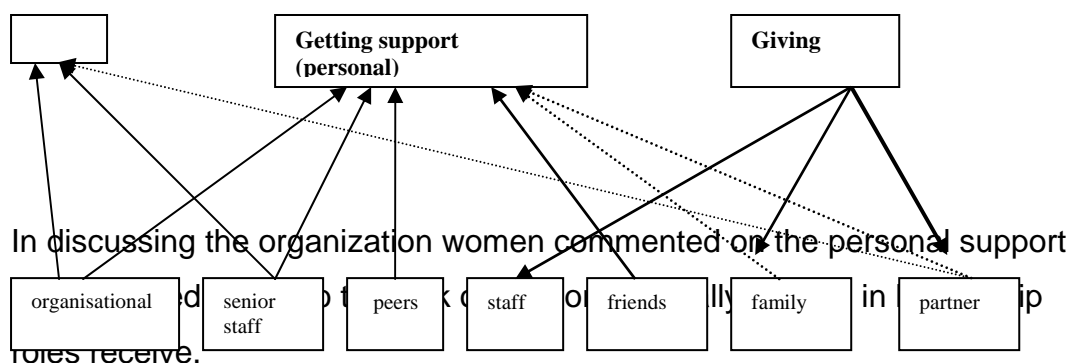
// so that's what I feel I'm doing is setting up a lot of opportunity, a framework and a secure system in which the academics I work with can achieve their potential and more // I have got to what I believe is as equitable as is possible and I have moved it from an inequitable uneven base to an equal // I'm very supportive of trying to advance their own professional development and have been instrumental in having some of the staff promoted . . . I've put them in key administrative roles, I've restructured the departments committee system . . . to have more staff have a say in how the department is running // I think I have tried hard to look after the fractional women appointees

Sustaining

Having adequate support can make the job of leadership much easier.
However, for many women support is conditional both at work and at home.
The women are still expected to behave in stereotypical ways and to take
responsibility for the 'jobs' that are seen as typically female. Acting
independently and actively pursuing an agenda for change was not always
viewed favourably by senior staff or by colleagues who were at the same
leadership level.

Women identified four main areas from which they gained support; the
organisation, a supportive boss, peers and family and friends. Lack of
support focused on the organisation, senior staff and peers. The organisation
was discussed in terms of the presence or absence of structural support such
as an adequate policy and procedure framework or appropriate levels of
administrative support. Peers were in effect divided into two groups. Firstly,
there are those that are at the same organisational level either within the
institution or external to it and secondly, where the women were head of a
school, peers included staff who were members of the school. Where peer
support was not available within the organisation some women had trusted
external colleagues with whom they could share experiences and 'test' their
thinking on certain issues. The support structures are shown in Figure 3
below. The thicker lines represent stronger support and the dotted lines
weaker or conditional support that the women received.

Figure 3: Support structures for women in leadership roles

Getting support
(personal)

Giving

In discussing the organization women commented on the personal support

| organisational | senior staff | peers | staff | friends | family | partner |

roles receive.

> *// I mean X is personally very supportive of me but the place is really, its got very poor management practices . . . so you get these incredibly mixed messages so you are in the middle of doing the budget and suddenly the goal posts change //the other thing I see is the lack of support for women in leadership roles. They will not ask for administrative support at a level that a male would and therefore they end up being more exhausted and doing more*

A number of women spoke about the lack of support they received. This made the job more difficult but didn't stop the women wanting to achieve the goals and outcomes they had set for themselves. A number of women noted the difference in the way they were treated compared to their male colleagues. It may not have been deliberate and in some cases the person concerned may well have been unaware that they were treating women differently.

> *// at the time my head of faculty told me he would prefer not to see me, not meaning to be unkind but it didn't fit well with him that I would let him know what we were doing and he felt very uncomfortable in my presence // so I came here and they had no support for senior staff they had no idea what to do with me // I am still absolutely stunned at the double dealing and back stabbing . . . I am annoyed when I am not backed up, when I am told to do something and I'm left hanging // I feel that I don't have the support of my current VC . . . from where I sit I don't believe I've got the support I feel I need // I know how to deal with argument but I can't deal with naked aggression // it comes out in forms of bullying like you're a woman, you don't need a job . . . things as gross as that //*

In addition a number of women spoke of their disappointment regarding the lack of support they received from other women who were in senior positions.

> *// so I was extremely disappointed in terms of X* (she) *was supposed to mentor me and there was just no way she was going to do that // I have sought out mentoring from women in the university and been let down // women provide less support for women than I expected . . . to be*

honest I haven't found a senior woman in this university that I feel I have had any support from // when they were appointed [women in senior positions] *they were totally unsupportive . . . I don't think some of the women realise they are doing it* [bullying] *its not a category thing its you the person they are having a go at continually // I felt so intimidated by these bullies really who were just not supportive at all. They were just like men, they were worse than men really in some ways // I think there is an assumption that a female discipline is going to be supportive of women and I would like to challenge that extremely strongly //*

A number of the women spoke about operating in professional ways and trying to ignore gender. However it was sometimes easy for 'outsiders' to see that gender was indeed an issue for some.

one of the lawyers came here to see me [in relation to a difficult industrial dispute] *and he said you know if it had been a white guy in your seat this wouldn't have happened. He said it's partly because you are female. Now I tried to take that out and say it's not because I'm a woman but he said look this wouldn't have been an issue any of these decisions or moves you have taken if you had been a guy*

Getting support was important for a number of women not only to take on leadership roles but to act in collegial, inclusive ways once they are in the role. A number of women commented on the support they received from their manager usually the dean and other senior men and for many it was a positive and affirming experience.

// the dean here is amazingly supportive // the CEO will come by the office and say lets go have a cup of coffee which means that its mentoring time which is great // I've had very good support from the faculty, they're really brilliant. The dean we've got at the moment is amazing // the key element in all of this is the current dean who's a very balanced rational individual . . . the dean is an exceptional man // I can think of many, at least four significant males in senior positions who have been absolutely one hundred percent, they have none of the

gender issues // we get a lot of support from the dean . . . she is fair to
everyone // some of my mentors and role models, most of them were
males // X as head of school has been amazingly supportive // my dean
has been incredibly supportive // had wonderful support from our dean
for setting up new facilities . . . our dean is a legend, he's great he is so
inspirational for anybody who interacts with him //having a woman
there at the helm is important for creating the climate where other
women feel they can say stuff and do stuff, it is really having a
particular type of woman //

But being supported was at times conditional.

The dean has been incredibly supportive . . . I've been rewarded but
I've also, its been tough and I had to prove myself. There was support
but yea its meant very long hours and complete dedication // I wouldn't
say encouraged I would say it was convenient for some people to offer
me jobs at certain points and that is different from encouragement // on
the whole people have been really fairly cooperative . . . I have been
well supported by all those professors or left alone // I had a very
supportive partner my ex-husband was very supportive. You know
supportive of me in the role as an academic . . . when I say he was
supportive not so much in terms of practical I think I was still doing all
the housework

Women in leadership positions found that they not only wanted to give
support to others there was also an expectation that as women they would
provide the 'glue' that held relationships together.

// the other thing you find as a woman . . . is you do provide a lot of the
social glue and the emotional glue . . . male egos need the most
extraordinary amount of stroking

Discussion

The findings help to explain how and why women enter leadership roles, how
they enact the role once they are in the position, their support structures and
for some the lack of support they receive. This experience of leadership takes

place within the context of being an academic woman within an Australian university at a time when universities are under increasing pressure resulting from globalisation and national agendas for reform.

For a number of the women, there continues to be ongoing challenges with respect to negotiating the expectations of others and themselves in relation to being a woman and being a woman in a leadership role within an academic institution.

The women have made deliberate choices to undertake certain roles because of the type of work involved and the difference they can make, rather than deciding whether or not a particular position or role would be a good career move. Many of the same elements may also hold true for men entering and undertaking leadership roles in universities. Wajcman notes however, that "at the same managerial level, men are given greater managerial responsibility than women" (Wajcman 1999). Women and men's work has been shown to be evaluated differently (Wajcman 1999; Todd & Bird 2000). Even if the same words are used by both women and men to describe for instance, their motivation it is likely that it will be played out differently as an experience and be interpreted differently by those who are observing the leader (Wajcman 1999; see also Fletcher 2001 regarding relational work).

Women can be reluctant entrants into leadership roles having been asked, told or encouraged by senior staff, peers and friends to put themselves forward for consideration. Where women have chosen to undertake a particular role as a career move they have done so because the position has either academic merit, that is, it is at a more senior level or it is seen as prestigious in terms of influence within their particular profession.

Very few of the women in this study speak about having planned their career and a number are surprised at finding themselves at senior levels in the organisation and in recognised leadership roles. They have, as they describe it, arrived at leadership by accident. They were committed to their work, highly committed to their discipline area, and to working itself, but have had

for the most part an accidental. This description is not one of self-effacement on the part of the women. Rather it is that the intrinsic value of particular jobs, being able to make a difference and interesting work were more important in their decision-making than the particular organisational level of a role or that spending time in particular roles would be good for their career.

Support for women in leadership roles was in a number of cases conditional. They had to manage others expectations regarding how successful women should be. For some women this meant a fine balance between their own career success and that of their partner. They were still expected to undertake stereotypical women's work in both the home and the office. As Wajcman argues women are seen in relation to the domestic sphere not isolated from it regardless of the organisational role or rank (Wajcman 1999). For some there had been 'battles' with secretaries who had willingly undertaken tasks for previous male bosses but questioned why they needed to do the same for a woman (the making of cups of tea and coffee for visitors for example).

It is interesting to note that many of the women spoke about the support they had received from senior men and how this had helped them to access leadership roles. In some cases this was through encouragement to give things a go, in other cases it was much more direct and directive. The end result was that for a number of women this support was enough of a trigger for them to step into a leadership role. Many were disappointed that they had not received the same level of support from women in senior positions. They had expected support but had not received it or felt excluded by other women. They found this difficult to understand and for some it increased the isolation of being a woman in a leadership role (Wajcman 1999)

For women having found themselves in leadership roles they were quite deliberate in the work they undertook, the ways they undertook it, how they saw the major focus of their role and the positive and negative impacts that being a woman had had on their career, and their experience in a leadership role. They were leaders to who are prepared to make a difference in practice,

to tackle long standing inequities and to do the current job as well as possible without necessarily focusing on their next move. That move will in effect start the cycle one more that is there will be a trigger and a range of motivating factors rather than a hierarchical move up the career ladder that will lead to a change. That change may or may not be a move up the traditional career ladder.

The experience of being in a leadership role is one that is generally positive. The women enjoy being in the role and being able to make change. It's not as daunting as some expected. However, support for women in leadership roles still appears to be very individualised. There appears to be little structural support for women entering leadership roles. Women from only one of the eleven universities in this study spoke of excellent structural supports for all staff going into leadership roles as well as specific support targeted at women.

It would seem then that if getting more women into senior positions is an issue for universities (as is often stated in their equal opportunity plans) then they could do well to ask women to apply. However for the experience of leadership to be sustaining then good structural supports for all leadership roles as well as specific support for women may be the minimum that is required.

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