

LEADING LADIES: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF WOMEN LEADERS IN THE UK MEDIA

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Abstract

Women continue to be economically disadvantaged and under-represented in positions of power and leadership. A discursive disjunction between cultural and media representations of women and leadership has been implicated in these continuing inequalities. We address this issue through an analysis of the ways in which prominent women leaders were portrayed in a UK radio series, BBC Radio 4's '*Profile*' broadcast between July 2011 and July 2013. Verbatim transcripts of 12 broadcasts featuring women were analysed within a critical feminist framework, to explore the ways in which these women leaders were discursively constructed. Our analysis explicates three constructions of 'women leaders': as 'traditionally' feminine; as having to balance 'masculine' and 'feminine' attributes; and as exceptional women who may nevertheless fail. We conclude that the impact of equality legislation continues to be limited while androcentric norms prevail and that we therefore need more gynocentric ways of imagining women leaders.

Keywords: women leaders; leadership; inequality; androcentrism; cultural representations

Introduction

In the UK's General Election of May 2015 women made up a record 29 percent of British MPs and, since Britain's EU referendum in June 2016, Theresa May replaced David Cameron, becoming the UK's second female prime minister and going on to narrowly win the general election of June 2017. The increased representation of women in parliament is encouraging but clearly we still fall far short of gender equality in the UK and elsewhere (UN Women 2015). The privileges men enjoy in relation to distributions of power, pay and access to resources at local, national and global levels is both well-known and well-documented (Joan Acker 1990; Donna Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Dana Britton 2000; Kevin Stainback, Sibyl Kleiner, and Sheryl Skaggs 2016). Gender pay gaps persist (Chris Watson 2015) and women

remain woefully under-represented in leadership positions in politics, business, finance and elsewhere (Sandrine Devillard, Sandra Sancier, Charlotte Werner, Ina Maller, and Cecile Kossoff 2013; Katti Gray 2015), facing increasing difficulties as they/we navigate “the career ladder” (Devillard et al. 2013).

Feminist scholars and others have long been interested in understanding these continuing inequalities (Stainback, et al. 2016). Explanations proffered span individual, institutional, structural and societal factors. They range from women’s alleged lack of assertiveness (Alison Cook and Christy Glass 2014), “fear of success” (e.g. Letitia Peplau 1976) and purported failure to network instrumentally (Denise Scott 1996); through “natural” and/or ideologically-produced gender differences in domestic and reproductive roles (e.g. Bobbitt-Zeher 2011), to gender discrimination (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011), cultural and institutional androcentric attitudes and practices (e.g. Karen Ross, Elizabeth Evans, Lisa Harrison, Mary Shears, and Khursheed Wadia 2013; Deirdre O’Neill, Heather Savigny, and Victoria Cann 2016); and indeed the gendered nature of organisations themselves (Acker 1990; Stainback, et al. 2016; Britton 2000). While this substantial body of work provides an array of often richly theorised insights into continuing gender inequalities, the precise nature of the processes whereby women are marginalised remains a matter of debate (Britton 2000; Stainback, et al. 2016). Amongst the issues requiring further scrutiny are questions about the significances and impact on gender inequality both of actual women leaders and of cultural representations of women leaders in the media (Philip Cohen and Matt Huffman 2007; Stainback et al., 2016).

Stainback *et al.* (2016) have argued that women leaders often act as “agents of change”, benefitting women at all levels of their organisation by reducing gender-linked inequalities for others. In addition to the anti-discriminatory practices of individual women

leaders, their mere presence may also be of benefit, in their symbolic challenge to androcentric notions of leadership as inherently masculine (Stainback et al., 2016). As Acker (1990) argued, understanding status inequalities requires an attention to how culturally dominant gender norms are embedded in organisational processes and structures, rendering women less plausible than men as effective actors and leaders within organisations (see also Britton 2000; Carol Isaac, Anna Kaatz, and Molly Carnes 2012). Others (e.g. Rosabeth Kanter 1975; Jean Lipman-Blumen 1980) have similarly noted that the culturally prevalent image of business leadership is one of “forceful masculinity” (e.g. Acker 1990; Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Britton 2000) and that while men need only exhibit “masculine” characteristics to be considered effective leaders, women may have to demonstrate both “feminine” and “masculine” characteristics for the same effect (Stefanie Johnson, Susan Murphy, Selamawit Zewdie, and Rebecca Reichard 2008; Clare Walsh 2015).

While such masculinist notions of leadership clearly persist, the need for greater equality in business and elsewhere has become a frequent topic of media discussion (see e.g. <http://banbossy.com/>) and, some have argued, media portrayals of women leaders have become more positive (Cohen and Huffman 2007; Stainback et al., 2016). Taking a critical feminist perspective, our paper thus seeks to contribute to current debates about contemporary cultural representations of women leaders by exploring how internationally prominent women leaders (see table 1) were portrayed in a weekly mainstream UK radio series, BBC Radio 4’s *Profile*, broadcast between July 2011 and July 2013. Before turning our attention to this analysis, however, we first outline some of the key issues and debates in research on women, leadership and organisational gendered power relations.

“Glass ceilings”, “leaky pipes” and other architectural features of patriarchal organisations

There are, of course, numerous other, often competing accounts of why there are still so few women in leadership positions (Isaac, Kaatz, and Carnes 2012). Some have argued that women's career networks are less powerful than men's and that their networking may be friendship-based rather than instrumentally career-enhancing (Herminia Ibarra 1992; see however, Scott 1996). A situation that could be seen as being both created and compounded by a range of norms and practices that support men's career ambitions more than women's (see Acker, 1990; Britton 2000). Among these is the "anytime anywhere" performance model that is often apparent, particularly at senior levels, requiring long hours, extended availability and sacrifices to personal and family life (Acker, 1990; Britton 2000; Devillard *et al.* 2013). This model disproportionately penalises women, who continue to be (viewed as) responsible for childcare, housekeeping and caring for elderly relatives (Devillard *et al.* 2013). Women's "double burden" and subsequent more frequent part-time status (Stephen Hicks and Jennifer Thomas 2009) not only means that many women are precluded from excelling in this particular model of performance but that all women, regardless of domestic arrangements, will be perceived as less likely than men to perform well.

These norms and practices are the foundations for various concepts explaining organisational gender inequality; oOne of the best known ~~concepts explaining organisational gender inequality~~of these is the "glass ceiling"; a term introduced by Bryant, and subsequently developed by Hymowitz and Schellhardt in the mid-1980s (Karen Boyd 2008) to refer to the invisible barriers that function to keep women and minorities from leadership positions regardless of their/our experience, skills and qualifications. While this glass ceiling remains near-impenetrable (World Economic Forum 2014), the career ladder leading to it is also hardly without obstacles, as illustrated by gender differences in probabilities of promotion (Acker 1990; Devillard *et al.* 2013). Thus, Devillard *et al.* (2013) refer to a "leaky pipeline" through which women are lost at all levels of an organisation such that few women

approach “the glass ceiling” let alone break through. Additionally, research also indicates that when women do gain leadership positions it is often in organisations facing crisis: a so-called “glass cliff” effect (Helena Liu, Leanne Cutcher, and David Grant 2015; Cook and Glass 2014). Indeed, Theresa May’s appointment as Prime Minister in the wake of a Brexit referendum result might be viewed as just such a precarious “glass cliff” promotion.

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Embedded in corporate organisations and cultures, then, are a plethora of gender norms working against women’s advancement (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Devillard *et al.* 2013). Yet some evidence also suggests these masculinist views are declining and, that, for example, traditionally “feminine” characteristics such as compassion, understanding and empathy are

increasingly valued in the workplace as much as “masculine” traits of rationality, competitiveness and assertiveness, (Gary Powell, Anthony Butterfield, and Jane Parent 2002; Greg Young 2016). Taking a critical feminist perspective, we see notions of gender and leadership, and consequently power relationships in organisations and (political) institutions, as discursively and culturally constructed, and at the base of many of the above processes creating gender inequality. Our paper thus explores how women leaders are configured in the cultural imagination and how gender and leadership are articulated together and/or against each other through an analysis of the ways in which successful women leaders are represented in mainstream British media. Specifically, our study entails a critical discourse analysis of how women leaders in the fields of business, finance and politics were discursively constituted in the BBC Radio 4 series, “Profile”, a UK “news and current affairs” programme broadcast weekly to provide, according to its website, “an insight into the character of an influential figure making news headlines”. The programmes are compiled and presented by both male and female editors and presenters, and feature recorded interviews with friends, colleagues, family and adversaries of the profiled person together with the presenter’s biographical narrative.

Methods

Data for this study are the transcripts of 12 *Profile* programmes, each lasting 20 minutes and all broadcast between July 2011 and June 2013. Over this two year period *Profile* was broadcast most weeks of the year and we selected every programme featuring a woman occupying a leadership position in business, finance, or politics, producing a total of 12 broadcasts (see Table 1) which we downloaded from the BBC Radio 4 website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qjz5>), transcribed verbatim (see note 1) and analysed using a discourse analytic methodology conducted within a critical feminist

framework. [Author 2We](#) developed a set of coding categories based on repeated reading of the transcripts, and coded the data. These coding categories included ‘family commitments’, constructions of ‘good mother’ and ‘traditional femininity’ (despite being successful). [Authors-We](#) then refined the analysis further, aligning codes and identifying discursive constructions of women leaders, leadership and gender, thus exploring not only how women leaders were discursively constructed but also how gender figured in representations of leadership in these broadcasts.

We also sought to ~~compare~~ explore how these broadcasts compared with those featuring men. While it might be argued that this move inserts “the phantom of the male norm” ([Yvonne Billing 2011](#)) into our methodology it did enable us to “test” what might or might not be particular to broadcasts featuring women. Not surprisingly, three times as many programmes featuring men were broadcast in our chosen time period. Of these, we chose 12 broadcasts featuring men who were broadly comparable with the women in our sample in terms of career and demographic characteristics. These we downloaded, transcribed and analysed to provide a basis for comparative comment about what might and might not be specific to broadcasts featuring women.

[insert Table 1 here]

Table 1. Individuals featured in the broadcasts by work sector/area

Analysis

There were, inevitably, many similarities in how women and men were presented in the radio broadcasts. For example, both invariably featured some discussion of childhood background, significant life events, personal attributes and career histories. At the same time, however,

interesting differences also became apparent and in the analysis below we endeavour to clarify some of the key ways in which gender figured in the representations of women leaders. Our analysis thus explicates three constructions of “women leaders” that were woven into the biographical narratives presented in the broadcasts: constructions of women leaders first, as “traditionally” feminine; second, as combining “masculine” and “feminine” attributes; and, third, as exceptional women who may nevertheless fail.

Safeguarding traditional femininity

There was a strong emphasis in the broadcasts on the women’s appearance and appearance-orientation, on their attractiveness and likeability, and on their domestic and childcare responsibilities such that these women were repeatedly constituted as stereotypically feminine and, more precisely, as conforming to a traditional white, middle-class, heteronormative femininity. In the excerpts below, for example, Christine Lagarde, Arianna Huffington and Jay Hunt are all portrayed in terms of appearance in ways which clearly feminise them.

She had a ready smile. Even today, I think you'd agree, she has an engaging smile and twinkling eyes, and so she was fun to be with. [Former teacher; on Christine Lagarde]ⁱ

Arianna Stasinopoulos as she was at the time she was in Cambridge, cut a very glamorous figure. She was stunning to look at. She was tall, she was a bit flamboyant, she was definitely going places. [Cambridge contemporary; on Arianna Huffington]

She’s always immaculately groomed. I mean nails, hair, dress; she is all coordinated, nice jewellery. She sets very high standards for herself, but at the same time, she’ll, I mean she has told me once, “oh I like your necklace”, or “I like this”, you know, she does try to show a sort of feminine side to her. [Media writer; on Jay Hunt]

These women are portrayed as having “a ready smile” and “twinkling eyes”. They are “very glamorous”, “stunning to look at”, “immaculately groomed” and interested in jewellery. They

are, we would argue, heavily feminised not only through the emphasis on their appearance *per se* but also through an emphasis on, for example, nails, hair, accessories and body shape, further coding their appearance as traditionally feminine. Moreover, these women's appearances are made all the more important by seeming here to also define, at least partially, the women's characters: their smiles, glamour and grooming are implicitly framed as indexing these women as fun, flamboyant and feminine.

The centrality of “beauty ideals” in defining women's worth is, of course, well-documented (e.g. [Susan Bordo 2003](#); [Dorothy Smith 1990](#); [Naomi Wolf 1991](#)) and arguably this cultural fixation with “feminine beauty” and the concomitant regulation of women's bodies has intensified in recent years (e.g. [Angela McRobbie 2009](#)). The emphasis on women leaders' appearances in these broadcasts is not therefore surprising and, indeed can be understood as signifying a “respectable business femininity” that [Sharon Mavin and Gina Grandy](#) (2016, 381) theorise as a gendered performance that elite women leaders often embody in an effort “to be evaluated as credible and respectable as leaders and as women”. Yet this emphasis on appearance might also be viewed as an obstacle to representing women as effective leaders. Resonating with [John Berger's](#) (1972: 42) observation that “men act and women appear”, it positions women as to-be-looked-at, as always-already passive objects rather than action-oriented, and hence perhaps as lacking the capacity to lead (see also [Mavin and Grandy, 2016](#); [McRobbie, 2009](#)).

In the extracts below this emphasis on appearance is extended to present these women as not only looking “feminine” but as also themselves appearance-oriented: as having, for example, a “penchant for a natty pair of shoes” or a preference for particular designer labels, tastes that also clearly index their femininity as middle class.

She could always seek solace in some retail therapy, indulging her penchant for a natty pair of shoes. [Cut to Interview] “She’s seen as a rather dour creature, but, in fact, the shoes suggest that there is rather a wilder side to Theresa May.” [Anonymous; on Theresa May]

She wears Hermes and Chanel and lots of wonderful bracelets, but she still keeps her own personality and signature which is what I love, you’re never quite sure what’s she’s wearing. She is so self-assured and carries herself with this grace and elegance. I would say the key words is attitude, and she carries it off so well in such a way that people are attracted to her and admire her. [Anonymous; on Christine Lagarde]

In these extracts May and Lagarde are both presented as invested in their appearance; a framing which functions to constitute them as traditionally feminine and, perhaps therefore, not wholly serious. For May, her interests in shoes and shopping are presented as “a wilder side” while Lagarde’s fashion-sense indicates her “grace and elegance” – guaranteeing her “femininity” and thereby rendering her seemingly more likeable: “people are attracted to her and admire her”.

While the majority of discussions about women leaders’ looks were complimentary, there were occasions when they were disparaging. In the excerpt below, for example, Marine LePen is derided for her “too masculine” appearance and voice, and the consequences of her thus “failing” to appear sufficiently feminine, although implicit, are made obvious enough by the seeming necessity of her transformation.

The physical resemblance [between LePen and her father] is very, very striking. She’s a younger version of her rather hefty old man, if I may say so. She’s very masculine and she has quite an impressive voice, a very assertive voice. It’s a very deep husky voice [...] She always looked to me like Stephen Fry in drag, that’s what she looked like. She had that sort of rather lumbering look of a sort of female impersonator but she’s transformed herself, not just politically but physically somehow, you know. She has [...] completely changed her image not just politically but as a woman. [Journalist; on Marine LePen]

The distinctly derogatory, cis-centric phrasing articulated here clearly frames LePen in terms of her appearance and thereby invalidates her on the grounds of her alleged “masculinity”. In contrast with Lagarde’s attractive “grace and elegance”, LePen is portrayed as “hefty”, “lumbering” and looking “like Stephen Fry in drag”. Despite also being described as “striking” and having an “impressive” and “assertive” voice, the depiction is nevertheless distinctly negative. Her “failure” to appear traditionally feminine damns her as unattractive and, through suggesting she looks like a “female impersonator”, perhaps also as inauthentic (cf. Liu *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, elsewhere in this broadcast her authenticity and trustworthiness are explicitly questioned. Her transformation “not just politically but as a woman” is thus cast as absolutely essential if she is to succeed. As we note below, a demonstration of “masculine” attributes may be essential for women to be perceived as viable leaders but, as this excerpt suggests, looking feminine is also vital.

In contrast to this necessity of a feminine appearance for women leaders, in most of the programmes on men, appearance is rarely mentioned, rendered unimportant or at most signifying respectability, maturity or the image of ordinariness as in the following excerpts on the easyjet founder, Stelios Haji-ioannou, or the French politician, Francois Holland:

What he’s saying is I’m not the bling President, I’m a normal person, I’m a normal guy, je suis Presidente normale [...]. So he’d be President, ‘bland’ not President ‘bling’ say the sceptics (.) a clean shaven bespectacled man in modest suits, promising to be president normal. [Political commentator; on Francois Holland]

I remember him for the first time when I saw him with his (), white jacket and uh blue trousers, he was, 15 years old, and he was a 15 years old and he was a mature young man. [...] in his suit, in his nice tie [laughing] yeah, absolutely. You know, he wanted to participate, he wanted to discuss, he wanted to be, in business. (University Professor; on Stelios Haji-Ioannou).

A second key way in which women leaders were construed as “traditionally feminine” was through narratives of their childcare, domestic activities and family orientation, a topic all but missing from the portraits of male leaders. For example:

Away from the stresses of the TV executive life, Jay Hunt relaxes at home in Clapham with her family. [Programme presenter; on Jay Hunt]

She’s someone who is very, very family orientated. She lives for her three daughters, who she makes lots of sacrifices for. [Friend; on Nadine Dorries]

She has a number of different cell phones and the one that is sort of the special hotline for her daughters rang and she was doing an on camera interview with Tim Armstrong, the CEO of [Aaol](#) at a conference that they attended out here in Los Angeles. And the special batphone rang and it was her daughter and she stopped the interview, took the call and dealt with what felt like a mini crisis, and finished that up and went right back to the interview. Didn’t miss a beat. [Colleague; on Arianna Huffington]

Hunt, Dorries and Huffington are all thus presented as mothers and, quite specifically, as ‘good mothers’ (see [Ann Phoenix, Anne Woollett and Eva Lloyd](#), 1991). They find time to “relax at home” with their children, “mak[e] lots of sacrifices” for them, and are always there for them regardless of circumstances, even when being interviewed “on camera”, thus exhibiting the communal, selfless and child-focused traits that stereotypically mark ‘good mothers’ ([Kristin Gorman & Barbara Fritzsche](#), 2002). In these and other ways the narratives presented in the broadcasts often evidence a considerable amount of discursive work to portray these women in a positive light; as “good women” and “good mothers” who, despite their prominent careers, conform to heteronormative gender roles: they have not neglected their feminine grooming nor their domestic responsibilities. The men’s profiles, in contrast, hardly mention families, children or even spouses, which pronounces the gendered importance of these family values.

Predictably, then, as with discussions of appearance, broadcasts featuring women leaders tended to differ from those featuring men in both the extent and nature of discussion about family and domestic activities. In the excerpt below this feminisation through accounts of domesticity is again quite apparent.

With her love of jam making and tending the roses at her country house in Normandy, Lagarde, a teetotal vegetarian who practices Yoga, could never be accused of aping the alpha-male behaviour of her colleagues. A strength, she believes, in her new job. “In terms of being a woman I think, you know, I bring to the equation a new dimension that is not very often represented in financial circles.” [Programme presenter; on Christine Lagarde]

Through reference to her jam-making, rose-tending, teetotal vegetarianism and yoga practice Lagarde is quite explicitly constituted here as the very opposite of “alpha-male” masculinity. And, in a seemingly positive move, this difference is framed as “a strength”, at least in her eyes. She brings “a new dimension that is not very often represented in financial circles”. Lagarde is construed as bringing something new to “financial circles”, precisely because she is “a woman”. Tellingly, though, it remains unclear how making jam, tending roses or doing yoga are relevant here.

In some ways, of course, these flattering representations of women leaders as traditionally feminine can be read as progressive. Undoubtedly, too, depictions in the broadcasts of women juggling work and domestic responsibilities resonate with many women and highlight gendered tensions in the cultural imagining of women as leaders. While Arianna Huffington is portrayed above as effortlessly not “miss[ing] a beat” in combining motherhood with a prominent career, others are presented as struggling. Dorries, above, is explicitly constituted (no doubt commendably) as sacrificing a lot and, in the excerpt below, Lagarde is portrayed as “touchy” that “perhaps she let down her children” by pursuing her career (see also Gorman and Fritzsche 2002).

[Motherhood is] something very touchy for her. She loves her kids, but she has the feeling that at one time she couldn't be the mother that they wanted to have, because she was always travelling around the world. So when you speak with her it's something very difficult for her to speak about. She feels that perhaps she let down her children.

[Biographer; on Christine Lagarde].

Lagarde is positioned here in a complex and ambiguous way; construed positively as a loving and perhaps commendably guilt-ridden mother but also as a possibly failing mother who travelled for her job rather than staying at home for her children. Such discussions, which were not apparent in broadcasts featuring men, re-produce women as *always* having primary responsibility for childcare regardless of career success and as therefore needing to find ways to negotiate this tension (c.f. [Donatella Campus](#) 2013). These narratives can thus be read as efforts to represent these women leaders in a positive light, defending against potential accusations of “selfishly” neglecting maternal responsibilities to pursue a successful career by highlighting efforts to combine both. They make visible some of the difficulties that these and other women face (e.g. [Paula Nicolson](#) 2002) at the same time, perhaps, as re-articulating a traditional status quo that ties women to the home.

Femininity is not enough

These narratives of juggling career and family highlight some of the problematics entailed in attempts to represent women leaders positively in a cultural context where women continue to be understood as naturally primary carers (see Phoenix, et al. 1991), and where ideal employees, including, of course, leaders, are conceptualised as being free of other commitments, that is, as fundamentally masculine (see Acker 1990; Billing 2011; Britton 2000; [Saija Katila and Päivi Eriksson](#) 2013). This equation of leadership (or indeed employment) with masculinity was also apparent in representations of women leaders in the

broadcasts we analysed, in attributing them with “masculine” characteristics, for example, rationality, detachment and aggression and, notably, in the use of military imagery.

She reels out, her arguments, her facts, her proposals, like a sort of machine gun really, and throws herself at things which is a sign, too, of this sort of energy, and she does seem some times to be a superwoman [...] and she has a reputation for being a ruthless and effective manager [Programme presenter; on Jay Hunt]

Her sheer intelligence, range of experience, doggedness, her thoroughness. It’s almost a military quality of steadfastness under fire. ... She clearly conveys an impression of somebody who was very calm and would deal with the situation; and that was what she did, and stood up to the minister, to the government. [Anonymous; on Elizabeth Filkin]

Effective leadership is presented here as a performance of militarised masculinity. The incongruence this implies between cultural notions of “woman” and “leader” is similarly apparent in research findings that women leaders may be less accepted and less liked than their male counterparts (e.g. Madeline Heilman and Tyler Okimoto 2007; Laurie Rudman and Stephen Kilianski 2000; Laurie Rudman and Peter Glick 2001). In several of the broadcasts we analysed, too, there was a notable emphasis on whether or not the women portrayed were liked or likeable. For example,

Without being critical she’s a very sort of upfront sort of almost pushy sort of person. She’s got her own mind and she puts her points over very well, and I think she was thought by some of my conservative-with-a-small-c partners to be perhaps, a little too confident for her age and experience as a young solicitor. But no, I liked her. [Superior at early career stage; on Sayeeda Warsi]

She was a deeply polarizing figure in Cambridge. You were either pro Arianna or you were against her. It was a bit like marmite you know. You either loved her or hated her and that was something that that went right the way through the community of the union society. We all knew that she was always going to be a significant figure. [Cambridge contemporary; on Arianna Huffington]

But she's often also described as a marmite person, someone colleagues either love or hate. [Anonymous; on Jay Hunt]

In contrast again with broadcasts featuring men, the issue of women leaders' popularity was often prominent. This focus no doubt reflects culturally embedded notions of women as existing for others but also perhaps illustrates a social ambivalence about successful women. Representations of women leaders as possessing the masculine qualities "necessary" for leadership inevitably come perilously close to damning them as "unfeminine". In describing Sayeeda Warsi as "upfront", "almost pushy", having "her own mind" and being able to "put her points over very well" the speaker is careful to mention that this should not be heard as criticism and that they liked Warsi despite these characteristics. What might be viewed as leadership qualities or even simply competencies are coded here as masculine/unfeminine and hence as possible grounds for disliking her. Women leaders were thus often rendered "marmite" people, both "loved" and "hated", facing possible social sanctions because, as women leaders, they might possess "masculine" qualities (c.f. [Renata Bongiorno, Paul Bain, and Barbara David 2014](#); Heilman 2001).

While women leaders were portrayed as exhibiting "masculine" qualities, their "feminine" qualities, such as people skills and empathy (e.g. [Inger Askehave and Karen Zethsen 2014](#)) were also frequently framed as strengths. Frances O'Grady is portrayed below, for example, as agreeable, friendly and polite *and* as a formidable and highly effective General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress.

One of her strengths is to be agreeable without being disagreeable; but I think those who try to take advantage of her, think she will be a push over because she will smile, she will be polite, she will not shout. I think men who underestimate her, do so at their peril [...] a really nice way with her which meant that she could bring some of the male, pale and stale, shall we say, people in the Transport Workers Union who were not convinced of the equality agenda so while she had a radical agenda, the way in which she spoke with

people and attempted to deliver it was hugely inclusive. [Journalist and politician; on Frances O'Grady]

O'Grady's "feminine" leadership is contrasted positively here with more masculine, confrontational leadership styles. Lagarde, quoted above, similarly asserted that "being a woman ... bring[s] to the equation a new dimension that is not very often represented in financial circles". Femininity is thus construed as adding value to women's leadership but it is also quite clearly constituted as neither necessary nor sufficient (see Liu et al. 2015). Observations that to succeed women have to work harder and deliver more than men are not new (Elizabeth Gorman and Julie Kmec 2007) and, in these broadcasts, are reflected in representing women leaders' success as requiring performances of both masculinity and femininity (see also Britton, 2000; Liu et al. 2015). While both feminine and masculine qualities appeared essential for women leaders, there was no discussion of femininity in broadcasts featuring men, producing feminine leadership characteristics as a bonus, but certainly not a necessity for (male) leaders.

Exceptional women, precarious futures

In the analyses above we have argued that the *Profile* broadcasts represent women leaders as traditionally, heteronormatively feminine and as combining feminine and masculine qualities. In many ways these broadcasts can be viewed as going to considerable lengths to portray these women positively. But in doing so we have argued they also illustrate the continued androcentrism of cultural images of leadership. In the excerpts below, embedded in ostensibly positive representations of women leaders, a masculinist perspective is again apparent where these women are construed as not like other women (see Cook and Glass 2014).

Her posh boys remark was a bit coarse, a bit overdone, but golly it was widely shared in the conservative party and throughout the Kingdom, and this is what I mean about Nadine Dorries. sShe was unusual in that she was brave. [Political writer; on Nadine Dorries]

Few women have reached the top in the civil service. Helen Ghosh is a striking exception. “Helen was something of a trail blazer, people look at you and they say how was it that someone was able to manage having children, proper family life, and getting to the really difficult job of being a permanent secretary and not just in one department but a number of departments.” [Anonymous; on Helen Gosh]

It was clear that this was a remarkable young woman. [Former teacher; on Christine Lagarde]

Dorries, Gosh and Lagarde are all described as unusual, exceptional and remarkable and, at least implicitly, as being better than other women, just as (as illustrated above) Jay Hunt “does seem some times to be a superwoman”. Unlike the profiles of their male counterparts, these women are depicted as exceptional and their success and power as surprising.

The portraits of the men, of course, also speak of their subjects’ strengths, but these are represented as less exceptional or surprising. Their success is presented more as a consequence of routine masculine qualities such as hard work, a drive to succeed, ruthlessness and competitiveness as for example in the extracts below discussing the then police commissioner Sir Bernhard Hogan-Howe, and the business magnate Sir Philip Green:

The Police spotted Bernard Hogan-Howe’s potential early and he was sent to Oxford to study Law before getting qualifications from Cambridge and Stafford University. Despite what he said about the terrifying experiences during the Miners’ Strike, he progressed quickly in the Police, moving to Merseyside in 1997 for the first of two spells at the Force. [Programme presenter; on Bernard Hogan-Howe]

When his father passed away he was sort of thrust into the environment of having to be there for his mother and for his family [...]. He *did* leave [school] at the age of 15, even before that he'd been helping his mother by working on the forecourt of the petrol station she ran. He went on to learn the raw facts of life about business as an apprentice in a shoe warehouse. At the age of 23 he set up his own business importing and selling jeans. [Schoolfriend; on Philip Green]

Of course, the depiction of the women as exceptional can be read as rightly recognising their achievements in the face of very real male privilege (e.g. Acker 1990; Britton 2000; Bobbitt-Zeher 2011). But it can also be read as re-producing masculinist norms whereby career success for women is not to be expected and where only women who are not like other women could be imagined to succeed.

This latter more negative reading is, we would argue, consolidated in the final aspect of our analysis: the broadcasts featuring women leaders often concluded by raising the possibility that, despite being extraordinary, these women's futures remained uncertain.

As Lagarde strives to meet the aspirations of the emerging nations, while at the same time bolstering Europe's faltering economies, will all the people skills and consensus-building, for which she's famed, be enough? [Programme presenter; on Christine Lagarde]

...nobody's prepared to stand up and publicly criticise Frances O'Grady right now but the honeymoon will end as austerity bites, and with some of her more radical colleagues champing at the bit, her preference for persuasion over confrontation will be put to the test. [Programme presenter; on Frances O'Grady]

More than a year into her contract, it remains to be seen, whether Jay Hunt will make a success of her time at Channel 4. Dan Sabbagh of the Guardian says, this is the test which will determine whether her career will continue its meteoric rise. [Programme presenter; on Jay Hunt]

“Traditionally Feminine” skills such as “consensus-building” and “persuasion” may have contributed to these women’s successes but are presented as shaky grounds on which to build a career. In contrast with broadcasts on men, these women are presented as potentially unequal to the future challenges they will face. Indeed, even in the broadcast on Theresa May (broadcast 13 August 2011), while the possibility of her becoming a future prime minister is acknowledged, there is, equally clearly, uncertainty that she will survive:

Even her supporters say that this week hasn’t been a great one for the normally unflappable home secretary. The department fondly known as the political armpit of White Hall has dented the ambitions of many of her predecessors and the riots present her most daunting challenge. Tim Montgomerie isn’t sure how she will emerge from it. [Cut to Interview] So much can go wrong for a home secretary as we’ve seen that this week. And so this may be her final job. But she is seen as someone, that if David Cameron fell under that proverbial bus, and the conservative party wanted a safe pair of hands, it’s her and William Hague that people talk of. Britain’s Mrs Miracle. [Presenter, and Tim Montgomerie; on Theresa May]

While uncertainties about their futures might, again, be read as reflecting the realities for women in the male dominated worlds of business, finance, and politics, these endings also re-articulate a construction of “woman” as lacking (Luce Irigaray 1996; Simone de Beauvoir 1997) and inevitably thereby failing, a continuing disjunction between cultural representations of traditional femininity and leadership and, today, for May, an image of a woman promoted only to the edge of a very precipitous “glass cliff”.

Conclusions

Leadership in any field is still clearly a gendered occupation not only in that men continue to heavily outnumber women in such positions (Devillard et al. 2013; Gray 2015) but also in that it remains “symbolically and discursively gendered” (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Michele

Bowring 2004; Britton 2000; Katila and Eriksson 2013; Walsh 2015). Yet as Britton (2000: 429) argues, while

the theory of gendered organizations (Acker, 1990...) is clearly an important systematic attempt to bring together the findings of research on the perpetuation of gender inequality in organizations and social institutions ... the meaning of labelling an organization, an occupation, a policy or a practice as gendered is still theoretically and empirically unclear.

In this article we have sought to contribute to understandings of gendered leadership by analysing how internationally prominent women leaders are discursively constituted in broadcasts of the UK's BBC Radio 4 series, *Profile*. Of course, positive media coverage of successful women leaders can in itself be viewed as a welcome development and, as noted above, the broadcasts we analysed often evidenced considerable discursive work to present these women "positively", for example, as "appropriately feminine" and as possessing "masculine" qualities deemed necessary in effective leaders. As Mavin and Grandy (2016: 381) argue

To be admired and held in high esteem, women elite leaders face gendered double binds and are expected to perform femininities associated with being a "woman" whilst also demonstrating masculinities expected of those in elite positions (Silvia Gherardi 1994; Su Maddock and Di Parkin 1994).

The focus in these broadcasts on women's appearance and domestic responsibilities can, we argue, be understood as performances of "respectable business femininity" (Mavin and Grandy 2016) performed by women leaders to appear acceptable and credible. Yet, while conferring status, these embodied performances also simultaneously reinscribe constraining gender stereotypes that undermine women's plausibility as leaders (Mavin and Grandy 2016). They re-articulate traditional, heteronormative femininities (e.g. Bordo 2003; Smith 1990; Wolf 1991) that privilege white, middle class, able-bodied heterosexuality that exclude many

women and, further, can be seen as post-feminist masquerades (McRobbie 2009) whereby women's empowerment is simultaneously "celebrated", "masked" and "undermined" through an emphasis on feminine appearance that reinstates the gender binaries of male/female, active/passive, subject/object. In contexts where gender issues have been "mainstreamed" and women are perceived as equal and empowered, feminism has been disarticulated while disempowering gender binaries persist (McRobbie 2009). A discursive double bind thus emerges where "attractive femininity" appears essential to a positive representation of these women but, at the same time, seems to, at least partially, invalidate their credibility as leaders.

Related to this is a second double bind in relation to the gendering of necessary leadership qualities. Stereotypically "masculine" traits, such as rationality and "ruthlessness" were produced as necessary for success for both men and women and were often ascribed to women leaders but these qualities also often appeared to render women less likable (Bongiorno, et al. 2014; Heilman 2001). Warsi, for example, was liked only despite being "almost pushy" and "knowing her own mind". In this context, the emphasis on women leaders' traditional femininity *and* their masculine attributes can, as noted above, be read as presenting these women in a positive light. Yet, the lengths that are gone to here precisely indicate the continuing disjunctions between cultural understandings of "women" and "leadership". The "defensive rhetoric" of emphasising their traditional femininity coupled with the attribution of characteristics that are clearly coded as masculine, the framing of them as exceptional (that is, not like other women) and as nevertheless liable to fail in their ostensibly successful careers all suggest a cultural failure to imagine strong women leaders in non-masculinist terms.

In a context where most positions of power and leadership are occupied by men, constructions of women leaders and their successes as unexpected is hardly surprising and, as noted above, could be viewed as rightly recognising these women's achievements in the face of androcentric attitudes. Yet, presenting successful and powerful women as both exceptional and as nevertheless facing immanent career failure, simultaneously constitutes traditional femininity (even in a nominal sense) as a career liability (also Britton, 2000).

In her analysis of Captain Janeway in the TV series *Star Trek Voyager*, Bowring (2004) illustrates precisely this problem. The series producers sought to portray a strong woman leader in a future where there is gender equality and throughout the series Janeway appears sometimes highly feminine, sometimes very masculine. Yet, reflecting the uncertain futures of the women featured in *Profile* so Janeway ultimately fails.

“Janeway’s character is, in the end, destroyed by her feminine attributes, giving up her ethics and morals to get her crew home, for purely personal reasons. Ultimately, *Endgame* [the series *finale*] refutes the notion that 20th century people can imagine a woman who is a leader and who does not fall into the prison created by 20th century dualisms regarding women and leadership.” (Bowring 2004: 384)

The solution to the problem of imagining women leaders, Bowring (2004) suggests, is not simply positive (complimentary) representations of women leaders as both feminine and masculine. Rather - drawing on her analysis of Star Trek fan fiction in which Janeway is romantically involved with another character in the series, the female/cyborg Seven-of-Nine – Bowring (2004) argues that a more successful imagining of women leaders requires a disruption of masculine-feminine binaries; a recognition of gender as fluid and performative rather than fixed and essential; and, just as crucially, a re-imagining of leadership in non-masculinist terms. The broadcasts we analysed are clearly largely complimentary representations of women leaders as both traditionally feminine and masculine, but what they

do not do is disrupt either the heteropatriarchal matrix of masculine-feminine binaries or the hegemony of androcentric models of leadership. This, we would argue, explains the seeming difficulties in imagining these women will prevail.

While equality legislation is obviously welcome, its impact, we argue, will always be limited while androcentric norms prevail (c.f. Ronit Kark and Ronit Waismel-Manor 2005).

As Foucault asserted

“the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them.” (1974, cited in Derek Hook 2007, p. vi).

The problem of representing women leaders not just flatteringly but in feminist terms that disrupt heteronormative masculine privilege is important not only for privileged women who are, or aspire to be leaders, but for all women who are subject, directly or indirectly, to employment inequalities. Critiquing current symbolic and discursive gendering of leadership and, following Bowring (2004), developing new gynocentric and queering ways (cf. Irigary 1996) of imagining women leaders is, we contend, central to this task.

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~~Table 1. Individuals featured in the broadcasts by work sector/area~~

ⁱ Square brackets within excerpts denote annotations by the authors. [...] denotes words have been omitted.