

# Stop looking at her shoes!

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Nineteenth century norms of respectability are alive and well for women elite leaders in the UK. Women leaders' bodies and appearance are markers for their performance evaluations – both as credible leaders *and* as respectable women. This barrier, facing women at work, is not often talked about in organisations.

## Respectable Business Femininity

Women in leadership face unique challenges relative to men. They must act like **leaders** (e.g., decisive, ambitious, competitive) but also like **women** (e.g., nurturing, collaborative, empathetic). Yet, too much of one or the other destabilises their credibility.

Further, the business 'suit' symbolises professionalism and credibility for men elite leaders – it normalizes men as leaders (see images from search term '**business suit**'). However, for women this is less clear. We explain how women attempt to navigate these ambiguous 'body and appearance' rules, to establish and retain their power, dignity, respect, privilege and credibility. We name these processes *Respectable Business Femininity*.

Based on interviews with 81 women from FTSE 100/250 companies and influential leaders from a UK region, we found that in terms of their presentation, women elite leaders can't be 'too fat', 'too sexy', 'too informal', 'too mother-like' or 'too male.' They can't be 'too focused on how they look' and, at the same time, 'not focused enough on how they look.' For very recent illustrations look to **media debates** on the credibility and respectability of the new UK Prime Minister Theresa May (e.g.,).

Women elite leaders gain privilege through their job positions but face social disadvantage based on their **gender**. Our research demonstrates how women elite leaders engage in *Respectable Business Femininity* to manage these expectations through processes of conferring, contesting and defending privilege.

### 1. *Conferring privilege*

Women elite leaders have to 'look the part' to retain their privilege, as leaders and as respectable women. When you 'look' the part you are more likely to be evaluated and rewarded as a credible leader. One woman put it this way:

“Men can shuffle up in creased old suits and unpolished shoes but... you can't do that as a woman. You need to look presentable, nice, that just gets everything off to a good start.”

## 2. *Contesting privilege*

As a woman elite leader, if you get 'it' wrong, then there are consequences for your credibility and your privilege. When bodies and appearances don't meet (ambiguous) expectations of what a woman leader 'should look like,' privilege and respectability are questioned and destabilised. An example can be seen in this account,

“I remember one interview I went to and somebody said to me 'Oh you're not very sparkly today and you don't look that good'... They wouldn't have dreamt of saying that to one of the men competitors... You always had to pay much more attention to your appearance because you were liable to be criticised for it.”

## 3. *Defending privilege*

Some women resist sexist expectations of their bodies and appearance. In doing so, they defend their privilege and credibility and create opportunities for change. As stated by one woman elite leader,

“Once in my career some man said to me you should wear less flamboyant clothes and basically my response to that was 'get stuffed, it's got nothing to do with you what I wear and I am who I am', I like dressing how I am and I will take the consequences of how I am and for me that's an important and genuine part of being me and I bring my whole self ... It's really important for women to bring their whole self to work”.

## **What can we do?**

Ask yourself, in terms of Respectable Business Femininity, when are we doing it? Why are we doing it? What are the implications of this for women's progress in organisations?

- We recognise that conversations about bodies and appearance at work are uncomfortable for all of us, but these judgements create barriers to women's progress and detract from their credibility as leaders.
- We can use *Respectable Business Femininity* as a language to 'call out' sexism and situations where women's credibility, as leaders and respectable women, are based on what they look like. Women should be evaluated on their performance not gendered expectations.
- We can also use this language in HRM, talent management, leadership development programmes and executive coaching to increase awareness to and provoke discussions about, the injustice of sexist evaluations that occur on daily basis.

## **In summary**

Our research surfaces how women elite leaders face sanctions and rewards based on what their bodies and appearance say against ambiguous norms. Respectable business femininity is a way of managing sexism. The same rules generally do not apply to men, although to see an exception of this, read the article on [Hilary Clinton's husband](#).

Here we have drawn attention to an elephant in the room when it comes to women's progress in organisations. Why in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are we still holding women leaders accountable to 19<sup>th</sup> century expectations of respectability? First thing to do – Stop looking at their shoes!



*Notes:*

- This post is based on the authors' paper [Women Elite Leaders Doing Respectable Business Femininity: How Privilege is Conferred, Contested and Defended through the Body](#), *Gender, Work & Organization*, 23(4), 379-396 (2016).
  - For more on respectability femininity see Radhakrishnan, S. (2009). Professional women, good families: Respectable femininity and the cultural politics of a "New" India. *Qualitative Sociology*, 32(2), 195-212; and, Fernando, W. D. A., & Cohen, L. (2014). Respectable femininity and career agency: exploring paradoxical imperatives. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 21(2), 149-164.
  - The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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