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Beyond the Glass Ceiling–Finnish Women’s Path to the Top Leadership Positions

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Beyond the Glass Ceiling – Finnish Women’s Path to the Top Leadership Positions

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Abstract- In Finland, women have advanced to top positions, and this positive development is the result from a long legislative development and advances in attitudes. How has this development happened and why? What kinds of obstacles women may face? How to bring women’s expertise forward? In this article, we discuss these questions. We highlight the importance of courage to do the effort for the better society.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In today’s Finland, an increasing proportion of leaders and supervisors are women. The number of employees working under the supervision of women is greater than in any other country in the European Union (Paoli, 1997; Paoli & Merllié, 2001). Indeed, a surprisingly fast change has occurred in the equality development of work life in Finland: women are taking over leadership roles even though they are still mainly possessed by men (Lehto, 2009; Hyvärinen, Uusiauitti, & Määttä, 2015).

This article describes the development of Finnish women’s position in the light of history and political decisions. In addition, our purpose is to discuss how work life has changed and requires new kind of leadership practices. Today, it is more and more important to support and encourage employees’ development and help them use their strengths. Also communality has increased its importance in modern workplaces. This article is based on Professor and Vice-rector Kaarina Määttä’s festive speech held in September 2017 at the graduation event of the Executive Master of Business Administration (eMBA) program at the University of Lapland, Finland. This two-year-long program was targeted at experienced women who work as leaders or entrepreneurs at public administration or private sector. The purpose was to combine academic research-based knowledge with wide experience at leadership in practice.

Regardless of their good education and talent, women still have less leadership positions than men. Why? We want to analyze why many women tend to underachieve and give up their career plans or pursuits of reaching a top position. It is important to identify those factors that would strengthen women’s expertise and power. Many women working at the top leadership

positions also act as models for other women showing how to enhance their performances and work for not only themselves but eventually to the whole society. Today’s work necessitates creativity: courage to give up the old routines and create new solutions. When asking where to find this courage, we expect to find the answer from strong women. Finland has numerous examples of women advancing to top leaders and renewal work they have done. Let us introduce these milestones.

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER EQUALITY IN FINLAND

In the past, Finnish women’s education and career opportunities have followed certain steps. The history is long, but changing positively. As mentioned, Finnish women hold the top record for leadership positions in the EU. What happened? The following phases and decisions are probably the most essential ones for the Finnish women’s career development (Office of the Equality Ombudsman, 1996):

- 1864 Unmarried women of 25 years became of full legal age
- 1870 A women passed the Matriculation Examination
- 1878 Women and men received equal right with regard to inheritance
- 1882 Women became eligible to teach at girls’ schools
- 1890 The first public kindergarten was established in Helsinki
- 1901 Women received the right to study at university, on equal terms with men
- 1906 Women received voting rights for national elections (the first country to do so in Europe) and the right to be electoral candidates (the first country to do so in the world)
- 1907 The first women jointed the Parliament
- 1919 Wives gained the right to work without their husband’s permission
- 1921 Compulsory general education decreed by law
- 1926 The Act on women’s eligibility in state posts was passed
- 1926 The first female minister for the Finnish government was instated
- 1930 The Marriage Act released wives form under the guardianship of their husbands and wives were given the right to their own property
- 1943 Statutory school meals were introduced

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1944 Act passed instituting local government maternity and child health care clinics and also local government health visitors
 1962 The principle of equal pay for work of equal value is established both in the public and private sectors
 1970 The Abortion Act was passed
 1972 The 1st woman was elected to be Minister of Finance
 1975 The 1st woman was elected to be Minister of Justice
 1978 Parents gained the right to share parental leave
 1986 Finland ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
 1987 The Act on Equality between Women and Men was passed
 1988 Women were permitted to enter the clergy of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church
 1990 Children up to the age of 3 were guaranteed a municipal child care place
 1990 The first woman in the world to become Minister of Defence
 1992 A woman became University Principal
 1992 A woman became Governor of the Bank of Finland
 1994 A woman became the Speaker of the Parliament
 1995 Partial reform of the Act on Equality between Women and Men: a 40 % quota of women
 1995 Act on women's voluntary military service
 1995 A woman becomes Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of the Environment
 2000 The first woman became the President of Finland.

These phases represent not only the milestones of Finnish women advancing to top leadership positions but also milestones of how women's position in Finland was improved in general too. In Finland, the number of women in leadership positions has been steadily increasing since 1984 and today 40 % of all employees and 63 % of female employees have a woman as their supervisor (Lehto & Sutela, 2008).

According to a report concerning EU countries, the proportions of employees working under female supervisors have increased in almost every EU country since 1995 (Paoli, 1997; Paoli & Merllié, 2001). Only in Germany, the proportion has remained at the same level (18 %). The growth has been the fastest in Belgium (from 16 to 25 %), although its score is still only average in Europe while the slowest growth has been in the new member countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, and Slovakia (Lehto, 2009; Paoli, 1997; Paoli & Merllié, 2001).

III. WHY TO RECRUIT WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS?

Numerous changes have taken place in work life based on which leadership and supervision questions have to be viewed in new perspectives

(Perlow & Kelly, 2014). Women's input as leaders is needed increasingly for the following reasons:

1. Team work has become more common and the traditional hierarchical structure in many fields has dissolved. This requires new kinds of leadership that provides encouragement, inspiration, attention to emotions, and acknowledgment and feedback.
2. Many employees have new kinds of goals for their careers: instead of advancing to higher positions, they pursue wider expertise in their current jobs.
3. Women's educational level has increased considerably and faster than men's education. Finnish women stand out in European comparisons as most educated women. Finland tops even the other Nordic Countries when looking at women's educational levels.
4. According to Statistics Finland, women differ from men as leaders and supervisors (see e.g., Lyly-Yrjänäinen & Fernández Macias, 2009). Female leaders have proved to be better than men in giving feedback, encouragement, and support, acknowledging good performances, noticing emotions, and especially in encouraging employees to study and develop in work. However, women and men did not seem to have differences in their abilities to solve conflicts, share responsibilities, distribute information, expertise in work tasks, or paying attention to older employees.

International research on employee or supervisor experiences of female or male leaders is scarce (Eagly & Heilman, 2016). The general impression on the one hand does not support the fact that female leaders are more and more common, and on the other hand creates stereotypical images of female leadership (Joshi, Son, & Roh, 2015; Kumra, 2014).

However, there are numerous theories about various leadership styles all the way from leadership trait theories (Parry & Bryman, 1996) and leadership style theories (Northouse, 2013) to authentic leadership (Gill & Casa, 2015) (see Hyvärinen, 2016). When it comes to women and men's leadership styles, Eagly (2007) has connected the transformational leadership style with women and the transactional style with men. Transformational leadership is based the idea that true leadership makes followers work better through encouragement and support. This kind of leadership enhances employees' intrinsic motivation. Transactional leadership has emphasis in control and extrinsic motivational factors such as rewards from good performance and punishments from bad ones (Eagly, 2007). Black-and-white analyses of differences between women and men may however maintain stereotypes (Vinkenburg, Van Engen, Early, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011).

Research shows that women still find it more difficult to combine work and family than men (van

Steenbergen, Ellemers, & Mooijaart, 2007). Women's solutions are interpreted differently than men's and the public discourse about the relationship between a leader's work and family suggests that this is only a women's problem (Aranda & Glick, 2014). A career-oriented woman's ability to take care of her family is often questioned and she can be blamed for neglecting her family (Bosley, Arnold, & Cohen, 2009). When it comes to male leaders, these discussions or analyses rarely take place.

Hopefully, the increase in the number of female leaders would spread understanding about the fact that the successful combination of work and family does not so much have to do with gender but the spouses' ability to compromise about career choices and agree with how duties are shared in the family (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2012).

IV. WHY DO MANY TALENTED WOMEN HAVE DIFFICULTIES IN ADVANCING THEIR CAREERS?

Talented women are often also those ones who have succeeded well at school, been nice and obedient. Those women who have advanced to leadership positions do not feel too grateful for these features in their past. When men's and women's experiences are compared, talent is interpreted differently (Festing, Komau, & Schäfer, 2014).

Good self-image and robust self-esteem are central factors for the development of talent and creativity. They influence the development of talent in women in a very special manner (Robinson, Feters, Riester, & Bracco, 2009). The self-esteem of girls who are known to be talented decreases especially during their adolescence. This phenomenon is connected to girls' ability to notice conflicting expectations in their environment. As girls grow, they become to realize that they are expected to possess the traditional female characteristics such as passiveness, adjustment, sensitivity to others' expectations, and altruism, while at the same time, they are expected to perform well and succeed (e.g., Combs & Luthans, 2007; Hyvärinen, 2016).

Contradictory expectations targeted to girls may lead to a situation where girls hide their talent and lose their potential. They may be afraid to succeed or avoid it because they believe that competitiveness and success would destroy their femininity or jeopardize their social relationships or acceptance by others (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015).

Similarly, perfectionism can hinder talent to come forward. When it is combined with responsibility and scrupulousness, accomplishments never satisfy these women. Strong tendency to avoid mistakes alongside perfectionism may also lead to underperforming (Corrie & Palmer, 2014).

Certainly, girls' and women's individual differences are great and they also differ in their ways of facing gender-specific expectations and pressures (Roth, Purvis, & Bobko, 2012). At the same time, stereotypical beliefs of women's features seem to be well rooted (Biernat & Vescio, 2002).

V. HOW TO TURN OBEDIENT GIRLS INTO STRONG-WILLED WOMEN?

Based on our own studies and research review (e.g., O'Brien, Scheffer, Van Nes, & Van Der Lee, 2015), we present five viewpoints or mottos to give better space to women's expertise, knowhow, and talent when pursuing a better work life. To improve the current everyday life at work, the following general features are necessary for female leaders:

a) *Communication Challenges: Perseverance*

- Women should learn to express clearly what they want and also take the risk of becoming ignored. They should pay more attention to how they express their viewpoints than what others think about them (see also Beukeboom, Finkenauer, & Wigboldus, 2010).
- If you have belief in your cause, do not give up immediately—even if the first reaction was disapproving.

b) *Focusing of the task and activities: Trust in one's expertise*

- Women should learn to focus on how to enhance and finish activities and make decisions, and this should be regarded as at least equally important than relationships between people who perform tasks.
- They could try to avoid the continuous thought of how to become accepted by others (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001; Biernat, Tocci, & Williams, 2011).

Women have to highlight their own expertise. When building functional and thriving living areas, day care centers, schools, churches, offices, kitchens, apartments, houses, and enterprises, women should disclose the knowledge they possess, they have obtained through education and everyday solutions (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Female leadership and expertise become common resource only when women themselves trust in them to be right (Castilla, 2016).

c) *Attitude: Appreciation and Positivity*

- Women should value themselves. A positive attitude and self-appreciation as well as appreciation of others make the world look a better place.
- "It would be quiet in the woods, if only those birds who sang the best were singing." The leader can give various experts opportunities to shine if they realize that together employees complement each other (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015). In addition, we

have to learn to be happy about ourselves, respect our own achievements, and appreciate our own opportunities and fulfill them.

When does the joy start?, asked a Finnish author Kari Hotakainen, and the same question was asked by Dr. Taina Rantala (Rantala & Määttä, 2011) when she did research among bored and frustrated fourth-graders. She created ten theses to strengthen joy of learning at school. Likewise, Eliisa Leskisenoja (2016) showed how joy at school could be improved by applying principles of positive psychology. Uusiautti and Määttä (2015) have done research on how positive emotions and successes at work can have a far-reaching positive influence on people's lives.

Basic positivity, positive thoughts about others and a positive self-image, can help surpassing feelings of failure or mistakes that must be allowed to everyone, even oneself. On the other hand, it would be good to be strong enough or one's own direction if new information or experiences prove it reasoned.

Perhaps, the ability to choose wisely is more important feature and strength than we often realize. People have enormous potential! It is difficult to decide what one should become and what to accomplish in life. However, time and resources are limited and women should not be bystanders or stay worrying their reasons for too long.

Previous experiences may hinder women if they gnaw their self-esteem or self-appreciation. Belief in one's success may be weak in adulthood. Researchers call this phenomenon "impostor phenomenon" (Clance & Imes, 1978): when people suffering from this syndrome succeed, they think they are cheating the world and assume their success to be just coincidence and not real.

d) *Collaboration with and between Women*

Women have to start collaborating and finding mutual connection with other women. Instead of isolating themselves, the purpose should be to work for enhancing everyone's opportunities and providing support for each other. When women's feelings and experiences become worded, they can turn into expertise, freedom, and courage. Clearly, the acknowledgment of women's experiences and sensitivity will help us to build work life that has space to intimacy, honesty, joy, and justice.

Solidarity is needed and it can be spread among women by supporting—not by leaning on harsh experiences such as "I have made it here by myself, why couldn't she do the same?" (Van Den Brink, Holgersson, Linghad, & Deé, 2016). Men's old-boy network has helped men, so why women find it difficult to collaborate? Research in workplaces where women dominate have often problems that are also called "toxic workplaces" (Gilbert, Carr-Ruffino, Ivancevich, & Konopaske, 2012). These situations can not only be

detrimental to employee health and emotional well-being (Gilbert et al., 2012) but also prevent talented employees advancing their careers (Buunk, Goor, & Solano, 2010). Competition among women is a complex phenomenon because women do not tend to openly compete for jobs or positions, but they do it in a hidden and stealthy manner (see e.g., Tracy, 1991).

Therefore, it would be incredibly important to learn to support each other and give space to the idea of helping others does not take anything from you but, indeed, gives back in many ways—not to mention increased well-being at work for starters (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013)!

We can set an example to men and women by being individuals who dare to use their personalities free from possible gender-related chains: doors should be open to many kinds of experts (Bleijenbergh & Van Engen, 2015). Women who are leaders can support other women by giving them resources and opportunities to advance in their careers (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000).

Likewise, women as leaders are models to girls. They see how leader women have developed their strengths and directed their resources wisely. These kinds of examples hopefully free girls from, for example, pressures of thinking about their looks and teach them how to show their expertise in their talents and strengths (see e.g., Savukoski, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016).

VI. CONCLUSION: DO WOMEN HAVE ENOUGH COURAGE?

As the 2020s is getting closer, numerous changes and crises, challenges take place. Globalization and related hopes and threats, refugee floods, climate change, digitalization, and deeper gap between the poor and the wealthy make facing these challenges true and frightening. Life in the middle of changes requires leadership that provides new dimensions and requirements also for women as leaders. The changes may also show how very much needed women are to become leaders (see Jyrkinen & McKie, 2011; Kalaitzi et al., 2017).

When looking at the world situation and change management one can conclude that for some changes form a threat that has to be rejected no matter what. This will only lead to isolation and clustering. On the other hand, some people tend to believe in a determined manner that there is no other option than passive adjustment. Others control our lives and destinies.

Luckily, some people perceive the change and related crises as challenges (Uusiautti, 2015) that ignite the wish to search for new solutions and change one's own conceptions and ways of action. The starting point is to learn to live through changes and to tolerate or merely appreciate insecurity and difference. This shows

courage in many ways. And like the milestones and women related to these listed earlier in this paper, we want to state that taking challenges as chances can support women in their aspirations for changing the world to be a better place (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; McLean & Anderson, 2009).

In sum:

- One needs courage to be open to changes and face new situations and challenges. If one lacks this kind of courage, one will not develop.
- One needs courage to realize one's personal strengths and opportunities. Lack of self-esteem keeps one insecure and passive.
- One needs courage to make decisions. Fearful insecurity does not lead to decisions.
- One needs courage to follow one's own principles, beliefs, and conscience. Fear makes one act inconsistently.
- One needs courage to think in a new manner. If one is hesitant and sticks nervously to what others have said and what others may want one to think, no revolutionary steps can be taken.

Fear makes us stick to old, while courage helps us build new. Various experiments can be easily judged as naïve or weak but it also may be that these exact experiments show path forward. Everything that may lead us forward and provides new expertise can be significant. Nothing happens without trying. And there is not just one right solution but different kinds of adventures should be appreciated and acknowledged—they give birth to new kind of courage. These are difficult but important guidelines to women, female leaders, and mothers and their way of life and make a difference. Good luck!

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