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Book review

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Karin Klenke, *Women in leadership: Contextual dynamics and boundaries*
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Studies into women and leadership are enjoying a long overdue renewed focus, partly fuelled by a recognition that leadership research pays limited attention to women's experiences (Elliott and Stead, 2008). In the last few years a concern to redress this balance and to extend critical understandings of leadership has produced a number of important texts that alert us to the complexity of women in leadership roles. For example, Eagly and Carli's (2007) research centres on how women negotiate what they term the labyrinth of leadership. Stead and Elliott's (2009) critical analysis of in-depth accounts from prominent UK women leaders illustrates how issues of gender are fundamental to theorizing leadership and informing leadership development. A recent study by Coleman (2011) of successful women traces the challenges women face within the context of change. Karin Klenke's text *Women in Leadership* joins with these works to offer a significant presence in the literature that underlines the continuing need to ask questions about why there remain relatively few women in leadership roles.

This body of work on women and leadership is given further impetus in the media and popular press through surveys that illustrate a global and persistent underrepresentation of women in senior positions. For example, a survey of US Fortune companies in 2010 (Catalyst, 2010) shows that women hold 15.7% of board seats; in the UK an annual survey (Vinnicombe et al., 2010) of FTSE100 companies reports that only 12.5% of board directors are women.

Thus the advancement of women to top leadership roles in the 21st century still strikes us as pioneering, remarkable and worthy of media attention. At the time of writing this review, for example, in the UK Lieutenant Commander Sarah West has been appointed the first woman to command a warship in the Royal Navy, and in France Christine Lagarde has been named as the first woman to become chief of the International Monetary Fund. That the global landscape is changing and leadership careers seem more of a possibility for women than ever before is undeniable, yet that leadership still remains a pioneering and often a particularly arduous journey for women offers a fertile and important site for research.

It is against this background of paradox that Karin Klenke positions her text *Women in Leadership*. In this book she sets out to uncover the nature of such a paradox by exploring women in leadership using the idea of context as a lens, including political systems, information technology, organizations, the media, the military, religion and spirituality, science, higher education and the arts, and finally global women leaders. Klenke chooses each context because of what she sees as their paradoxical nature. Thus she draws on the paradox of

more women entering the workplace and yet persistent boundaries to their advancement, changing expectations of women entering leadership roles and yet enduring stereotypes and prejudice that position them as outsiders, success stories of women permeating male-dominated industry such as the mass media and the military but within organizations that continue to be defined and organized through patriarchal systems. Klenke focuses her examination through the concept of scenario planning with three questions: what does the future hold for women leaders in a range of contexts? How do women view their future as leaders in different organizational contexts? What is the future of women's leadership in the global environment?

In order to do this Klenke draws on a wide number of sources, from academic literature to the global media. The book's introductory chapter sets out the core themes of the book. Here Klenke defines context, using a range of conceptual frames. Usefully Klenke points to the 'criticality' of context, and the recognition that context is open to multiple interpretations. She then goes on to introduce gender and culture as contextual and intertwined prisms. This provides the basis for setting out a range of perspectives on gender difference in leadership style and in the evaluation of male and female leaders. By bringing attention to continued debates from leadership style to issues of power this introductory chapter sets out women's leadership as a series of paradoxes.

The next 10 chapters then develop the themes of context and paradox within particular settings (as listed above). Each chapter opens with a vignette that aims to portray a woman leader in a particular context, and is followed by a critical discussion. These discussions, while concise given the scope of the book, are given strength through the richness in examples, which give colour and life to the text and also, through the lens of paradox, tease out key issues. For example, in the chapter on the media as context for women's leadership Klenke concludes that, although women's representation has changed over the past 20 years due, amongst other things, to the changing role of women in the workplace, the subliminal message of a patriarchal society ideology that continues to objectify women remains the same. She illustrates this vividly, drawing on topical US examples, such as key political television debates with Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, and using a host of examples, from media moguls such as Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart to award-winning filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow. Klenke provides helpful summaries at the end of each chapter, drawing together the main trends, but also highlighting themes particular to that context, which might serve to provide a research agenda. For example, she notes in her summary to the chapter on IT how men and women 'constitute different discourse communities in cyberspace', while in her discussion on religion and spirituality Klenke asks what role women might be playing in developing more collaborative and democratic institutions.

Klenke acknowledges that this book is predominantly Western in its focus and in particular takes a US perspective, with many of the narratives and portrayals depicting US women. The narrative nonetheless points to other cultural and geographical locations and raises important issues that resonate more widely. For instance, I found the chapter on history as context for women's leadership a potent and little-documented reminder that historically and globally women have a strong leadership legacy across arts, science and politics. For me this was a third and important theme that ran through the text; women are not newcomers to leadership or interlopers, but have a particular and rich leadership history that is significant in looking towards the future. Klenke illustrates, for example in the chapter on political systems as context, how women have shaped political history in the US through taking on some of the most visible and highly complex roles in government.

In questioning why there is yet to be a female US president she reveals a complex web of systems and practices that are highly gendered and serve to maintain the status quo. Thus Klenke sets out in front of us the paradox between women's history of leadership and the organizational and contextual constraints in which those paradoxes are enacted. An important contribution of this work to critical studies on women and leadership is therefore that it highlights how women's legacy of leadership is all too often hidden or masked.

A further key strength of the book lies in how it has marshalled a vast amount of information and colourful examples to show the positioning of women's leadership today. Klenke's voice, as a narrator of how things are, is reassuring and yet realistic; women are achieving leadership roles but an overriding message is that there is much work to be done. While we might say that this is nothing new, it is precisely because of that and the continued lack of attention to women in standard leadership texts that it is worth repeating, and Klenke's use of context and paradox is a fresh way to bring to light the enduring complexities of leadership and gender with reference to women.

So what does the future hold for women leaders? With regard to the particular contexts she uses, Klenke points to a future of continued paradox shot through with optimism, where women are becoming more widely represented (for example in the military) but still face considerable challenge. She observes how in Western countries such as the US and Australia there are more women entering senior roles who provide a developing base of role models for aspiring female students. On the other hand, she highlights how the work of women leaders in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq focus on establishing basic gender equality. With this breadth of scope, Klenke argues and adds weight to existing literature that context in its broader sense (geographical, economic, historical, social and cultural) is fundamental to the enactment of leadership, and as such demands new models of leadership and leadership development to reflect this contextual complexity.

The style of the book – moving between description and analysis, from facts and figures such as the number of women in particular professions to implications for women leaders drawing on conceptual frameworks – works well at a number of levels. First, it provides a useful overview for students and researchers of broad issues concerning women in leadership, which can be related to each of the chosen contexts and yet also have commonality across contexts – for instance, a debate on how hierarchical structures perpetuate old boys' networks (chapter on organizations as context for women's leadership). Second, in choosing breadth over depth the book encourages a 'dip in and out' approach that is particularly helpful for scholars who are seeking to gain an introduction to some key debates in relation to women in leadership in a particular area. Third, and what I, as a researcher of women and leadership, found of most value in this text, is that the breadth of scope and wealth of examples act as stimulus for multiple points of departure for further research both within and across the particular contexts described by Klenke. The epilogue, for instance, summarizes context as a key theme that has underpinned the book and points to new and emerging contextual factors and attendant issues that can inform new arenas for research: the economic recession and its impact on women, a new generation (Generation Y) of aspiring women leaders facing developing technological challenges, increasingly flexible workplaces and the pressures of changing family structures. As a leadership scholar, it is this richness that I have enjoyed, and the explication of multiple strands that positions women's leadership as fundamental and important work in the study of leadership.

Klenke states that the development of this research has fuelled her passion for continued work in this area. At the end of the book, as a fellow researcher in the field, I find that I, too,

feel energized and supported by this text, for it offers both a pragmatic assessment of women's leadership and an important further contribution to our developing understanding of what it means to be a woman in a leadership role. In particular, this work reinforces the importance, highlighted by other studies, of understanding and developing an empirical database from a wide range of contexts grounded in women's experiences.

I look forward to more work, which undoubtedly will result from the foundation that this book sets out.

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