Guest editorial: Women-in-leadership research and feminist futures: new agendas for feminist research and impact on gender equality

Introduction

This is the *first* Special Issue of *Gender in Management: An International Journal* dedicated to positioning *women leaders as part of feminist futures and theorising*, and considering *their impact on gender equity*. Our aims in curating this Special Issue are to contribute to feminist theorising and develop research agendas for women-in-leadership research; consider the current position of women leaders in neoliberal post-feminism and post-feminist research and practice, including the backlash towards women leaders as diluting the feminist cause; and consider the impact women leaders can have on gender equality and feminist theory.

Women in leadership continue to be a source of fascination, confusion and controversy for researchers and organisational practitioners alike. Even after a wealth of scholarship in this area, many questions remain unanswered about how far we have really come and why (Boatman, 2007). It is impossible to deny the influence of neoliberalism and post-feminism for women holding leadership roles, while they also continue to face inequalities, and confront ongoing dilemmas and contradictions within a discourse of hegemonic masculinity (Elliott and Stead, 2018; Mavin and Grandy, 2019; Stead and Elliott, 2019). Women leaders are subject to post-feminism which decries that feminism is no longer needed. Instead, relying on their individual efforts women can now achieve in leadership roles, and in doing so are seen to brush inequalities aside and deny feminism (Rottenberg, 2014; Eisenstein, 2010). A resulting backlash towards women leaders positions them as diluting the feminist cause which in turn impacts researchers of women in leadership. However, the realities of women leaders globally are that they retain a minoritised and marginalised status compared to men. Furthermore, white women leaders are the majority of women who hold leadership roles, and racialised dynamics also impact women's leadership representation.

Against this backdrop, there is complexity at the heart of the post-feminist thesis, and multi-layered feminist challenges become evident when understanding the praxis of women leaders and advancing women-in-leadership research. Feminist critique can position women leaders as turning their back on solidarity and collective feminist action (Negra, 2009) by focusing on personal career progression in the corporate world (Rottenberg, 2014). Such complexity and criticism of women-in-leadership research can paralyse women-in-leadership researchers and women leaders in their efforts to articulate inclusive agendas for change and intellectual advancement, as well as close the door to women leaders and researchers engaging in feminism and feminist research.

To develop new agendas for feminist research, we begin by outlining our understandings of post-feminism, moderate feminism, feminist critique of women leaders and challenges for women-in-leadership research. We then discuss the themes of this Special Issue and offer a further avenue for women-in-leadership research.

Post-feminism and moderate feminism

Post-feminism is a critical concept understood in terms of a discursive formation, with no single, definitive interpretation of post-feminism, and with a range of conceptualisations signalling its malleability (Lewis *et al.*, 2019). Post-feminism "simultaneously rejects feminist activism in favor of feminine consumption and celebrates the success of feminism while declaring its irrelevance" (Butler, 2013, p. 44). Gill (2007) conceptualised post-feminism as a "sensibility", composed of an "entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes" (Ronen, 2018, p. 149). Butler (2013) influenced by Gill (2007, p. 44) views post-feminism as a sensibility and identifies six characteristics which often denote post-feminism, including:

(1) implies that gender equality has been achieved and feminist activism is thus no longer necessary;

(2) denies femininity as a bodily property and revives notions of natural sexual difference;

(3) marks a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification;

(4) encourages self-surveillance, self-discipline and a makeover paradigm;

(5) emphasises individualism, choice and empowerment as the primary routes to women's independence and freedom; and

(6) promotes consumerism and the commodification of difference.

Post-feminism is tightly entangled with neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism's reclamation of ideas about femininity and womanhood. In line with the ability of capitalism to reinvent itself, these ideas make use of discourses of generational difference to re(present) feminism as obsolete and feminist ideas as restrictive and disempowering (Whelehan, 1995). In addition, they reinforce the individualised, entrepreneurial agency of highly privileged, mainly white, middle-class women, guiding them away from solidarity and common goals and promoting the reclamation of the self (Negra, 2009) through the focus on their personal initiative to improve their career prospects in the corporate world (Rottenberg, 2014). Such individualism, including the lack of challenge to structural inequalities, versus the collectivism of feminism challenging inequalities for all, is a platform for critiques of women leaders. For example, Ozkazanç-Pan (2019) suggests that collective agency grounded in context is more likely to evoke radical change than individual agency or struggle.

More recently, challenges to the stranglehold of post-feminism have been theorised as moderate feminism, which reflects more moderate "acceptable" forms of feminism operating in the public domain through a "double movement", where feminism is affirmed while distance from radicalism is secured (Dean, 2010, p. 397). For example, Mavin *et al.*'s (2019) study of women political leaders in the media contributes a new modality of feminist politics, offering a space where feminism can be affirmed, encouraged and progressed, where the gendering of women leaders provokes feminism as well as denying inequalities. Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) explore the UK gender equality tool and accreditation, Athena SWAN, arguing that a pragmatic approach to this moderate tool can be used to pursue more radical change. Lewis *et al.* (2019) ask whether mainstream acceptance of a restrained feminism, with its focus on the psyche of individual women, stymies radical versions of

feminism or whether the take-up of moderate forms of feminism provides a visible space to call for structural and cultural reform to address the persistence of gender inequalities. While Mavin and Grandy (2019, p. 1558) argue that women leaders and women-in-leadership researchers can impact gender equality via moderate feminism, "located in the ambiguous and imperfect place between post-feminism and feminism", which "offers opportunities for progressive change".

Post-feminism and moderate feminism place women leaders and those doing women-in-leadership research – front and centre of feminist futures. Women leaders and researchers are enmeshed in these debates, vulnerable to critique and hyper-visible as highly privileged, mainly white, heterosexual women. Sometimes they are feminists, sometimes in their role as leaders and knowledge-producers they are located as the problem.

Feminist critique of women leaders

In the West, women leaders are in the minority and face inequalities, while at the same time they are predominantly white, middle-class women and privileged. They have progressed in organisations and in doing so they challenge the status quo by destabilising patriarchy and the masculine order. However, this progress is seen to be at the price of privilege and working for capital rather than being subject to capital. Women leaders are critiqued as "corporate feminists" (Scott, 2006, p. 13) and "are largely unrecognized for their efforts on behalf of feminism. Rather they are criticised for their privilege and not being politically active on behalf of 'ordinary' women" (Mavin and Grandy, 2019, p. 1549).

Women leaders are critiqued by Calás *et al.* (2017) for advancing corporate interests, becoming members of a system of masculinist capitalism, denying gender inequalities and becoming "company women because there is nothing left to be (Gordon, 1983, p. 5)" (Calás *et al.*, 2017, p. 207). Women leaders who are seen to be performing "corporate feminism" are criticised, for example, for remoulding feminism and delivering "self-declared manifestos . . . symptomatic of a larger cultural phenomenon in which neoliberalism is fast displacing liberal feminism" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 419). As such, feminism is seen to be corporately seduced to produce a certain kind of hegemonic feminism (Eisenstein, 2010), embodied in women such as Marissa Mayer and Sheryl Sandberg. Paradoxically, the success of such women in achieving these leader positions means other women can see what they want to be; they can identify with women leaders and recognise that women can make it to the top of organisational hierarchies. Sealy and Singh (2008) argue that the increasing number of women who manage to break the glass ceiling not only enhances other women's ambitions and alleviates the danger of tokenism, but it can also create more gender-inclusive work environments (also see Vinnicombe and Mavin, in this Special Issue).

Women leaders are critiqued for "submitting" to post-feminism. They are seen to deny inequalities, deny the need for feminism and to enculturate neoliberal norms of the ideal worker. Women leaders are viewed as undermining the feminist cause in that "displaying sexual and economic agency within the public sphere, means they must withhold critique of hegemonic masculinity and disidentify as feminist" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 85). Ronen (2018, p. 517) argues through "immersion in discourses of having it all (Pomerantz *et al.*, 2013), women workers find that naming sexism is challenging — if not dangerous" and "relegate experiences of sexism to the past or other places and accept discrimination as part of the status quo (Gill *et al.*, 2017, p. 232)".

There is complexity at the heart of the post-feminist thesis. A key paradox in the feminist debate regarding women leaders is that many women want to progress to, and continue in what can be precarious senior leadership roles. Women's progression to leadership in politics, business and society surely remains instrumental for the feminist project. We

propose that simply by holding top organisational leader roles with significant power in otherwise men-only hierarchies, women leaders disrupt the patriarchal social order and offer potential for structural change and feminist progress.

Challenges facing women-in-leadership researchers

Women-in-management and -leadership researchers also face feminist critique for not progressing feminism and perpetuating post-feminism. Women-in-leadership research is seen to reproduce masculinity (e.g. through sex variable comparisons of women to men leaders, reproducing gender binaries, fixing the women, lack of intersectional analysis) and is viewed as lacking a focus on gender equality (Calás *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, women-in-leadership research can appear to reinforce McRobbie's (2015, pp. 15–16) argument that "at most it will be said that a competitive woman wants to make it to the top 'in a man's world'", such that women with "inner-directed self-competitiveness" are safe guarding male privilege and reinforcing the status quo. Thus, the "collectivist feminist battle against patriarchal oppression and male dominance is traded in for the axiom of individual female power and freedom of choice" (Lewis *et al.*, 2018, p. 6). The focus on the glass ceiling in women-in-leadership research is challenged by Calás *et al.* (2017, p. 206) for reducing women-in-management literature "to that of the life history possibilities of only an elite few – a continuing blind spot in both the academic and the popular literature on these topics". In this way, women-in-management literature is viewed as "having a primary focus on the upward mobility of women" (Calás *et al.*, 2017, p. 208) (read white, middle class and privileged) through individualisation, empowerment and choice.

Women-in-leadership research also faces critique for producing scarce knowledge about the experiences of women leaders from ethnic minorities. While gender has been shown to destabilise the privilege of white women in leadership (Mavin and Grandy, 2016), they still hold privilege as the majority of women leaders. Women of colour in leadership, as the minority of women leaders, have their privilege destabilised further (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014). This ongoing instability is evident in the significant UK gender pay gap for women leaders and an even wider one for women of colour who are leaders (Woodhams *et al.*, 2015). Showunmi *et al.*'s (2016) work on ethnic, gender and class intersections in women's leadership experience offers a rare glimpse into the experiences of both white women leaders and minority ethnic women leaders. They conclude that differences in self-definition of leadership exist in the stories of white and minority ethic women, such that the former were more likely to frame their leadership identities in contemporary (neoliberal) models of leadership and the latter more likely to indicate a "simultaneous internal and external orientation that was grounded in their ethno-cultural identities" (p. 928). Moreover, they also noted that white women were more likely to discuss class and minority women's ethnicity. They also identify differences in the experiences of Asian women leaders and Black women leaders, where the former more frequently referenced cultural and religious identities while Black women leaders were more likely to make reference to skin colour as part of their leadership identities. Dosekun (2015) takes this argument further and ties it to post-feminism, arguing that much more space needs to be made for non-Western women in a post-feminism agenda and accounting for intersectionality. Following Showunmi *et al.* (2016) and Dosekun (2015), we need to know more about how intersections play out for women leaders with different ethnicities. As (white) women-in-leadership researchers, we suggest that one step in this direction is that we could also be explicit about our own researcher positionality and intersectional reflexivity to explain why and how we produce new knowledge.

The critiques we have highlighted leave women leaders, and women-in-leadership research, in a polarised space full of tensions that risks blaming women leaders and researchers for the systemic ills and inequalities that feminism reveals and seeks to counter. To progress and sustain in leadership roles is to be discounted in feminist progress for advancing post-feminism, corporate interests and diluting feminism, while it has been argued elsewhere that the "persistent rarity of women who hold senior positions in organizations illustrates why their experiences are imperative in feminist futures" (Mavin and Grandy, 2019, p. 1547). In considering new agendas for women-in-leadership researchers and contributions to feminism, we suggest (arguably from our own privileged place) that *continued division* between women in racialised, role and social class terms, along with other intersecting social categories of difference, constrains possibilities for change and challenge to patriarchy. For example, Scott (2006, p. 14) considers critiques of corporate feminists where gender is seen as trumping class while women leaders work for capital and argues that such critique:

> [. . .] implies that feminism is not open to all women; only to those of a certain class and place. These distinctions inevitably lead toward selective discussions of who is "inside" and who is "outside"; a path that should be forbidden to a social movement that hopes to encompass the world.

Rather we view feminism as a "floating signifier" (Dean, 2010, p. 395) where feminism's precise meaning is left open to explore different types of exclusions and associations as we "see" feminism in action.

Our motivation for the Special Issue is to offer alternative lenses for women-in-leadership research and through our differences focus on challenges to patriarchy. Feminism is not over for women leaders and researchers of women in leadership. Inequalities are not consigned to the past. We continue to face an unequal high risk of failure, marginalisation and stigma, as well as unstable privilege and legitimacy. As women-in-leadership researchers, following Lewis *et al.* (2018), we agree that individualism in feminism is not always apolitical and that the personal as political is part of identity politics. In outlining some of the critiques of our field, we raise consciousness to opportunities for future research. However, we see women in leadership and women-in-leadership researchers, not just as subjects of post-feminism and gendering, "unable to recognize their predicaments – as almost having been duped into them" (Calás *et al.*, 2017, p. 14). While we are socially constructed by neoliberal and post-feminist discourses, there is agency to make innovative responses.

We frame these challenges as central to developing agendas to achieve equitable and sustainable leadership futures where women leaders and women-in-leadership researchers *thrive in their differences*. We argue that space is opening up to consider alternative agendas for women in leadership to contribute to feminist theorising.

The special issue papers

In this Special Issue, we asked researchers to consider the complexity and paradoxes, and we thank the researchers who accepted the challenge and crafted papers offering significant provocations for women leaders and women-in-leadership research. They are (in alphabetical order by last name): *Helene Ahl, Karin Berglund, Laura Bierema, Karin Berglund, Yvonne Benschop, Alexandra Cox, Rafia Fiaz, Hayley Finn, Rita Gardiner, Elisabeth Anna Guenther, Weixin He, Patricia Lewis, Katarina Pettersson, Jenny Rodriguez, Malin Tillmar, Eunbi Sim, Sue Vinnicombe and Melissa Yoong.*

The complexity and inherent tensions for feminist theorising in women-in-leadership research are explored in three broad themes within this Special Issue:

(1) Resistance to post-feminism and identifying alternative feminist futures, including Speaking (Out) as resistance;

(2) Intersectional approaches; and

(3) Women-in-leadership progress in practice and interventions for change for women in leadership.

Resistance to post-feminism and identifying alternative feminist futures is a key theme in the Special Issue to challenge post-feminist discourse, current feminist critiques of women leaders and to pave the way for new avenues for women-in-leadership research. In their paper *Gendered hybridity in leadership identities: a post-feminist analysis*, Patricia Lewis and Yvonne Benschop consider the discursive constitution of leadership identities by senior women leaders working in the City of London. Through an empirical study, they highlight how the gendered hybridity of leadership identities unfolds the possibility for a fundamental makeover of leadership by opening-up space for a transformative change that accommodates women leaders. In one of the very few studies that foreground the leadership identities that women leaders construct within the confines of post-feminist gender regimes, the study shows how these women invoke authenticity, unfolding possibilities for the transformational change of and political challenge to traditional gendered leadership in their organisations.

Karin Berglund, Helene Ahl, Katarina Pettersson and Malin Tillmar's paper *Conceptualising feminist resistance in the postfeminist terrain* focuses on women entrepreneurs as leaders and women leaders as entrepreneurs, discussing an empirical study of women rural entrepreneurs. They draw upon philosopher Jonna Bornemark (2020; 2018) who has interest in the connections between contemporary neoliberal culture and the thought system established during the enlightenment (mind over body), who suggests that we are able to resist the ratio(nality) of neoliberalism, including the autonomous individual, by leaning on our *intellectus* ability. Berglund *et al.* (2022) explore how feminist resistance unfolds as an interactive and iterative learning process where the subject recognises their voice, strengthens their voice, believes in a relational process and finally sees themselves as a fully fledged actor who finds ways to overcome obstacles that get in their way. Conceptualising resistance as a learning process stands in sharp contrast to the idea of resistance as enacted by the autonomous self. The study enables researchers to understand that what they may have seen as a sign of weakness among women is instead a sign of strength: it is a first step in learning resistance that may help women create a life different from that prescribed by the post-feminist discourse. In this way, researchers can avoid reproducing women as "weak and inadequate".

Speaking (Out) as Resistance is considered by Melissa Yoong, who uses feminist critical discourse analysis in the paper *"If your voice isn't accepted, does it mean you stop talking?": exploring a woman leader's reversal of postfeminist confidence discourses*. Yoong (2022) offers a lens for the exploration of women leaders' production of resistance through post-feminist discourses. Through the case study of Bozoma Saint John, a high-profile Black C-Suite executive, the study examines micro-acts of subversion and considers the extent to which they can promote feminist thinking in the corporate world and the implications for feminist theorising about women in leadership. The paper demonstrates how Saint John reproduces elements of the post-feminist confidence discourse to defy stereotypes of Black women, while simultaneously reversing the individualistic conception of confidence in

favour of corporate and collective action. Combining reverse discourse, intersectionality and feminist post-structuralism with a micro-level analysis of women leaders' language use can help to capture the ways post-feminist concepts are given new subversive meanings. Whereas existing studies have focused on how elite women's promotion of confidence sustains the status quo, this study shifts the research gaze to the resistance realised through rearticulations of confidence, illustrating how women-in-leadership research can advance feminist theorising without vilifying senior women even as they participate in post-feminist logics of success.

Speaking out as resistance using policy is also illustrated in the paper by Rita Gardiner and Hayley Finn, *Implementing gender-based violence policies in the neoliberal university: challenges and contradictions*, where they outline three women leaders' engagement in the implementation of a gender-based violence policy in academia. They highlight the challenges women leaders in academia face in putting policy into practice through four interconnected themes:

(1) the insidious institutional roots of gender-based violence (GBV);
(2) naming, or lack thereof;
(3) pockets of resistance; and
(4) balancing contradictions.

Gardiner and Finn (2022) illustrate how leading institutional policy change, in and of itself an act of resistance, requires determination and courageous action to combat organisational sexism (Ahmed, 2021). They offer learning from women leaders' practical experiences to support feminist scholars in understanding the difficulties effecting institutional change, especially regarding turning GBV policy into practice. They demonstrate how this action is not without risk to the careers of those willing to speak out against gender injustice in the workplace (Gardiner and Finn, 2022).

Intersectional approaches to women-in-leadership research and feminist futures is a theme developed in the Special Issue. Firstly, in their paper, *Feminist futures in gender-in-leadership research: self-reflexive approximations to intersectional situatedness*, Jenny Rodriguez, Elisabeth Anna Guenther and Rafia Fiaz reveal the narrow and restricted understandings of leadership and how this influences who is regarded as a legitimate leader. Using memory work, a methodology that is not commonly used in gender-in-leadership research, they situate their understandings and experiences of leadership as part of socio-historical contexts. Intersectional situatedness helps to identify tangible ways to see how inequalities impact women's career progression to leadership and enable more nuanced conversations about privilege and disadvantage to advance feminist social justice agendas (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2022). They argue that adopting an intersectional situatedness approach helps to advance the field by embedding the recognition, problematisation and theorisation of situated difference as critical to understanding leadership, its meaning and its practice in management and organisations. They contend that, memory work and intersectional reflexivity offer more inclusive understandings of leadership that recognise difference positively and support changing the narratives around the meaning of "leader" and "good leadership" (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2022).

Second, in an invited Viewpoint article, *Reflections on women's progress into leadership in the UK and suggested areas for future research*, Sue Vinnicombe in collaboration with Sharon Mavin draw on data from the annual UK Female FTSE Board Report (2021) and the Hidden Truth Report (2022), tracking gender diversity on UK company boards. They outline reflections on progress and jointly suggest areas for future women-in leadership research.

They argue that intersectional representation of women in company boards is dire and unacceptable. They call for intersectional approaches as a priority to extend research into how race, ethnicity and social class as social identities impact on women's experiences of leadership and in reproducing inequalities (Vinnicombe and Mavin, 2022).

The third theme in the Special Issue is a focus on *women-in-leadership progress in practice and interventions for change in practice for women-in-leadership*. In their paper, Vinnicombe and Mavin (2022) reflect on the progress of women on boards and identify a research agenda of 12 specific areas for future women-in-leadership research. Key areas of focus for change include stop making the business case for gender diversity in leadership and stop focusing on fixing women; examining access and appointment to the roles of Chief Finance Office/Finance Director, Senior Independent Director and Chair of the board, and conducting structured research into the role of bias in these senior appointments; interrogating why we have so few Finance Directors in FTSE companies when as many women as men study and qualify in finance/accounting; and returning to examining barriers to women's progress at middle management and the role of managers and leaders in progressing gender diversity in the middle of organisations.

Laura Bierema, Eunbi Sim, Weixin He and Alexandra Cox's paper *Double jeopardy: the paradox and promise of coaching women leaders from a critical feminist perspective* identifies coaching as offering potential for *Interventions for change in practice for women-in-leadership* and also speaks to the themes of *Resistance, and Speaking (out) as resistance*. Bierema *et al.* (this issue) interrogate the "double-jeopardy" in widely adopted women's leadership development interventions aimed at "fixing" women. Their paper explores critical feminist coaching perspectives and practices and offers more equitable and just alternatives for developing women leaders. Their study highlights how post-feminist approaches in organisations are little scrutinised due to the dominant post-feminist discourse that women's subordination and oppression have been "resolved" through neoliberal, individualistic interventions, such as post-feminist coaching programs. Infusing the message of "fixing women" through emphasising "4 C's" – confidence, control, courage and competition, post-feminist coaching programmes have been submitting women leaders to "double jeopardy". They critique this post-feminist coaching paradox from a critical feminist perspective foregrounding "4 R's" – reflecting, reforming, raising and rebuilding – promising more equitable, just development. Their study is the first of its kind in describing critical feminist coaching and presentation of a conceptual and practical model of the process. Identifying post-feminist coaching as the disavowal of feminist values and failure to challenge gender hegemony in the coaching process, Bierema *et al.* (this issue) propose a model of critical feminist coaching – CFC – defined as the explicit embrace of feminist values and challenge of gender hegemony in the coaching process. CFC offers alternatives for developing women leaders amid paradoxical, complex, capitalist systems, through a critical lens challenging post-feminism.

Future research

We wish to add *Interrogating Public Responses to Sexism* to agendas for future women-in-leadership research to problematise the critique that privileged (white) women leaders, holding both a place of marginalisation (as a minority relative to men), and privilege (as white and with positional power), reject discrimination and sexism and deny the feminist cause. We propose that a new avenue for future women-in-leadership research in contributing to feminism is to interrogate the changing contours of post-feminism, examining whether and how it is changing by interrogating public responses to sexism. Rather than women leaders denying inequalities and withholding challenges to patriarchy,

we identify profound examples of women leaders in the UK calling out sexism, calling for collective action, provoking others into feminism and challenging masculine hegemony. We offer the case of Amanda Blanc, a white, elite, privileged CEO of global company Aviva. In her position as CEO, Amanda Blanc increased the number of women on the Board by recently appointing the first woman to the role of Chief Finance Officer for the FTSE organisation Aviva. Shortly afterwards as she faced sexism and misogyny from her shareholders in the company's Annual General Meeting (May 2022). She very publicly calls out the shareholder behaviour in her personal LinkedIn post (Blanc, 2022), which states:

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> In all honesty, after 30+ years in Financial Services I am pretty used to sexist and derogatory comments like those in the AGM yesterday. Sadly, just like many other women in business, I've picked up my fair share of misogynistic scars whilst travelling on my journey through various companies and boardrooms until arriving at Aviva. We all have our own stories [. . .] I guess that after you have heard the same prejudicial rhetoric for so long though, it makes you a little immune to it all. I would like to tell you that things have got better in recent years but it's fair to say that it has actually increased – the more senior the role I have taken, the more overt the unacceptable behaviour. The surprising thing is that this type of stuff used to be said in private, perhaps from the safety of four walls inside an office – the fact that people are now making these comments in a public AGM is a new development for me personally. I can only hope that initiatives seeking gender equality like #womeninfinance and others can slowly eradicate this type of occurrence for the next generation – but in truth that seems a long way off; even with the help of some fantastically supportive men who speak out on the issue. So we have little choice other than to redouble our efforts together [. . .]

Amanda Blanc's post raises a number of key issues. She is "used to sexist comments", has "misogynistic scars" and after so long "it makes you a little immune to it" but she recognises that sexism and inequalities increase the closer to power you get as a woman, where the unacceptable behaviour is more overt. She uses her voice in a public space to outline how the backlash to women achieving power has moved from secret to public spaces and calls on gender equality initiatives and others to "redouble our efforts together". Amanda Blanc, a white, privileged, elite leader who has power and freedom of choice, does not brush this sexism aside. She does not deny feminism, and although subject to the discourse of having it all, she does not ignore the inequalities she faces. Amanda Blanc does not safeguard male privilege nor reinforce the status quo; she publicly resists and challenges patriarchal oppression, using her privilege to call for collective action against gender inequality and sexism. In doing so, she provokes others into feminism.

Amanda Blanc's LinkedIn post was picked up by UK broadsheet newspapers and others, as well as social media who, unusually, communicated a clear message that gender inequality and sexism is unacceptable. This is an important stance by the media who have power in constructing who is culturally intelligible in discourse. The Guardian newspaper headline (Makortoff, 2022) is an example, "'Unacceptable': Aviva CEO hits back at shareholder sexism along", along with the by-line of "Amanda Blanc says sexism in business has actually got worse after being told she is 'not the man for the job'".

Significantly, in different media, we hear how the Aviva Chairman George Culmer who chaired the AGM, "hit out at shareholders after investors subjected female company executives to a barrage of sexist comments, at the company's first in-person AGM since the start of the pandemic" (CITY A.M., 2022). This is important public allyship from a man demonstrating feminism and resistance to sexism and misogyny. Culmer is reported by CITY A.M. as being left "flabbergasted" by a barrage of "inappropriate" comments, such as one investor suggesting that "Blanc – who joined Aviva in July 2020 as the insurer's first

female chief executive – was 'not the man for the job'". The article reports that another shareholder asked whether "Blanc should be wearing trousers", as he made reference to Blanc's (men) predecessors at the firm. A small investor, after congratulating the board for its high levels of gender diversity, was reported as saying: "they are so good at basic housekeeping activities, I'm sure this will be reflected in the direction of the board in future" (CITY A.M., 2022). The chairman reportedly "hit back as he slammed the shareholders' inappropriate comments" (CITY A.M., 2022).

This is an example of sexism centred on women's bodies and appearance and highlights the continued policing of women's bodies as a way of silencing them. This discrimination not only objectifies women – what they are good for – but is also a powerful way to oppress women. What is the counterargument to the claim that Amanda Blanc should be "wearing pants"? The interpretation of silence is that there is no answer.

One critique of women leaders subject to post-feminism is that they are more likely not to publicly confront sexist comments because by virtue of their top role they are expected to rise above them and to do otherwise is challenging and dangerous (Ronen, 2018). We suggest that there are public indications that (some) women leaders in the UK are no longer prepared to accommodate aspects of post-feminism. They are rejecting the need to downplay sexism as something from the past or that occurs in other contexts (e.g. not here but maybe somewhere else). Nor are they accepting discrimination as part of the status quo (Gill *et al.*, 2017; Ronen, 2018). Are the voices of women leaders, men allies and the public in the UK growing louder in calling out unacceptable gendering and inequalities? Is there change as a result of women holding powerful positions of leadership which is aggravating public displays of sexism? Publicly calling out sexism and provoking feminism may be a space where women leaders can *be* feminist, articulate experiences of disadvantage, call for collective action, acknowledge inequality and challenge patriarchy. We suggest that interrogating public responses to sexism is a fruitful avenue for future feminist women-in-leadership research and offers potentialities for agency in defiance of post-feminism agendas.

Concluding reflections

The collection of papers that form this Special Issue present a critical and creative challenge to theorising women leaders in relation to post-feminism, and women's leadership within neoliberal political economies. Collectively, the empirical and theoretical diversity of this collection of papers shifts the binary, and the gendered ways in which women leaders are studied and understood. The themes that thread through the different contributions illustrate how women leaders resist the post-feminist and neoliberal contexts that are intimately intertwined with their leadership positions and how women-in-leadership researchers can pursue alternative feminist theorising:

- Resistance to post-feminism and identifying alternative feminist futures, including Speaking (Out) as resistance;
- Intersectional approaches; and
- Women-in-leadership progress in practice and interventions for change for women in leadership.

The papers identify the structural constraints and challenges women leaders face, and suggestions for the insights that can emerge by taking research stances that are reflexive and draw attention to researcher intersectionality, and that further communicate how women speak out to resist sexism, provoking feminism. The

proposals and contributions here also urge a resistance to gendered approaches to women's leadership development that can reinforce a cycle of post-feminist orthodoxy that traps women leaders within conformist subordination. Taken together, the papers in the Special Issue challenge women-in-leadership feminist theorising to recognise and make explicit similarities in the way women in leadership roles may face common challenges of institutional sexism whilst simultaneously experiencing leadership differentially. In doing so, the Special Issue identifies multiple and intersecting axes of difference as essential for advancing women-in-leadership research. Finally, this Special Issue illustrates the potential for more in-depth and nuanced methodologies that bring forth the complexities of the field and the need to continue to press for progress and change.

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