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The Invisible Power

Volatile and turbulent business environment poses a real challenge to sustainability and success of companies, their structures, business and organizational practices together with underlying concepts that people adopt as true and valid and as such use as guidelines in their behaviors. Naturally, leadership came under scrutiny of scholars and practitioners who heroically announced „we don't need another hero” [Badarraco 2001, pp. 120–126] and called for a more flexible, participative and relational type of leadership that would help transform organizational structures into learning organisms that are able to inspire their employees to creatively and effectively react to the turbulences of the global economy.

Being superior to old paradigms, transformational leadership „is expected to create conditions under which collective learning and continuous improvement can occur”, which „depends not so much on technical expertise [...] but on what is commonly called emotional and relational intelligence” [Fletcher 2003, pp. 204–210].

Attention given recently to transformational leadership exposed salience of specific attributes, often underestimated before, that enable a leader to achieve success, transform the situation through individualized consideration given to followers, their needs and development through motivation and intellectual stimulation [Bass 1996, pp. 5–34]. Relational skills, collaboration, caring, support, mentoring based on openness towards the needs of others, empathy and active listening skills seem to be commonly associated with traditionally perceived women's traits. Such authors as Sally Helgensen, who wrote „The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership” [Helgensen 1995, p. 5] or Marylin Loden in her „Feminine Leadership or How to Succeed in Business Without Being One of the Boys” [Loden 1997, p. 79] strongly advocate that what leadership needs today are feminine qualities or feminine principles.

Is it really true, however, that the current redefinition of leadership has changed and still will substantially change the situation of women in management? Does this new perspective constitute a real turning point for women who have become more visible as leaders? Numerous observers of management practice and statisticians would probably confirm that view claiming that the proportion of women in US management has changed positively from 21% in 1976 to 45% by the very end of 20th century and two further percents in 2002. The American management has now a “female face” [Powell, Graves 2003, pp. 133–156], almost half of the time. This view might be further supported by the reduced number of respondents that describe a manager as a person who has predominantly male attributes. The period from 1977 to 1999 accounts for a substantial decrease of typically male traits in the descriptions of a good manager. The research conducted by G.N. Powell together with D.N. Butterfield and most recently J.D. Parent [Powell, Butterfield, Parent 2002, pp. 177–193] with the application of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, BSRI, in various groups of respondents i.e. male MBAs, female MBAs, male undergraduates and female undergraduates confirms a positive trend in perceptions of attributes necessary for a good manager.

A closer analysis of the situation proves, however, that women are still underrepresented in top leadership positions. In 2002 in US 500 largest companies women accounted for 16% of the corporate officers, with 71 of the 500 companies not having any women corporate officers at all [Catalyst, 2002]. In addition, recent studies on turnover among women of Fortune 1000 companies [Krishnan, Park 2005, pp. 1712–1720] indicate that the rate of turnover among Top Management Team women officers is almost twice a rate of men on TMTs, which indicates that it is still much more difficult to hold a visible position of responsibility for a woman than for a man. It is true, contrary to the fact, as it was proven by Krishnan and Park [Krishnan, Park 2005, pp. 1712–1720], that representation of women in general has positive impact on TMT performance since it contributes to diversity that is necessary in order to adapt and succeed [Palmer, Varner, Iris 2007, p. 20]. The visibility of women holding top executive positions is lowered due to their concentration in so called „velvet ghetto” of non strategic departments of human resources, education and accounting that are considered as low profile influence in the organization and have low revenue-generating impact [Bowles, McGinn 2005, pp. 195–196].

The situation does not differ positively in Europe, especially in countries that have not functioned too long in the market economy, including Poland. The average rate of employment in EU countries in 2004 differs from 70.9 for men to 55.7 for women and indicates unequal access to work for the two sexes, with Poland having lower rate of 46.2 rate than Czech Republic with the rate of 56 and Slovakia with the rate of 50.9 in women’s employment. In Europe women earn less by 15 % than men, which is close to the Polish index of 16%, but much lower than in Czech (19%) or Slovakia (23%) [Eurostat, 2004, Report 13, pp. 14–

17]. In 2003 there were on the average only 30% of women holding managerial position in EU, which is close to Polish and Slovakian indices of respectively 33% and 34% with a little lower index of 28% in Czech. The biggest percentage of women holding managerial positions was observed in Ireland (39%) and Latvia (38%) [European Commission DG EMPL, Report 13, p. 14].

If it is true that transformational leadership is what we need today and the skills and traits associated with it are possessed and used by women more eagerly or naturally than men, how can we explain the fact that organizations find it so difficult to acknowledge these truths and allow women to become more visible as leaders? In spite of substantial changes in the proportion of women holding managerial positions and the changes that really have taken place for the last three decades, gender-triggered stereotypes are still in operation at the workplace and heavily influence perceptions of both sexes. As Virginia Schein [Schein 1973, pp. 95–100] proved by her studies of gender, leader and the relationship among sex role stereotypes, both women and men believed in the 70s that middle managers should expose attributes perceived as typically masculine. The perceptions of women managers changed in more recent studies and today they ascribe both female and male attributes to good managers. However, the perceptions have not changed among men managers who still choose predominantly masculine characteristics while describing managerial roles [Deal, Stevenson 1998, pp. 287–300]. As recently indicated by Schien, similar perceptions are shared across cultures i.e. in Germany, UK, China and Japan [Schein 2001, pp. 675–688]. The surprising sustainability of stereotypical gendered-biased thinking is confirmed by Sandra Bem, who used a concept of androgyny, combining both male and female characteristics. The concept was tested against masculine, feminine and undifferentiated attributes in different groups of male and female MBAs and undergraduates while researching their perceptions of effective managers by Schein, Butterfield and Parent [Powell, Butterfield, Parent 2002, pp. 177–193]. The research was conducted in 1976–1977 and repeated in 1984–1985 and 1999, the period that noted subsequent increase of women in management from 21% to 35% and to 45%. Contrary to Schien, Butterfield and later Parent expectations, the demographic changes in real management were not followed by the change of „stereotypically masculine management face”. Although the change was noticeable, its scale was minimal over the period of thirty years, which proves how resistant to change stereotypical perceptions are.

A question might be asked here if stereotypes really matter considering the fact that changes take place in spite of them. Even if stereotypes may partially contradict the reality they are important because they create constraints on female managers' behavior. Contributing to the incongruity between a female role and a leader role of women managers, stereotypes support double standards in women leaders' evaluations. When a woman acts close to a typically feminine stereotype, she is criticized as not displaying leader traits. When she highly

conforms to the stereotypically perceived role of a leader she fails her feminine role violating the norms of niceness [Branson 2002, pp. 12–17; Rudman, Glick 2001, pp. 1004–1010]. Thus, organizations in which men are in majority and have power to create organizational culture exert pressure on women to conform to a masculine stereotype of a leader, simultaneously reinforcing this stereotype.

As indicated by Powell [Powell, Graves 2003, pp. 133–156] sex stereotypes have real impact on self-perceptions and lead to the situation in which women perceive themselves as having the attributes less consistent than men with a stereotypically described leader. Women internalize stereotypes and see themselves as those who deserve less than men for the same performance. Such perceptions would result subsequently in behaviors refraining women from realizing their potential as leaders even though they might in reality possess the most required skills. Consequently, they stay invisible, often not being able even to effectively claim positions of authority [Schein 2001, pp. 675–688]. Thus, sex-type images of leadership provide a real hurdle to women's prospects. What is more, the higher the company ladder, the higher the stereotypically conditioned resistance to women authority is, in other words, the resistance increases together with the increased proportion of men, who reinforce gender-biased social roles through behaviors and social interactions [Dovidio, Ellyson, Keating, Heltman 1988, pp. 233–242].

Being resistant to change, stereotypes also influence the perceptions of others, forming their attitudes and often contributing to the prejudice that women may experience at the workplace. The survey conducted in 22 countries by the Gallup Organization [Simmons 2001] indicates that in spite of the increased number of women in managerial positions people still prefer a male boss. In US 45% of men and 50 % of women preferred a male boss in the year 2000 as compared with 1975 poll in which 63% of men and 60% of women expressed such a preference. Although the negative preferences towards women as managers have been gradually changing, women are still twice less desirable in managerial positions than men by their subordinates. The results presented by the Harvard Business Review surveys conducted in 1965 [Bowman, Worthy, Greysler 1965, pp. 164–178] and 1985 [Sutton, More 1985, pp. 42–66] and measuring perceptions of male and female executives confirm that the perceptions have been changing into more favorable towards women, yet they are still substantially less favorable than towards men. The percentage of male executives that expressed negative attitude to women executives dropped from 41% to 5% whereas the percentage of males who would accept working for a woman boss grew from 27% to 47%. A question whether the business community would fully accept business top managers was answered negatively by 61% of men and 47% of women in 1965 and these numbers decreased subsequently to 20% of men but only 40% of women in 1965. Interestingly, the justification of these negative attitudes included prejudice towards women playing outside-home roles, women's acceptance of

the exclusion from managerial positions as well men's unwillingness to compete with women for managerial roles. The latter reason being especially plausible with young men who in both surveys expressed much less favorable attitudes towards women in management than their older colleagues.

Meta analytic research of laboratory studies [Eagly, Makhijani, Klonsky 1992, pp. 3–22] does further support the survey results mentioned above. Women in executive positions are evaluated more negatively than men, most negatively when they distance themselves from the female stereotype by adopting typically male style or occupying traditionally male leadership positions or when they are evaluated by men. This may prove that gender is an important negative factor in the perceptions and evaluations of women managers especially when they interfere with stereotypically understood roles and norms. Even if playing those roles female managers perform similarly to male managers they are evaluated lower due to their sex and consequently stay invisible as leaders.

In real life the separation is often „more myth than reality”, which additionally proves that stereotypical perceptions might be the source of prejudice. A more hopeful picture is represented by the results of studies based on experiences of work with actual managers. While evaluating male or female managers they have been really working for, subordinates do not differentiate between male or female bosses [Eagly, Karau 2002, pp. 573–598]. Nonetheless, it has to be noticed that the experience of having a woman manager has a positive impact on the perception of females in managerial positions only when the experience itself had proven positive.

The phenomenon of sex-linked stereotypical division of roles is, as Fletcher concludes [Fletcher 2003, pp. 204–210], connected with the separation of the social world into two spheres of activity: public sphere of paid job and private sphere of family life. We do not only evaluate them differently, public sphere as the domain of skilled work and family sphere as the domain of unskilled, personal and innate characteristics, but we also associate with them two different images of idealized masculinity and idealized femininity. „Most of us carry a sex-linked set of principles – an underlying logic of effectiveness – about how to do good work in each sphere that is assumed to be appropriate for that sphere alone” [Fletcher 2003, pp. 204–210]. Being culturally and historically deeply rooted in social life, the paradigm is powerful enough to determine our expectations, perceptions and eventually actions as appropriate or inappropriate.

No differentiation between male and female factors in evaluations of actual managers raises hope that in time the reality will positively influence human perceptions and eventually change stereotypical attributions. On the other hand, the gap between stereotypical way of thinking and the reality additionally proves the resilient nature of stereotypes that will long determine our expectations and might long negatively color our perceptions and evaluations. Women may not long receive the same opportunities to develop leadership qualifications and if „we wait

for the time to correct the problem, we will be waiting a very long time. At current rate of change, it will be almost three centuries before women are as likely as men to become top managers in major corporations [...]” [Rhode 2003, p. 161].

Numerous researchers indicate that the lack of critical management experience is as one of the most important barriers to become more visible as top leaders. As mentioned above, statistically women are present in management. Nonetheless, the level of managerial positions as well as the fact that in majority women hold managerial positions in low profile influence fields naturally deprive them of possibilities of advancement in high profile influence fields which, in turn, results in diminishing their potential visibility as leaders. Thus, the phenomenon of exclusion might be identified as the very source of the lack of access to resources necessary for acquiring more visible positions in corporations. Being classified as the other due to individual-level differences or demographic and psychological characteristics of male and female executives, women are often excluded from so called “boys clubs”. Social identity theory indicates that managers would identify themselves as belonging to an elite in-group whose members share specific attributes, as stated earlier traditionally perceived as typically male, and would be naturally socialized into that group’s norms [Kent, Moss 1994, pp. 1335–1360]. What is more, gender itself would be treated according to social identity theory as one of the salient characteristics, based on which classification into in – groups and out-groups could occur [Haslam 2002, pp. 167–168]. The exclusion from group membership equals exclusion from important decision making, and support networks, which in turn jeopardizes career advancement [Haw Siu Chow, Crawford 2004, p. 224] and makes potentially effective management players invisible due to low representation.

As mentioned above, another plausible argument used to explain the invisibility of women in management is their own acceptance of this exclusion or the lack of motivation in aggressively claiming positions of authority. The claim is supported with the qualitative research whose results indicate that women more often than men hold informal leadership roles avoiding the potential conflict and intuitively striving towards more cohesion in the team [Neubert 1999, pp. 635–646; Kolb 1992, pp. 63–91]. As a result men would more likely become group leaders whereas women group facilitators as shown by the meta – analytic research of laboratory and field studies, [Eagly, Karau 1991, pp. 685–710], which is consistent with favoring by women such terms as „facilitator” or „coordinator” over the term „leader” [Andrews 1992, pp. 74–94]. The lack of motivation was researched in the national survey of British managers’ career development, which checked motivation as a manager among women and men. The findings did not prove any negative differences in motivation among women as compared with men. What is more, women scored higher on top five motivators: challenging job, opportunity for development, autonomy, being appreciated and good quality senior managers [Alban-Metcalf 1989, pp. 95–108]. How could this

discrepancy between motivation studies and the management practice studies be explained. As suggested by Bevely Alimo-Metcalfe [Alimo-Metcalfe 1995, pp. 92–109], psychology explains a situation of cognitive dissonance, when we face two conflicting truths, as a dissonance which generates tension. The tension is usually reduced by attributing the discrepancy in cognition to a particular cause. Man's success tends to be attributed to ability, woman's success to good luck or bigger from average effort in trying to accomplish a goal. On the other hand, man's failure tends to be attributed to bad luck, woman's more readily to the lack of ability [Wallston 1981, pp. 9–41]. Thus, while we do not find differences in motivation, we create them resolving the problem of cognitive dissonance through sex differences in attributions. It is further proved by Laura Rudman [Rudman 1998, pp. 629–645] in her studies on self-promotion that contrary to the fact that both men and women articulate their professional competence successfully, women appear to be evaluated as incompetent and undesirable for the position. Again, the expectations of others play a strong inhibiting role in claiming authority as well as in women's socialization [Ridgeway 2001, pp. 637–655], which might in turn contribute to reluctance towards women's pursuing opportunities in an aggressive way.

The argument attributing lack of motivation can be also effectively refuted by the evidence concerning women leaving large organizations and opening new businesses. The evidence collected by Bowles and McGinn [Bowles, McGinn 2005, pp. 195–196] proves high dynamism of growth in women-owned businesses in US with survival rates exceeding the US average i. e. 78% increase in the period of mid 1980s to mid 1990. Whereas the biggest proportion of businesses appeared in the service sector, the highest growth was observed in the sectors of construction, transportation, manufacturing and wholesale-trade, in other words, traditionally perceived male sectors. The Krishnan's research [Krishnan, Park 2005, pp. 1712–20] on the TMT women turnover in US Fortune 1000 companies proves that 16% of TMT women who left their organizations in the three years of study (the beginning of 1998 and the end of 2000) started their own firms whereas 50% joined a rival company. In Poland the percentage of women running their own businesses accounted for 36,3% of the self-employed in 2000, which places our country among the EU leaders in that category, the ratio in Poland compares with 34,2% in Austria, 32,8% in Finland, 27,2% in Czech or 26,5% in GB [Geneva 2000, pp. 53–63]. Facing the evidence it would be hard to prove that women are not motivated in pursuing better opportunities to realize their leadership potential, even when the challenge is linked with putting at risk their current professional position.

Why do women leave their position of authority and choose to become less visible as managers? What happens if women become visible in an organization and find their place in the Top Management Teams. The above mentioned interesting study conducted by Krishnan [Krishnan, Park 2005, pp. 1712–20]

among TMT women in Fortune 1000 companies in the US shows that the turnover of women, being twice the rate of turnover of men, is especially visible among women having careers in marketing, operations or law i.e. predominantly male environment, where the turnover is 50% and compares with 8% turnover among TMT women in Human Resources, general administration or communication. Measuring environmental, organizational and individual-level factors the research showed negative correlation between environmental dynamism and environmental munificence and the TMT women turnover, and positive correlation between the size of an organization and its relative power index and the TMT women turnover. In other words, it proves that women can realize their potential as leaders in environments of relative instability that provide excess resources to support sustained growth whereas large organizational structures will trigger bigger turnover among the TMT women. The latter might be explained by the fact that large corporations tend to conform to established patterns and old routines, which may mean that they create psychological hurdles to non-traditional members [Pfeffer 1981, pp. 56–70]. The relative power ratio, defined by the age differential between women and men, appears to be one of the most important factors that has an impact on a TMT manager's decision if to stay in the company [Krishnan, Park 2005, pp. 1712–20]. The greater the differential, the higher the turnover among women who were not given an opportunity by the organization to enhance the knowledge and expertise of the corporate operations. Since women cannot enjoy expert power they often make a decision to leave and join rival companies (50% of the researched TMT women who left joined a rival), open their own businesses (16% of those who left started their own company) or join another industry (over 8% of those who left changed the industry).

An attempt to explain the invisible processes connected with high visibility of women in management was made by Kathy Kram and Marion Mc Collom Hampton and published in „When Women Lead: The Visibility – Vulnerability Spiral” [Kram, McCollom Hampton 2003, pp. 211–223]. The theoretical model they created is based on the Klenian object relation theory which claims that humans at the early age and later as adults use mechanism of splitting and projection while dealing with unpleasant emotions. The psychological mechanism of splitting is „an action undertaken in fantasy that can be used to separate things that belong together” [Segal 1992, p. 36]. The splitting self defense mechanism of separating the self from painful feelings is combined with the mechanism of projection which is understood as active placing of those feelings into someone else.

When women become visible as leaders, due to a combination of processes in action they are exposed to challenges critical to their leadership effectiveness [Cox 1993, pp. 80–120]. The first step is created by the minority status of women in organizations, which results as Kanter [Kanter 1977, pp. 110–120]

claims in heightened visibility, intense scrutiny and pressure to assimilate into the majority culture. Heightened visibility, which itself does not have to be a negative factor, is experienced by women more negatively than men due to a wide range of conscious and unconscious expectations for women's behavior and leader's behavior. Leaders are expected to defend the group especially in the moment of crises and are heavily criticized if they lose the battle. The criticism increases together with anxiety when the organization survival is put at risk. Additionally, the image of a leader clashed with the image of a woman, who is still stereotypically perceived as a weaker sex and potentially in need of support and protection because easily victimized and vulnerable. Unconscious stereotypes about women collide with unconscious stereotypes about leaders [Bayes, Newton 1985, pp. 309–322; Eagly, Karau, Makhijani 1995, pp. 125–145]. Thanks to heightened visibility and perceived potential vulnerability, female leaders raise the anxiety in an organization potentially providing higher risk to organizational survival. In the situation of increased anxiety splitting and projecting mechanisms come into action. According to the object relation theory individuals will tend to split their feelings of vulnerability and project them onto others. Thanks to sex role socialization women are prepared to experience that feeling and manage it mainly through relations with others. What is more, they will tend to easily absorb it whereas men would rather deal with it projecting it to an out-group rather than to an in-group.

In addition, the projected vulnerability of women is combined with the real vulnerability as leaders. The intense scrutiny under which women have to play the leader's role creates and intensifies real vulnerability or, in other words, risk of failure in role. The mistakes will be noticed sooner and will be criticized more often [Aker 1983, pp. 191–202]. Not-sex role appropriate behaviors will be detected readily and criticized severely resulting in negative attributions of women leaders, especially in cultures where sex roles are clearly defined. [Cox 1993, pp. 80–120]. Considering the fact that women build their sense of self esteem in the relations with others [Baker Miller 1991, pp. 11–26], their experience of inner vulnerability would be additionally intensified by close scrutiny and criticism [Eagly, Karau, Makhijani 1995, pp. 125–145]. In such a situation according to Kram and Hampton [Kram, McCollom Hampton 2003, pp. 211–223], women leaders will experience a real risk to their authority, limit potential range of leadership styles in use and eventually undermine effectiveness.

Abstract

Women have made enormous progress for the last several decades substantially marking their presence in management and making inroads in the upper echelons of corporations. Interestingly, the latest concepts of transformational leadership, participative, flexible and relational, expose the salience of attributes traditionally perceived as feminine.

Nonetheless, women tend to be overrepresented at the bottom of organizational hierarchy and underrepresented at the top. The paper explores the issue of low visibility of women in leadership positions addressing selected factors that contribute to still prevalent invisibility of women business leaders. The paper examines frequently indicated sources of women's underrepresentation: ender-triggered stereotypes in operation at the workplace, factors reinforcing stereotypes, lack of critical management experience, exclusion from decision-making and support networks and the lack of motivation to aggressively pursue existing opportunities. Social identity theory, object relation theory and visibility-vulnerability spiral are applied to gain insight into the problem of women's invisibility at the upper corporate echelons.

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