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'No one can actually see us in positions of power': the intersectionality between gender and culture for women in leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Research examining women in leadership has traditionally focused on a single aspect of women's lives, often their gender or race and ethnicity. Increasing awareness of the complexity associated with multiple and diverse identities within the workplace offers an opportunity to examine how cultural and ethnic diversity interacts with women's leadership experiences.¹ Intersectionality provides a conceptual lens to better understand the overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation that deter women leaders and the power domains that can influence their experiences and ability in the workforce and beyond.² It can encourage deeper understanding of how interacting dimensions of identity, including gender, ethnicity, class, ability and sexuality can lead to oppression and social inequality.³ However, intersectional perspectives within leadership literature, including efforts to understand the leadership experiences of First Nations women and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women, are limited.^{3,4}

Equal representation of diverse women in leadership roles is fundamental to the economic and social fabric of society. Diversity of perspectives and experiences are vital to drive innovation, economic growth and social progress. While there have been improvements in women's participation in the workforce, ascension into top leadership positions remains significantly low.⁵⁻⁷ Regarding women leaders from minority cultural backgrounds, especially women of colour, intersectionality emphasises the multiple and simultaneous barriers that can further compound workplace inequity across sectors, including healthcare.^{3,8,9} Intersectionality is a powerful means to understand leadership experiences and ability at the intersection of culture and gender and enact solutions to the significant barriers faced by diverse women who aspire to leadership.^{1-4,10} This issue of intersectionality regarding women from CALD backgrounds and First Nations women is the focus of this commentary. We are a team of healthcare clinicians and/or health and social care academic researchers from diverse backgrounds who have experienced discrimination in leadership. We sought the views of female leaders across Australia whose leadership work is outside of the health and social care sectors to learn from their experiences. Our goal was to engage them in critical discourse via targeted dialogue focused on 'how' we can reverse the inequity in women in leadership.

METHODS

Research design

We conducted a qualitative descriptive study consisting of semi-structured interviews. To explore the experiences of women leaders outside of health and social care and to identify if and how inequities for women in leadership are being addressed, three broad questions were asked:

1. What should we preserve?
2. What needs to be changed?
3. What does better look like?

Participants and recruitment

Five women in senior leadership positions were invited to participate in this study as they were in the authors' networks. We sampled women from CALD and First Nations backgrounds in current or former senior leadership positions in government, the arts and hospitality, and law as these sectors have also grappled with inequities in women in leadership. The women are profiled below (figure 1). Consent was obtained via email before the authors scheduled the interview.

Our study did not seek to be generalisable as we were seeking strategic perspectives of women with experience in senior leadership roles. Instead, our sample size was guided by appraisal of information power.¹¹ Information power is a concept that helps researchers conducting qualitative research determine if their sample is adequate. We deemed our sample adequate based on the following: (1) the sample of five women met the research aim, resulting in strong and clear dialogue between researchers and the participants; (2) participants held highly specific characteristics that were aligned to the study aim, hence sample specificity was met and (3) the qualitative data we collected and collated was sufficiently rich to enable content analysis.¹¹

Commissioner Sue-Anne Hunter: Yoorrook Justice Commission

Sue-Anne Hunter is a Wurundjeri and Ngurai illum Wurrung woman, a trained social worker, Deputy Chair and Commissioner for the Yoorrook Justice Commission, the first formal truth-telling process into historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria, Australia.

Senator the Hon Penny Wong: Parliament of Australia

Penny Wong is a Malaysian born Australian politician who has been a Senator for South Australia for over



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Figure 1 Five women in senior leadership positions who participated in this study.

two decades and is currently the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs.¹

Mariam Veiszadeh: Media Diversity Australia

Mariam Veiszadeh is an Afghan-born Australian human rights champion, lawyer, diversity and inclusion practitioner, and the founder and current president of Islamophobia Register Australia.

Her Honour Judge Nola Karapanagiotidis

Nola Karapanagiotidis has been a barrister for close to twenty years and in 2021 was the first Greek-Australian woman to be appointed as a County Court Judge.

Duré Dara OAM

Duré Dara is Indian by race, Malaysian by birth, and, since the age of 15, Australian by choice. Duré studied social work and went on to develop restaurant ventures. She was the first woman president of the Victorian Restaurant and Caterers Association, member of the management committee of La Mama Theatre, former Vice President of Philanthropy Australia, a Patron of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, Chair of Global Reconciliation Australia and on the board of the Victorian Women’s Trust for more than 20 years.

Analysis

Qualitative manifest content analysis was conducted in NVivo. This analysis stays true to the content of the text, describes what the participant says and creates themes from the words of the text. We analysed participant responses under each of the interview questions and categorised the concepts into key domains to identify themes.¹² The themes were verified by the women interviewed.

RESULTS

What should we preserve?

While there are limited women in senior leadership positions to act as role models, there are considerably fewer women from diverse backgrounds. The initial overall reaction of the women

¹This was Senator Wong’s role at the time this research was conducted. She is now the Leader of the Government in the Senate and Minister for Foreign Affairs for the Australian Federal Government, elected on 21st May 2022.

interviewed is that ‘there is not much worth preserving’, demonstrating a sense of resignation and despair.

This is about having power and Authority on my own country in which I hold sovereignty which is not recognised [SH]

The women acknowledged a slow shift in the culture and gains that have been made over the past decades, thanks to women leaders who had come before them. Previous and current women leaders have paved the way and demonstrated what is possible, highlighting the need for respectful relationships and the importance of leaders having both lived experience and expertise in diversity and inclusion to champion the way forward.

The women that have paved the way to allow somebody like me... [my] background, working class, migrant background, parents who didn't experience high school... to occupy a very privileged position that I now have [NK]

Duré Dara stressed the support that women can offer each other through ‘fighting friendships’, respectful collaboration and asking each other tough questions, which is a foundation to be preserved and strengthened.

Fighting friendships are friendships between women who have a kind of understanding that there are going to be tough questions that they have to ask each other, or they have to push back or push forward. But still moving towards each other because they need so much help in collaboration [DD]

The contribution of advocates with diversity and inclusion expertise and lived experiences of racism was recognised by Mariam Veiszadeh;

...there are passionate advocates out there that are recognising that this is a particularly niche area that needs specific advocacy and expertise...we're starting to see impact [MV]

She went on to highlight the impact of organisations such as Women of Colour who are quantifying the problem and disseminating focused research, and the Victorian Women’s Trust.

I think we're starting to see impact... we're going to have to wait to see if there's going to be systemic change but we are certainly starting to see a level of impact with a heightened level of awareness and it's being done because of organisations like Women of Colour [and] other organisations that are starting to quantify what the problem is by putting research out there that speaks to this specific issue [MV]

What needs to change?

The entrenched barriers to equality and inclusion for women in leadership demands systemic change. Women spoke about masculine and European privilege, the need for nuanced understanding and approaches to First Nations and CALD leadership, and awareness of systemic barriers. First Nations women and CALD women are often not visible in senior leadership positions, influenced by societal norms and narratives that value and privilege personal traits and notions of leadership that are not helpful to women, especially women from diverse backgrounds.

I think society still privileges, values, identifies particular traits as leadership, which are associated with how men have led, and a particular type of man [PW]

The narrative of a woman of colour succeeding is not a narrative, you have to create and forge that narrative [SH]

Understanding cultural diversity is also nuanced and complex; the experiences of a woman of European descent will be different to a woman of non-European descent who deal with physical differences when compared with the majority.

It is a different experience to a woman of a non-European background, a woman who's born in Afghanistan like myself, a woman who's got a darker skin tone, a woman who has an accent, a woman that has to contend with being visibly and physically different [MV]

This is further felt by First Nations women.

The value of a First Nations person is very low in this country. The value of a First Nations woman is even lower, white men and white women cannot and do not actually see us in positions of power [SH]

These systemic intersectional barriers, including racism, sexism, bigotry, prejudice and biases, oppression, discrimination, stereotypes, structural inequalities, unconscious biases, institutionalised patriarchy and safety concerns, affect women's capacity and desire to take on leadership positions.

At the core of all of this is patriarchy, sexism, and the ideas that inform that. And then adding to that when we look at other women, women with disabilities, LGBTQ women, women of colour, migrant refugee women...there is racism, discrimination at play, all of those issues, they're big issues, obviously that need to be addressed within the workplace [and] work practices [NK] There needs to be a recognition that the personal is still political, reconciliation comes from working together, listening together [DD]

The women all revealed their own experiences of workplace discrimination, including within one organisation working in the diversity and inclusion space. As Mariam described:

It's not because culturally diverse women or people of migrant backgrounds are not ambitious. The challenges that they face in an everyday setting are very different to some of the challenges that someone more privileged is going to face... if you don't have to deal with microaggressions on a regular basis... it's a lot easier for you to have the headspace to say, I'm going to aim for that leadership position [MV]

Interviewees provided solutions to these systemic barriers being support for diverse women to access and achieve leadership positions. For Aboriginal women, their status, knowledge and power on their lands need to be recognised. Addressing 'institutionalised patriarchy embedded in the law' [DD] is necessary at the policy level. Within workplaces, greater flexibility, affirmative action policies spanning employment, remuneration, promotion, opportunities, and engagement, and targets and mechanisms to reach those targets must facilitate equity and inclusion. Several women also described the importance of shifting the language from exclusion and division to inclusion. Greater opportunity, encouragement, mentoring and role modelling for diverse women, who will become role models for future women leaders, is needed. Further, we need to recognise women with lived experiences of racism as experts in both the change needed and the solutions to tackle the problem. Space must be created for them to lead the discussion and decision-making.

...ultimately the problem-solving has to come from people with lived experience. That requires other people to recognize when they don't have that lived experience and potentially either stand aside or open up room to invite other people with lived experience to come and speak about it [MV]

Another theme was the need to better engage with leaders and society about how their attitudes, behaviours and biases can endorse existing inequality and the explicit actions needed to proactively influence positive change. For example, aligned to the 'fighting friendship' [DD] concept, women shift from competition with each other to collaboration.

I think the more important thing for us to think about is ...within the broader society, how do we engage with men and women who may have a view that equality is a good idea, but don't necessarily see or understand the ways in which behaviours can ratify existing structural inequality? And to talk through, not in a kind of accusatory way, but rather asking how is that? What can they do? [PW]

Similarly, the power that men currently hold and the role they can play to promote equality was noted in several interviews.

...all of us, men in particular, taking some responsibility, recognising that there is, they have a privilege, male privilege and being prepared to work with women as equals [NK]

The responsibility of all leaders to stand up against exclusive behaviour, shift attitudes and use their power to facilitate change and promote normative messages that support diversity was emphasised.

All of us, men, in particular, taking some responsibility, recognising that they have a privilege and being prepared to work with women as equals [NK] You need diversity around the table. And it's not just the white men or women, who get to make the rules...because that doesn't work anymore. It's time to stop that... [SH]

What does better look like?

The women unanimously agreed that better means diverse women being recognised, included, visible, heard, valued, respected and well-represented in leadership positions across the community, in business, politics, institutions and organisations, as equals.

Whether it is politics, business or the community more broadly, better looks like leadership in our institutions which better reflects who we are [PW]

A culture that very much changes to embrace this, to not be threatened by it, but embrace the value that women and diverse women have to offer [NK]

[For First Nations women] Acknowledging our space on and in our Country as knowledgeable leaders is a start [SH]

Much more diversity of roles and structures of people working together challenging all the structures of leadership - it has to be looked at because it has been encapsulated by one culture [DD]

This can only be achieved when the disadvantage that comes with diverse identities is recognised, understood and accepted as a societal issue and responsibility.

...there is an acute awareness that your diverse identity does mean a level of disadvantage and that we don't have to convince people of that, that people can just understand that, that it's an expected fact that this is problematic and society's brought on a journey to kind of just get that, 'This is wrong. This crap's happened in the past, people being mistreated and it's wrong and we need to do better.' And there's less resistance, there's less resentment, there's less kind of, "Why are people of a particular identity getting a leg up" [MV]

The women reflected that better means systemic coordination and cooperation to shift societal culture, norms and practices to promote gender equality, equity and collaboration.

...gender equity, the pay, affirmative action to ensure that women are equally represented. I mean, that's it, we need those targets and we need, better looks like women being equally represented [NK]

DISCUSSION

While the subject of women in leadership is increasingly under study, a focus on gender and sexism has come at a cost of other

forms of discrimination.¹ Through an intersectional approach, this study captured the perspectives of five women leaders to identify how we can tackle the inequity experienced by First Nations women and women of colour in leadership. Here, we attempt to capture and learn from the perspectives and knowledge of those who have overcome systematic structural barriers. We must also listen to and learn from women who face overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation, who have experienced structural barriers in achieving the same levels of success. Deeper understanding of the spectrum of experiences is critical to ensure the road to success is achievable for all.

A substantial body of research has focused on interventions to promote women in leadership globally. Research and practice is now also focusing on intersectionality in leadership. For example, in the US intersectionality has been researched and described in the federal government. Women from racially under-represented groups describe higher levels of cooperation and empowerment that may emerge from cultural differences, but report lower levels of fairness, openness and support. This highlights the need to examine intersectionality and dimensions of diversity, inclusion and equity to understand its complexities.³ Greater attention towards building and implementing targeted, organisation-wide programmes that promote diversity, inclusion and equity may foster leadership pathways and more supportive workplaces. As one step in the right direction, the Federal Government in Australia announced on 8 September 2022 they will be investing in work to enhance opportunities for culturally and racially marginalised women to move into workplace leadership roles by funding the Diversity Council Australia and their partners.

Limitations

This paper does not intend to be generalisable, instead offering an opportunity for critical discourse around reversing existing paradigms. The women interviewed are highly successful in their fields and their experience may not be representative for many women from First Nations and CALD backgrounds.

Recommendations

Based on the insights shared by these five diverse women leaders, we offer recommendations to tackle the under-representation of women in leadership from First Nations and CALD backgrounds.

1. Intersectionality matters: Women in leadership is a much-needed area of research. However, deep cultural and structural work is required to ensure that all workplaces are inclusive and promoting of women from different backgrounds, especially racially underrepresented women. The intersection between gender and race is part of the 'women' in leadership puzzle that is missing.
2. Understanding the problem and generating solutions: Change cannot be driven by those with inclusion and diversity expertise alone (ie, those with qualifications in Law or Human Resources, without lived experience). Women with lived experience must have a voice and the opportunity and support to lead discussions and decision-making.
3. Reversing existing paradigms: Equity and inclusion of women from diverse racial backgrounds in leadership requires system-level change that can only be realised when individuals, organisations, and communities act and take responsibility for change within their context and sphere of influence.

This and the recommendation above require that men in particular recognise their privilege within many workplaces and take responsibility for actively and meaningfully addressing gender inequality through their behaviour, decision-making and advocacy.

4. Layers of intersectionality: This paper explores the intersectionality between gender and race for women leaders. Other layers shape the experience of First Nations and CALD women, who may face further disadvantages due to sexual identity, gender identity, disability and/or migrant or refugee status. Further work with women is needed to understand how these layers of influence are felt and experienced, and the change needed to reverse inequality and inequity.

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