Wanda Krause
Royal Roads University

Sharing a Voice in the Discussion on Women in Civil Society and the Workplace: Towards Women's Thriving and Impact

Introduction

A great deal of evaluative research has been devoted to understanding women's place, role and status in the workplace and organizations. Women are moving into more influential positions but not within the scope or at the speed at which they can presently be considered to be equal with men. Hence, reports, studies and conferences are devoted to feminist studies and understanding women's position vis a vis men, and why women have not achieved greater equality more quickly when there is greater awareness of inequality and greater efforts to support women's empowerment. In this paper, I add my voice to these explorations and discussions on why women are not occupying more positions of economic and socio-political influence so to be equal with their male counterparts and ask the question: what are the factors that contribute to women's progress, what are those factors that hinder women's advancement and, more importantly, why are these barriers to our advancement persisting?

Reviewing especially studies on women's place and status and the contributions feminism has added to the discussion around equality, I argue that the conclusion that women's participation in the workforce is not equal to that of men's and especially at the higher levels of leadership is undeniable. On the other hand, I believe it is erroneous to conclude that women do not have equal voice in civil society. It is therefore important to understand what those factors are that hinder women's advancement in some spheres, and understand that if women are progressing in other spheres, why that is. I discuss both the workplace, as the economic sphere, and civil society because by placing boundaries on place for discussion hinders our capacity to understand women's role and status more comprehensively. By looking at both offers an opportunity to grasp better what leads to the asymmetries to inform how to achieve women's greater influence.

I share a voice in this discussion as my chosen methodology in this paper because I speak not only or even primarily with engagement with "scientific" research. I also choose to highlight gaps and offer insight sourced by my own observation

and experience as a woman. I have spent over two decades in numerous volunteer positions, involved myself in the study of civil society theoretically and in practice through extensive field research, and participated in the organizations and networks that I studied over the same number of years. In essence, I employ action research and subjective experience which comprise ways of knowing that are largely excluded as legitimate. While conventional inquiry methods have not kept pace with our changing world, the action research repertoire brings tremendous value to our big questions (Bradbury, 2105, p. 3). Action research is regarded as "systematic and orientated around analysis of data whose answers require the gathering and analysis of data and the generation of interpretations directly tested in the field of action" (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p.122). According to Bradbury, "Practical knowing offers a culmination of knowing that emerges when we balance science and artistry. We bring our knowing to fruition as a contribution for self and others." (p. 7). Through this repertoire, which includes my own experience, I seek to add my voice to the discussion.

In the following I contend that discussing participation, status, role, or influence without acknowledging the myriad ways in which a woman might feel her participation and influence matters to her skews what progress, influence and impact means. For the most part, policy relies on sheer number increase to address the gap in participation rates among women in the public sphere. This is primarily achieved through the increase of quota systems in the workforce, and especially for mid-management and upper-management positions. The thinking and approach behind numbers is that the greater the proportion of women in the public to the private sphere, so that a more even ratio between men and women exists, the greater influence women will have. However, there remain some key challenges with oversight in both an understanding around influence and this strategy. In reference to this oversight of what little progress is actually occurring and that increasing numbers does not necessarily contribute to greater impact among women, Arianna Huffington remarks, "By counting the trees, we're missing what's happening with the forest" (Thrive Global, Sept. 21, 2018).

In this discussion, I include what I have observed to be a critical topic and that has not been well factored into considerations around influence and impact: wellbeing. I rely here largely to experience. Women – and sometimes men – sometimes contact me expressing angst at how to deal with these increasing challenges from personal workplace burn out and/or feeling they're having no impact despite all the education they have achieved. They often do not know how to deal with expectations placed upon them, to work more effectively and efficiently with, for example, increasing numbers of displaced persons and refugees or homelessness, despite all the programs devised to deal with such global issues. These people are burned out, feel paralyzed by the overwhelming challenges and expectations placed upon them, sometimes don't have the requisite leadership competencies to know what to do, but often are simply overburdened beyond human capacity. These women's sense

of lack of impact is not actually contextualized by an awareness of their being out-numbered by men in their respective organizations or roles. Their actual struggles, stress, aspirations and desires are informed by so much more. And further, in line with experience as my chosen method for including voice, I can confirm what I am hearing from others. I have not always felt my work as being particularly impactful for myself and for others despite being in a leadership position leading others, and in fact I have felt more desperate to participate impactfully because of burn out.

The following inquiry and discussion is driven by awareness that humanity is faced with many more and increasingly complex challenges. Civil society organiza-tions, businesses and various institutions are often struggling to grapple with these increasingly complex challenges. What leaders need to be more cognizant of, then, is that women – and men – are operating within systems that do not allow them to move forward and have the impact they might desire while challenges are intensi-fying. In other words, we are on a slippery slope. The impact of workplaces fuelled by stress and burnout are bad for everyone. However, they're particularly bad for women, disproportionately affecting their physical and mental health. As a result women are fleeing the workplace as fast as most of the well-intentioned workplace diversity policies can bring them in (Thrive Global, Sept. 21, 2018).

It is my belief that if we have any hope of addressing our global challenges it will require the participation of both men and women as equals, and as healthy, re-silient, adaptable, creative, caring and thriving human beings. Hence, the following inquiry focuses on the women and their capacities to influence with these qualities sustainably. It is a critical time that think tanks, policy makers and organizational and business leaders recognize that narrow approaches and thinking, such as mere-ly increasing women in the public sphere, is missing the mark for women's empow-erment and equity. The goal should shift to be focused on whether women are thriv-ing and can have impact in a fast changing world. If women are not thriving, they cannot have positive, transformational impact. As such, the question that drives this inquiry is: what do we need to achieve greater inclusivity of women and enable their wellbeing, performance and impact?

Place, role and status of women

To begin, if we think that quota systems are working and illustrations of women entering the public sphere mean impact let us look at some numbers and what they mean. Typical of state level attempts to provide examples and proof of progress, usually of the efficacy of their funding and programs, the Canadian government cites statistics on women's increased visibility in the workforce. The province of Ontario, for example, is referred to as illustrative of how the employment rate for women aged 15 to 64 increased to 68 per cent in 2012, which was up from over 51 per cent in 1976 (Statistics Canada, 2013). Statistics Canada also reported that women com-prised 48 per cent of the employed labour force in Canada by 2011 (ibid.). In some

of my geographical research areas, the UAE and Qatar in particular, governments also seek to argue that women's empowerment is increasing by their citing women's numbers mushrooming in government and the workforce. State feminism is the enabling of women pathways to advancement as defined by the state itself through state driven programs. In this region, the state has created much greater visibility of women in government. However, these numbers mean very little in way of impact and actual experience of influence among women.

In the latter case, many of these women are hand picked from the elite economic, political and religious class to represent elite interests of powerful families, at times and even purposefully so to the marginalization of women – and men – that might threaten the status quo of political organization (Krause, 2012). In some of these Arab Gulf countries, women may also be appointed to key governmental positions as a symbolic gesture rather than such being an indication of change (Seikaly, Roodsaz & van Egten, 2014, p.19.) This is not to say that some women do not experience greater influence when they take up roles of influence that serves a broader, common good. Nor does this mean that some women do not thrive personally in these roles having a rippling effect on civil society. The point is that increased numbers are not synonymous with empowerment of women or lead to real impact. Nor do numbers tell the whole story.

The *Women in the Workplace 2017* report by McKinsey&Company has surveyed over 200,000 people in over 350 companies since 2012 and found that women remain underrepresented at every level in corporate America, all this despite women having earned more college degrees than men (p. 2). In the case of statistics referred to in Canada, it is important to also note that only 29 per cent of women with some high school education are employed in comparison to more than 40 per cent of men (Statistics Canada, 2013). In 2009, in Canada, women accounted for about seven out of 10 of part time employees since the late 1970s (Statistics Canada, 2010, p. 13). While Statistics Canada (2013) argues that women leave to take up part time work to care for their families, the Harvard Business Review (2013), in its study, reveals that 90 per cent left not to care for their families but because of workplace problems. The 2017 McKinsey&Company report concludes, "progress continues to be too slow—and may even be stalling" (p. 2), but how to support progress is still little understood if we are focused on quotas and rely on women entering the public sphere in larger number to conclude that an empowerment process is taking place.

In another study, McKinsey&Company reported that for numerous reasons women are simply less likely than men to advance (https://womenintheworkplace. com/). The primary reason is that women experience an uneven playing field, and the report adds that their odds of advancement lower at every level. Further, "there is a persistent leadership gap in the most senior roles; gender diversity is not widely believed to be a priority; and while employee programs designed to help balance work and family are abundant, participation is low among both sexes due to concerns that using them will negatively affect their careers" (ibid.). Similarly, the 2013 report in the Harvard

Business Review examined the nature of projects given to high-potential employees of 1,660 business school graduates and found that men get more of the critical assignments that lead to advancement than women do (https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-in-the-workplace-a-research-roundup).

Obviously, gender parity is important, and for both men and women. But are we also too focused on women versus men in our attempt to conceptually understanding gaps for women's empowerment and impact and create the right strategies to advance empowerment of women? There are a variety of reasons why we are on a slippery slope and why I argue that our main focus for women's inclusion and impact is misplaced. There is a dearth of recent research into the workplaces and civil society organizations where many leaders are, in fact, women. In much of my research on women in civil society organizations I have discovered that many organizations do, in fact, have many women leaders. I discovered that some of these organizations are having massive impact and through various indicators, such as democratic principles they exercised and the impact of services to the individuals they sought to help, such as described by those individuals, as well as the ability to change policy or law, there is a difference between organizations. The difference was not primarily related to the sheer numbers of women in leadership.

The difference in impact had much more to do with the ability to influence these women had collectively, and when I discovered that there could be a striking difference I began a quest to document this phenomenon by inquiring into the qualities and capacities that the individuals themselves possessed. Among my findings is that women together can have incredible impact. Women together with men can make real headway in addressing challenges facing humanity. And a group of mostly women leaders can be so overburdened and stressed that the work they seek to do has little impact or is unsustainable. Additionally, I have gone on to follow up on some of the hundreds of women I have studied over the several years to learn that some emotionally or physically broke or were broken down to no longer be able to do the kinds of great things they once did. Some simply have gone onto other pursuits in their various life stages. Such includes choosing to focus on raising a family as another means to contribute to humanity and fulfillment. But I have found that some did not have the capacity to continue to thrive or did not have the conditions or environment to continue to thrive and have the impacts they desired.

As relates to the economic sphere, the Harvard Business Review cites further reasons why women leave the workplace as "chiefly frustration and long hours" (ibid.). It goes on to detail that "Two-thirds of those who left tried part-time work but found it problematic; since they'd been putting in long weeks, part-time tended to mean 40 hours of work for 20 hours' worth of pay. Factoring even more into decisions to opt out entirely, though, was the inability to work part-time without being marginalized" (ibid.). Data from McKinsey's most recent survey of 60 major corporations show that both the number and the percentage of women fall off dramatically in the higher ranks of organizations (https://hbr.org/2013/09/

women-in-the-workplace-a-research-roundup), confirming that in fact some of the effort to get women into the public sphere is a questionable focus if staying full-time in the workforce is, in reality, not sustainable.

Empowerment and impact

Leaders need to continue to provide means through policy and practice to increase diversity and inclusion of all marginalized groups and at all levels, in particular the higher levels of leadership and management. Numbers are not the key. But if women are leaving the workplace chiefly out of frustration and long hours and as fast as most of the well-intentioned workplace diversity policies can bring them in, at this time we need to be inquiring into what the internal and systems conditions are. What is it about our organizations, workplaces, and the broader systems in which our organizations operate that create such stressful environments where women – and men – are suffering under increasing physical burnout, including emotional and mental health challenges? As it may very well be that we are going down a slippery slope, what is it that we need as leaders and policy makers to achieve greater inclusivity, individual wellbeing and performance among women?

As Huffington argues, some of the women not returning or returning only part-time, are making a considered and not unreasonable choice when going back means burning out, which is still a choice women face more than men (Thrive Global, Sept. 21, 2018). She adds that even though 70 percent of women with children under 18 are working, they're still doing the lion's share of the work at home, which ends up excluding women and making it harder for them to advance into leadership positions (ibid.). But when pressure individuals are viewed as machines and pressured to constantly perform, there will need to be a paradigm shift in the values, desires, thinking and actions that undergird the purpose of their work and what it is we are trying to achieve in context of a global consciousness.

Feminism has offered a great deal for women's advancement and especially an epistemological consciousness and ontological sensitivity that seeks to validate and give agency to women and sexual minorities. Feminism's epistemological emphasis on subjective experience and consciousness and its ontological sensitivity towards marginalized people arguably offers the most comprehensive, effective, and ethically viable approach to empowerment (Bakker and Gill 2003: pp. 3-4). However, it has yet to expand in its endeavor to represent a larger systems view concerning women from multiple forms of oppression, especially notable within larger systems structures that serve to oppress them, such as the civil society sphere and economic sphere that have been structured via men and whereby women must operate essentially in a "man's world". Feminism has also driven the entrenchment of thinking among some of its theorists that in order for women to advance men need to be central in addressing women's disempowerment. Men can experience disempowerment and disempowerment within the structures development by men, too.

Hence, feminism has a ways to go to be more adequately comprehensive. Feminism or any approach or theory regarding the resilience of the current structures and systems that keep marginalized groups repressed must consider also potentially all members of the system working to burn out and collapse and in this vein must document the systems influences for the exodus of women from sustained participation in the public sphere, not excluding men, or their incapacity to sustain their efforts where such is located. In essence, documentation of women leaving or not returning to full time work or their inability to no longer participate in civil society serves also to enable understanding of a shift in what is empowerment today, as well as what is needed for empowerment today. It helps bring awareness to what such means to sustained impact. Such situates, mobilises and advances an entirely different knowledge production around political and social impact that underscores the importance of premising strategy on women's, and others', empowerment on nuance, multiple angles, and honesty around what structures of repression actually exist beyond a centring on men. In sum, such broader thinking could enable us to see the bigger picture.

To provide a better, more comprehensive strategy for women's inclusivity, wellbeing and impact, we need to consider what empowerment means within the experience of women, the different spheres and broader systems. While, the epistemological assumptions underpinning action research embrace knowledge creation as an active process, knowledge is viewed as needing to incorporate views that comprise also the individual experience, and the object of the enquiry is the "I" (McNiff & Whitehead, p. 26). Empowerment is directly linked to the ability of women to contribute more effectively. Hence, empowerment is much broader than a woman versus man issue or a woman versus the state and oppressive state laws illustration. We need to shift from a conceptual understanding of power as power over necessarily resulting in resistance or acquiescence. Empowerment is the ability to use one's internal and external ability to affect change and to shift dynamics, structures and systems of power relations. Change can be within a state of being as well related to the experience of influence, freedom, and fulfilment. Often empowerment is felt before its impact is effectively visible. Disempowerment describes also a state of being or experiences on the individual, private level before we see more visible representations.

One of the foundational slogans of second-wave feminism is "the personal is political". It was the title of an essay written by Carol Hanisch (http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html). The point of Hanisch was personal problems are also political problems (ibid.). The slogan moved then from being a description of the reality to a prescription of how one should act as a feminist. But the significance of the personal affecting or being related to the political is that women's place, role and status in the public sphere as well as the personal, individual, level has political import. Hanisch explains:

As a movement woman, I've been pressured to be strong, selfless, other-oriented, sacrificing, and in general pretty much in control of my own life. To admit to the problems in my life is to be deemed weak. So I want to be a strong woman, in movement terms, and not admit I have any real problems that I can't find a personal solution to (except those directly related to the capitalist system). It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say (ibid.).

Power to influence, therefore, is not something that is exercised only in the public sphere. Resistance to domination, such as domination exercised by men, captures a tiny fraction of where empowerment or the shifting or power relations might be documented. Power to influence must also be noted in other expressions of power. The documentation of empowerment continues to be focused on participation and the exercise of power in the public sphere, and both by politics and feminism (Krause 2012, 10). The private sphere is typically defined as that realm which comprises the family (though it is sometimes viewed as encompassing the neighbourhood or even the community) and interpersonal relations between friends and acquaintances (Bystydzienski 1992: 2). Thus, as Jill Bysydzienski points out, in contrast to the public sphere, perceived as an area of male activity, women's activities defined largely by and to a large extent limited to the private sphere are deemed *apolitical* (ibid.).

As such, what is termed *apolitical* will be eliminated as insignificant empowerment and to impact (Krause 2012, 9). Michele Foucault, also, argues that power cannot be understood merely within the framework of domination, as something possessed and used by persons or states over others. Instead, it permeates life and produces new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses (Foucault 1978, cited in Mahmood 2004: 17). More precisely, what we need then to achieve greater inclusivity of women and enable their wellbeing, performance and impact begins with a paradigm shift around where power lies and what empowerment then means. It begins with acknowledging that as wellbeing relates to one's ability to thrive, working endlessly and tirelessly or in environments that fail to provide the structures or conditions to thrive will not sustain productivity and impact. It is one that embraces women's shifting and developing desires, objects, relations, discourses and how well women feel, irrespective of whether they inhabit the false dichotomy of space of a public or private sphere.

Conclusions

Health, resiliency, adaptability, creativity, the capacity to care, where individuals thrive and men and women are equal are some of the essentials among the capacities and qualities that we need to have sustainable, positive impact. With these essentials, women – and men – may be armed and nurtured to take on the increasingly complex challenge that humanity is facing. The critical question, therefore, is not so

much about how many women are we getting into the workplace and civil society. The better question relates to what we need to have to attain real, transformational impact. Such is going beyond numbers and quotas and the beginning to conceptualize a paradigm where we can see the larger picture for why women may be leaving the so called public sphere, what the conditions are that drive them out, and more centrally what we need as leaders to move forward at this time. So the larger task at hand is creating environments in which qualities related to wellbeing and thriving are embraced as basics - that's the heart of a Third Women's Revolution (Huffington, 2018).

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Abstract

Women are moving into more influential positions but not within the scope or at the speed at which they can now be considered to be equal with men. Policy relies on sheer number increase to address the gap in participation rates among women in the public sphere. However, there remain some key challenges related to this strategy. The paper serves as an inquiry into the qualities and capacities needed for women to become more empowered and have impact in the workplace and civil society. Health, resiliency, adaptability, creativity, the capacity to care, where individuals thrive and men and women are equal are some of the essentials among the capacities and qualities that we need to have sustainable, positive impact. With these essentials, women – and men – may be armed and nurtured to take on the increasingly complex challenge that humanity is facing. The paper argues for going beyond numbers and quotas and for beginning to conceptualize and create a paradigm where we can see the larger picture for why women may be leaving the so called public sphere, what the conditions are that drive them out, and more centrally what we need as leaders to move forward at this time.

Keywords: civil society, women, workplace, thriving, empowerment, impact