

DRO

Deakin University's Research Repository

Vongalis-Macrow, Athena 2015, In the bid for more female leaders, 'mansplaining' probably won't help, *The Conversation*.

The published version is available online at THE CONVERSATION :

<https://theconversation.com/in-the-bid-for-more-female-leaders-mansplaining-probably-wont-help-43844>

©2015, Conversation Media Group

Reproduced by Deakin University under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution NoDerivatives Licence](#)

Available from Deakin Research Online:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30077044>

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

In the bid for more female leaders, 'mansplaining' probably won't help

July 8, 2015 6.07am AEST

Author



Athena Vongalis-Macrow

Director Master of Educational Leadership and Management, Deakin University



It will take more than 'male champions' to disrupt the gendered norms of leadership in Australia. Lukas Coch/AAP

There is an unspoken divide among women on the role men should play in helping to boost the ranks of female workplace leaders.

Increasingly, men and women are enlisting the support of "male champions" to participate and even lead gendered leadership change. It is this approach that enables Tony Abbott to be Minister for Women. Some say this strategy is progressive, others believe it is regressive.

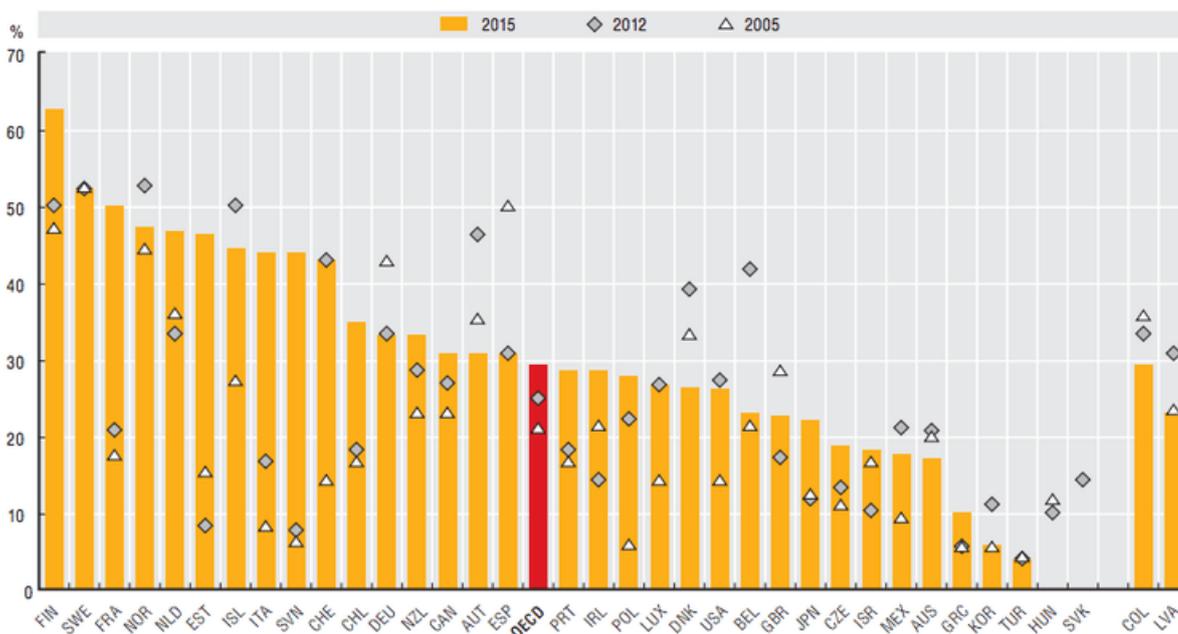
Organisations and organisational leadership have been [imprinted](<https://en.wikipedia.org>

/wiki/Imprinting_(organizational_theory) with the male leadership norm since their inception. External influencers, such as economic depression, war, and technological change have enabled women to enter organisations to challenge the male as leader norm.

But the power of the initial imprinting continues to shape and define organisational structures and behaviours. Despite women now forming close to 50% of the workforce, statistics reiterate the persistent lack of women in leadership.

A recent OECD report on governments found the gender gap in Australia's ministry has worsened since 2012 (see chart below), with Australia among the worst of the OECD countries for women in its highest ranks of government.

Share of women ministers



OECD/Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

The OECD says women still face important barriers in reaching senior leadership positions. The gap highlights the need for women to take strategic control of their participation and leadership.

At the core of the organisation remain “self-reinforcing mechanisms” which according to European researchers are likely to lead an organisation into a “lock-in”.

Given these circumstances, why bring men along to lead organisational disruption?

A disruption in organisational imprinting requires a hostile takeover to break the path of dependency and disrupt imprinted lock-in about gender and leadership.

Lessons from hostile takeovers

In most cases, management and those in power are against a hostile takeover, and will defend the company from outsiders. Given women are seen as leadership outsiders, the organisational structures

and those in power will defend against more women in leadership. To deflect a hostile takeover, the company will use a number of tactics to maintain status quo.

It may make the stock look less attractive to the new acquirer, for example. In the case of female leaders, they may suggest that leadership is not for women, that they are not suited for the role, that they are erratic and don't have what it takes. Leadership is not about capacity and power, but is constructed like a "poison pill".

The "crown jewel" defence of a hostile takeover sees the company diminish its best assets - its crown jewels - in order to look less attractive. Under these circumstances, it would be expected that most are deterred from taking over since the prospects for future growth and prosperity look dim. It is also under these precarious circumstances that female leaders are given a go. This often results in a "glass cliff".

Women who are given rein in times of crisis are set up to fail. With diminished resources, and lack of time and support, women leaders tend to go over the glass cliff. For those who do succeed, a male leader is usually reinstated once prosperity and any hostile threat is over. When the female leader fails, the imprinted notion of male leaders being required to lead growth and development is re-imprinted.

The strength of the organisation in reinforcing this is the way it rewards those in power. The golden parachute strategy prevents those in power from changing sides. Incentives and contracts given to male executives act as an anti-takeover measure. Stock options, cash bonuses, and generous severance payouts strengthen the resolve to retain privilege and stay the course.

A challenge for women

Women seeking leadership need to fight the privilege and closed ranks of those in power who are strengthened by their rewards. Women in leadership have an uneasy relationship with power, so women in leadership programs stress ways women can empower themselves, get more skilled, do more to emulate male leaders. Meanwhile those in power continue to imprint the privilege of male leaders and deepen the path of dependency.

Breaking the path of dependency that has imprinted male leadership requires a gendered response to hostile takeover. It will require strategies to counter the deep imprint of male leadership and overcome the resistance of organisations to leave their well-worn path and embrace organisational and behavioural change.

Smart companies see their employees as assets and provide stock ownership plans as preemptive lines of defence against hostile takeovers. Rather than being seen as hostile outsiders, organisations that give greater ownership of work and control to employees can expect greater harmony between employees and management.

Women can lead this kind of change by working on a strategic redistribution of power in which the

employee takes greater ownership of the processes so that they are reflective of employee interests.

Women are in a position to take ownership and share the power of control, especially in the many sectors in which they are numerically dominant - education, health, service industries - to name but a few, however it requires a systematic understanding of “hostile” work environments and whether those in power have capacity to change by handing over ownership to women and women’s leadership. This kind of change begs the question, can a male champion ever really get this?

 **Gender equality** **Workplace leadership**