Chapter 4

Women and Crisis Management in Higher Education:
Lessons in Leadership From a Global Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an insight into the challenges faced, specifically by women in relation to the agency they are afforded within the context of change management in crisis situations and responses. This is contextualized within global higher education and examined through theoretical perspectives such as Neoliberalism, which have impacted so much on the context specificity of change management and the cultures within which it has influenced so greatly. The recent global COVID-19 pandemic is used as a vehicle by which to drive thinking around concepts, which have had such an impact on women during this time, such as emotional labor and inequality. The chapter concludes with a consideration of organizational structures and the agency that this has afforded women both historically and within the leadership challenges they currently face.

INTRODUCTION

'There is nothing wrong with change if it is in the right direction…' -Winston Churchill (1874-1965)

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has ensured not only that humanity has dealt with a sudden and harsh reminder of its own position relative to the risks man lives with on an everyday basis, but also the opportunities to initiate and manage change that these bring, specifically for women in business (Peters et al, 2020). The existential crisis facing Higher Education Institutions as a direct consequence of 2020 has served as a lens through which other facets of ambiguity and contingency also influence meta-thinking concerning their strategic governance and operationalisation of policies in practice (Pellegrini et al, 2020). Facing ethical dilemmas, institutional leaders also must grapple with compounding intraneous and extraneous variables which exacerbate the current crisis situations HEIs now face (Rapanta et al, 2020).

Whereas the majority of HEIs across the globe work within specific methodological and management methodologies, the capacity for flexible adaptation, creativity, and innovation in crisis, arguably manifests more commonly amongst women leaders than their male counterparts (El-Besomey, 2020). The gender balance and diversity that women bring to executive leadership positions during times of crisis provides a correspondingly more diversified epistemic standpoint through which crises can be considered (Aldrich and Lotito, 2020). These often subtle but diverse differences in knowledge positionality serve to be more transformative than transactional and as such are often more contextually and situationally relevant to immediately pressing issues, offering a wider lens through which to present, frame and articulate considered solutions (Martinez-Leon et al, 2020). Crises impact upon the theoretical underpinnings of the institutional rationales, designs, and operations of these contexts – within HEI and in parallel fields of praxis, where women have been witnessed at executive leadership levels, coping better and more appropriately than their male peers, almost as if facing a hypothetical wartime battle (Benziman, 2020; Maas et al, 2020).

The malalignment of the theoretical framework of HEI relative to the disciplinary perspectives of education has long been annotated as an issue for address (Barnett, 1990), however this was framed at a particularly politically volatile time as a means of highlighting larger ethical issues of concern, rather than crisis as an independent concept (Jandrić et al, 2020). The most recent challenge, presented by COVID-19, is to ensure that pedagogic practice across HEIs can adapt to new teaching and assessment methodologies, whilst at the same time ensuring an optimal quality and student experience for those joining academic programmes of study at HEIs (Rapanta et al, 2020) These experiences will potentially form the foundational

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