

11 Investigating Women as Public Relations Leaders in Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia

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Introduction

Despite the success of many women in forging public relations careers, the industry's feminisation is widely understood to negate its standing as strategic counsel and, in turn, capacity for leadership. Leadership is a particular issue for public relations, which has long sought recognition as a strategic management practice and therefore as an occupation, which deserves a seat at the table in the corporate boardroom. Yet, understandings of both leadership and public relations rely heavily on Anglo-American and European studies that tend to reproduce Western and masculinist hegemonies.

This chapter highlights the value of focusing on gender and social contexts for understanding, women, public relations and leadership and offers perspectives from Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia. It interrogates notions of gender and leadership in public relations using a critical feminist lens in order to challenge existing assumptions and investigate power and power relations, along with the structural processes that produce gendered discourse and practice (Fitch, James & Motion, 2016). It also draws on diverse perspectives within the Australasian region, in order to establish the need for more research on public relations and leadership from non-Western and settler colonial contexts that engage with notions of gender.

This chapter aims to challenge the ways women and leadership are conceptualised in public relations scholarship. It introduces women leaders' voices from Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia in order to highlight the urgent need for more nuanced and complex understandings of gender and leadership in public relations outside of Western business contexts. The chapter is structured in four sections. First, we review scholarship on women, public relations and leadership in order to identify the ways it largely negates social and organisational contexts in its focus on the identification, development and success of individual leaders. We also highlight our concerns with essentialist understandings of feminine and masculine styles of leadership and the Western bias in much of this scholarship. Second, we outline our methodological approach in this chapter, incorporating feminist and critical perspectives, interdisciplinary research and diverse women leaders' voices from Australia,

Indonesia and Malaysia. Third, we then investigate women and public relations leadership in Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia to establish the need to better reconceptualise leadership as relational and contextual rather than concerned with individual agency. Finally, we discuss the factors that support our case for more qualitative and nuanced scholarship on women and leadership outside of Western organisational contexts in order to develop a more sophisticated conceptualisation of women and leadership in public relations.

Women, PR and Leadership

Women and Leadership

Scholarship on leadership is generally framed within business and human resources disciplinary frameworks (unless it relates specifically to political leadership when it draws on political science). Its underlying ideology is neoliberal, in that the focus tends to be on the individual traits and characteristics of ‘good’ and ‘effective’ leaders. Sheryl Sandberg’s (2013) bestselling book on women and leadership, *Lean In*, offers a good example. Its popular feminist mantra attributed women’s lack of career success to their lack of self-confidence:

We hold ourselves back by lacking self confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in. We internalize the hidden messages we get throughout our lives—the messages that say it’s wrong to be outspoken, aggressive, more powerful than men. We lower our expectations of what we can achieve ... My argument is that getting rid of these internal barriers is crucial to obtaining power’.

(Sandberg, 2013, pp. 8–9)

Sandberg is of course writing from a position of privilege and in relation to her own experience within US tech corporate structures and boardrooms. Similar assumptions dominate women public relations leaders’ perspectives. When asked in an interview about the challenges for women working in the public relations industry, the first female CEO of Ogilvy Australia, Kieran Moore, identified none: ‘I don’t think there are any. Certainly here at Ogilvy people rise or fall on merit’ (cited in *Leaders in Heels*, 2012). Yet, industry surveys, government reports and scholarly research confirm again and again the ongoing gender inequality in the industry, evident in the gender pay gap and the under-representation of women at senior levels (Fitch, 2016; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018). Nevertheless, Moore attributes her career success to her efforts: ‘I do know like everyone who has succeeded in their chosen career, I have worked very hard. It’s amazing really, the harder I work, the luckier I get. Who would have thought!’ (cited in *Leaders in Heels*, 2012). Sandberg and Moore’s attribution of women’s leadership success to ‘leaning in’ and ‘hard work’ disengages leadership from its social, cultural, institutional and organisational contexts.

A major concern with such individualist approaches to understanding leadership is the failure to recognise leadership as a socially constructed process and therefore one that must be understood in relation to particular social, cultural and organisational contexts (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Stead and Elliott (2009) argue that the experience of women leaders is largely invisible in leadership theory and attribute this conclusion to the dominance of American and British scholarship that foregrounds masculinity in their conceptualisation of leadership. They argue ‘leadership theory continues to be dominated by men and draws on the white, Western male experience as it occurs mainly within Western hierarchical organisations’ (Stead & Elliott, 2009, p. 6). Therefore, they call for more qualitative research from non-Western and non-business contexts to increase the diversity of understanding that pays attention to both gender and social contexts. It is worth noting that feminist scholars have levelled similar criticisms at the public relations discipline, maintaining it is ‘too White and too first world’ (Golombisky, 2015, p. 389).

Some scholars theorise that women lead differently, noting that feminine leadership styles result from women’s innate communication styles or female values. This understanding of women’s leadership has influenced various public relations scholars (see, for example, Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2000). In a Welsh study of women’s media leadership, which explored more relational understandings, O’Brien (2017) found that while women perceived their leadership as feminine – relational, collaborative, engaging rather than controlling, and non-egocentric – their leadership was not feminist as it did not lead to a systematic change to masculinised media work. The point is having women leaders is not necessarily feminist and does not necessarily signify greater gender equality or structural change. Ultimately, women find they have to conform to expected and dominant notions of leadership (Trinidad & Normore, 2005).

PR and Leadership

Scholarship on women and public relations recognises the relatively slow progress of women’s advancement towards senior leadership roles (Meng & Neill, 2021; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018). There is now a body of work investigating women and leadership emerging from Europe and the US, in part due to concerted efforts by networks such as EUPRERA’s Women in Public Relations project (see <https://euprera.org/what-we-do/projects/women-in-public-relations/>) and the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations (see <http://plankcenter.ua.edu/>). However, scholars note the lack of global perspectives (Meng & Neill, 2021). In line with theorising on leadership, public relations theorising is largely drawn from the US and European studies of industry practices. In their book, Aldoory and Toth (2021) lament the overwhelming emphasis on the individual, white, heteronormative practitioner in earlier studies of feminism and public relations and note that only recently have US scholars began to engage with studies and perspectives from outside the US.

The emphasis on the individual characteristics of good leaders we identified in leadership scholarship in the previous section extends to scholarship on leadership within the public relations discipline. In particular, scholarship within reworked and updated Grunigian paradigms reproduces similar ideas:

Excellent leadership in public relations is a dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produces ethical and effective communication practice. Such practice fuels and guides successful communication teams, helps organizations achieve their goals, and legitimizes organizations in society.

(Meng et al., 2012, p. 24)

Various barriers are attributed to the lack of individual women's advancement towards leadership positions, including the lack of role models, lack of management experience and the need to balance work and family life (Meng & Neill, 2021). This liberal feminist approach, which focuses on individual agency and career advancement, is critiqued by other – primarily critical feminist – public relations scholars (Fitch, 2016). Radical feminist scholars tend to attribute the difference in women's leadership styles to stereotypical patterns along gender lines. Combining radical and liberal feminist perspectives, Grunig, Toth and Hon (2000) argued that feminine characteristics could make public relations practice more ethical and similar ideas around feminist leadership attributes remain persistent in the literature.

Critical feminist approaches to leadership focus on institutional and structural issues around gender and leadership. For example, Place and Vardeman-Winter (2018) call for scholars to move beyond a feminine-masculine dichotomy in the discussion of leadership styles and to instead focus on the organisational contexts, which cultivate successful women leaders. They also call for greater attention to be paid to the ways leadership is socially constructed in a particular cultural and organisational context by investigating 'how "leadership" is situated and created within a single culture when prescribing qualities and practices that deem an individual a "leader"' (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018, p. 172). In addition, they advocate for significant structural change among leaders and policy makers, along with more education around inequality in order to develop more diverse leaders. To overcome the largely US, white, heterosexual assumptions underpinning public relations research, Vardeman-Winter and Place (2017) call for a stronger emphasis on intersectionality theory to highlight the under-explored, compounding disadvantages of gender, race, sexual orientation, class, age and disability.

Investigating Women Leaders

Heeding McKie and Willis' (2015) call for more interdisciplinary scholarship on leadership and public relations, we draw on feminist and critical

perspectives on leadership. We see value in incorporating diverse female leaders' voices into this chapter, in part to address the dominance of male perspectives and quantitative empirical work on leadership and leadership attributes (Stead & Elliott, 2009). Given qualitative approaches are useful for investigating social processes in particular contexts (Stead & Elliott, 2009; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017), we argue a qualitative approach calls attention to the need to pay greater attention to women and leadership in public relations contexts outside the US and Europe and outside the corporate sector.

When scholars investigate leadership in the Asian region, gender is rarely the focus. Often, the research is modelled on Western theories and approaches, using quantitative research to define particular leadership styles and to account for diverse cultural contexts and associated leadership challenges. Even when such research reveals startling disparities along gender lines, the finding is rarely interrogated. For example, in a study of ethnic Malay leaders, Jogulu and Ferkins (2014) found that almost half (49%) of female leaders were single, in sharp contrast to only 19% of male leaders. This finding suggests that women who prioritise career advancement do so at the expense of personal relationships or family life. One study that does focus on Asian women in leadership argues that gender inequality is widespread and results in the underutilisation of women's talents (Cho et al., 2017).

The value of studying leadership in different cultural contexts is increasingly embraced within the literature. Hofstede's work is influential in global leadership theory (e.g. see: Fernando, 2018; Rowley & Ulrich, 2014), as it is within the public relations discipline. However, its limitations include its essentialist approach to understanding 'national' characteristics, founded on monolithic and static understandings of culture, and that it does not account for cultural diversity or transnational activity (Courtright, Wolfe & Baldwin, 2011). Although we focus on the ways gender and leadership are constructed in particular social and cultural contexts, we are not attempting to theorise 'Asian' or 'Australasian' leadership in this chapter.

Rather, as feminist scholars, we are keen to draw on the voices of diverse women leaders in 'other contexts', noting 'different women's stories—as well as men's stories who are not part of the standard White, heterosexual, American experience—are severely underrepresented in public relations practice and research' (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017, p. 335). As a result, we value qualitative approaches for documenting different women's stories in Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia. In this chapter, therefore, we draw on utterances from media and research interviews and trade media and women's memoirs to weave 'other voices' into our call for greater focus on gender and public relations leadership in understudied social and cultural contexts.

We employ an expanded understanding of public relations as persuasive communication in order to move beyond business and management theoretical frameworks of women and leadership and to more fully account for the range of public relations activities women perform. These activities might

include community and civil society leadership roles that occur outside of formal organisational and institutional structures. A good example can be found in Singaporean civil society activist and founder of the women's group AWARE, Connie Singam (2013)'s memoir. In writing of the challenges of the AWARE presidency, a position she describes as Singapore's 'feminist-in-chief', Singam wrote:

You have to be almost foolhardy to take it on, considering the work involved, the demands of being a public voice, the stress and strain of organising volunteers, raising funds, persuading donors and advocating human rights issues that are considered highly political and perhaps also demonised in the Singapore political culture.

(2013, pp. 260–261)

Singam, who described herself marginalised as a woman, an Indian, a widow and a civil society activist, had six terms as AWARE president. The work described by Singam offers a useful example of the impact of women's leadership outside business contexts and justifies an expanded understanding of public relations to encompass women's voluntary and civil society leadership activities.

Perspectives from Australasia

In this section, we draw on research into diverse political, cultural, institutional and organisational contexts in order to consider what 'leadership' means for women working in public relations and related promotional activity. We incorporate women's voices, noting that this approach – the conversational, the anecdotal – can offer new insights into women's leadership perspectives, experiences and understandings in Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Australia

There has been limited research on the intersectional positions of gender and Indigenous Australian identity within public relations research and scholarship, and a corresponding gap regarding Indigenous women's leadership skills and narratives within the profession (Clark et al., 2019, 2021). This situation is consistent for Indigenous Australian women across all industries, with many continually undervalued in senior roles, experiencing racism within the workforce and struggling to manage personal responsibilities (Fredericks & White, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2019; Thunig & Jones, 2020; White, 2010). Given the absence of historical and contemporary leadership narratives of Indigenous women, this section highlights and pays respect to several Indigenous women who have undertaken public relations activities.

The value of giving back to Indigenous communities is a strong principle of Indigenous women leaders in public relations type roles (Clark et al.,

2019). Aboriginal woman and pioneer Jackie Huggins (Bidjara/Birri Gubba Juru) explains that an Indigenous leader is a person who centres community interests: ‘this is particularly true of our women leaders, many of whom work tirelessly, thanklessly, behind the scenes to make their communities healthy’ (Huggins, 2004, para. 4). This emphasis on working with and giving back to the community has been reiterated in several voices of Indigenous women working in public relations who implement social change and strength-based narratives as components of an Indigenous Australian public relations protocol (Clark et al., 2019).

The first recognised case of national protest in Australia, the 1938 Day of Mourning, involved several organised groups (Aborigines Progressive Association, Australian Aboriginal Progressives Association, and the Australian Aborigines’ League) raising awareness of the 150-year anniversary of the colonisation of Australia on January 26. Pearl Gibbs, a member (and Secretary) of the Aborigines Progressive Association, had experience in speaking to large crowds and was the first Indigenous woman to participate in an Australian radio broadcast (Standfield, Peckham & Nolan, 2014). Goodall described Pearl Gibbs and her publicity work as:

Conscious of the importance of media coverage, Pearl ensured that journalists were kept informed. Although often outspoken and abrasive, she could also be charming and persuasive. She reached a wide audience in Sydney and Wollongong when she spoke about women’s and general Aboriginal issues on radio station 2GB in 1941. Her writing appeared in the women’s, local and Sydney press.

(2007, para 6)

Pearl Gibbs’ extensive media knowledge and skill in liaising with journalists would have been an asset to the strategic and pioneering Day of Mourning event. The Day of Mourning significantly highlighted the racism and poor treatment of Indigenous peoples and demonstrated resistance to the continued colonisation of their country. To this day, the Day of Mourning event continues with annual protests on Australia’s founding day of celebration.

There are documented cases of dedicated public relations and publicity positions recorded in the minutes and agendas of the 1950s–1970s Indigenous organisation, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and its State-based committees (National Museum of Australia, n.d.). FCAATSI and its State groups were established to raise awareness and advocate for Indigenous rights and improvements and were notable for their campaign contributions to the 1967 Australian Constitution amendment (known as the 1967 Referendum) (National Museum of Australia, n.d.). May McBride (Butchulla) was the publicity officer for the Queensland branch of FCAATSI (called QCAATSI) in the 1960s and undertook duties, including lobbying, promoting and encouraging Indigenous peoples to register on the electoral rolls (McBride-Yuke, 2020; National Museum of Australia,

n.d). The 1967 Referendum is one of the 'first modern Australian political campaign[s]', in that its publicity campaign engaged with major newspapers, magazines, radio segments, television programmes and included community engagement, pamphlets and posters (Turnbull, 2010, p. 165). Unfortunately, May's publicity role and activities are scarcely documented, and she is generally mentioned in relation to the work of her husband, fellow Aboriginal campaigner and QCAATSI Chairperson Lambie McBride.

In the new millennium, communications and media studies graduate and granddaughter of prominent Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins, Krystal Perkins (Arunta/Namal) became one of the first well-known Indigenous women communications specialists (Finnane, 2010). Through her work as the National Marketing and Communications Manager for National Indigenous Television (NITV), Krystal helped to launch the new television channel in 2007 and created its branding (Finnane, 2010). NITV is a culturally important, free-to-air channel and hosts Australian and world Indigenous stories and news (Dibley & Turner, 2018). In 2010, Krystal established the consultancy All the Perks and founded Australian Indigenous Fashion Week in 2014 (Learson, 2014). Krystal stated that through All the Perks, she wanted to work in Indigenous communications and give back: 'I want to help youth in my community to realise that there are plenty of opportunities in life. I want to show leadership in that way to my community' (Finnane, 2010). Krystal typifies the work of several Indigenous women, who have emerged as trailblazers in senior roles and established their own communication consultancies and are often called upon as spokespeople (Clark et al., 2019, 2021). The examples in this section demonstrate that Indigenous women over the past century have embraced public relations leadership roles whether through Indigenous campaigns or Indigenous organisations.

Indonesia

Women have traditionally dominated Indonesia's public relations industry in numbers but not in leadership, causing many women to leave their corporate job and opt for an agency job where women practitioners seem to thrive (Simorangkir, 2011, 2013). Indonesia's Minister of Women Empowerment and Child Protection Bintang Puspayoga believes that the lack of women leaders generally deprives organisations and institutions of women's point of view, thus indirectly influencing policy-making and resulting in a low gender equality index (Faqih, 2021). In the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index report, Indonesia placed 85th out of 153 countries and women's participation in the labour market and education is low (Statista, 2021).

There is evidence of significant sectoral segregation along gender lines within the Indonesian public relations industry, where it is perceived as a masculine profession in resource sectors such as oil and gas and a feminine profession in hospitality, fashion and retail sectors (Damayanti & Saputro, 2017). This gendered segregation ultimately impacts on perceptions around public relations

leadership, where masculine leadership is stereotyped as requiring assertiveness in decision-making, ability to take charge in management, and being brave in facing difficult challenges, and feminine leadership is stereotyped as having an attractive face, interesting personality and a perfect physique as the ‘face of the company’ (Damayanti & Saputro, 2017, p. 33–34), pointing to the significant aesthetic labour female practitioners are required to perform. Mustafa’s (2019) research on public relations in the banking industry confirms the existence of lookism for female practitioners; she explains that the concept of ‘brain, beauty, and behavior (3B)’ is used as a standard requirement for public relations officers, as they are considered the customer front line. This view clearly degrades women’s leadership competency, disciplining their bodies and behaviour, and reducing them to mere pretty faces.

Because the public sector is regarded as masculine, government public relations leadership is therefore also dominated by men. According to Kriyanto (2019), even though men and women have equal chances in entering the field, in government public relations, men tend to hold managerial roles, whereas women tend to hold technician roles. A few women, however, have become public relations leaders in the government sector while still adhering to stereotypically communal traits (Eagly & Karau, 2002) that are traditionally considered feminine, e.g. pleasant, likeable and trustworthy. According to Dyah Rahayu, associate vice-president of corporate communication of a government financial enterprise:

Women tend to have a higher sensibility compared to men. Women are also able to tell a story, whereas men tend to be more straightforward. This feminine characteristic is identical to the characteristic of PR. There is an art to it.

(PR Indonesia, 2017)

Essentialist and stereotypical notions of masculine and feminine leadership attributes dominate perspectives on leadership within the Indonesian public relations industry. PERHUMAS, Indonesia’s leading public relations association, appointed its first and to date only female chairperson, Prita Kemal Gani (2011–2014). Kemal Gani founded the London School of Public Relations and is a prominent industry commentator. She, too, believes that the most important traits of a public relations professional must be likeable, aesthetically attractive and able to socialise (Fadli, 2019). Kemal Gani acknowledges the challenges for women pursuing leadership roles in public relations, given expectations that women prioritise family:

The key to fulfill my personal and professional goals is self-discipline. My work and my other social engagements are scheduled in-between my day and after everything is settled with family matters. I put my family first and that gains a tremendous return of support from them.

(Kemal Gani, cited in Healey, 2016)

In fact, the centrality and prioritising of the family contribute to both the empowerment and disempowerment of women leaders in Indonesia (Riantoputra & Gatari, 2017). Although Kemal Gani puts her ‘family first’, she also mirrors Sandberg and Moore’s assertions around hard work and individual achievement.

Malaysia

Despite the increase of women in the public relations industry in Malaysia, with some achieving senior positions in the corporate world or establishing successful consultancies, gender inequalities persist. However, there is almost no research to quantify gender inequality within the public relations industry. In the 39-year history of the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM), the oldest and largest national public relations professional association, there has only been one female president. The immediate past director-general of the government Department of Information (that oversees all government information officers) was the only woman in that position since it was set up in 1957. Currently, out of 14 state information departments, only one is headed by a woman. British-born public relations pioneer Paddy Schubert, who played a pivotal role in the development of the industry in Malaysia, observed the challenges women faced in the workplace:

The male ego also required that a man should dominate a woman in order to prove his superiority ... male graduates studying along with women acknowledged their academic prowess but graduation viewed the woman as a threat and intrusion into a man’s world.

(cited in Souket, 2021, p. 89)

A senior corporate public relations practitioner who is the head of the department in a large organisation also identified the lack of organisational commitment to promoting women into leadership roles:

The lack of gender equality policies in the workplace is the biggest hindrance for a woman to move up the corporate ladder. Most organizations, whether MNCs or local, lack clear goals and firm leadership commitment for achieving gender parity in decision-making levels.

(Kaur & Souket, 2020)

However, gender equality policies do not sufficiently address the gendered power structures within organisations; even where women constitute at least 50% of top management positions in public relations, deference is still given to the senior male’s decisions, which often supersedes that of the woman in meetings. Further, the heroic leadership trope is significant in Malaysia and there is little challenge to leaders, due to the ‘acceptance of power and status [that] is further strengthened by the custom or respect for elders and

seniority' (Jogulu & Ferkins, 2014, p. 92). The deep entrenchment in cultural and religious beliefs becomes a hindrance to progressing women leaders by constantly reminding them of their family commitments and societal expectations (Khadri & Subramaniam, 2015).

In a qualitative study with ten senior female public relations practitioners, Kaur and Souket (2020) found a number of factors that limited leadership opportunities for women practitioners despite their being as qualified as their male peers. These factors included the patriarchal cultural barrier where men are seen to be the head of the household and the primary provider for the family, irrespective of whether the woman earned a higher income, and social conditioning where the woman is expected to be the primary caregiver for her family and is therefore limited in her mobility to take on new career opportunities. A senior consultant based in an international public relations consultancy in Kuala Lumpur noted 'men's careers are usually never dictated by caregiving responsibilities and they have the flexibility to take up opportunities even in other geographical locations away from their home base' (Kaur & Souket, 2020). The consultant added that while their organisation practised diversity in the firm locally, 'in the regional and global offices, the PR leadership positions are dominated by men'. Mobility was also often a barrier for women who had aspirations to take on more senior, regional positions alongside a lack of infrastructure such as support for childcare.

Despite the recognised structural barriers to the progress of women into public relations leadership roles, there are also widespread perceptions that women hold themselves back or simply lack confidence, echoing Sandberg's call for women to lean in. A senior public relations consultant expressed that women can sometimes be their own worst enemies:

They don't trust their own capabilities and question their qualification instead of applying for the top job. Some women in male-centric industries, especially, like finance and engineering, prefer not to apply for promotions or prepare themselves to become PR bosses in their companies. They feel they have inadequate power or fear political interference and also probably don't feel comfortable to have to deal with the majority male senior colleagues as peers.

(Yati, 2015)

Stereotypes even lead some authors to argue that the compassionate, emotional and connective nature of women suggests their suitability for leadership positions in sectors such as corporate social responsibility, particularly when involving environment or community activities (Alazzani, Wan-Hussin & Jones, 2019). The path to leadership positions in public relations has therefore not been easy for Malaysian women who face numerous barriers, including gender stereotypes, rigid cultures and beliefs, stringent organisational practices and family commitments.

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly reviewed three diverse social and cultural contexts for public relations leadership. In introducing women's voices and perspectives, it highlights the urgent need for more empirical and qualitative research in order to develop more sophisticated, context-sensitive and nuanced scholarship on women, public relations and leadership. We found that Western conceptualisations of leadership are persistent in common perceptions around women and leadership, even in non-Western settings. In particular, a neo-liberal framing of senior leadership roles that are achieved through merit and hard work dominates perspectives on women's career trajectories. We observed persistent themes that women were holding themselves back, a position that we hope more research can help address in order to move away from essentialist stereotypes around women's suitability for certain kinds of public relations work as well as a better understanding of both aesthetic labour and the additional responsibilities many women face. These factors differ across social, cultural and organisational contexts.

Scholarship on leadership often fails to consider structural and institutional barriers to achieving workplace equality and the ways that gender, race and class, to offer just three examples, operate to limit leadership opportunities. For Indigenous women in Australia, the history of activism offers unique insights into both public relations leadership and the role of public relations in social change. Communication practitioners perceived their work involved both representing and giving back to their Indigenous community. In Indonesia, the family is paramount and female practitioners work in an environment characterised by increasing conservatism. In addition, their appearance informs perceptions of their role and work, suggesting considerable aesthetic labour is required to advance in their careers. In Malaysia, a masculine, heroic leadership trope persists and is reinforced by respect for elders and seniority. Women must also negotiate family and professional responsibilities, as well as entrenched workplace discrimination.

The findings in this chapter point to the urgent need to reconceptualise feminist leadership and to develop new models of feminist leadership (Batliwala, 2010) and how these apply in public relations work. Women's lack of career advancement into leadership roles is not due to innate differences in leadership style (Rajasekar & Beh, 2013). Rather, leadership is a socially constructed process and therefore its meanings must be understood in relation to specific social, cultural and historical contexts. We are limited in the scope of this chapter in investigating notions of leadership and women's public relations careers in diverse sociocultural contexts, but recognise the value of critical feminist perspectives concerned with gender and power and, in particular, institutional and structural inequality. By investigating our diverse perspectives and discussing the particular social, cultural and historical contexts in which we live and work, we heed Mohanty's (2013) call to reimagine cross-border feminist solidarities and highlight the need for greater reflexivity in feminist public relations scholarship.

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