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## **Female Leadership: Individual strategies to counter gender stereotypes and the model of the leader**

Chantal Morley, Isabelle Collet, Marité Milon, Katherine Maillet, Martina Mc Donnell

### **Abstract**

Female managers form an integral part of today's business world, but they still represent a minority group. Results from research on the existence of a veritable style of female leadership do not concur. Our research objective is to argue that displays of female leadership stem from women's "agency" according to the obstacles they encounter and the advantages at their disposal. Although theories about leadership have evolved over the last few decades to include a greater emphasis on the importance of the human dimension, an area traditionally linked with femininity, the model of the leader remains typically masculine. We put forward the idea of a behavioural, strategic and/or discursive positioning with regards to stereotypical representations, and suggest four types of strategies illustrated by results from our research. We have attempted to verify this model with two sets of data; on the one hand, a study of recent articles in the French presses on female leadership and on the other hand a field study analysis of a student simulation of setting up a company. Alongside more traditional management styles, we show the emergence of a new type of behaviour that exploits femininity. This latter behaviour allows women to retain their identity yet be recognized visibly as a leader exercising power; however there is the risk of naturalising the idea of female leadership.

**Keywords:** Gender, Leadership style, Stereotype, Women, Strategy

## **Introduction**

Women leaders form an integral part of today's business world, however the number of women leaders in business circles has only slightly increased despite an increasing pool of qualified candidates. Furthermore, their presence in companies remains at a significantly lower level than the number of graduates or female executives present in the professional world. This phenomenon has generally been seen as the result of contradictory forces; theories lauding new styles of management favouring the entry of women into business, versus the clash between contradictory perceptions of the ideal leader type, and the female stereotype representing a deterrent. Fifteen or so years ago, various authors defended the idea of a style of «female leadership», which received extensive media coverage. It has since become a research topic, mainly in North America, where attempts have been made to ascertain if gender effectively infers a particular leadership style. However, the results are far from consensual [Eagly-Carli, 2003], which has led us to approach the question in a different way. Basing our approach on [Foucault, 1984; Butler, 2006], we put forward the hypothesis that women can use their “agency” to position themselves in a universe dominated by men. Our objective is to show that displays of female leadership are the result of a positioning choice adapted by women according to the obstacles they encounter and the advantages made available to them. Drawing on previous research and the power / resistance dialectic, we have attempted to identify different types of strategies. We have tested this model with data from two differing sources: on the one hand, a study of the recent French press dealing specifically with female leadership and on the other hand a field study analysis of students who are simulating setting up a company.

## **1 Leadership styles and gender**

### **1.1 Leadership styles and femininity**

Since the pioneering works of K. Lewin in the 1930s, research has categorised leadership styles by first opposing, then by conjugating two "neutral" poles; a focus on production as opposed to a focus on the human dimension. Leadership styles are evaluated according to the extent to which the leader focuses on accomplishing tasks and/or his/her regard for the group. Under the pressure of economic and competitive forces, the human dimension in management has taken on more importance, giving birth to "transformational" leadership, initially described by [Burns, 1978] in his study on top leaders and further developed by [Bass, 1985]. With this style of leadership, the leader him/herself serves as the model, winning the trust and the support of co-workers with his/her charisma. Thus he/she aims to transform them by developing their potential. He/she is opposed to "transactional" leadership, a more conventional style of management where responsibilities are established and people are compensated or punished according to how well they meet objectives.

For nearly fifty years, research on leadership ignored the sex variable, almost all the leaders under study being men. Absent from the models, women suddenly entered the scene when several authors, in particular [Rosener, 1990], suggested the existence of a management style which he labelled as "feminine". Most often it refers to management *by* women, even if it is sometimes presented as a style of management marked by characteristics which *we generally find in women*. In both cases, the human dimension is in the forefront. Taken up by popular literature, it led to recommendations for a massive entry of women into management positions, a recommendation that has only been followed up somewhat.

## 1.2 Research on female leadership

The notion of female leadership has raised two major questions among researchers. Is there indeed a different management style according to one's sex? Is it an advantage or an inconvenience to be a woman when competing for a management position?

### 1.2.1 A specifically female management style

Research results concerning the first question, although far from being unequivocal, tend to answer to the negative. Research results which confirm the existence of a specifically female style of management usually refer to qualitative studies or studies carried out only on women [Helgesen, 1990; Rosener, 1990; Calás-Smircich, 1996]. These publications have had an important influence on the media which has largely contributed to spreading a distinctive image of the female manager.

Many comparative studies hold that gender is the only explanatory variable. This sometimes appears to ensue from a personal conviction of the researcher, based on the observation of social behaviour, or socially accepted behaviour, where men generally appear more confident, aggressive, and direct. For example, [Burr, 1998: 30] having questioned the weight gender stereotypes carry in the analysis of results, concluded: *«Despite these cautions, it seems reasonable to accept that women and men differ in some psychological characteristics. It is also difficult to ignore the claims about difference that arise from our common experience of social life.»* Also, [Paton-Dempster, 2002: 543] conscious that a specifically feminine type of behaviour has not yet been completely proved suggests nevertheless: *«Given the focus and intent of this paper it was decided to accept (while noting the wider problems) that gender differences do exist and that they have may have an impact upon management.»* And [Krishnan et al., 2005: 1713] who attempted to measure the impact of feminine presence in a management team on the performance of the company, assert

without any further proof: «Women are more likely to possess a «feeling» cognitive style, a style that emphasizes harmony, compared to their male counterpart".

[Eagly-Johnson, 1990] did a meta-analysis which showed that results differed depending on if the studies were conducted in a laboratory or in the field. Experimental research with students, as well as evaluations by persons not in management positions, showed that women are more democratic and more focused on people, and that men are more focused on tasks and have a more autocratic style. On the other hand, field studies have shown only slight differences of focus between men and women. A recent meta-analysis showed a slight, but significant difference: women adopt a transformational style more often than men, while men manage in a more transactional way [Eagly et al., 2003]. However, it should be noted that this research is often based on self-evaluations. The study of [Dobbins-Platz, 1986] which eliminated self-evaluations did not show a difference of style according to sex. [Vecchio, 2002] found that using male/female stereotypes to interpret comparative management styles is more indicative when it is a question of describing men or women in management in general or when one describes one's own behaviour retrospectively.

[Cliff and al., 2005] in conducting field studies on the behaviour of company bosses, whom they view as more free to choose their own management style, found no difference between men and women. On the other hand, in their discourse, these bosses describe themselves in a gendered way: " *Although male and female leaders may be commonly believed to conduct business ' on their own terms ' (and themselves may talk as if they are actually doing so), our study clearly suggests that the effect of owner sex on organizational characteristics and managerial practices is more of a myth than reality* " (:87).

### **1.2.2 The advantage/disadvantage controversy**

The second question raises a controversy. Given the emphasis placed on the human dimension in leadership over the past fifteen years, one would imagine that women have

benefited from the idea that they have the natural skills to be today's sought after managers. They would thus be at an advantage. This idea has been defended in particular by authors who launched the notion of female leadership.

Nevertheless, putting theory aside, the model of the leader has remained strongly infused with male characteristics and the image of the born male leader still holds [Oakley, 2000; Atwater et Al, 2001; Scott, 2006; Marry, 2004]. Thus women may be seen as not having the necessary qualities to exert a role of command. It is what [Eagly-Karau, 2002] calls the theory of non-congruence. There is a gap between the female sexual stereotype and expectations concerning the leader. A recent study in Germany has shown that the concepts of "leadership", "manager", and "businesswoman" are close [Koch and Al, 2005]. Nevertheless, the concept of "businesswoman" is very distinct from the concept of "woman", which thus does not question the theory of non-congruence. An analysis of quantitative research, often based on self-evaluation of leadership style, tends to show a difference between men and women, whereas field research tends to show less of a difference. Thus we will reconsider the ambiguous concept of female leadership by making the assumption that practices result not from characteristics, associated with women, be they naturally or culturally acquired, but as the result of a selected positioning. This approach makes it possible to explain non-convergent research results.

## **2. Positioning strategies as opposed to models and stereotypes**

### **2.1 Strategy, agency and positioning**

The capacity of an individual to position his/herself according to opportunities and obstacles has been studied in various fields, in particular in the sociology of organizations or in studies on structuring social groups, as well as by research on identity construction within the framework of collective norms of behaviour. Thus, for [Crozier, 1977], the relationships

between individuals in a company are controlled by rules, partly interiorized, which constrain, legitimize, or limit action. However, within this framework, individuals can develop individual strategies or group strategies to improve their position by manipulating zones of uncertainty which they control. Similarly, [Giddens,1984], in his theory on structuring, developed the idea that the real structure of a social organization results from the interaction of the individuals among themselves around the official structure, that he calls “virtual”.

[Foucault, 1984: 314-315] holds that any relationship of domination (contrary to relationships of slavery) implies a certain freedom of the individual, i.e. the dominated person has a minimum margin for manoeuvring the dominant person. A relationship of power is a dynamic process which can be understood as a confrontation of the strategies of the dominator and the dominated. From this perspective [Butler, 2006:13-29] argues that the accepted gender norm in society, on the one hand, as it touches the core of one’s identity oppresses the individual while on the other hand provides a framework within which the individual builds his/her identity. This construction implies “agency” which is sometimes necessary to develop in order to question the norm.

Studies on female leadership very often measure the influence of different variables on managerial behaviour. Among these, gender occupies a major position. Stable causal relationships are sought. The hypothesis of capacity to act is seldom used, as [Barry and Al, 2006] have pointed out in their study on the types of reactions of professors when faced with reform in Sweden and England. They use the concept of “positionality” developed by [Alcoff, 1988: 433] who moves away from observations of stable characteristics to focus on the positions occupied: *“When the concept ‘woman’ is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context in which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person’s relative position, just as the position of a pawn*



*on a chessboard is considered safe or dangerous, powerful or weak, according to its relation to the other chess pieces».*

In the field of gender identity and management, [Ahscraft, 2005] provides a good example illustrating how one can use “agency” by strategic positioning. She observed the behaviour of airline pilots in the United States whose virile identity was threatened by the managerial directives imposing less authoritative behaviour and supporting the empowerment of the crew. She identified seven discursive strategies which made it possible for these once all powerful pilots, to rebuild their identity when faced with the de-masculinisation of their model.

## **2.2 Categorizing the strategies women use to counter gendered representations**

### **2.2.1 Positioning**

The incongruent results concerning the possible relationship between gender and management style, and even more so certain contradictions between women’s discourse and their observed behaviours, would thus make it reasonable to think that behaviour varies according to the personal strategies implemented by women managers, according to their “agency” and their positioning in the race to obtain and hold a management position. A strategic course of action leads one to exploit one’s advantages and to compensate for one’s weaknesses. From this point of view, the advantage/disadvantage opposition for women with regards to positions of leadership must be reconsidered by maintaining both dimensions; women can use a "demilitarized" management style, but they must face the incongruity of the female stereotype and the leader model. A major obstacle for women managers is gaining their subordinates’ trust. In order to do so, they must create a positive image of themselves to reassure other managers as well as their subordinates.

A strategy can thus be classified two dimensionally according to answers given to the two following questions:

- What is the positioning strategy towards the female stereotype? Two opposing attitudes would be to make others ignore her sex, or, on the contrary, to make it very apparent and conform to the female stereotype.
- What is the positioning strategy towards the male model of the leader? The two extremes of behaviour would be to completely disassociate oneself from the masculine model of the leader, or, on the contrary, to conform to the model.

It is thus possible to distinguish four main categories of feminine strategies according to the weight given to each dimension (Fig.1), with all the intermediary states:

1. The strategy of neutralizing femininity
2. The strategy of accepting femininity
3. The strategy of exploiting femininity
4. The strategy of the asset.

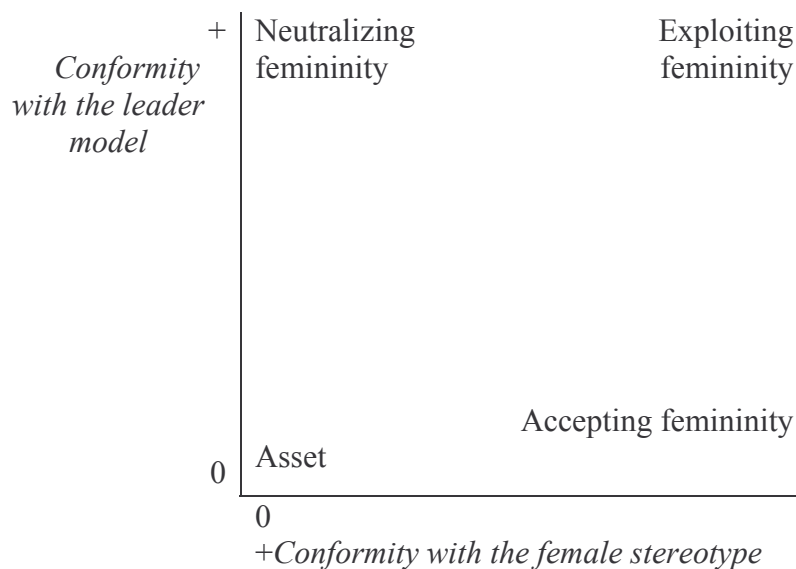


Figure 1: Categories of strategies for female leadership

It should be noted that these categories do not correspond to permanent behaviour of the female leader, but can help us understand certain behaviour at a given time or a series of attitudes.

### **2.2.2 The strategy of neutralizing femininity**

This strategy consists in denying the gendered character of power roles and in considering that management is not a matter of sex. It involves taking into account the male model of the leader, and aligning oneself with male appearances and attitudes. The female manager endeavours by her discretion and her appearance to make others forget her sex, perhaps even adopting a virile attitude. Trust is inspired by the fact that she is no different from a man. This strategy was frequently adopted in France in the 1970s and 1980s, as described in the study by [Laufer, 1982], even if it did not always pay off.

### **2.2.3 The strategy of accepting femininity**

This strategy is used because it is difficult to trust somebody with whom one does not feel at ease. It is difficult to behave neutrally with other human beings. "Girl or boy?" is the first question asked about a new-born baby. The sex of angels, which has obvious religious and theological consequences, has given rise to much debate. In business, sex gets a great deal of visibility. A "deviant" sexual orientation, although it has absolutely no impact on business or relationships at work, creates uneasiness, as a survey on homosexual executives shows [Falcoz, 2003]. Many are pressured into admitting their homosexuality and as a result, far from being rewarded, become openly isolated.

The strategy of accepting femininity consists in playing the game of the model female, without trying to develop leader attitudes. She avoids creating uneasiness which could be caused by disregard for the female stereotype. Indeed, virile behaviour, far from inspiring confidence, can on the contrary, indicate suspicion that there may be inconsistency in her identity. This can lead to judgements such as "she is worse than a man"! Female managers

may regard this strategy as the price to pay to be accepted, to reassure others. It can be a temporary strategy.

#### **2.2.4 The strategy of exploiting femininity**

This strategy also involves taking on the female stereotype, but mainly in appearance and in discourse. Attitudes and behaviour, on the other hand, can be aligned to those of the leader model. It can be seen as dressing up the male model in the female model clothes. A female manager confronted with a difficult economic environment, which requires rapid, clear decisions, would thus choose an appearance which leaves no ambiguity about her sex. She is then free to move forward and exploit her charisma. This strategy can take two non-exclusive forms: a hyper feminine appearance and/or an insistent reminder of maternity as a guarantee of true femininity.

The in-depth study of [Edley, 2000] shows a good example of an almost entirely female company, where the female bosses exercise a type of patriarchal power, accompanied by discourse about work and working relationships entirely inspired by female values. A recent French study from [Belghiti, 2003] shows that women who move up in the hierarchy adopt male values; however only their behaviour and appearance indicate whether it is a question of neutralizing femininity or exploiting femininity. Looking at a different field of study, cheerleaders in American schools would appear to provide another example of this kind of positioning. Because they present a hyper feminine image, they can deploy virile behaviour in keeping with their rigorous, physical training: *"Cheerleaders dressed in shorts skirts and tight vests often cheer for female basketball players dressed in baggy shorts and shirts. Through their uniforms, the cheerleaders accentuate their femininity while the basketball players hide theirs. The cheerleaders try to play up to their masculinity, not through their clothing but through their stunts and tumbling, while the female basketball players often play up their*

*femininity off court to become the "heterosexy" athlete (Griffin 1992), thus gaining acceptance and avoiding the lesbian label "[Adams-Bettis, 2003: 88] .*

### **2.2.5 The strategy of the asset**

This strategy can be used when the female manager has an «asset» when faced with the obstacles she confronts; she does not need to win trust, because it has already been won. This is notably the case of the "heiress", where family ties mean everyone ignores her sex. Her candidacy is legitimate by filiation or family. There is no longer opposition between nature and behaviour because "good breeding will out". It is thus preferable for women in this position to focus on their competence, which be it real or not, would not alone have dispelled distrust.

This strategy involves abandoning the game based on sexual stereotypes and the leader model to try to position oneself elsewhere, in general, in the field of true competence. Neither appearance, nor conformity with the model of the leader is important. These women sometimes refuse positive discrimination, because it may put their competence into question. However they do not consider that such action will eliminate discrimination towards women. Margaret Thatcher, as described by [Pilcher, 1995], deployed a femininity strategy which she used in her campaign to take the lead of the Conservative Party and then to become Prime Minister. She had herself photographed in places or with attitudes which marked her out as a woman (in the kitchen, going shopping etc.). On the other hand, after her victory, she claimed that only her competence had led to her nomination: "*...it is not a victory for women. It is a victory for someone in politics*" (:495).

We will now see if these categories can shed light on how women leaders are presented in the press and the variety of accompanying discourse.

### 3 The press brings femininity into the limelight

What happens «when power is feminised<sup>1</sup>»? “when women command<sup>2</sup>”? In order to bring to light the image the French press gives to female leadership, we studied all long articles<sup>3</sup> dated from 2004 on the topic of female leadership published in magazines belonging to the French EUROPRESSE group. Our corpus contains few sources, only articles from *Express*<sup>4</sup> (March 14th, 2005), *Management* (May, 2006), *La Nouvel Observateur* (October, 2006) and *Le Figaro* (March, 2006) are included. We added an article from the *Financial Times Magazine* (a British publication) from October 2006; this provided an example of how the topic is dealt with by a British newspaper. We also added an earlier article dated February 1999 from *Les Enjeux* in an attempt to measure how the situation has evolved over the past seven years. In fact, this article turned out to be very similar to the one in *Management* May, 2006. All these articles<sup>5</sup> reflect the current events of the time they were published with the exception of the article from *Management*. They were published either around March 8<sup>th</sup>, Women’s Day, or at the time of the Women’s Forum in October, 2006.

#### 3.1 Female managers in the press are first and foremost women

The management style put forward in these articles is accepted femininity. The sentence which best summarises the message most of these journalists want to make, whether it be 1999 or 2006, are that today’s female managers «*have no hang-ups about asserting their femininity*» (MA: twice), «*they happily assume their difference*” or “*show their differences*”

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<sup>1</sup> Title from an article in the *Nouvel Observateur*, October 2006

<sup>2</sup> Title from the article in *Management*, May 2006

<sup>3</sup> Articles which are longer than 1000 words are considered to be long.

<sup>4</sup> This article describes a coaching seminar for future female managers in which female leadership and feminine values are not part of the programme. This is why this article was not included in our study.

<sup>5</sup> In the text below, these articles will be coded in the following way: (MA) *Management*, (EX) *L’Express*, (NO) *Le Nouvel observateur*, (LE) *Les Enjeux*, (FI) *Le Figaro*, (FT) *Financial Time Magazine*

(MA). The articles speak about «*feminine qualities*» (LE), or about «*feminine values*» (MA) or «*assumed differences*» (FI), of "*complementarities*" (LE). To sum up, what one appreciates about these women managers, is that they are first of all women. The discourse is entrenched in a defence of traditional femininity. In some cases the text is woven with clichés about women: "*the privilege of the beautiful sex*" (LE); "*the so-called weaker sex*" (MA); "*these passionarias*" (NO.), or humour is introduced by pointing out the inconsistency of stereotypically feminine characteristics in a typically male context: "*watch out they don't scratch you if you tread on their high-heels*" (MA), "*these executives in stiletto heels*" (MA), "*a beautiful blonde*" (MA). One journalist even makes a dirty joke, commenting on the story of a female manager who took her laptop to bed with her to work. The journalist points out ironically that such behaviour is, «*Ideal for the life of a couple*». While these remarks might seem harmless, they set the tone; they speak about attractive, seductive and sexual women, "real" women in fact. Such discourse is quite different from "neutralized femininity" described by [Laufer, 1982] in writing about women executives of the 1980s.

What is central to all these articles, is that they first position female managers according to a set of reference criteria established by their male homologues. Their sex is seen as being the most pertinent key to understanding their professional behaviour, however their competence will be measured against their male counterpart's. Women managers attitudes and behaviour are at first positioned according to a hierarchical comparison with the masculine reference framework; they are not appreciated for themselves, but because they are more or less like men. Thus, they are seen as being "*more proactive than men*" (LE), "*they have less ego*" (MA), "*they have more feeling*" (MA), "*are more open to dialogue*" (MA), "*they need to be recognised in their work more than men*" (MA), "*they are less sensitive to external representations of power*" (LE), "*they are less afraid of losing their status than men*" (MA), "*they are more interested in details*" (MA), "*they are more hard-working*" (LE), etc. And in

examples that exclude this hierarchical positioning, comparisons are still made: "*a forceful female manager who has proved herself like a man*" (MA).

This long list of differences provides a discourse which would seem to imply that women are naturally endowed with traditionally masculine character traits. However, "*it is not a question of genetics, but of socio-cultural heritage*", Domenica Reiniche (LE) affirms, "*a little is innate, a lot is acquired*" (NO). *Management* dedicated four, well researched pages about socio-gendered education which leads to differences between boys and girls. In spite of gender neutral nurturing, certain naturally feminine characteristics would appear to be enduring. Perhaps they are acquired in childhood, but they are now part and parcel of what constitutes a "woman". Thus, women "*also have their own weaknesses*" (MA), they have "*a natural distance from the company*" (LE). Throughout all the articles and despite their discourse which bases the differences between the sexes on acquired social behaviour, we have observed that these female managers all quite naturally display characteristics of "femininity"

Since these female managers are women by the most common understanding of the term, they are also mothers or, at the very least, potential mothers. To be a mother appears to be an indispensable condition of assumed femininity. For example, a woman is described in *Management*: "*this mother of three children assumes her femininity. For her third child, she took all her maternity leave*" (MA). A fixation with children is a recurrent topic in the portraits of the women described in this article. For each woman, the reader knows whether or not she has children and how many. If she does not have any, the article specifies whether or not she wishes to, in the immediate future. Often, the description of the family includes information about the capability of this mother "to reconcile" her professional and family life.



After reading such a long list of children who are perfectly happy to be living with their working mothers, the discourse becomes counter-productive. It makes women who find it incredibly difficult to reconcile their family life and professional life (a situation which actually raises much more conflict than conciliation [ Marry, 2004:252 ]) feel guilty. A dangerous parallel is built progressively into the discourse of these women: a family is managed like a company. Therefore, when one is a top female manager, one is also a "top mom". In other words, if one does not manage to be a "top mom", how can one really hope to become a top female manager?

An excellent demonstration of the link between top female manager and "top mom" is given in an article from the *Financial Times Magazine*.<sup>6</sup> The CEO of a large, French industrial group, mother of eight children, tells how her ten - year - old daughter telephoned her while she was in a meeting to ask her where her red socks were. From there, the article resembles a fairy tale, a family fable incarnating absolute, maternal power which is exercised at the same time at home and in the company. While the mother does not know where the infamous socks are, a circumstance quite comprehensible to the reader, she feels obliged to justify herself by announcing that she has not been home for two days. At no time does she make any allusion to any home help, of which there must be many who surely assist in the domestic chores and in particular in sorting out the laundry! However, the "super mom" solves the problem by suggesting her daughter wear blue socks instead of red, reassuring her that she will be just as beautiful. Any person having been around a real ten - year - old child will doubt that the young girl is satisfied with this response and this without any negotiation! But in this story, the mother's clever reply provides a "happy end" to the article. «*I am convinced that managing a family and a company are very similar in as much as we can acquire the essential skills to become good at managing both families and companies*», she says to

conclude. Excellence and control of the world would appear to have neither boundaries nor limits for the top manager-mother, so much so that one wonders whether in this dream world, where work and family are "reconcilable", if the best female managers are not also mothers of large families.

This type of discourse, however flattering it may be for mothers who "assume femininity" i.e. women who incarnate the style of feminine leadership, is in fact an illusion. It makes it possible to place female managers on an orbit parallel with that of men. It is reassuring to think that, in spite of their taste for power, women remain women. Before the female manager was spared having to conform to the traditional norms of seduction but nowadays this is no longer the case. And she is encouraged to limit herself to specific areas of competence without trespassing on territory where men excel. Thus "*men appreciate women for their differences*" (LE). Being complementary is the opposite of being competitive. Men do not have any reason to fear the female manager who assumes her femininity. They occupy positions which men could not really have occupied.

### **3.2 Assumed or Exploited Femininity?**

Photographs included in the article taken from *Management* magazine provide the final argument to convince readers of the femininity of female managers. The illustrations begin (perhaps without the journalists knowledge) with the article on socio-gendered roles that children learn to play. It shows two children, a boy and a girl, being bombarded by sentences from adults. The boy is standing with his arms crossed, wearing a long-sleeved sweater, and is looking upwards. The girl is wearing a summer dress and has bare arms and shoulders. She has her hands behind her back in a rather unnatural position, and is looking behind her.

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<sup>6</sup> With the exception of this introductory article for which the chosen theme was the manager herself, the rest of the article is a rigorous example of how to treat the subject: no sexist common ground or complaisant humorous remark, no man/women hierarchy about skills attributed to one or the other sex. The question of children is treated in an anecdotal way.

This same type of posture and clothing will be found in the images of female adult managers. Of the eight women photographed specially for the report, two are stretched out on sofas. One of these photographs introduces the article. The woman is stretched out on a couch, she is wearing a short skirt; and is leaning on one arm, her other arm resting on her knee, outlines and emphasises her legs. In the background four other women are leaning backwards slightly or are relaxing in an armchair. One woman is standing up, with her arms crossed but leaning forward slightly to smile rather maliciously into the camera. Only one woman escapes this treatment, but her photograph appears only in a vignette and she is cut off at the shoulders. A man was also photographed in this same series of portraits. His picture is cut off at the waist, his arms are crossed and he is looking straight at the camera.

These photographs provide the ultimate proof that today's female managers are feminine, i.e. they adjust their appearance to comply with the desires of men. They are sexy women, good mothers - or eager to be mothers soon - they assert female values which will be put to good use in the company, with men at their sides who will be able to deploy their own traditional leadership qualities. This new model of the female manager is heralded as real progress, an alternative to the "*war of the sexes*" (LE) which is supposedly being waged in the United States. It is presented as a solution which is much closer to the real nature of women who are no longer forced "*to dress in gray and wear their hair short*" (MA). In short, these new female managers can be themselves, they are no longer obliged to accept "*the contradiction of two lives in one*" (Marry, 2004: 24).

However what are these women really saying? Are they really demanding to assume their femininity without hesitation? Do they mention female values? In fact none of the women interviewed use these terms and we can sometimes detect a gap between the remarks quoted and the way in which the journalist interprets them. A female manager says, "*I suffered so much myself that given a choice of candidates with equal skills, I will always choose a*

woman". The journalist thus concludes, *"This is how feminine values gain ground"*. The journalist automatically attributes feminine values to women, sealing gender and sex, while in fact, the only indicator which is gaining ground in this example, is the number of women. In the same way, other remarks made in the article will be put forward as specific indicators of female sensitivity. It is interesting to note that of the two similar quotations below, the second is highlighted in a colour frame on the same page: *«women oblige you to adopt a more subtle form of management because they need to understand an objective rationally while at the same time sense intuitively that they are being asked to move in the right direction"* (MA) and *"I have to make a greater effort to sell a project to a woman. Rational arguments are not enough; they need to be touched emotionally"*(MA). On this same page, an employee speaks about *"a sense of feeling"* which is specific to women.

However if we study the remarks made by the women being interviewed, leaving out the journalistic interpretations, there is relatively little "femininity", "sensitivity" or "charm". They are rather expressions of energy or determination: *"I appreciate courage, in particular someone being able to say that he/she really messed something up. I have a direct style and I expect others to behave in the same way with me"*(MA), Valerie Accary, General Director of BBDO Paris. *«I do not spend hours trying to figure out where the problem comes from. I try to solve it at once"*(MA), Helene Poulit-Duquesne, Director of Marketing at Cartier." *During meetings, I want everyone to get right to the point, we all have other lives to get back to"*(MA), Sandra Le Grand, CEO of Canal CE does not make private life a specifically female affair. The ambiguity of these articles is found in the difficult juxtaposition of the female managers' discourse and achievements and the journalists' desire to promote specifically female qualities. The journalist reconciles these by focusing solely on female manager skills that emanate femininity, by exploiting photographs and page-setting artifices, and finally by playing down anything that does not correspond to the female sex stereotype. Because they

are women, their every act naturally emanates femininity. In reality, the article is attempting to show us that these female managers are above all women, whereas these women seem to be saying that they are above all managers. Nonetheless, they have all been in situations where they were able to exploit their singularity, where their co-workers gave them more attention than they would have given to a male counterpart. *"When I was at Kronenbourg, the bar-owners, once they had overcome their initial surprise, were much more open with me than with my male colleagues"*, says Elisabeth Fleuriot, president of Kellogg's France. *"Because I was the only young woman at this level of responsibility, my sales partners were open and understanding"*, adds Laurence Berman, Directrice General of Jet Turns. They add that the labour unions are also more conciliating.

This advantage is somewhat ambiguous. We could postulate that a potentially seductive relationship or gallantry as being the motivation for sales partners and labour union members to be so open and understanding. They would reproach themselves if they had been tough with a person of the weaker sex. Moreover, if these women are extraordinary, it is precisely because they are "the only ones", because they cause a "surprise". Their advantage will only last as long as they remain exceptional in "their gender" [Collet, 2006].

In fact, these exceptional women understand perfectly well that when confronted with obstacles on their career path, any winning cards are welcome. Skills and excellence are not enough. They know they have to be noticed, to stand out from the others, to draw attention to themselves. [Molinier, 2003] speaks about women who do not hesitate to wave the banner of feminine qualities, all the while deploying strategies completely aligned with virile qualities to take their place in the male world, advancing behind a smoke screen of female specificity. In a male world, using seduction lucidly is a weapon which has largely proved its success. Does female ambition come cloaked in certain virtues? Women must claim them and be feminine, or at least give the appearance of being so.

In part 4, we provide insight into how certain behaviour is learned.

#### **4 Positioning training in engineering and management schools**

We observed students in their fourth year of university studies at a French “Grande Ecole” (with an engineering faculty and a management faculty on the same campus) during a special week-long project designed to initiate them in the creation of start-up companies. This project, which is called “Challenge Projects d’Entreprendre”®, is organized as a contest between competing teams. The purpose of the project is to stimulate creativity and encourage students to set up their own company through the weeklong experience which includes team work, decision-making, and project design and implementation. Each working group has six members, which includes both engineering and management students. At the end of the week, we carried out 18 thirty-minute, directed interviews, with students from four groups, which included three groups of finalists. The students interviewed were as follows:

- 8 girls (4 engineers and 4 managers)
- 10 boys (8 engineers and 2 managers)

It should be mentioned that female students are underrepresented at the institute where the study was conducted; they represent 34% of the total student population with 24% in engineering and 50% in management respectively.

Each team appoints a “team captain”. This person is co-opted by his/her team-mates and represents the group. He/She does not have real hierarchical or decision-making power as a real project leader would have, but he/she must motivate the group, organize the information flow and facilitate the decision-making process. We observed that team leaders were not really in a leadership position on a permanent basis; power was distributed in a more complex way, sometimes based on a common accord, but often causing conflict. The students were surprised to find that a great deal of their time had to be devoted to group management and

they learned at least as much about human relationships and power plays as they did about setting up a company. During these interviews we focused on identifying which positioning strategies the girls chose to take.

#### **4.1 Accepting femininity or femininity "for want of something better"?**

A particularly representative demonstration of accepted femininity by default involved a female engineering student who was in a group with five boys. She had difficulty in finding a role for herself and she finally occupied the only one which was left to her. This girl was not wilfully cast out of the group, but for personal reasons, she did not succeed in getting recognition from the group. She was inhibited about speaking French, she was in admiration of her team-mates, and she herself felt foreign and disorientated due to an abrupt change of culture and frame of reference. The only moment she felt she had played a role, a moment which she recalled with wonderment, was the evening when the group chose the product name. *"Everyone suggested a name without fear of being made fun of"*. She added off the recording, *"It was like giving a name to a child"*. Her team-mates were only able to hear her when she intervened on a context that was considered feminine, for example when she proposed to develop a product specially designed for the handicapped in order to make their project more humane. She could never make herself heard when she spoke about technology because the conversation was appropriated by the other three engineers. However, none of the other three engineers could be qualified as particularly macho nor did they voluntarily seek to silence her. During this phase of the project when each team member has to fight to promote his/her own ideas, anyone who stepped aside for a shy, reserved female would have weakened his/her own position. This female student also felt that she was responsible for providing support for the other members of her group; when her team was not selected for the final, despite her shyness, she felt it was her duty to speak to them.

The interview reflects the difficulty and the ambiguity of the female engineer's position. While she would have liked to play a more technical role, she was only allowed to play a more supposedly feminine role. If she played this role partly as a result of her own making, saying for example that naming a product, was like naming a baby, she would have liked to have been exempted from feeling obliged to comfort the male students when the team lost in the finals. This feeling of obligation was not expressed directly by the boys in the group during the interviews. It is improbable that they were expecting to be mothered by the female engineer. She felt that she had been assigned this role, both because of her traditional upbringing and because she alone had been assigned to human resources management by the team. It is important to understand that she did not choose this role, that it is not the only one that she is qualified to hold, because as she assured us she is not usually considered as timid, she is rather a motivating force and a decision-maker. She chose however to play this role during the project rather than become completely invisible in the group.

The interviews conducted in other groups showed us that girls are often expected to ensure group cohesion and motivation, that they "soften blows", calm passions, serve as confidantes. Some girls did it very well: *"My role, in fact, was to move things forward. I had to reconcile two parties. I knew that neither would give up their idea. I had to go see one group and say, "Your idea is good", because if I said it was no good, they would fight immediately. So your idea is good, but so is the other one. It would be good to do both"*. This young woman insists that if she fulfilled the role of mediator, it was because she had no choice. Somebody had to do it and it so happened that she was the only one who was capable. If she had not done it, the group would have split up. It is obvious that she would have preferred to devote herself to marketing strategy which was the part of the project that she had chosen, rather to spend her days trying to keep the group together. While these two young women found themselves incarnating the "female values" of team management, it would be difficult to say that they



accepted their differences without hesitation. The complementary roles assumed in these groups did not occur naturally. In the first case, the girl needed to find a reason for being complementary or disappear. In the second case, the girl agreed to do "the dirty work", the job that nobody wanted, but which was essential to the survival of the group.

When confronted with the threat of having to manage the interpersonal relationships in a group, some girls deploy avoidance strategies right from the start. One young woman, feeling herself unqualified to do such a job, took steps not to find herself in such a position, although she had previously played this role several times. She thus consciously gave up the role of project leader, entrusting it to one of her female manager colleagues, who in her opinion was more capable of managing the group. Several girls seemed to be aware that they would be expected to manage relationships within the group; they felt this was inevitable if they took on the responsibility of project manager. "*This is why the manger is paid more*", one of them said. None of the young men interviewed seemed to feel that someone should be responsible for resolving interpersonal conflicts. They never feel compelled to assume this role, nor do they feel that this task should be considered as part of the team leader's responsibility.

The interviews would tend to indicate that some girls refuse to take on the role of project leader, not because of the responsibilities related to this task, but because they know that in their case they will also be asked to manage the conflicts within the group. A boy can take on the task of team leader without thinking that conflict management will fall on him, although he may be later faced with this situation. Can one really speak about assumed femininity and a specifically female style of management here? Rather we should postulate that women who agree to manage are those who accept that some of the time they will have to manage as a "female" at least part of the time. Other women understand very early on in life that management inevitably implies dealing with conflict and to a certain degree playing a maternal role, and thus avoid accepting such a role.

## 4.2 Femininity? Another weapon!

Not all girls feel themselves stuck in a role that they do not want. While there would appear to be only two options; exploit one's femininity or avoid accepting a leadership role, we observed that certain girls used femininity like a Trojan horse in order to establish themselves as leader. The following comment is indicative: *"She has a strong personality. She speaks with so much conviction that one ends up believing her"*. They adopt strong positions, leaving little place for negotiation, all the while affirming that it is important people to listen to each other and that a dysfunctional group is a result of a lack of communication. They do not hesitate to make affirmations or abusive generalizations based on their opinions. They try to impose their choices by force, if they do not succeed collaboratively: *"I drafted the report. The team brought the rough ideas to me and I wrote them down. I write well and in any case, they know me. They knew that if I didn't write the text, I would take it and rewrite it"*. These girls cannot understand that the others may not want to rally behind their opinions which appear to them to be just common sense. *"I was very irritated by their negative attitude. I did not like that at all. I expressed this several times. I asked everyone to make out a schedule and people said, "yeah, yeah, yeah", but in the end nobody did it"*.

In the opinion of these female students discussion is tantamount to contradiction, due to a bad attitude or even childishness. *"There were many reactions which I found childish and very far from what companies expect from us"*. These girls claim to be part of the exchange (*"I expressed", "I asked"*), requiring that there be communication. *"I made an effort to improve the level of communication in the group. I insisted that we verbalise everything. I insisted on regular meetings"*. They propose "democratic" voting. *"We voted democratically. Everyone listed what he/she preferred in order. For me, the innovative product seemed me to*

*be the most "fun" category etc.», which seen from the outside was an imposture. "As in any case there is one person who will never do what he/she does not want to do, there was no other choice; it had to be the innovative product". The female leaders are exceptionally effective and perform at a level higher than that expected. They are ready one month before the official date for launching the project. They have high standards: "I took the financial statement because I know that it is often the reason why a team is eliminated. If somebody else did it, I would have perhaps said to myself: ah, he/she did not work enough. Whereas me, I know I will do a good job. I only have confidence in myself". And as regards her attitude towards the others who must maintain the same rhythm: "We were very clear. It's a one week "Challenge". There will be no "I have to see my mom, I have to see my dad etc." And in reply to a female team member's comment: "ah yes, I am likely to have problems..." the female team leader replied Ah no, no emotional problems, not this week".*

The female leaders are effective, intelligent, qualified but what one notices first is that they are seductive in a conscious and studied way. To a certain extent, they approach camouflaged [River, 1929 ], visibly feminine, verbally promoting communication and exchange. They exert their leadership with a force which has little in common with the feminine stereotype. We are far from complementary roles. It will be difficult for men to say they appreciate the differences when it comes to competence. However, there is a difference; they are girls in a very visible way. This is why certain boys need to justify themselves by explaining why they agreed to play second role. *"She was the one who created the team, it was logical that she be team leader, moreover, a female leader represented a plus. I was totally in favour of it. Everyone knows the "Challenge" is more or less political. The competition between teams is political so a female leader is better, and moreover, she was very competent. In any event, she was the one giving the orders, she was a girl, and she had to be the leader".* A good portion of the interview with this young man was dedicated to showing how he could just as well

have been the project leader. To a certain extent, he validates the deployed femininity strategy. Admittedly, she is competent, but so is he. If she was chosen to be the leader, it was because, all other things being equal, her "femininity", her sex, was strategically useful. She brought something to the role of leader that the boys could not. It is primarily for this reason that her leadership is accepted. She is incontestably, visibly a real female.

This is a gender performance, as [Butler, 2004] understands it. The female leaders set a scene for themselves in which they are shown as women of exception because they are competent and openly female. This staging gives them power to perform and to persuade their entourage. They are exceptional and people see them as exceptional. Thus they can command, hold opinions and impose them. They have the recognition of their team; their difficult personality may be questioned, but not the fact that they are competent and demanding women, nor does one question whether they deserve the position they occupy, or that they are playing their role as women of power.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, our model of the four types of strategy which women deploy in management sheds light on the somewhat vague, ambiguous notion of female leadership and its different manifestations. We have attempted to demonstrate that although women continue to encounter major obstacles, linked to an enduring, stereotypically masculine leader model and the gendered stereotype concerning women's behaviour in positions of power, they do implement various strategies to bypass these obstacles, according to the resources at their disposal. This vision is consistent with situational theories of leadership (STL) which postulate that in order to be effective, it is necessary to adopt a leadership style appropriate to the context. [Cliff and al., 2005: 64] considered the circumstances in which leadership styles differ between men and women: « *This line of reasoning is consistent with the broader*

*contingency approach to leadership, which argues that there is no one right style of leadership; instead, the best style depends upon the conditions the leader faces* ». We believe that, the conditions women managers face include obstacles which are linked to the feminine stereotype and the leader model.

Our study showed that women pay dearly for deploying a strategy of neutralizing femininity by sacrificing their private life. The strategy of accepting femininity allows men and women to maintain their traditional roles, however gives women little advantage in the struggle for power. According to many women the rising strategy of exploiting femininity allows them to retain their feminine identity, and increase their visibility and power. However, it is possible to imagine that the development of this strategy could naturalise the notion of female management and would exclude women who do not wish to display ostentatiously feminine attributes. Comparing male / female aspects of cheerleaders, [Adams-Bettis, 2003: 88] finds: « *Cheerleaders, for all their athleticism, toughness, and risk taking, do not disrupt twenty-first century, taken-for-granted notions of normative femininity and masculinity. In other words, they ultimately do not challenge the status quo by transgressing gendered boundaries.* ». The same question could be asked about the impact of women managers who choose to deploy a strategy of exploiting femininity.

The model we propose should be tested under different cultural and ethnic conditions. When a cultural variable is introduced, it is possible to identify some groups of women as closer to the “masculine” model or the “feminine” model. The [Wu-Minort, 1997: 19] study, despite the reservation that the women under study were not at the same level in company hierarchy from one company to another, concludes that « *American female managers tended to be more independent, more aggressive, more social, and more practical. Japanese female managers tended to be more dependent, less aggressive and more work-oriented. Taiwanese female managers tended to be more conservative, with a traditional family and gender role*

*orientation.* ». The ethnic dimension introduces a supplementary obstacle. [Parker, 2001] describes the strategy of the female Afro-American leader who is careful not to be associated with an depreciating ethnic model while at the same time wishes to set herself apart from the image of the white American woman . These women use collaborative communication strategies. It would be interesting to study where these women would situate themselves with regards to femininity.

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