

# Case studies skew women leaders' roles

December 10 2018, by Paul Mayne

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Despite the strong presence of women students in university business programs, women leaders are portrayed stereotypically – or not at all – in many business case studies that are a key educational tool in management education.

The omitted or clichéd portrayals unintentionally promote a 'hidden curriculum' that shows and reinforces implicit assumptions about [women](#)'s fitness to lead, said Colleen Sharen, professor of Management and Organizational Studies at Brescia University College.

Her study, with professor Rosemary McGowan of the Business Technology Management and Leadership Programs at Wilfrid Laurier University, is newly released as "Invisible or Clichéd: How Are Women Represented in Business Cases?" in the *Journal of Management Education*.

"We were expecting some of the stereotypical representation because that's our culture. The thing that surprised us was the amount of presence that was diluted in the female cases," said Sharen.

The analysis will be helpful in designing case studies and will help establish a baseline for improvement in the school's commitment to diversity and inclusion, said Ivey Acting Dean Mark Vandebosch.

"As leaders, we need to continuously assess our systems and invest in the improvements necessary to eliminate bias and promote diversity and inclusion," said Vandebosch.

"This research highlights the need for a re-evaluation of case writing and editing standards in order that we ensure equality and fair representation across the case production process."

"This is not representative of Ivey or the people who are writing this," Sharen emphasized. "A lot of this is unconscious. When people write cases they don't set out to write cases to portray women this way, so this is not an indictment of Ivey."

The researchers examined 266 sample cases from the Ivey Publishing

collection published between Aug. 2013 and Aug. 2014 and found

- More than 80 per cent of these cases had no woman leader as protagonist;
- When the cases do portray women leaders, they are more often shown as less competent, less creative, less visionary and less strategic than men; and
- Women were also portrayed as risk-avoidant, more tactical, more emotional, more ethical, more detail-oriented, and more communal than men.

Sharen said she too has unwittingly been part of the issue.

"I went back and looked at some of the cases I had written for Ivey, that weren't in the sample, and I had been doing the same thing. It was unconscious, but it was definitely there.

"You're talking about someone who teaches at the country's only all-women's university (Brescia), and is very aware of these issues – and I found out I was doing it."

The pair examined only cases at Ivey, which is the second-largest case publisher worldwide, accepts submissions from international academics and its cases are peer reviewed. That focus helped ensure consistency in criteria for publication, presentation, classification and editorial standards. Additionally, Ivey Publishing provides easy access to teaching notes (many case publishers do not), which were used to determine the objectives of each case.

Women's absence as decision-makers in the [business](#) cases is a glaring example of reinforcing existing beliefs, values, ideologies and gendered behaviours in the business world, said Sharen.

"We need young women to believe that their skills are valuable leadership skills, and we need young men to start to believe that women have valuable leadership skills," said Sharen. Failing to provide students with female role models in business cases negatively affects both women and men, she said.

"The simple answer is business schools train the next generation of leaders – and if young men and young women don't see [young women](#) as business leaders, we're not going to change the problem. And the business cases are one way we can role model strong female business leaders."

Women represent almost 50 per cent of undergraduate business graduates and 36 per cent of MBA graduates at Western.

Despite U.S. and Canadian numbers showing women represent almost half the undergraduate enrolment in management studies, there's a wide gap between them and their male counterparts after they enter the workplace: of every 100 women promoted to their first managerial position, 130 men are promoted.

Other findings of the study:

- Independent decision-making: In the male business cases, the male was the only decision-maker 65 per cent of the time, while women were sole decision-makers 37 per cent of the time
- Quotability: Female protagonists are quoted in fewer cases and quoted less frequently and less extensively than males. While male protagonists' quotations covered 2.6 per cent of the case length, female protagonists' quotations covered only 1.4 per cent of the case length.
- Visionary: In businesses with women leaders, it is often the organization that is portrayed as visionary; in organizations with

male leaders, the visionary traits are ascribed to the men.

- **Best-sellers:** Of the 96 English-language cases with teaching notes (and excluding general-experience cases) chosen most by professors as teaching tools just six per cent featured a female protagonist.

Sharen added during the pre-course planning phase, instructors should be encouraged to include cases featuring female protagonists, look for a balance of representations and search beyond the best-sellers list.

She said educators consciously and unconsciously shape students' identities as managers and leaders through what they teach, how they teach, their choices as role models, the discussions they entertain in the classroom and the materials they select.

"Institutions and professors have to decide this is important and, once they do that, it's not going to change overnight, but every move we make toward helping senior leadership believe and understand that women are capable leaders, every single step we make has potential to make change," she said.

**More information:** Colleen M. Sharen et al. Invisible or Clichéd: How Are Women Represented in Business Cases?, *Journal of Management Education* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1052562918812154](https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562918812154)

Provided by University of Western Ontario

Citation: Case studies skew women leaders' roles (2018, December 10) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-12-case-skew-women-leaders-roles.html>

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