



Gender effect in Russian public relations: A perfect storm of obstacles for women



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SYNOPSIS

This study uses a model of excellent public relations leadership to examine gender differences in perceptions of professional leadership among Russian public relations practitioners. Analysis of a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews indicate that Russian women place greater importance on leadership than Russian men. However, female practitioners seem hesitant or unable to take a leadership role due to a perfect storm of gender effects: existing societal and professional gender stereotypes, male-dominated societal and organizational culture, and lack of support from educational programs and professional associations, among others. While experiencing this perfect storm, female professionals assumed a traditional gender role rather than a professional leadership role. In addition, those women who were top leaders in organizations did not necessarily desire leadership nor saw themselves as leaders in the communication field.

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Introduction

Though a growing body of research has found that women seem to lead more effectively than men (Bass, Avolio, & Atwater, 1996; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Zenger & Folkman, 2012), the majority of organizational leaders worldwide remain men (Zenger & Folkman, 2012). In addition, the higher the position level, the higher the percentage of men (Zenger & Folkman, 2012). One of the explanations for this phenomenon is a cultural stereotype of leadership that remains strongly masculine across many countries and nations (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Russia is not an exception — 94% of higher level state positions are occupied by males (Ochirova, 2011). Despite rapid economic and political changes, Russia is still a predominantly traditionalist society that equates power/leadership with masculinity while assigning women the role of homemaker (Ochirova, 2011). As in other parts of the world (Pompper & Jung, 2013), gender inequality is evident in the power distribution in the public relations profession in Russia. Although the majority of professionals are women, men tend to occupy top management positions. Tsetsura (2011) argued that when demand for public relations services started growing in

Russia, men moved into the occupation to make money and advance their managerial careers.

This study uses a model of excellent public relations leadership (Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012) to shed light on the complexity of the relationship between gender, culture, and the public relations occupation in Russia, a little explored area in public relations research. Drawing from a Russian survey that was part of a larger global study of leadership in public relations (Berger & Meng, 2014; Erzikova, 2014) and interview findings, the current study examines the way a confluence of gender issues, cultural issues (both organizational and societal culture), and myriad of professional factors (or systemic factors in professional associations, education, and training) affects the advancement of women in public relations.

The importance of this study is its anticipated theoretical and practical implications for an ongoing global study of leadership. The study results contribute to a better understanding of the causes of gender inequality in a professional setting and, thus, help inform the course of actions to overcome the discrimination. In addition, those educators and practitioners who are in charge of leadership development programs will

benefit from learning about the results as they signal the importance of cultural factors in the process of educating future leaders.

Literature review

Women and leadership in Russia

The Russian Constitution guarantees equality between men and women, but mainly because of a wage gap and poor political representation for women, the Gender Gap Index places Russia in the 75th place out of 142 countries (*The Global Gender Gap Report*, 2014). The fact that Russian women have failed to advance in their economic and social status can be explained by the dramatic post-communist changes in the country (Aivazova, 2008).

Communism “promised to liberate women through increased opportunities in education, employment, and political representation” (LaFont, 2001, p. 217), but the Soviet policy on gender equality failed largely due to the failure to eliminate patriarchy. Not surprisingly, the post-communist decline in women’s status has been accompanied by the resurrection of patriarchal traditions. Women were pushed to the domestic domain to increase familial stability and birth rates (LaFont, 2001). Research has shown that women’s management approaches are more effective during economic transitions or times of uncertainty (Chirikova, 2003). Thus, it seems logical that instead of pushing women back to their “natural” status as subordinate to men, the post-communist state should have been more active in assisting women to become managers, or at least to offer them a choice between the two options.

Shteinberg (2002) argued that the violation of a woman’s right to be part of management is explained by traditions of the Russian political culture. Historically, the relations between the state and citizens have been characterized by either stable opposition or total absence of interaction. The absence of a constructive dialog has probably made the Russian people believe that the authoritative power (a “strong hand”) is most effective. Such belief does not help Russian women become leaders. Overall, in order to advance their careers, female managers must integrate into the culture of a management system created by and for men.

Russian female and male managers differ on a number of characteristics and qualities. Unlike men, women (1) have low self-esteem and high self-criticism; (2) avoid questionable practices (e.g., protectionism); (3) voluntarily accept a subordinate role; (4) have to prove constantly that they can do their job; (5) are altruistic; (6) avoid risk; and (7) suffer from a conflict between their professional and personal lives (Shteinberg, 2002). At the same time, both women and men value the same leadership qualities that help them manage their organizations: ability to act effectively in a conflict situation; readiness for changes and innovations; ability to capitalize on subordinates’ skills; and the power to resist pressure (Chirikova, 2003). All of these qualities are essential for public relations managers to cope with everyday challenges.

Public relations is an emerging occupation in Russia. A discourse on public relations leadership might be difficult to create in the country mainly because practitioners perceive the occupation as a service field (Tsetsura, 2010). Further, public relations has been divided into two areas: corporate public

relations (easily accessible for women, “a woman’s job”) and political public relations (dominated by men, “a man’s job”) (Tsetsura, 2011). Accordingly, discussion of public relations leadership inevitably leads to the question about the degree to which leadership in the true sense is possible in the “service” industry, and especially in its corporate corner heavily populated by humble women.

Like their U.S. colleagues (Dozier, Sha, & Shen, 2012), Russian female public relations practitioners are underpaid (Tsetsura, 2011). It appears that managing multiple identities remains the biggest challenge for women-leaders (Chirikova, 2013), including those employed in public relations. As Daymon and Surma (2012) put it, “All women working in public relations face the challenge of juggling roles as worker, mother, partner, parent or grandparent” (p. 191). Public relations specialists in Russia also deal with a hyper-sexualized patriarchal workplace and thus, they have “to discipline their bodies through physical appearance in order to dismiss or at least minimize any sexual harassment” (Tsetsura, 2012, p. 13).

A leadership role has been and continues to be gender based. Bass et al. (1996) found that women’s leadership styles appeared to be more transformational, while men’s behaviors tended to be more transactional. Though many Russian female public relations professionals have successfully carried out managerial and leadership duties, the female sex role stereotype still prevails *within* this emerging occupation.

Public relations leadership

The feminization of public relations in the U.S. has resulted in a declining status for the occupation, lowered salaries and gender discrimination (Aldoory, 2005). Tsetsura (2014) argued that such factors as (a) the majority of public relations specialists being women and (b) the nature of public relations as social and service-oriented contributed to the perception of public relations as a semi-profession. The conceptualization of public relations as a gendered occupation implies a power struggle (Tsetsura, 2014) that impacts the way leadership positions are achieved and maintained.

Concerning the gendered nature of public relations leadership, Aldoory and Toth (2004) argued that “due to the connections between transformational leadership and feminine traits, women may be more suited to be public relations leaders” (p. 179). However, they also acknowledged that many factors (economic conditions, business environment, organizational culture and gender stereotypes) might constrain women’s advancement as leaders and soften the style they practice. Further, Jin (2010) examined the role of emotional leadership in an organizational setting and found that a unit size can be a factor in determining style. In large U.S. organizations, public relations leaders tended to be more transactional – controlling and less emotionally attached to followers. Yet, overall, empathetic transformational leaders were more effective in organizational settings because of their ability to instill confidence and gain employees’ trust (Jin, 2010).

As an emerging occupation worldwide, public relations strives for legitimacy at different levels – from organizational to societal (Berger & Reber, 2006). This task is incredibly difficult because public relations is still a weak and tenuous occupational field that tolerates encroachment by other

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