by Sharon Mavin & Gina Grandy

Wanted: Courageous Business Schools to Challenge Patriarchy

Introduction

There is increased attention across the globe on the rise of women to business school dean positions. Reports indicate one-third of business schools are now led by a woman (e.g., Hymowitz, 2024) with the media interested in this novel phenomenon (e.g., Lewington, 2019). We read reports of more women MBA students, more women professors, and more women deans … Have business schools become more gender friendly and inclusive? While recognising the significant impact of women deans, a full celebration is premature. Business and management schools have yet to face some uncomfortable gendered realities of being a woman in business schools.

Business schools worldwide publicly commit to solving wider societal problems and increasingly aim to actively address inequalities and discrimination in organisations and communities. Gender inequality is one such issue, covered by the United Nations Goal 5, where gender equality is a human right and a precondition for realising all goals in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Global Focus includes examples of business schools working innovatively to reduce gender inequalities, increase women's representation and address anti-racism (Mthombeni, 2023; Ogbonna, 2024). There are calls for business schools to expand efforts and to develop future leaders with insight and courage to drive societal and workplace changes required for equality (Page *et al.*, 2022). To engage with this vitally important agenda, business schools have to confront how they are not immune to patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism.

Talking about 'societal gender equality gaps is "big business for business schools,"', yet few schools are good role models for other employers (Kossek and Lee, 2022, p.2). Here we outline why courageous business schools are needed to disrupt their (own) patriarchal cultures. We draw on experiences from holding five business school dean positions in two different western geographies, and our research into gendered organisations and women-in-leadership. We aim to i) shift the gaze from 'fixing the women'; ii) point out key challenges to gender equality deeply entrenched in the system and iii) call on men to challenge patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism and to lead significant changes in gender equity and equality in business schools. We speak from the socially constructed category 'woman' and recognise multiple identities and gender diversity beyond the sex binary. Core to our feminist approach is being accountable to our community, and we shared drafts of this piece with six women academics (across career stages and from different business schools). Their support and challenge to go further influenced our writing. We outline only a fraction of the uncomfortable realities of patriarchal, gendered business school life; show how we still have far to go to normalise women in business schools, gender in our curricula and business and management theory; and how men leading on women's impact in business schools is fundamental to disrupt cultures and contribute broader economic and social impact in this area.

We argue that business schools face the tremendously wicked problem of patriarchy. Patriarchy, a social system of gendered structures and practices, positions men as primary, and women as secondary and operates over and above individuals (Walby, 1989). Patriarchy in paid work leads to the 'closure of access' for women (Walby, 1989, p.223), and becomes visible if we look closely at how social relations reflect women's exclusion and segregation (e.g., low numbers of women deans and professors), the devaluation of women's work (e.g., doing service work, marginalising women's theorising) and associated low wages (the academic gender pay gap). Patriarchy

continually changes and infiltrates everywhere, shaping gendered social relations and organising men as legitimate and natural figures of authority (Katila and Meriläinen, 1999). It provides the context which legitimates 'the logic of misogyny' (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016, p.171). While patriarchy lacks scrutiny in the Global North (Ferry, 2024), researchers in the Global South are acutely aware of patriarchy's contemporary impact on business practice. For example, Adisa *et al.*, (2020, p.146) demonstrate how patriarchy's system shapes women's behaviours in high street banks in Nigeria, in that 'patriarchal attitudes, often practised at home, are frequently transferred to organisational settings'. This maintains men's (self-perceived) superior status quo, where 'women are dominated, discriminated against and permanently placed in inferior positions' (ibid).

Through a feminist perspective and gender lens, business schools are notoriously oxymoronic. They purport EDI and commitment to social mobility and societal grand challenges through public statements, rankings and branding (Yarrow and Davies, 2022). However, this commitment is simply 'window dressing', as business schools remain deeply ingrained patriarchal 'gendered institutions' where 'gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power' (Acker, 1992, p.567). Men dominate – in leadership hierarchies, in the professoriate, in classrooms and wider professional, business and academic communities (particularly in external donor communities) and the persistent gendering of the economy and organisations is invisible in business school curricula (Mavin *et al.*, 2004; Perriton *et al.*, 2022). The insidious nature of patriarchy is reflected in hostile academic environments with unacceptable gender and ethnicity pay gaps, particularly in research-led contexts (Healy *et al.*, 2024), and 'women academics' struggles to achieve and stay in senior leadership reflect the gendered order of academia rather than any general 'fault' of women themselves (Haynes, 2024, p.2295). We propose that three powerful socially active principles operate in business schools, acting on behalf of patriarchy to sustain the gendered nature of the system.

Principles Feeding Patriarchy in Business Schools

First, meritocracy without equity, perpetuates gender blindness and discrimination in business schools. Meritocracy, a fundamental principle on which universities and business schools stand, is a social order where people are 'objectively' evaluated on individual ability and achievements related to a job, regardless of social identity or context. However, as Simpson and Kumra (2016, p.562) show, if the occupational identity is misaligned with the embodied social identity of woman, this leads to the 'Teflon effect', where 'merit fails to "stick"' to women's bodies. In business schools, merit slides off academic women and minoritised others. Excellence is frequently used as a legitimating discourse in higher education 'to "explain" the under-representation of women in senior positions – the suggestion being that access to such positions is entirely meritocratic and that women lack the confidence, academic excellence, political 'nous', leadership, or networks to facilitate their access' (O'Connor, 2023, p.674). Van den Brink and Benschop (2012) demonstrate how academic excellence as a universal and gender-neutral standard of merit is inherently gendered in the evaluation of professorial candidates, producing privileges for men and disadvantages for women. Under patriarchy, women academics are 'systematically less likely to be tenured or promoted than men with a similar record, and when they are, it is typically at a less prestigious university' (Kossek and Lee, 2022, p.6). An indicator of the strength of patriarchy upheld through meritocracy without equity, is how, despite protection in collective agreements, women's maternity and family leave and pregnancy-related absences are considered in promotion decisions, and how mitigation for caring responsibilities during COVID-19 is (still) applied in any management decision accounting for the volume and quality of research outputs. Even when individuals recognise how academic meritocratic systems of progression are not what they seem, the

power structures, principles and application do not change (Śliwa and Johansson, 2014) and business school EDI rhetoric (e.g., visions, missions, websites, programme adverts, accreditation submissions) becomes gender washing, 'presenting the myth of gender equality through discourse and text', while women and marginalised others see no change (Fox-Kirk *et al.*, 2020, p.586). Women's representation at professorial levels in UK and Canadian business schools remains woeful, the gender pay gaps remain too wide to justify (e.g., https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/) and women academics are writing collectively of experiences of gender-based violence behind a 'smokescreen of equality' (Bourabain, 2021) where experiences of sexism may not be believed (Edwards *et al.*, 2022).

Second, the principle of gender-blind curricula and theory, which sustains patriarchy, underpins world-leading research and informs learning and teaching in business schools. This gender blindness has been scrutinised and 'called in' for over 25 years (Mavin and Bryans, 1999; Wilson, 1996), with little change. 'World-leading' theorising continues to be 'mostly malestream' (Cunliffe, 2022, p.2), with feminism generally ignored as a legitimate source of knowledge (Bell *et al.*, 2019; Calás and Smircich, 2014). Very little attention has been drawn to how many theories authored by or featuring women are presented to students, resulting in business school learning underpinned by normative theory written by men, and based on 'largely white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical senior executives' (Knights *et al.*, 2024, p.2). In terms of gender-aware curricula, Perriton *et al.* (2022) conducted a content analysis of module /course descriptions offered in business and management degrees on 112 UK university websites for prospective students. They conclude 'gender issues and perspectives are largely absent from this shop window' (Perriton *et al.*, 2022, p.59). We also see this gender-blindness in teaching cases, commonly used in business schools, where students roleplay as senior leaders making critical decisions. Women are notoriously absent as the senior leaders featured and 'if we can't see it, we can't be it'. When women leaders do feature, they are often portrayed in stereotypical ways (e.g., more emotional, less visionary, less decisive) (Grandy and Ingols, 2016; Sharen and McGowen, 2019). This gender blindness is evident in business school international accrediting bodies, including PRME, which guide curricula towards socially progressive content and emerging CSR issues. However, the Perriton *et al.* (2022) analysis does not show routes for gender on the curricula even in human resources or CSR-related modules. Further, holding accreditation showed no association with the number or gender content of undergraduate programmes. Women are also business school students - where do they see themselves in gender-blind curricula and theory? How does the status quo of men-normative curricula and theory prepare men and women students to progress toward gender equality in business and management practice?

Third, the principle of competition, in how business schools have imbibed neoliberal ideologies and individualism (Naidoo and Enders, 2022), is marked by gendered assumptions and restrictions for women. Despite careers in neoliberal universities experienced as the 'academic hunger games' (Lemon, 2018) and competition generally being at the heart of business schools, we tend not to discuss or teach how women doing competition are subject to competing discourses. The gendered discourse socially punishes women for competition (standing in opposition to femininity) and the neoliberal competition discourse expects it (Mavin and Yusupova, 2024). Neoliberal competition and individual entrepreneurialism dominate in business schools yet a competitive woman academic is a norm deviant. This is evidenced by patriarchal resistance to citing women's research (Ennser-Kananen, 2019), how women are silenced and have less representation in decision-making (Aiston and Fo, 2021) and continue to carry the academic housework (Mavin, 2001). Gendered competition leaves women academics 'backstage' and invisible when it comes to visible performative aspects that count in promotion; service work is less valued by promotion committees (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2024). Competition discourses uphold patriarchal power, with men as competitive and academic women positioned for interpretation as non-competitive and not ambitious. This bleeds into business school gender blind curricula and theory, where competition is generally taught from theory using

experiments based on perceived biological sex, treating competition as a 'self-evident, static and easily measurable phenomenon' which 'proves men as competitive and women as non-competitive' (Mavin and Yusupova, 2021, p.85). We also see this in how we teach negotiation, rarely discussing or providing skills development around the complexities of women's negotiation (e.g., they are less likely to negotiate on salary and when they do, salaries go up, but the women are often punished for violating norms of femininity).

To illustrate how patriarchy manifests in business schools, the Journal of Management Studies recently published a detailed account by Andrea Prothero (2024), including sexism in the classroom, rejection by male students, being told she should be grateful to have made Associate Professor, and being punished by men because of (perceived) behaviour from her man academic partner. Between us, we could add a thesis detailing our experiences of patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism as women making our careers in business schools. Those we are prepared to reveal illustrate patriarchy's power and its operation towards women academics who have accumulated the 'necessary' merit and display some competition (and ambition) to achieve promotion to professor and the dean position. Having gained enough merit to be promoted to Professor, we were accused of sleeping with men to get there; seen as 'fair game' and sexually harassed at a deans conference; isolated as only the third woman at professorial level; and labelled 'scary feminist' for prioritising gender equality. Having been competitive 'enough' to be promoted to dean, we were advised by men and women not to engage in EDI because that was what people were 'expecting', it would threaten our credibility and we were told the business community didn't think we were good enough - we weren't local, our pedigree wasn't elite enough and we were perceived as an equity hire - so we had 'to prove ourselves'. When appointed as dean, we were the only woman in the room, working in toxic masculinity, facing sexist comments, and being continually undermined and physically intimidated by men in meetings. A memorable example was having a poster pinned to the noticeboard outside the dean's office with the title 'Cock handler' alongside a photo of a cockerel and a by-line of the 'Best of Cocks'. These examples demonstrate patriarchy's strength, regardless of women's hierarchical status and its wickedness in business schools. Political and grounded in gendered power, dismantling patriarchy requires engaging those communities impacted and taking collaborative responsibility to work toward change. This is where courageous men in and around business schools step forward.

Calling Courageous Men

Men senior leaders are more likely to view their organisations as gender equitable with adequate policies and initiatives (Cortis *et al.*, 2022). However, men academics in business and management schools are now publishing debates on their role in disrupting patriarchy (recommended reading Tienari and Taylor, 2019; Prasad *et al.* 2021). These discussions draw attention to the challenges facing men to 'change a system that is not only socially and historically entrenched but also one that they have benefited from and that has enabled them to become "men of power"' (Prasad *et al.*, 2021, p.1586). To step forward and influence change requires prioritising the needs of minorities and recognising and addressing inequalities, misogyny, and sexism whenever they occur. This is not just an intellectual project and change needs to extend into patriarchal stereotyped personal lives (Tienari and Taylor, 2019). We are all trapped in patriarchy's ideology and can sharply feel its essence in men-dominated business schools, constructing social relations with material basis that control both women and men. However, it is not up to minority women deans and academics to fix patriarchy in business schools. All deans should be stepping forward to work collaboratively with their communities to challenge patriarchy and all business school academics with a modicum of power have a responsibility to turn towards disrupting patriarchy rather than turning away – accepting that this 'may undermine their own privilege and standing' (Cortis *et al.*, 2022, p.206).

As part of a clumsy approach (Grint, 2010) to disrupt the wickedness of patriarchy in business schools and support the development of inclusive environments where women feel they belong, we outline some provocations where courageous men could start. First, as academics(!), do the research and develop understanding of what patriarchy is, how men's privilege accumulates, and how patriarchy is perceived to operate in business schools[i]. Reflexively question your assumptions and responses to the research. Talk about this with trusted others, including your own internalised patriarchal expectations (we all have them) and how patriarchy plays out in your personal life. Second, engage in some field research. Talk with women academics about their experiences to learn how patriarchy operates for them in practice. Third, do some observation work in your own business school context; what do you notice about its structures, how it operates, its hierarchies and where power is located. For example, who chairs and serves on the most influential committees in your school? Are women leading and serving committees with power or less influence? Review the school's workload and roles; are women primarily doing 'backstage' academic housework, hugely time-consuming and unimportant for tenure and promotion? View your business school through the lens of women, what would you change? Fourth, find others who share the motivation for change to connect with and begin to plan the next steps.

Prasad *et al.* (2021) provide examples of how as men academics they are already taking steps to disrupt patriarchy in business schools, by:

- Taking up academic housework such as student-facing work and academic management;
- Intervening when people are mistreated; calling out and addressing misogyny and sexism;
- Citing women's research;
- Developing comradeship with women; and,
- Engaging in critical reflexivity relative to gender egalitarianism and the arrangements of their personal lives.

We have our own experiences as women deans in business schools of (attempting) to lead on disrupting the patriarchal status quo. We share some of the leadership practices which we understand (and from others) have had a positive impact over the years and which to some extent, are reflective of Prothero's (2024) solutions, see Table 1.

Table 1. Leadership Practices to Challenge Patriarchal Business Schools
• Deans regularly interrogating gendered workload allocations and scrutinising promotion applications by comparing applicants' previous five years of workload allocation.
• Agreeing voluntary targets and positive action for women's representation in hierarchical levels, in powerful roles, on decision-making bodies/committees, for shared parental leave, men taking parental leave, and accountability for those responsible for decisions and facilitating inclusive cultures.
• Creating psychologically safe enough spaces for people to talk about experiences of patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. Leading on training and development related to unconscious bias and organisational gender and race fluency for faculty, recognising that a 'tick the box' approach is insufficient and awareness is critical but not enough.
• Scrutinising who takes up non-promotable but essential tasks (Babcock *et al.*, 2022) (e.g., student-facing and perfunctory management roles) and having honest conversations about future strategies for succession and change with accountability.
• Leading on revising business school curricula to include women's theorising, preparing students to tackle EDI in organisations and setting the EDI culture for engagement with external stakeholders, particularly donors, and securing external funding for gender-based projects.

[i] The reference list here might be a starting point.

• Challenging the gendered and raced meritocracy discourse; changing recruitment, selection, promotion, sabbatical, and appraisal policies and practices that mask discrimination under the guise of meritocracy.
• Challenging promotion policies. Sharing 'insider rules'. Mentoring (internally and externally) women for promotion, providing rigorous statements of support (and as external referee), 'calling in' any discriminating elements (e.g., gendered language) and emphasising intersectional mitigating factors for a committee to consider, including breadth of care responsibilities and impact of cognitive load[ii].
• Providing sponsorship (e.g., advocating for women when they are not in the room) to foster understanding of the system and working to change it.
• Writing collaboratively with women academics. Securing funded PhDs for gender-related problems. Instrumentally sourcing women's research appropriated by men and citing them. Gender-aware editing and reviewing of journals and Special Issues and encouraging women to submit.
• Challenging women's development programmes emphasising the minority to fit in and fix gender diversity.
• Normalising stigmatised 'women's issues' (periods, pregnancy, miscarriage, postnatal depression, menopause (4, 2024)) which impact on performance and well-being at work.

Having courageous men disrupting patriarchy and progressing gender equality is critical for cultural change in business schools and in support of addressing societal challenges and developing students to progress gender diversity in organisations. 'Gender inequality is everyone's problem and everyone's responsibility to dismantle' (Prasad *et al.*, 2021, p.1593). Continued patriarchal power and the gendering of business schools, along with embedded misogyny and sexism, and lack of representation of women academics in professorial and leadership roles, seriously curtail women's impact. Patriarchal cultures are disingenuous, and at odds with business school visions and missions. This is a significant problem to be prioritised and addressed. Having considered (only) three of the socially active principles feeding patriarchy in business schools and brought these sharply into frame, we have suggested practical steps and opened up new research directions where everyone in our community can take action to dismantle patriarchy.

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[ii] Cognitive load is the gendered organisational and emotional work related to family and personal logistics inside and outside the home (not housework) shouldered primarily by women and mothers, reflecting a second unpaid full-time job that is exhausting, frustrating, time- and energy-consuming and not recognised by others (DeGroot and Vik, 2020).

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About the authors

Sharon Mavin is Professor of Leadership and Organisation Studies at Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle University, UK. She had held several Dean, Director and Associate Dean roles in UK business schools. Awarded the British Academy of Management for Leadership in 2021, Sharon's research focus is gender in organisations and women-in-leadership.

Gina Grandy is Professor at the Haskayne School of Business, University of Calgary, Canada. She has held several Dean, Associate Dean and Research Programme Lead roles in Canadian and UK business schools. Gina's research interests are in leadership, gender and women at work, stigmatised work, and case writing.