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Advancing Women In Leadership

Where Have All the Smart Women Gone?

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When society discourages women from showing their intelligence, two problems arise. Not only are women's abilities hidden, but *bright women are literally hidden from one another.*

"Yes, you're bright, but shut up. You talk too much. I was very clearly taught that in order to be accepted, you had to keep the lid on about how bright you were." These words were spoken by Sally, one of the participants in my study of gifted women. The study was designed to investigate women's reflections concerning their childhood gifted label. The study focus was twofold: whether the participants felt giftedness was a positive, negative, or mixed influence on their lives and how their achievements were affected by their giftedness. Gifted labeling, gifted women, and women's achievements provided the literature contexts. The study subjects were 34 college-educated women between the ages of 30-50, who had participated in school gifted programs as children.

Overwhelmingly, participants shared the view that being identified as gifted was a positive experience in their lives. They found it a motivator to do well in school. Even beyond school, it was still a part of their identity. Negative effects focused on external social issues, such as feeling separate or isolated.

Study results lead to the conclusion that although being identified as gifted did help the participants as young women in that it gave them internal feelings of competence and confidence, there seemed to be no apparent link between being labeled gifted and career aspirations and achievements. Once their education was completed, there was no, or little, external encouragement, support, or guidance to become high achievers in the professional field. This study formed the basis for my book, [Where Have All the Smart Women Gone?](#) Though the study I conducted was about gifted women, I believe the themes in their lives overlap with most women, whether or not they are seen by others as gifted. (In addition, the women in the study spoke of giftedness in broad terms, not just in brightness or ability to do well in school. They included the nurturance of one's children and family and the joy of accomplishment from the pursuit of a career that still allows time for a satisfying personal life.) My hunch is that women in leadership

positions, or who aspire to them, will find at least some of these themes to be VERY familiar.

A Country Called Double Bind

The Land of Lost Dreams

Where have all the smart women gone? They went to a Country called Double Bind. This is not a literal country, but a place many of us understand on a deep level, because we have been there ourselves. The Country of Double Bind is a symbol for the dilemmas that women find themselves in, especially if they happen to be smart and competent. In this country are four lands. The first is the Land of Lost Dreams. On the edge of this land is a place called Miss Invincible. Most of the women in the study believed they could achieve anything.

I was taught I could do anything I wanted to do." (Anne)

I felt like there wasn't anything I couldn't do. Everything was out there. (Roxanne)

They had a strong message they could do anything, but did they? Not necessarily. One reason for this ironic twist: they faced that double bind. They were told they could do anything in the classroom, but beyond that, the message was often, "Well, of course you can't do THAT."

When Sputnik went up, they put me in Math Analysis and Physics and Chemistry to groom me. But when I wanted to be an astronaut, I was told, 'You can't apply.' (Brenda)

Many women felt a lack of role models. Ruth, a nurse, said:

Whatever I did, I did well, but if I had to point to something that kept me from trying out a different career, I think it would be the lack of female role models. I didn't see in front of me what the possibilities were.

Anne, also a nurse, could not picture herself in the career she had in mind originally, partly because she saw no women entering that field:

I wanted to be a nuclear engineer when I started high school, but I couldn't see myself doing that. I couldn't imagine myself in a tie and wing-tipped shoes.

The Land of Sexism

In addition to a lack of female role models, a related reason for not achieving one's dreams is cultural

sexism. This is the Land of Sexism, located next to the Land of Lost Dreams. In various ways, both subtle and direct, our culture discourages women from expressing their intelligence. Many of the women in the study faced gender role expectations. The following comment by Brenda is a powerful testament to the conflict involved in being a woman and being bright:

I was never told it was okay to be a girl. My dad raised me like a boy because I had the intelligence. For me, there was a loss of femininity, the whole side of me that made me a woman. Now I've had to go back over that part, telling myself it's okay to be a girl.

CONTINUE

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[AWL Journal Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 1997](#)

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