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Woman Up: Empowering Women Leadership in Higher Education

Lexi Kane

Meghan Trainor’s 2016 song, “Woman Up”, serves not only as a call to action for women everywhere, but also serves as a representation of the collective force of women necessary to exist and persist within higher education. Throughout this piece, one will come to see that student leaders need experiences in higher education to feel empowered, and women leaders can be the ones to create those experiences. Carol Gilligan’s Theory of Women’s Moral Development will serve as the foundation for discussing how to proceed in advancing the holistic development of women student leaders. In the discussion about opportunities and moments for experiences, one can see that there are practical ways in which we can apply the theory in everyday life. Through this work and Trainor’s lyrics, it will be evident that women are necessary in the structure of higher education and need to bring each other up to create change within the system.

Keywords: women empowerment, women student leaders, transformational leadership, Gilligan’s Theory of Women’s Moral Development

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Woman Up: Empowering Women Leadership in Higher Education

In 2016, Meghan Trainor released one of her hit songs, Woman Up. The lyrics for part of her chorus are as follows: “All my girls, raise your hand/ If you don’t need a man/ ‘Cause you’re more than good enough/ You gotta (woman up, woman up),” (Trainor, 2016). These lyrics offer a way for women to feel seen and empowers them to be their most authentic selves. Trainor is talking about women universally, but there is evidence to believe that her lyrics speak directly to the call of women in higher education. Throughout the song, Trainor mentions women as a collective, which amplifies the idea that women in leadership can help other women, especially women student leaders, find themselves and achieve their goals. In short, student leaders need experiences in higher education to feel empowered, and women leaders can be the ones to create those experiences. This sentiment needs to continue, though, for women in leadership positions who also deserve transformational experiences and support. Through this collective identity, women can grow together and empower each other through higher education.

I believe that my own personal experiences have shaped my narrative and understandings surrounding women and leadership. In my undergraduate career, I was heavily involved in different facets of student leadership and had many women supervisors who helped to support my own growth and development. They helped me achieve goals and reach the position I am in today. I currently serve as an advisor for Sorority Life at the University of Vermont, overseeing six Panhellenic sororities. In my day-to-day life, I have the honor and privilege to work in a field of women empowerment. I want to serve as an example to the students I work with that you can be successful in life when equipped with the right resources and foundational support. This research is also inspired by my work with the Sisters of Color, a race-based affinity group for women of color who are also members of sororities, a system that was fundamentally built against them from the start. Through these experiences and opportunities, I feel connected to the work of Meghan Trainor and her lyrics of building other women up. I hope and strive to achieve this in my everyday life and create opportunities for others to reach for their aspirational goals as well. Trainor’s motto is one of women empowerment that I want to weave in my future career as a scholar and practitioner.

This piece sheds light on the perseverance of these students in overcoming challenges and experiences that inform who they are as people and how their identities shape their experiences. One will first see the importance of centering women in the language used today, and then continue to learn how some theories either excluded or included women in the moral development theory narrative. Towards the end, there will be a discussion about how to take this knowledge and apply it to situations in higher education today while also emphasizing some gaps and needs for future research in the field. Through this work, it will be evident that women are necessary in the structure of higher education and need to bring each other up to create change within the system.
“All my girls, raise your hand”- Centering Women in Language

Woman versus Female

Trainor starts the chorus of the song with “All my girls, raise your hand” which helps to ground this piece on women and womanhood. In thinking about the choice of words as a concept, it is important to situate these terms in relation to leadership positions. In this piece, I choose to use the term “woman” rather than “female” to describe the subjects. Within grammar, both female and woman can be used as nouns, but female can also be an adjective (Safire, 2007). This is seen in daily life such as with mammals; there can be a female human being and a female cow, but there can only be a woman, not a woman cow (Safire, 2007). A Twitter user also made a connection between this debate of man and woman versus male and female being rooted in “the intentional exclusion of non-white women in the nineteenth century when doctors still needed a way to talk about their bodies,” (Hypno, 2022). By making this distinction, I choose to place higher emphasis on women as people and not gendered mammals and want to be inclusionary of all woman-identifying people who exist within this system. I believe it is important to recognize the contributions that women have made to society, rather than mammals. In my understanding, women can be more than their biological purpose in society, especially within higher education. This distinction provides more weight to the piece and places greater respect on the topic at hand.

Transformational Learning

Transformational learning can be defined as “learning that leads to some type of fundamental change in the learners’ sense of themselves, their worldviews, their understanding of their pasts, and their orientation to the future.” (Brooks, 2000). This learning can show up through experiential moments, student leadership positions, or even in the classroom. Personally, this showed up in my experiences outside of the classroom- being a Panhellenic Officer, participating in theatrical productions, being a Resident Assistant, an Orientation Leader, etc. I found that my experiential learning started to outweigh my academic learning, which is how I was able to find myself in higher education post-graduation. To have these experiences, though, students need to be supported in all aspects to have the space and opportunity to grow. Collay and Cooper present this concept well by stating that the process is “complex yet possible” when those leading the cohorts “are clearly able to describe how they learned about themselves as leaders,” (2008). It can take a leader to make a leader. Leadership can come in different shapes and forms, but it takes the investment of time into a leader than can help shape that person for their career and development to come. Transformational leaders aim to inspire others in their meaning making and encourage them to “transcend their boundaries” (Ward et al., 2009). This brings me back to Trainor’s lyric- “all my girls, raise your hand,” (2016). We want women in leadership to be proud of who they are and who they have become, and to share it with
full authenticity for the rest of the world to see. Leading by example can help transformational learning thrive within the education system.

“If you don’t need a man”- Kohlberg Left Us Out, But Gilligan Brought Us Back

Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development

Meghan Trainor said it best- “(raise your hand) if you don’t need a man” (2016). At the onset of moral development theory was Lawrence Kohlberg, a man who was focused on how individuals progressed in creating their own moral judgements, especially college students (Patton et al., 2016). His work primarily focused on the study of adolescent boys and how their morality developed while in higher education (Patton et al., 2016). Within this theory, there are three levels and six stages, with two stages per level (Patton et al., 2016). These levels and stages support Kohlberg’s theory that “values and ethics are developed from the interaction between the person and the environment; and that moral judgement is characterized according to how a person reacts- structure- rather than according to what the person thinks- content,” (Kohlberg, 1976).

In his work, he specifically did not mention women or whether his theory applied to their moral development as well. Kohlberg also faced critiques from researchers and theorists such as Guertin (1986), who assesses Kohlberg for his “preoccupation with the cognitive aspects of moral reasoning and omission of emotional, affective dimensions,”. In short, Guertin claims that Kohlberg is forgetting to analyze the relationship-oriented aspects that make human beings care about their decision-making and meaning making for their life. Being relationship-oriented is part of human nature, especially the nature of women, and Kohlberg was unable to bring these concepts into his own theory. Although he started the conversation about moral development theory, there are more researchers and theorists out there who could better describe women’s development.

Gilligan’s Theory of Women’s Moral Development

When Kohlberg left women out of the picture, Carol Gilligan was swift enough to bring women’s moral development theory to the forefront. She noted that Kohlberg had stated that “women were unable to reach the same developmental pinnacle as their male counterparts,” (Patton et al., 2016). It is interesting that Kohlberg was able to state this, as there seems to be no evidence to back up this claim. Gilligan was an empowering figure in her own right as she critiqued Kohlberg and other theorists of moral development’s work further by noting that these researchers had chosen to portray women as “either deviant or deficient in their development” to explain away women’s moral development specifically (Gilligan, 1977). No one during this time had yet been able to capture the timeline of women’s development in relation to their moral identity.

Taking this into consideration, Gilligan decided to publish her own response, titled In a Different Voice. This publication centered on the idea that for women, “relationships with others carry
equal weight with self-care when making moral decisions,” (Patton et al., 2016). Gilligan separated her theory into three levels with a transition in between each level (Gilligan, 1977). The first level focuses on self and transitions quickly transitions into responsibility for both self and others (Gilligan, 1977). The second transition then encompasses a combination of morality with responsibility for those around the woman, even though the balance may seem unequal. The second transition allows the individual to recognize and question why she has been putting others first at her own expense, and she starts to find how to equally balance these two ideas (Patton et al., 2016). By the last level, level three, the individual can balance between her own needs and the needs of others, while emphasizing her extreme level of care and concern for those around her (Gilligan, 1977). This relates back to one of Trainor’s lyrics that was mentioned earlier, saying “all my girls, raise your hand” (2016). Women, through their moral development, have the ability to balance care and relationships through their own being, while also empowering others to do the same. It takes women to empower women, and a collective force is truly what will change the system and society.

Gilligan’s approach is unique in the way in which it centers women and I appreciate her emphasis on care and concern within women’s moral development. Her work has influenced other researchers in the field such as Eva Skoe, who was able to develop the Ethic of Care Interview (ECI) measuring care-based moral thought amongst adults (Patton et al., 2016). The interview contains four moral dilemmas that participants will have to answer or solve throughout their interview (Skoe, 2012). Three of the topics included in the ECI are unplanned pregnancy, marital fidelity, and care for a parent (Skoe, 2012). These dilemmas are based upon the work of Haan as well as Gilligan, and how participants answer should align with the previous research surrounding moral development (Skoe, 2012).

Gilligan’s research into women’s moral development is thorough in its formation. She is empowering in her writing and gives voice to women who deserve to be heard and recognized. In doing this work, she did face some pushback from other researchers. Murray (1996) makes the excellent argument that both men and women can exhibit justice and care in their moral development, not solely women. It is certainly important to recognize Kohlberg’s work in the start of moral development, but even more important to recognize the strides made by Gilligan. She wrote out against a prominent researcher to state her position backed up by facts. She also, as a woman, has the lived experience to help shape her own scholarly narrative. A man was necessary to help initiate this conversation, but a woman brought light and new meaning to moral development.

“Cause you’re more than good enough”- Women Leadership Matters

Women leadership matters- plain and simple. There are many ways in which institutions and systems can help to elevate this experience to make it a universal one for women. First, it should be noted that women leadership can be and is impactful on college campuses. In relation to Gilligan’s
work, a study on women-friendly campuses found that faculty and staff cared about the holistic development of the students and balanced that with their academic identities (Wolf, 2000). Students felt support from those that they worked with, saying words like “one-on-one’, mentoring, and hand holding.” (Wolf, 2000). Although these might not feel like measurable items, student support and success for holistic development is important in the overall success of an institution. Gilligan’s model of care and justice should echo throughout all facets of higher education to show that faculty and staff truly care about the development of their students, especially women leaders.

Next, there is a lack of recognition of and support for teachers as leaders within education (Collay & Cooper, 2008). The pair did a study on women’s experiences in two graduate programs and how it shaped their perception of being educational leaders in the field (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Collay and Cooper are able to connect support for graduate students to having an effect on their transformational learning (2008). They both understand the impact that reframing the narrative can have, and that by making an active effort to name their students as leaders can help to change the students’ self-perception and willingness to persist (Collay & Cooper, 2008). This also speaks to findings that suggest that women who are in positions of power who can speak up should speak up and advocate for others (Hannum et al., 2015). In this same article, Hannum et al. noted that having women leaders serve as examples can help to open conversations surrounding professional aspirations and goals. If we can see the work being done in front of us by women who are capable, then we ourselves will feel capable and empowered to do the work. Through all of this, though, we need to remember that we need to equally compensate or recognize those who are high-achieving and amazing representatives of the work.

Another point of acknowledgement in relation to moral development is that meaning making can be instrumental to the process. For example, Collay and Cooper recognize that journaling or reflection on past experiences can be helpful self-authorship and knowledge construction (2008). Taking the moment to actively reflect on how one is leading and growing as both a professional and human can be important to self-growth. This research also makes a great note to say that “regular and systematic reflection is...especially important for individuals from groups who have been excluded from leadership,” (Collay & Cooper, 2008). Oftentimes, it is those from marginalized identities, or even multiple marginalized identities, who are left out of the narrative and forced to persist despite the circumstances. Consistent reflection and meaning making can lead students to deduce what they need to succeed and show them how to advocate and navigate capital whenever they can.

Throughout these moments for elevation of women student leaders, it is important to recognize that they may face imposter syndrome along the way. They may feel that they are not good enough or not capable of achieving what they can do, but it is the role of scholars and practitioners to help them realize their full potential. In other words, these women leaders are “more good enough,” (Trainor, 2016).
“You gotta (woman up, woman up)” – We Can Be the Difference

What does “woman up” mean in this context (Trainor, 2016)? How can we as a collective shape and reform the narrative that has been told to us for so many years? To me, “woman up” means taking charge to shift the culture and raise up the voices of women, but this is not insurmountable. We have proven time and time again that women can do these hard things. The literature and theories support women empowerment, but there must be more of it to amplify those voices that need to be heard. Throughout this next section, I hope to present opportunities for growth and improvement in this area of women empowerment and leadership.

First, more research needs to be done on women leaders in position of power on campus, especially BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) women leaders to analyze the intersection of gender and race. Although not previously discussed, intersectionality and the recognition of its role in our lives is essential to delving deeper into our own moral development and how we persist and succeed within society. In these wise words of Collay and Cooper, “it is essential that women of color are not only recognized as qualified leaders, but that the multiple perspectives of leadership they bring to the profession help transform the way schools are led.” Even though their research was done on elementary and secondary education, this sentiment should be consistent throughout all forms of systems. Women students of color need to see representation in their everyday lives to recognize that these leadership positions are tangible and not so far out of reach. To make this more of a lived reality, we will need to disrupt the systems that were built against us and work towards a more equitable and inclusive future.

In the same vein, more research can be done on women in leadership who are also balancing other responsibilities, such as motherhood, families, advancing their careers, etc. One example made evident through research by Hannum et al. is that women are typically assigned more responsibilities than their male counterparts, such as a heavier service, course, and advising load (2015). By limiting a woman’s ability to move further up in leadership positions at an earlier career point, women are then in a place of stagnancy where there is no room for upward mobility in the system. It can also lead to a “experience gap” that then becomes evident at higher levels of authority (Hannum et al., 2015). In relation to identity outside of the work environment, women are often found in multiple household roles such as mother, wife, caregiver, etc. What can often happen is that women need to choose between their career or their families, but this should not be the case, especially when men rarely must make this decision (Hannum et al., 2015). In thinking about the bigger, more holistic picture, we need to make sure that as practitioners, we are aware of the multiple identities that women hold outside of their profession and make space for that in our everyday lives. We need to create avenues for growth in these positions of power, and it is necessary to move the needle forward for progress in higher education.
Lastly, the relationship of men in leadership with women in leadership can use further analysis. As a society, our perception of leaders can be distorted and result in a default of men being leaders and women being “atypical leaders, with the perception that they violate accepted norms of leadership, no matter what the leadership behavior,” (Hannum et al., 2015). It feels that while this perception can be true, it highlights society’s regression into the standard roles or norms for both men and women. Times are changing and to keep up, we as a society have to alter those perceptions within ourselves and make that visible to the upcoming generations. Women can be and should be leaders, but often face imposter syndrome along the way. It will take time to overcome these internal and external challenges, but we need to work collectively to move forward.

The work is truly being done, but the practice needs to be translated back into research and literature. We know that there are people out there who are making a difference in the lives of women and showing them their power as leaders and advocate, but it isn’t being recorded enough. We need to hear the voices of those who have made an impact and take their practice into consideration for our own careers. This, to me, is being able to “woman up” (Trainor, 2016).

Conclusion

Women, especially student leaders, deserve to feel and embrace women empowerment from women leadership, and the same needs to be reciprocated back up to women leaders in order for anyone to succeed and thrive within this oppressive system. This is evident in research done by Ward et al., who stated through their studies that the participants “were committed to help other women evolve and improve their lives,” (2009). Women have been the backbone of education through their models of care and justice, and that same care needs to be shown to them in return. The narratives and understandings that I have shared with you only shed some light on the work that needs to be done to place women leadership on a higher pedestal. It will only work if there is a system in place to support it. Women have the ability to work together as a collective and serve as an example for each other in order to change society for the greater good.
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