

How to break a woman

By Dr Beatriz García



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Today, in Buenos Aires, I have started a series of denunciations against what I have learnt are the deeply entrenched biases towards certain kind of leadership in public institutions - academia, in particular.

It is the kind of leadership that has been convenient to men of a certain era, the era that preceded the mass uprising of educated, self-entitled and motivated women who felt confident they would get

what they wanted, the way they wanted, if they worked hard for it and had the right communication skills.

I represent that wave of women. **I was born assuming I would have the same rights and opportunities as anyone else** - as any man, certainly. I never thought I had to be a 'feminist'. Feminism felt like an angry cause to me. I felt sympathy for those calling themselves feminists but I thought:

*“this does not apply to me. **I will figure it all out.** And I will be so amazing at what I do & love, so patient humble and clever in facing-up to the challenges, that there is no chance I don't get where I want to get to. **I do not need a feminist tag. I do not need anger. The world is made for people (both men or women) like me”***

But the time has come to be proven wrong. It is 2019, I have worked for over 20 years at universities and I have given every ounce of my energy and my passion to my job. I have achieved a lot and I have felt valued by many. I have progressed in my career - not as quickly as other peers with similar

capacities, but I thought this was because I like 'distracting' myself writing poetry and using not-very-practical languages for 21c academia (that is, non-English). And now, after all that... I have clashed straight on against a wall I did not see coming.

I am pleased to have joined a [Disorderly Women Alliance](#). And I am grateful to have attended a talk that made me see certain pervasive barriers I had refused to acknowledge before. So, by April 2019, I

feel I must recognise and talk about the glass ceilings that still exist in the world I know: the world of Universities, in general, and the specific set of Universities I have worked for during the last 13 years in Liverpool and the United Kingdom

I must talk about the glass ceilings that still exist

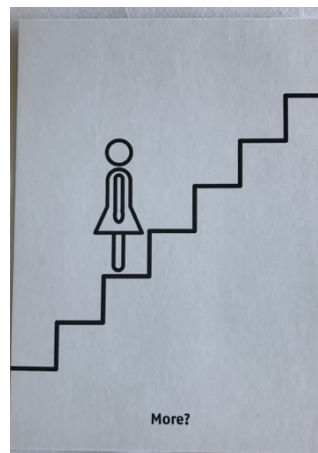
I cannot point the finger at anyone. In fact, I feel a lot of respect for the colleagues I have worked with – and continue to work with – in my current institution. I value, even admire, both those in the top roles, as vice chancellors and pro-vice chancellors, and those in supportive roles across administrative and corporate services.

But, institutionally, there is a problem. Because it has become clear to me that it is only possible to reach a top leadership position by adapting to a model of operations, a way of working, of prioritising, of communicating, of line

managing and ultimately of understanding your place as a ‘professional’ that is completely indebted to the era I thought I was born out of. The era when it was only men – backed by supporting wives – taking the top jobs. Authoritative male professors or supercharged male managers advancing their careers throughout their 30s and 40s free of childcare, grocery shopping & laundry worries. Thinkers and game-players that decided a reliable leader should contain emotion, talk measuredly, not be taken-up by specific causes or passions – be adaptable, understand the game – and, more than anything: smart souls that never say clearly what they think.

It is only possible to reach a top leadership position by adapting to a way of working, prioritising, communicating, line-managing and understanding your place as a ‘professional’ that is indebted to an era I thought I was born out of.

I am a good communicator. I have been dotted by a natural instinct for empathy and performative skills that go well with most people – when they do not feel threatened (or outsmarted) by outspoken and talkative women. I have also taken seriously the most technical aspects of the research I direct, and I managed to secure large funding streams as well as convince hardnosed data analysts of the value of the work I promote and ‘perform’ on when I take the public stage. However, none of these communication and technical skills have been valued when it comes to gaining credibility as a ‘reliable’ research leader



or rather, when it comes to gaining the trust of a classically trained Board. Too much colour on stage is perceived with suspicion. Too much enthusiasm is seen as distracting. Too many words are taken as annoying.

The way to proceed, to run ambitious programmes of work is to keep it monochrome (grey), tempered (sanguine) and short (standardised mostly to the point of meaningless).

There is no time to fully engage with causes and ambitions if you are to be accepted as a reliable leader in a public institution. Do not care too much, do not show what you feel and do not speak openly.

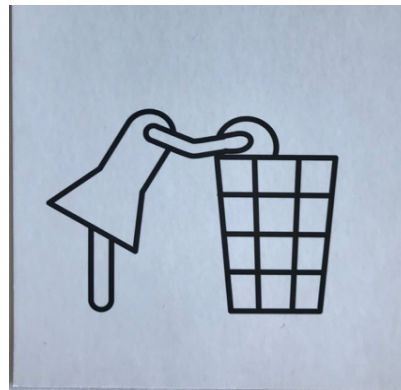
Against my character, I have decided, as so many feminists before me, that I have to be a bit less of a ‘darling’ and a bit more of a ‘pain’

In 2016, I decided to explore poetry as an avenue to express what academia and my role as the face of an Institute and a large international research programme did not allow me to. **By 2019, however, I have decided I do not want to keep separating modes of expression.** I have decided that, far from toning down the colour I need to present the value of my research, I want the colour plus the rings and the bells.

I have decided I will not adapt to the leadership model that has been asphyxiating me for the last 10 years. I have decided I will not go through the motions, I will not make it easy and flavourless for my Boards and superiors. I have decided, as so many feminists before me, that I have no choice but to be a bit less of a ‘darling’ and a bit more of a ‘pain’.

This comes after 20 years being a compliant, cheerful while always obedient and endlessly adaptable member of staff.

I have always done what is expected of me, I have guessed my bosses when they did not know what they wanted out of me and delivered, with flying colours, against their priority agendas.



At one point, in late 2017, I burned out and decided I could no longer prioritise that endless mountain

of stakeholder expectations. I switched to my own voice, trusting that my long experience and impeccable track record would make me still likable, if not even *more* likable!

I could not be more wrong.

So here I am, in the wilderness that it is to say ‘no, I do not agree’, ‘no I will not do that’, and ‘no, I think you are wrong and I won’t apologise for thinking I am right’

So here I am, in the wilderness that it is to say ‘no, I do not agree’, ‘no I will not do that’, and ‘no, I think you are wrong and I won’t apologise for thinking I am right, ‘no, I will not pretend you know better and it is best for me if I please you.’

- I will do so without anger, though I won’t be able to help communicating it with ‘colour’ and a strong accent.



- I will shorten it up (a little) but not so short is says nothing.
- I will play the ‘calm woman’ card and when I am not calm, I will make sure I smile, as I always have done.
- I will not believe I have enemies. I know the people I so strongly disagree with are not out there to ‘get’ me or any of the other women who have been driven to despair by institutional inertia and old-fashioned managerial-dominated styles of communication.
- I will expect my senior management to go out for a coffee with me rather just rely on meetings at 8am on a Monday or 4.30pm on a Friday as a way of addressing difficult issues.
- I will request more informal & personal exchanges to complement the impossibly rigid style of ‘bottom-line’ meetings.
- I will do so because, like so many men before me, I have earned that right, and because it is the best way of moving complex situations forwards.

**Do not read this as a rant.
Please read it as a lucid, though frustrating,
coming to terms with realities that must change.**

I leave it there.

I am completing another (more focused?) ‘**how to break a woman**’ piece. I will develop a manifesto. This is just the start

I am also writing about ‘**how to break and impact**’ piece. (The ultimate paradox at British Universities: they want a new, unprecedented, impact agenda, while placing every imaginable administrative and emotional barrier on what I would name the avantgarde of ‘impact-driven’ academics – people like myself!!)

It is empowering to write this way.
And I am not angry. Truly.

Feminist? Maybe, finally, yes, I feel I need to be. Finally, yes, I agree we all should be. Because women – and men – with female sensitivities remain at an enormous disadvantage. Let’s keep talking about it, constructively, but loud and clear.

I’ll go back to my poetry now. And I’ll ask for this not to be read as a rant. It is anything but. Please read it as a lucid, though frustrating, coming to terms with realities that must change.

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Beatriz is the Chair of the European Capital of Culture Selection Committee in Estonia, member of the European Capital of Culture Selection and Monitoring Committee for the [European Commission](http://www.europeancommission.eu), and member of the Culture and Olympic Heritage Commission for the [International Olympic Committee](http://www.olympic.org).