

Between and Beyond: Tomboyism and the Reconceptualization of Gender in Leadership

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In *Women and Economics* (1898), Charlotte Perkins Gilman claims that “the most normal girl is the “tom-boy”— whose numbers increase among us in these wiser days— a healthy young creature, who is human; not feminine till it is time to be” (Gilman, 1998, p. 29). Gilman’s quote gives us insight into the social definition of the tomboy figure, as well as the conundrum it poses. A few key words stand out—the youthfulness of the tomboy phenomena, the gender neutral blank slate of a ‘creature’/‘human’ with an internal ticking time bomb to perform a gendered role. What Gilman is getting at is the immanence of tomboyism, or gender-nonconformity in a non-male individual. There is a space for tomboyism in Critical Leadership Studies (CLS), a scholastic zone fraught with discourses on the gendered embodiments of leaders and leadership practices. Much of this is entrenched in the male/female binary—and navigating its deconstruction in leadership. The use of tomboy leadership as a metaphor allows for both the amalgamation and deconstruction of gender performativity, and leaves space for a sense of playfulness in the fluid transition between categories and norms.

The tomboy thrives in grey areas, in the fissure between male and female, childishness and maturity, delinquency and conformism. It is playful, fluid and most of all, disruptive. The tomboy embodiment is processual, and dynamically evolves from context to context. It queers societal binaries, and disorients (Ahmed 2006, 4) societal expectations. It is reflexive, and holds a mirror up to the processes of gendered conformity. Like tomboyism, leadership is a critical process of becoming. It has been historically tied to patriarchy and masculine codes of meaning-making. Within this context, nonmale leaders navigate complex identity tensions, and have to actively engage with the individual and combined processes of gender and leadership. Hence, the tomboy embodiment is a powerful metaphorical lens through which to understand, analyse and reimagine nonmale leadership. The liminality of the tomboy identity—characterised by its simultaneous proximity to and distance from normative masculinity— mirrors the complex negotiation of gendered practices in a leadership context. By using the tomboy as a metaphor in disorientation, we can develop a nuanced understanding of leadership that transcends binary constraints.

Many CLS scholars engage with the notion of gender in leadership, arguing against the use of gender essentialism in theorising power in organising (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Collinson & Hearn, 2014; Harding et al., 2012; Ford, 2006). Much of this is rooted in challenging patriarchy

disguised as gender-neutral workplace imperatives (Acker 1990). Feminist management and organisation literature have set out to disrupt status quo by using femininity as a marker of disembodied organizing (Fotaki, 2013; Harding et al., 2013; Lewis, 2014; Vachhani, 2014). Most of these works are informed by the works on gender performativity by Judith Butler (1993, 2007) which argues that gender embodiments are discursively constructed. This wave of poststructuralism centres gendered materiality—or rather *female/feminine* gendered reality in as a means to disrupt status quo (Ford et.al, 2017; Harding et.al, 2022). Alison Pullen cites Dale & Burrell, 2000 and Höpfl, 2000 in summing up this fascination:

The gendered, leaky body has the capacity to disrupt organising and perhaps this is why organisational attempts to contain neuter bodies is commonplace (Pullen 2018, 128).

This un-neutering/ celebration of ‘leaky’ of bodies can be in the form of an emancipation from social constructionism (ie, cyborglike embodiments) in thinking about gendered leadership (Muhr, 2010) or the embracing of the abject grotesquerie (Thanem 2006; Vachhani, 2014). Either way, the female form is metaphorized as technologically superior, or horrifically powerful. These allegorical representations transcend the confines of the female body to make a strong point, albeit reinforcing the idea that female embodiment is somehow still not enough—unless fortified by metaphor.

What sets tomboy metaphor apart from a heightened form of transcendental gendered embodiment like Muhr’s (2010) cyborg leadership is a sense of playfulness and relatability. Muhr’s cyborg leader displays a “mechanical and superior leadership” that “performs both masculinity and femininity excessively” (2010, p. 342). Even in the use of metaphor, there is a distinction between female/ feminine and male/masculine, and the and the downfalls of the hyper-incorporation of both traits as distinctive entities. The process of deconstructing the binaries of male/female, insider/outsider, professional/unprofessional further reinstates this dualism through the preference for one binary over the other, reminiscent of second-wave feminist thinking. Instead of using a metaphor that attempts to transcend embodiment, I am proposing tomboyism because of its ability to coalesce the binaries into a gender-nonconforming identity that is both situated in and upsets the norm.

The concept of tomboyism as an idealised metaphor for nonmale leadership allows for a sense of fluidity and gender play in theorising gendered leadership. It lends itself to the relationality of processual leadership (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; Tourish, 2014; Crevani, 2018), with the process ontology focused on the production and/or disruption of gendered norms. There is a dissonance and disidentification that occurs when bodies exist where they are not normatively represented,

such as leadership spaces, a “tenuous location” for non-normative leadership (Puwar, 2004, p.8). As such, there is room for the dynamic doing and undoing of gendered embodiments (Butler, 2005; Ahmed 2006) in relation to leadership contexts.

Tomboyism does not feature much in CLS, with the exception to its relationship with masculinity in determining career success (Hilgenkamp & Livingston, 2002), leadership styles (Topić, 2023), and in the creation of safe spaces in CrossFit culture (Burø et al., 2024). The concept of tomboyism has captured the attention of critical thinkers since the 18th century, and it evolved together with feminist and queer movements. It has been studied as a form of resistance in reality (Carr 1998; 2005; 2007) and fiction (Abate, 2008; Sentilles, 2018; Proehl, 2018; McDermott, 2019). It has contributed to theories of sexuality (Creed, 1999; Rubin, 2011) and has been enmeshed with discourses of gender-nonconformity (Mackay, 2021) and transgender identities (Halberstam, 1998; 2004). There is a fluidity of embodiment and feeling attached to the tomboy identity (Joseph 2023; 2024) which necessitates a relational ontology in perceiving tomboyism as a metaphor for nonmale leadership.

Although tomboyism has not featured prominently in CLS, tropes of its non-normativity sits in line with emerging queer literature on leadership and organisational studies, a much needed answer in the call for a more dialectical fluidity in CLS (Collinson, 2020; Gherardi 2018). Using the tomboy embodiment as a metaphor calls for a “trans-subjectivity” (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015) in viewing corporeality and embodiment. Situating tomboyism solely in the realm of masculinity would undermine the unique nature of tomboyism’s dynamic movement between, and within gender categories.

Binary representations preclude variability, flexibility and difference or deviation from the norm—in short, they freeze or reify the dominant masculine normative order (Knights 2015, p. 203)

We can view tomboyism as a nexus of identities and embodiments that both reside within and outside of the norm. It is multiplicitous, dynamic, and heeds the call for a different view of gendered embodiments in organisational studies (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015). In turning it into a metaphor of gendered leadership, it undoes the binaries of gender, and has the same effect as transness (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016; Thanem 2011) and queerness (Pullen et al., 2016) has on gendered embodiments organisational studies. This is in line with the movement towards a “norm-critical leadership” (Christensen et al., 2024) driven by queer theory’s quest in disrupting the various gender/sexual binaries and decentring heteronormative organizing and embodiment (Christensen, 2018).

This article will analyse the narratives portrayals of Jacinda Arden and Kamala Harris' leadership in the media, and the ways in which their non-normative identity contributes to the way their leadership is both practiced and perceived by the public. Both leaders are from distinct contexts, with political personas that challenge the norms. The former prime minister of New Zealand is still celebrated for her compassionate leadership, especially at the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Simpson et al., 2022; Wart et al., 2022; McGuire et al., 2020) and the ways in which she has embraced motherhood as a political leader (Timperley et al., 2025) and her show of feminism while navigating a predominantly masculine field (Wilson, 2024). Harris, on the other hand has been subject to identity deconstruction in her contribution to the politics of Black/immigrant female leadership (Bishop 2024; Filindra & Fagan 2022). She is the very embodiment of racial tensions and gendered anxieties that has historically plagued the United States (Knuckley & Matthews, 2024), and represents the hope for a new, non-normative leadership (Clayton et al., 2022; Abdellatif et al., 2021).

The leadership of Jacinda Arden and Kamala Harris can be read through the metaphor of tomboyism in its gendered disalignment with the patriarchal status quo. Tomboyism as a metaphor captures the tension between conformity and resistance, softness and strength, queerness and heteronormativity. Arden's maternal yet assertive leadership style and Harris's intersectional embodiment of authority both illustrate how nonmale leaders navigate political terrains not built for them. Their orientations—toward care, relationality, and embodied presence—disrupt masculinist norms embedded in the process of leadership. In this sense, the metaphor of the tomboy is used as a phenomenological tool; a way of exploring how nonmale leaders reorient themselves and the institutions they inhabit.

This article will make use of Sara Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology* in establishing tomboyism as a spatial temporal orientation challenging heteronormative gendered leadership. We will conceptualise a metaphorical tomboyism that is *queer* in its orientation, using a narrative montage of Arden and Harris' leadership, focusing on their embodied leadership practices. We aim to employ the concept of tomboyism to move past gender essentialism to include the varied experiences of leaders and leadership across the gender spectrum—including both cisgender and nonbinary individuals.

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