
The authors of Women in Public Relations: How Gender Influences Practice are among a handful of academics in the United States who have spent the past two decades examining the shift in public relations from a male-dominated to a female-dominated occupation. With more than 750 references ranging through the literature of communication studies, psychology, sociology, public relations, and management, the authors have brought together a substantial body of research on the topic of women in public relations. Unfortunately, the very strength of this meticulously documented work also leads to its weakness. The authors, who write from a liberal-feminist perspective, bring little new thinking to the topic, and many readers may find the material repetitive and the prose sluggish. However, for scholars working in the area and those who are new to the debate, the book is an excellent resource. I assigned one of the introductory chapters, “Understanding the Issues,” to my first-year public-relations class, which is 85% female. Their written responses to the reading were not unsurprising to anyone teaching undergraduates in the past few years. One woman’s statement, “I am not a feminist but I’m appalled to learn of the discrimination against women in public relations,” was representative of the majority of the responses. Although few first-year students would manage to read the entire book closely, this overview chapter definitely raised some consciousness.

The book is somewhat uneven in quality, possibly because of the need to integrate original research with a substantial review of already published work and the difficulties inherent when three people sit down to write one book. The authors review the literature on women in management and entrepreneurship and examine parallels between the experiences of women in public relations and female workers in other fields as diverse as law, veterinary medicine, and espionage. (The authors quote a study indicating that while 40% of the workforce of the Central Intelligence Agency is made up of women, they occupy only 9% of the career-making positions.)

The sections devoted to diversity and to the experiences of African, Asian, and Hispanic American practitioners are less satisfying in that they fail to situate these experiences in the broader literature on racism and organizations. In a section subtitled “Concluding Thoughts,” in the chapter titled “Racial and Ethnic Minorities in U.S. Public Relations,” the authors note: “At this point in our book we have established that American women—minority and majority alike—are disadvantaged in most career fields where they work…. Only now, early into the decade of the 2000’s, are we coming to an understanding of how discrimination affects different minority groups in different ways” (p. 169). Feminist theorists such as bell hooks, who have been writing about the lives and ideas of women on the margins since the early 1970s, could provide a valuable context for any discussion of the experiences of African American women working in public relations. Chapters on encroachment (the overseeing of the public-relations function by marketing, for example), public-relations roles (technical versus managerial), the gender gap in salaries, and the glass ceiling are stronger, for they are closely related to the expertise of the authors.

While early on a brief description of the debate on the meaning of sex and gender is provided, the authors suggest that for the purposes of the book they will equate the term “gender” with biology or physiology and the term “sex” with characteristics that have been associated with men and women, such as assertiveness and submissiveness (p. 21). Some readers may find this use of the terms somewhat confusing. And in fact, later in the book, the authors themselves seem to contradict their earlier assertion by arguing that gender is socially constructed. In addition, the equating of “gender” with biology is unsettling, as it often leads to an invocation of what could be considered essentialism. The authors regu-
larly allude to the riskiness of this type of argument but at the same time make a case for women having the potential to change not only their organizations but the larger society and even the world because of their perceived preference for more negotiation and less domination. In the final chapter, where globalization is discussed, the authors suggest that “customers, suppliers, and competitors of the typical United States–based organization are more heterogeneous than ever before. Thus what some consider women’s ‘natural’ talents as communicators, integrators of information, negotiators, educators and even healers should be increasingly valued” (p. 357).

Although the second-to-last chapter is entitled “Feminist Strategies with Radical Intent,” one has to wonder just exactly what is meant by radical. For example, in the section “Reassessing Undergraduate Education,” the authors highlight such ideas as moving public-relations education into schools of business and incorporating women’s perspectives into the curriculum by encouraging more women academics to write textbooks. Since the “Torches of Freedom,” a campaign created by Edward Bernays in 1929 that co-opted the values of feminism to increase the market share of a tobacco company, public relations as an occupation has allied itself with the values of the corporate world. Moving public-relations education into business schools doesn’t seem like the most innovative strategy to bring about equality for women working in the field. One only has to look to the experience of women who in the 1980s saw the MBA as their ticket to progress in the corporate world for a sobering second thought. A census of women corporate officers in Canada reported by the *Globe and Mail* last year indicated that only 3.4% of corporate officers with “titles of clout” were women. Only 6.4% of line officers were women (February 9, 2000, p. A17). Perhaps a more radical recommendation would be to require courses in feminist studies and cultural studies in the core curriculum of a public-relations degree.

Nonetheless, this book serves a very useful purpose in drawing attention to how women have participated in the field of public relations. Through their in-depth interviews and focus-group studies, the authors have given many individual women a voice in articulating their experiences in this occupation. The book might also serve as inspiration for Canadian academics to document more fully the issues of gender and public relations as they exist in Canadian organizations. Very little research has been published on the Canadian situation, and what little has been done is dated. A quick scan of the archives of profiles published by *PR Canada*, an on-line magazine for practitioners, shows that of the 17 profiles presented up to October 2000, six were of women. All of the women featured had started their own public-relations consultancies. Despite the idiosyncratic nature of this small sample, one has to wonder why these women chose entrepreneurship over organizational public relations. *Women in Public Relations: How Gender Influences Practice* gives us plenty of food for thought to help answer that question.

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