



UNIVERSITY OF
AUCKLAND
Waipapa Taumata Rau
NEW ZEALAND

BUSINESS SCHOOL

Re-birthing new life to leadership



Dr Amanda Sterling
February 2024

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Foreword

When I first connected with Amanda, I had just published an opinion piece on my experience as a mother in leadership.

At the time, while I knew some of my immediate peers quietly shared my perspective, it still felt incredibly uncomfortable and lonely outing my actual experience in a public forum. Unfiltered in all its raw and unapologetic detail, exposing it was really like to lead while pregnant and then return to a C-suite role with very young children.

As a woman growing up in the generation sold the dream of being able to “have it all”, it felt like both an act of rebellion and an admission of great failure to challenge whether this was indeed possible, let alone survivable or enjoyable.

Amanda’s research, a world-first, is incredibly important and a significant advancement for mothers, women and arguably all leaders. It publicly documents the lived, physical and mental experiences of mothers and helps us all go deeper into the uncomfortable, but necessary, conversations we must have if we are to properly shift the dial on women in leadership.

With just a handful of female CEOs in the NZX50, and an even smaller group of them mothers, the evidence is clear. These discussions are not only needed, they are critical to ensuring greater representation of women, and inclusion of mothers, in leadership.

Needless to say, for me personally, discovering I was not so alone in my views and that there were others like Amanda, and the cohort of women she interviewed, asking similar questions, was incredibly affirming and empowering. As I am sure it will prove to be for many others.



From an organisation’s perspective this report helps light a pathway ahead by offering practical steps to support change and stem the flow of women exiting their careers at a critical juncture. Importantly, also showing that it is not women who need to fix themselves, be more confident, or learn to assimilate better, but the systems and work practices that need to evolve around them.

In doing so, the opportunities presented are not just for the benefit of mothers or women, but for all organisations, businesses large and small, in Aotearoa and beyond, to unlock their full potential. Maybe then in turn, authentically allowing everyone the opportunity to really have it all.

Isobel Kerr-Newell
Group CEO, VideoTaxi
& Artemis Communications

A note from the author

It was always my intention for my doctoral research to make a meaningful difference to the inclusion of women in leadership roles. This report, summarising the insights and findings of my research, is part of fulfilling that intention.

I began this research to make sense of my own experience. When I returned to paid work when my son was a year old, I struggled to reconcile breastfeeding, sleep deprivation, and daycare illnesses with being rewarded and recognised as a leader. For example, despite exceeding all objective measures of performance, I was passed over for a leadership position in my team, kept out of the loop on challenging projects, and told I lacked ‘confidence’.

At the time, I internalised this as my own failure to be both a mother and a leader. However, through my research, I’ve unravelled too many stories similar to my own where women are struggling to progress their careers because of expectations that, in order to be leaders, they either need to perform as if there is nothing going on with their bodies, or risk being marginalised. This is not an individual problem, but a systemic issue.

Since completing my PhD, I’ve had many conversations with organisational leaders interested in addressing these challenges. These are people doing excellent work on policies and practices to support working parents, as well as on how they recruit, develop, and recognise female talent.

The research I’ve done contributes to this work by highlighting a need to challenge and change norms of leadership to recognise and support the embodied experiences of women. I called my research ‘re-birthing new life to leadership’ because of the possibilities mothers reveal to do this.

This report has been written for anyone wanting to make a practical difference to the inclusion of women in leadership. However, what I’ve summarised here only scratches the surface of my research. After reading this report, I invite you to explore and apply these insights further, and I’ve included some ways we can work together to do this at the end.

I’m grateful to the courageous and inspiring women who participated in my research to share their stories. It was a privilege to hold space for your vulnerabilities, and to weave your experiences into this work. I would also like to thank Professor Brigid Carroll and Dr Janine Swail at the University of Auckland Business School for their support in the messy trenches of life and a PhD.

“The research I’ve done highlights a need to challenge and change norms of leadership to recognise and support the embodied experiences of women”.



About the author

Dr Amanda Sterling completed her PhD at the University of Auckland in 2023. Her research explored the experiences of embodied mothers in leadership, and how those experiences (e.g. of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and care of very young children) could challenge normative ideals of leadership and open up greater opportunities for the inclusion of women in leadership roles.

Before commencing her PhD, Amanda worked in corporate leadership development for large global and small local businesses.

She was also recognised globally, and received an HRNZ award in 2016, for her work leading a community of people and culture practitioners to re-imagine and act differently around humanity at work.

Amanda is currently a neuroscience-trained coach and business consultant who works with organisations to increase the representation of women in leadership positions.

Executive summary

Organisations are struggling to recruit and retain women in leadership, and women are struggling to stay. While current approaches to address this are well-intentioned and have made some inroads, this world-first research demonstrates how recognition of embodied experiences within leadership (i.e. performances, experiences, and emotions associated with our bodies) could lead to better outcomes for women, as well as the organisations that employ them.

This report draws on PhD research conducted by Dr Amanda Sterling, which explores the experiences of embodied mothers in leadership (i.e. pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and care of children, and the embodied strategies that women engage in to manage these experiences). This research found that mothers were ‘pulled’ by leadership norms that limited their leadership capability and required them to ‘perform’ to mainstream ideals in order to be considered legitimate, but also ‘pushed’ them into more embodied, empowered, and connected forms of leadership.

These findings fill a significant gap in our understanding of the challenges women face enacting leadership. However, they also highlight the opportunities for organisations to support more inclusive and impactful leadership. There are three key takeaways explored in this report:

1. Where embodied experiences are not explicitly recognised and supported in leadership, it leads to greater physical, emotional, and mental labours. These **embodied labours** will continue to be problematic for the inclusion of women in leadership.
2. Recognising the experiences, performances, and emotions associated with our own bodies can support leaders in resisting unhelpful leadership norms. This **embodied recognition** can lead to more empowered leadership.
3. Where embodied experiences are recognised and supported, leadership is expressed *with* people, through relationships, communities, and networks (rather than *on* people). The **embodied possibilities** of this are more inclusive, connected, and purposeful leadership, and ultimately better outcomes for organisations and women.

The opportunity for organisations is to improve how they attract women and embrace their experiences, and for women to not just survive but thrive. The end of this report includes three ways organisations can leverage this research to advance their leadership gender equity goals. These include engaging with this research further, taking a more focused (and nuanced) approach to measurement and action, and developing embodied leadership capability.

Please get in touch with Dr Amanda Sterling if you'd like to explore these opportunities further. a.sterling@auckland.ac.nz or amanda@dramandasterling.com

Introduction

This world-first research shows how a focused approach to supporting women in leadership could lead to better outcomes for women as well as for the organisations that employ them.

We know that having more women in leadership is important, not just for gender equity but for businesses and public service organisations to successfully address the challenges they face. For example, changing consumer demands, the diversity of thinking and experience necessary to respond to complex global issues (e.g. climate change and conflict), and acute talent shortages. There is already enough research to show that organisations with greater gender diversity are more profitable and outperform those without¹.

However, despite good intentions, setting targets around representation, and considerable investment to achieve these targets, most organisations are still struggling to close the gap in representation, and some areas are going backwards. As an illustration of this, within the private sector, women only make up 41% of senior management (a number that has dropped 6% from 2022-2023) and 38% of executives/GMs within the more progressive organisations participating in the Champions for Change reporting². For NZX-listed companies, this representation is only 28.5%³.

The research in this report fills a significant gap in addressing this challenge. Because, having assessed the landscape of current initiatives directed at supporting women's careers (e.g. flexible/part-time work, pay, parental leave, return to work/maternity support, leadership development programmes), and the research

surrounding these initiatives, it hones in on the piece that's missing. That is, how the unavoidable embodied experiences of women (i.e. performances, experiences, and emotions associated with our bodies), and the assumptions associated with these experiences, act to exclude (or include) women from leadership.

To explore this, this report draws on the PhD research of Dr Amanda Sterling and the experiences of embodied mothers in leadership (i.e. pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and care of children, and the strategies that women engage in to manage these experiences). This research focus was chosen because, despite motherhood being one of the main reasons that women continue to drop out of the 'pipeline' to leadership, there is no research that accounts for the experiences of mothers *in* leadership. Furthermore, leadership scholarship and practice still tend to exclude the embodied experiences of women within concepts and performances of 'leadership'.

The findings and insights from this research reveal a pathway forward for organisations, and the leaders within them, to advance their leadership and gender equity goals. That is, to recognise and support embodied experiences within leadership practice. Because, in doing so, organisations won't just benefit from improved outcomes around retention and recruitment, but also from greater engagement, innovation, complex problem solving, and customer responsiveness where people feel they can bring the diversity of their human, and embodied, experiences into their leadership roles.

1 Amar, S. (2023). *Why everyone wins with more women in leadership*. Forbes. Retrieved 6th December 2023 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/02/07/why-everyone-wins-with-more-women-in-leadership/?sh=75dd30eb3cdd>

2 Champions for Change. (2023). *Lighting the Pathway to Change. Diversity Equity and Inclusion Impact Report 2023*. Retrieved 4th September 2023 from, <https://championsforchange.globalwomen.org.nz/>

3 NZX (2022, July 31). Gender Diversity Statistics. Retrieved 15th March 2023 from <https://www.nzx.com/regulation/nzregco/diversity-statistics>

This report is structured as follows:

What was found explores the research findings, including norms of leadership and the ‘pulls’, ‘performances’, and ‘pushes’ experienced by the women who participated in this research.

What it means outlines the consequences for women if embodied experiences are not explicitly supported in their leadership roles, the steps by which these experiences can be recognised, resisted and reformed, and the embodied possibilities that are available from doing so.

What next points to the ways organisations can apply the findings and insights from this research. These include engaging with this research further, taking a more focused (and nuanced) approach to measurement and action, and developing embodied leadership capability.

Research method

This research involved focus groups with 48 women who were either in leadership roles (formally or by influence), were on a trajectory to leadership, or had leadership aspirations. These women came from some of New Zealand’s largest corporations, most innovative start-ups, and community-connected organisations.

Women were invited to participate if they had children younger than five years old, and thus had a recent recollection of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and care of very young children.

A total of eight focus groups were conducted between August and December 2020 (despite COVID-19 lockdowns): one each in Hamilton, Christchurch, and Wellington, and five in Auckland. Academic benchmarks of between four to six groups indicate that this research exceeded standards for rich data collection.

Participants were asked to bring photos to the focus groups and engage in creative exercises to explore their experiences of motherhood and leadership. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants and their families, these photos and creative outputs were not published in the final research.

Academic rigour came through layers of analysis, continual questioning of perspectives, cataloguing findings, observing of patterns and contradictions, and interweaving of stories. This research took a stance that questioned established ‘truths’ about the world, in order to expose new meanings and possibilities for leadership.

Names have been changed and details that identify individuals and organisations have been removed.

What was found

This section overviews the findings from this research. Participants experienced what were called ‘pulls’, ‘performances’, and ‘pushes’ as they navigated tensions between their experiences as embodied mothers, and norms of leadership. A summary of these findings is included at the end of this report.

These norms of leadership were defined by what the participants in this research observed above and around them, the stories they heard, and the intangible expectations they felt, but couldn’t quite pin down. The women in this research described ‘leadership’ as predominantly men or women who were single with no children. These norms had consequences for their experiences of being and doing leadership.

“ Our whole exec are white middle aged men.

Adele

‘Pulls’

The women in this research experienced ‘pulls’ to conform to these leadership norms. These were called ‘pulls’ because they implied a gap between where someone was as “less of” a leader, where they needed to be to be considered ‘more of’ a leader, and an involuntary force whereby they “had to” close that gap. These included ‘pulls’ to be present and performing, to hide their experiences, or to feel a “lack of” capability and need to prove their worth.

“ Colleagues who do advance are generally women who either don’t have children or their children have left home.

Carey



Participant descriptions of leadership. Larger words indicate the most frequently occurring words.

“ It’s like she’s broken the glass ceiling and wants everyone to crawl through the broken pieces of glass on the way up like she did.

Jessica

To be present and performing

This was about being in a particular place at a particular time and having to look and behave like a ‘leader’. These expectations were sometimes made explicit. For example, Helen was a General Manager who described the impossible choice she was faced with when

“ I turned up at this meeting and had literally come straight from the hospital. I hadn’t had a shower in like two weeks. I was not in a good state of mind, and I remember sitting in this meeting and them just being like ‘we really need you to be doing XYZ’ and it’s like ‘but my kid is literally on a breathing machine.’

Helen

her child was in hospital, and the call that she got from the CEO (her manager) telling her she needed to come into work. She explained how this situation ultimately led her to walk away from her role and take another that was a “massive step down”. However, these expectations were more often implied through observations of leadership behaviours, and the limited support they experienced as mothers in leadership. For example, Sally explained how she worked for an organisation that had “lots of family-friendly policies”, but when her young son was in hospital for a week, she didn’t have “that understanding from people”.

“ [There was] a whole lot of men who were just like ‘what is that baby doing here?’ Nobody said it out loud, but you know this feeling.

Kate

“ I was in the hospital with a mountain of emails going ‘what the fuck am I doing? Just stop, like it’s not important’, and not feeling like I had that understanding from people. I went straight back to work as soon he got out of hospital, the next week. And no one asks ‘oh hey, how are you? Do you just want to take a day?’ or ‘i’m going to back off on some of these deadlines because obviously you haven’t had the last week to do them.’

Sally

To hide embodied motherhood

This was about women protecting themselves from judgement, discomfort, and potential discrimination, and was most notable during pregnancy – as if, while they still could hide their embodied motherhood, with their babies still tucked away in their stomachs, they did. These ‘pulls’ occurred even within organisations known for their supportive policies. For example, within a conversation about the lack of opportunities for women “if they’ve got intentions to have children”, Katie described how she made an “effort to demonstrate that I was not pregnant”. This was despite noting it would be a failure for her organisation if she was to leave after becoming a mother. Her organisation had policies targeted at supporting women, and Katie described herself as one of only a few female leaders as well as a high performer.

This ‘pull’ to hide was driven by the discomfort they experienced from the visibility, intimacy and scrutiny of their embodied motherhood. For example, Sabrina described her pregnant body saying “here I was, on display” and Jill talked about the “level of scrutiny” she received.

“ [I] never liked the visibility of being pregnant because I actually found it an intimate thing and I didn’t like that it was so visible to everyone what was happening with my body at any kind of moment in time...and here I was on display.

Sabrina

“ I felt uncomfortable at the level of scrutiny I received that men will never receive. So, the comments, mainly the comments. Or just people looking me up and down.

Jill

To prove their value

This was about needing to demonstrate leadership legitimacy and rationalise the allowances necessary to embody motherhood. These mothers felt ‘pulled’ to “make up” for flexibility needs, or described a ‘pull’ to “prove my value” or demonstrate that “I will work incredibly hard”. However, what emerged in this ‘pull to prove’ were inconsistencies between feeling “less of” and their leadership contributions. For example, Carey, who worked for a manufacturing company, and was the only woman on her executive leadership team, described how she was looked to for leadership during Covid-19. When it came to her performance review, however, her manager described her lack of “consistency” but was unable to articulate what that meant in relation to her performance and leadership potential.

“ *Maybe I’m not the right CEO if this is the kind of style that they like. That’s not going to be me.*

Lisa

“ *I think the consistency, you know, because there has been a bit of flexibility which we’ve afforded you... still 40 hours. So, I’m kind of like, what I’m hearing from him, is that I will be high/high again when I’m back to the ‘old Carey’.*

Carey

“ *There is this culture out there, particularly in male-dominated fields, that you can’t actually be highly competent and negotiating children.*

Bernadette

Beatrice’s story

In the focus group, Beatrice shared a selfie (an image she took herself) of her sitting in the front seat of her car with makeup on, corporate dress, jacket, straightened hair, and a car seat visible over her shoulder, and describes:

“I took these for my friend because I had had nearly zero sleep. What is funny about this photo is that I had just been to see a very large corporate who had *no idea that I had a baby*. All that is seen as... I don’t know if it’s a weakness so much, but I was very much wanting to *put on a face where I’ve got this, I’m capable...* umm I’ve had eight hours’ sleep, not two hours’ sleep’.

And it was such a massive business that *I couldn’t fail*. I had a lot of *expectation on me from work to achieve this*. And I found this photo funny because I was so sleep-deprived, and in the background is my son’s car seat, and I had just pulled out of this meeting, and I was *embarrassed* of being in a car with a car seat when I’m at a top corporate company. Because that is *not the image that I was wanting to portray*. It wasn’t the image that I wanted to have that I was a mum and a worker.

For this particular company, *they were all men*. I work in financial markets, so that is what my role was. So *very male-dominant*. I’m going on, but basically. Success is what I want to be at work, and I want to be as a mum. And this photo is me, I guess *trying to tie the two together*.”

‘Performances’

‘Performances’ were where these women drew on mainstream norms of leadership, namely role-modelling and authenticity, to legitimate their status as mothers in leadership. These were called ‘performances’ because they were more often rhetorical in nature, and conflicted with, contradicted, or didn’t necessarily flow through to, their embodied experiences.

Authenticity and role-modelling

At the end of every focus group, these women referred to their responsibility as leaders to role-model how it was possible to “be a mother and have a career [in leadership] at the same time”. However, many of these women continually landed on rhetorical constructions of ‘authentic leadership’ as “important to leadership”, or “what I aspire to”, while struggling to back this up with their experiences. Furthermore, being a role model was often an additional labour, as they navigated “doing it all” and “what it looks like” with the complex realities of their experience.

“ Showing that vulnerability is actually what makes you the more authentic leader and makes you more relatable.

Bella

“ I’m tired. There is quite a lot to do... Do I need to carry the mantle? Can someone else do it? ... and that’s terrible.

Sophie

Sabrina’s story

Sabrina was a senior executive at a very large, complex and bureaucratic organisation. She “never liked the visibility of being pregnant”, describing it as an “intimate thing”. She explained how her second birth experience was “awful” because she was not in control, and felt vulnerable and not respected, stating “I didn’t feel like I was cared for at the hospital”. In reflecting on her birth experience though, Sabrina explained how,

“... vulnerability in leadership matters. That’s *what I aspire to*. That’s what I hope comes out of that birth experience for me... you’re more vulnerable in terms of your returning experience and your ability to lead. Being more vulnerable really allows you to lead.”

However, in this second excerpt, Sabrina goes on to reflect on an experience where she didn’t put her “armour on”, and the emotional consequences of this for her,

“You get really used to *bracing yourself*, going to work and having to answer those questions and *being okay*. And that day, for whatever reason... *I didn’t put my armour on*, and *I wasn’t prepared for that day*. And I remember *that day got me*.”

‘Pushes’

‘Pushes’ emerged as counterforces against the leadership norms. These were likened to a rubber band being ‘pulled’ (towards masculine and childless performances of leadership) and then being ‘snapped forwards’ in the opposite direction (into expressions of embodied motherhood AND leadership) with more force and momentum. What these women described were empowered actions in which they challenged norms, owned their visible vulnerabilities, and expressed greater connections to themselves, their children, their communities, and the people that they led.

To challenge

Challenges included speaking up or making decisions against work practices and leadership expectations that didn’t support their experiences. These challenges were signified by strong language that spoke to an absence of fear or concern for the consequences of their actions in challenging. For example, in they described saying “fuck off” to another colleague, or explicitly expressing “these are my terms” or “I am holding my boundaries”. These challenges were often done in embodied ways. For example, when a pregnant Naomi overheard her male colleagues making sceptical comments about Prime Minister Ardern returning to office after her daughter’s birth, she felt compelled to stand up and challenge the idea that “I shouldn’t be able to come back to work if I have children as well.”

“ They know I am going home at 4 o’clock. I don’t care what is happening, I am going home at 4 o’clock... I’ve said, ‘if you want me in a meeting you need to make meetings when I am available. But clearly you don’t value me enough to change the meeting time. If I was important, you’d change the time.’

Mandy

“ I didn’t care about being difficult. I’ll take it or leave it frankly. But if you want me, these are the terms: you will have to pay for childcare when I’m at the meetings, if he’s not with me, otherwise he’ll be coming with me; you have to ensure that everywhere we are having a meeting there is a family room. I just listed all the things, and I said, ‘and sometimes I will have to join virtually and you’ll have to make sure that the whole meeting is constructed and works for virtual people’. And they were like, ‘yup, yup, yup, yup, yup.’

Stephanie

“ Jacinda Ardern announced her pregnancy and, being in markets, we had news about it all the time. The head of trading at the time made a bunch of comments and I sat just down the row. I’d been in the same leadership team as him for long enough that I felt quite comfortable and I stood up and, I didn’t say a lot, but it was very clear ‘are you saying that I shouldn’t be able to come back to work if I have children as well?’

Naomi

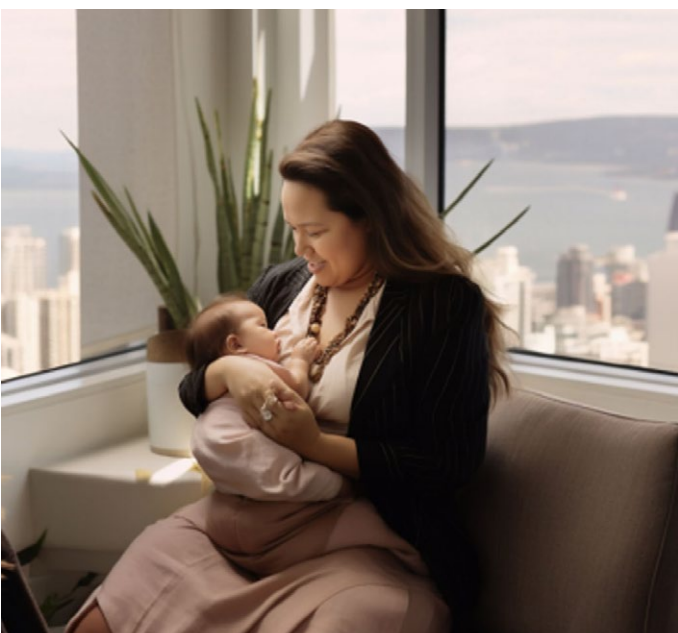
To be empowered

Their experiences of growing, birthing, and sustaining new life led to them feeling more empowered in their bodies. For example, Lisa describes the connection to “the small person growing inside of you” and the power she drew from her journey through IVF and then her successful pregnancy. She described how it was a “really powerful time” in which she “was just owning everything”.

To connect

What emerged were synonyms of ‘connection’ that appeared in two overlapping ways.

Firstly, they appeared through their greater connections to themselves in moments of vulnerability. For example, Kate contextualised motherhood and leadership as her pausing to connect with, and breastfeed, her son. She explained how, when the New Zealand Government announced lockdown restrictions in 2020, she was “stressed about the situation” because, as a business owner, this was going to impact her livelihood. But the decision she made was to sit, comfort, and connect with both her son and herself.



“ I actually noticed that I had more mana, more respect for being a mum and it opened up different conversations.

Sandra

“ You have to stand in a more powerful posture. I had lower back pain, so somehow the stance becomes more powerful. It sounds really weird but that’s what it was for me. When I was standing in front of people there was more of me and my legs were further apart and my shoulders were back and it was just that I had to own it.

Lisa

“ Being a leader is a lot about connection. I think a lot of what being a mother teaches you is how to connect better.

Bernadette

“ It was a good moment to connect with yourself. Like ‘ok, hang on, what is going to be will be, whatever happens on the TV is going to happen regardless of whether you are watching it or not’. You know, the decisions are out of your hand at this stage. But this is the decision that you choose.

Kate

“ In that first year Rose was pretty much attached to me. She would come to every single meeting. Everyone knew that if you wanted Vanessa there, Rose would also be there.

Vanessa

“ It’s the connection to people and places, including the small person growing inside of you.

Lisa

Astrid's story

Astrid described herself as a “multipotentialite” – someone who has no “one true calling” but pursues many paths – and had a 10-month-old ‘lockdown baby’ (born during one of the COVID-19 lockdowns). She described experiencing marginalisation, both as a mother and with “being non-white” in that, because of how she looks, “people naturally assume that I’m not a leader in any context” because they “sort of assume that you are a certain thing in the workplace, and they try and put you into boxes”.

In the focus groups, she shared an image of herself looking proud and strong, with her chin up – powerful and embodied – gazing

into the distance, wearing a black wraparound dress and a colourful necklace. She described the image as representing motherhood and leadership for her. She is standing in front of a mural representing the land in which she lives, and the people she feels connected to. She is not visibly pregnant, but points out the presence of her son, what he represents to her, and the power she drew from this in that the image was,

“... symbolising my *connection* with this piece of land and with the people in it but also, having Ryan, which is his name, with me along the journey. And yeah, I really love this photo because it *symbolises me bringing him along on this journey* and continuing to grow with him.”

Secondly, they appeared through their greater connections to others including their families, their communities, and the people they led. For example, Jayne describes breastfeeding while in a meeting with a “staunch” woman, and how “it really helped just *resonate* and *talk on a level*.”

“ You just realise that people, they’re all real, and it’s not a corporate company, it’s just person-to-person talking.

Jayne



Image Credit: Katie Mangai, Luni Maternity

What it means

This section discusses the implications of these findings. It includes the embodied labours that result from masculine and childless leadership norms, how greater attention to embodied experiences can empower leaders, and the possibilities for greater inclusion and leadership performance when embodied experiences are recognised and supported.

These women were experiencing additional labours over and above the pressures and expectations they already faced in leadership and in motherhood.

“ They’re all dads, or grandads, but they haven’t been mums.

Beatrice

“ I went to the doctors because I was sick, and I was really really tired and I said ‘I’ve got this off-site’ and she was like, ‘you’re not going to that’, and I was like ‘no I have to, I have to’ and she’s like ‘no, you’re not travelling again, here’s the certificate’. I was like ‘oh crap’. But that was great because then I felt like I had permission to not.

Jill

“ Unbeknownst to me I had preeclampsia, and so was physically very unwell. But I was so determined that I was going to be finishing everything that needed to be finished. My team still needs this and I need to do that. A Director of the time, who was amazing, he actually said ‘Katie, I’m walking you to your car and you’re not coming back.’

Katie

Embodied labours

This research illustrates how mothers in leadership engage in even greater physical, emotional and mental labours, where their experiences of motherhood are not explicitly supported within their leadership roles.

Mothers in leadership experience the challenges of navigating motherhood and work to a greater degree of intensity (than women ‘just’⁴ navigating work and motherhood) because of the additional scrutiny, visibility, autonomy and responsibility of their leadership roles. These women:

- were hypervisible as the only embodied mothers within predominantly male leadership teams
- seldom had someone else directing their work (therefore no explicit counters to what they described as the “voices in my head” and “expectations from myself”)
- needed to meet the needs of their team
- needed to be available for decision-making
- were required, because of the responsibilities of their roles, to be visible, be accessible, and push through.

This resulted in additional labours over and above the pressures and expectations they already faced in leadership and in motherhood.

⁴ Although there is no ‘just’ about this.

Physical labours

These mothers described how they “had to” be physically and visibly present and engaged leaders who were “leading from the front” and “like this corporate superstar”, as if there was nothing going on with their bodies, while they also struggled with experiences of embodied motherhood including pregnancy exhaustion, sleep deprivation and child-illness. This was a physical labour of managing the performances and presence of leadership at the same time as the physical demands of motherhood.

Emotional labours

These mothers described a range of emotions from trying to manage or hide their pregnant, breastfeeding, or tired bodies. These emotions were marked out by expressions of “it felt” or “it didn’t feel”, followed by sensations of shame, discomfort, embarrassment, judgement, awkwardness, stress, effort, tiredness, anxiety, horribleness, scaredness, terror, and fright when their embodied experiences leaked through or were “on display”. These emotions emerged as a result of their experiences and created additional labours to manage, process, or hide.

Mental labours

These mothers felt a need to prove their value as leaders specifically *because* they were mothers. They described the perception that being a mother made them “less of” a leader or lacking in some way. As a result, they grappled with feeling less competent, confident, and consistent. This led to them engaging in additional efforts to prove themselves, demonstrate their commitment, accrue credit, and overcompensate. These mental labours came from trying to reconcile being ‘enough’, with the impossibility of this task as embodied mothers trying to conform to disembodied norms.

“ You’ve just got to show you’re there and you’re committed.

Aimee

“ I had to tough it out. You’ve got to keep performing, you’ve got to keep turning up.

Jill

“ I started my job when I was pregnant. I didn’t tell anyone until I was about five months. But I felt like I had to prove that I was worth the investment, and so I overcompensated... There’s this norm around what a good worker looks like, and it’s not someone who starts their job pregnant, and then goes off on leave and then is too exhausted to say yes to things, so I had to shovel that stuff aside.

Adele

“ We still have this sense that when we become a mother we’re going to be less of the leader, we’re going to be not as good a leader any more. Because we’re going to have less time and less thinking about that, and less...

Ngaire

“ It’s the barrier and the fighting that knocks your confidence. You’re just so capable... but you’re talking about getting so tired and battling.

Penny

“ It’s this weird thing. I want the flexibility, but I need to demonstrate to you that I will work incredibly hard. I will blood sweat and tears.

Aimee

Embodied recognition

These women revealed how a greater connection to their embodied experiences enabled them to resist the disembodied leadership norms and engage in more empowered forms of leadership. What emerged in their stories were three steps of recognition, resistance, and reformation/re-birth.

Step one: recognition

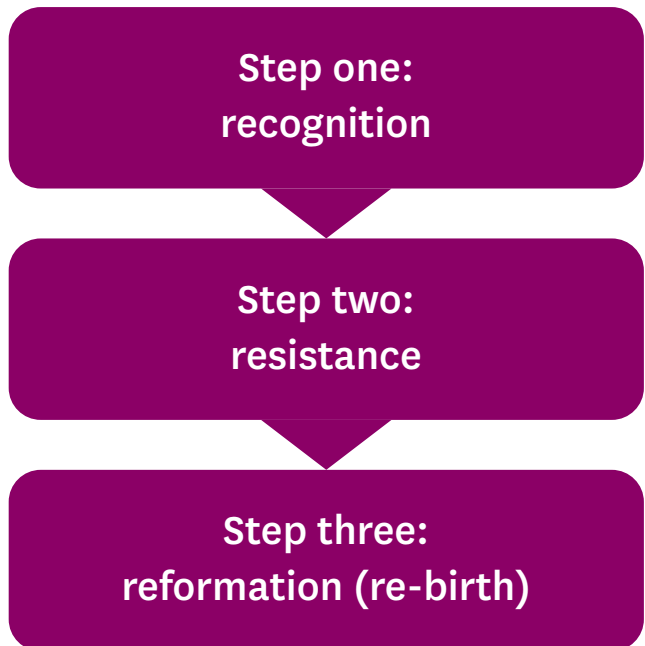
This was about recognising, and reflecting on, the experiences, performances and emotions associated with their bodies. These women went through experiences that were oftentimes incredibly hard (and in some cases, traumatic) in order to become and be mothers. In being conscious of how these experiences felt, what the experiences meant to them, and how the experiences affected their performances of leadership, these women were able to take the first step towards enacting more empowered leadership. For example, the pregnancy exhaustion Jill experienced led her to set up a space in her business for pregnant women to rest, and a casually unsupportive comment from her Director led Lauren to set up her own business.

“ I was being asked if I can take half a day instead of 2 half hours instead to do pick up at the end of the day... umm because that would be more convenient. That would be easier to manage. My children are going to be on the side of the road, so no.

Lauren

“ I used to sleep on the back seat of my car and I just wish we had a sick bay or somewhere that I could just go and lie down for an hour. I could have done the whole day but I just really needed a sleep. I cannot be the only person that this has happened to at work.

Jill



Step two: resistance

This was about acknowledging the representations, characteristics, work patterns, and assumptions surrounding leadership that were causing or compounding their embodied labours and channelling these into resistance. For example, Sophie described her experience within the male dominated banking industry, where “you don’t cry at work, you wear a jacket on your back”. She was asked by her CEO to re-interview for her job during a restructure, which was an involuntary ‘pull’ to be present and performing. She had recently been through an emergency caesarean, and described how she was “about to have a nervous breakdown” and was “still wearing sanitary pads” (an embodied experience that was unavoidable). This experience became a ‘push’ for her to refuse and resign.

“ If you think that my big priority right now is pandering to you and your pathetic restructure and getting me to put a CV in and come in to interview with the board for my, for a job, you can take a hike.

Sophie

Step three: reformation (re-birth)

This was about channelling their embodied experiences into reforming (or re-birthing) the leadership norms. This occurred through their greater connections to themselves and what was important to them, greater role-modelling of authentically vulnerable leadership, and more explicitly bringing their embodied experiences into their leadership (as opposed to trying to hide them). For example, Joanne shared an image of her representing her company at a traditionally male-dominated event, and noted how there were “a lot of men in suits”. In the image, she is holding her young daughter while her son is in her “puku down there”, and she describes “the energy, that joy” from changing the norms of leadership within that context.

Embodied possibilities

This research reveals how attention to bodies, and embodied experiences, has the potential to unleash more purposeful and impactful forms of leadership (and ultimately, better outcomes for women and organisations). These possibilities emerge through new meanings to leadership, vulnerability and connection, and leadership with others.

New meanings to ‘leadership’

The experiences of these mothers open up new, more inclusive, meanings to leadership in two ways.

Firstly, their experiences challenge us to examine normalised leadership behaviours, historical assumptions that underpin those behaviours, and the work patterns and systems that reinforce them (i.e. what gets rewarded and recognised as ‘leadership’ in organisations and society). Explicit conversations about these behaviours, as well as allyship and support, are critical to counter what

“ They hadn’t had an event where there were kids, and you could tell that people were so excited to see kids there, and the energy, that joy. I just really liked that moment, knowing that this can change.

Joanne

“ One of the young women in our team said to me “it was seeing you in action that inspired me to imagine a life for myself where I can be a mother and have a career at the same time”. So not only are we lifting our children up, but also the people around us.

Charlotte

Their experiences challenge us to examine normalised leadership behaviours, historical assumptions that underpin those behaviours, and the work patterns and systems that reinforce them.

“ I thought it was important that other people saw I was a mother of young children. So that it was more normal and that other people wouldn’t be so afraid to also show that it was part of their lives.

Sabrina

these women describe as “the stories in my head” they experience as a result of masculine and childless leadership norms.

Secondly, all the women who participated in this research positioned themselves in varying ways as role models on how to parent and lead. Role-modelling of motherhood and leadership, in all its varying ways, gives different examples of how leadership can be done and opens up other possibilities for new meanings and new inclusions to leadership. These performances iteratively, and ultimately, change the norms of leadership.

Vulnerability and connection

For a long time, mainstream perspectives of leadership (e.g. transformational, charismatic, and authentic leadership) have promoted ‘authentic’, purposeful, and values-driven approaches to ‘unlocking’ organisational goals. However, the research in this report highlights how rhetorical these ‘important’ aspirations are when embodied vulnerabilities (and their associated threats of marginalisation) are not recognised within leadership. However, when we pay attention to the performances, experiences, and emotions associated with our bodies, and the insights that come from this, we have greater capacity to recognise our mutual humanity, focus on what matters, and harness our energies in more productive ways⁵. The women in this research revealed these possibilities when they recognised their embodied experiences, had a greater sense of what was important to them, and had an enhanced ability to connect with people.

Leadership *with* others

Through the experiences of these women, an alternative possibility for leadership emerged. That is, leadership as a process of embodied connection *with* people, through relationships, communities, and networks, rather than *over* or *on* people. This type of leadership was predicated on these women connecting to, or owning, their vulnerabilities and being supported to do so. For example, Charmaine described this when she shared an image of her six months pregnant, with her young daughter seated in the front row, and leading a whakaaturanga (presentation) in a way she described as “speaking on behalf of the people hosting”. The possibility is for leaders to engage in connections *with* themselves and others, in order to solve complex challenges to which there are no easy answers, and for which a variety of perspectives are needed.

⁵ Summarised from Sinclair (2013). A material dean. *Leadership*, 9(3), 436–443. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013485859>

“ I think it’s just that idea that everyone’s going through so many battles and, as a leader, you have to take all that on board and figure out ways to work through those things with people. Because really it’s about you enabling each member of your team to do their best job. So if you have that approach to things, you’re more likely to be able to let everybody around you flourish.

Carey

“ [She] gave me a stronger sense of who I was, and understanding where I came from, to know where I was going in life.

Vanessa



“ He [her CEO] approached me saying ‘I know you just had a child a few months ago, but would you want to come and work with us? You know, we can make it work for you, it can be flexible, it can be part-time, you can bring your child, like whatever works for you.’

Charmaine

What next

With support from the University of Auckland's Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CIE) and Uniservices, three pathways have been developed to support organisations in advancing their leadership and gender equity goals through a research-backed approach. These pathways would be delivered by Dr Amanda Sterling and/or associates (if needed).

Engage and inspire

The first pathway involves a presentation of the research and a facilitated conversation around its implications. In this, organisations – and the senior leaders within them – are invited to engage in a conversation about the terrain of existing leadership and gender research, theories of leadership that open up greater possibilities for diversity and inclusion, and how vulnerability and connection can be enacted as sources of leadership strength. This is an opportunity to expand your knowledge on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and to be inspired about new meanings and possibilities for definitions, demonstrations, and developments of leadership.

Measure and map

The second pathway is about understanding the impact of your current leadership inclusion initiatives and providing a road map for improving the recruitment, retention and representation of women. This approach is backed by research into the success factors for existing initiatives (e.g. flexible/part-time work and leadership development programmes) and proven methodologies for assessing leadership capability, as well as this world-first research recognising embodied experiences within leadership. The output includes a written report and presentation to your leadership team, which maps out what is going to make the most difference for your organisation and the women within it.

Develop and deliver

The third pathway involves empowering ALL your leadership (men and women) with the self-awareness and practical skills to recognise their embodied experiences, enact resistance by disidentifying with leadership norms, and reform leadership in more vulnerable and connected ways. This draws on contemporary leadership research and practical experience in developing leadership capability. It can be delivered through either leadership development programmes (full programmes or stand-alone modules) or leadership coaching (1:1 and group).

This research reveals how explicitly recognising, and actively supporting, embodied experiences within leadership could lead to better outcomes for women, as well as the organisations that employ them. The possibility is for leaders to engage in greater connections with themselves and others, in order to solve complex challenges to which there are no easy answers, and for which a variety of perspectives are needed.

Concluding comments

This research invites organisations, and the senior leaders within them, to consider how embodied experiences act to exclude or include women in leadership. The lack of women progressing to leadership has historically been attributed to a lack of confidence, competence, or commitment to achieving and enacting those roles.

However, until we account for the embodied experiences of women in leadership, and the vulnerabilities associated with these experiences, we are unlikely to see a significant shift in the quantity and quality of women in leadership positions. While not all women will become mothers, many do, and their inability to reconcile embodied experiences with leadership remains problematic.

The opportunity here is for organisations to talk about, acknowledge, and support embodied experiences within leadership, and to build capabilities for vulnerability and connection. This has implications not just for mothers, but also for anyone else experiencing their bodies in ways that don't fit within current leadership moulds. For example, it includes women going through menopause, and those who are LGBTQ+, neurodivergent, or otherwise ethnically or culturally diverse.

This is about continually exploring, recognising, and legitimising the diversity of leadership experiences that organisations need to survive and thrive. The experiences of the mothers who participated in this research are 're-birthing new life to leadership' by revealing the ways in which this could be done and the power of doing so.

If you are interested in discussing the insights and findings from this research, or want to discuss advancing your leadership and gender equity goals through a research-backed approach, please get in touch with Dr Amanda Sterling

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or amanda@dramandasterling.com



Appendices: summary of findings

| Definition | How this appears | The power dynamic | Example words/phrases |
|--|------------------------------|--|--|
| ‘Pulls’ <i>Involuntary force towards enactments of disembodied leadership norms</i> | To be present and performing | An involuntary action to look and behave like a ‘leader’ | “I didn’t want to”, “I wasn’t allowed to”, “I had to”, “you got to keep performing, you gotta keep turning up”, “the work doesn’t stop”, “this massive pressure”, “expectation”, “you have to separate work and family”, “you have to be strong”, “you’ve got to be present”, “I had to tough it out” |
| | To hide embodied motherhood | The desire to conceal embodied motherhood to protect themselves from judgement, discomfort, and potential discrimination | “bracing yourself”, “didn’t feel accommodating”, “nobody gave a shit”, “you know this feeling?”, “felt like a huge deal”, “never liked the visibility”, “on display”, “ashamed”, “uncomfortable”, “embarrassed”, “judged”, “irrelevance”, “intimate”, “irrelevance at work”, “ashamed”, “shamed”, “stressed”, “effort”, “tiring”, “awkwardness”, “anxious mess”, “bawled my eyes out”, “effort”, “horrible”, “scary”, “you can’t lead if you’re vulnerable but terrified”, “represents weakness”, “fear”, “mask” |
| | To prove their value | A need to demonstrate leadership legitimacy and to rationalise the allowances necessary to embody motherhood | “less of the leader”, “less of a leader”, “lacking”, “consistency”, “lost”, “undermining”, “prove my value”, “overcompensating”, “need to demonstrate my worth”, “you have to prove”, “needing to demonstrate value”, “accruing credit”, “expectation I have on myself”, “not meeting my own expectations”, “proving it for the sake of proving it”, “I don’t feel I’ve earned it”, “Imposter syndrome” |
| ‘Performances’ <i>Rhetorical acts drawing on mainstream norms of leadership to legitimise alternative and ‘other’ positions</i> | Authenticity | A way to legitimise their exposed vulnerability as an embodied mother | <i>Synonyms of ‘authenticity’:</i> “authentic”, “authentic person”, “true to myself”, “relatable”, “approachable”, “unlock”, “unlocking their best selves”, “whole selves”, “bring my whole self to work”, “their best job”, “your entire self”, “true self” <i>The importance of this:</i> “a better way to lead”, “enabling”, “the magic formula”, “high-trust environment”, “I’m a massive fan”, “that idea”, “I think that is really important”, “what I aspire to” |
| | Role-modelling | A felt responsibility to demonstrate an alternative form of leadership to the masculine/ disembodied norms | “other people saw”, “they see me doing”, “impression”, “show”, “showing”, “show up”, “what I’m showing up with”, “setting a good example”, “demonstrate”, “demonstrating”, “cognisant”, “version of myself”, “everyone else sees”, “intentionality to what I’m bringing to people”, “what it looks like”, “perceive”, “how I present myself”, “fly the flag”, “carry the mantle” |
| ‘Pushes’ <i>An energetic counterforce moving away from leadership norms</i> | To challenge | Spikes of energetic embodied resistance to encroachments on vulnerability | “fuck off”, “fuck other people”, “take it or leave it”, “I don’t care”, “I’m not afraid”, “I’m bringing my child”, “accept who I am”, “take a hike”, “these are the terms”, “you will have to”, “make that work”, “holding my boundaries”, “licence to be freer”, “the following terms”, “if you want me”, “don’t mess with me”, “keep challenging”, “clear about what I need”, “boundaries”, “challenge my own narrative”, “that is not ok with me” |
| | To be empowered | Enacting bodies as leadership presence and power | “more of me”, “empowering”, “empowered”, “own it”, “owning everything”, “the depth”, “confidence”, “where our leadership power is”, “powerful leader”, “a powerful thing”, “stronger leader”, “push for that more”, “more mana, more respect” |
| | To connect | Connecting to embodied selves and embodied others | “connect”, “resonate”, “talk on a level”, “person to person talking”, “contribute”, “family”, “sense of who I was”, “integrate”, “community”, “village”, “approachable”, “normal person”, “honest”, “identify”, “identified with”, “connection and humanness around people’s lives”, “some real connection”, “being a mother teaches you how to connect better” |