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Kristin Demetrious  
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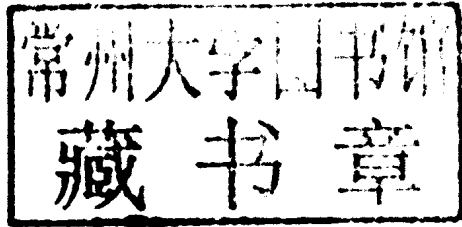
# Gender and Public Relations

Critical perspectives on voice,  
image and identity

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**Christine: For my god-daughter, Luisa Miller, whose radical creativity challenges and inspires me.**

**Kristin: For the students, and for the practitioners, trying to make sense of things.**

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# Foreword

*Lana F. Rakow*

What does gender mean to public relations, and what does public relations mean to gender? We have long needed the attention this volume brings to the question, and I am thankful that editors Christine Daymon and Kristin Demetrious have taken up the challenge. The answer, it turns out, is more interesting and important than most scholars of either gender or public relations have understood. The editors and contributors open up new insights into the taken-for-granted approaches to gender and public relations that have guided feminist scholars in the field of public relations and that have eluded the attention of other scholars for at least the last forty years. Indeed, even more recent interest in turning the gaze of critical theory to public relations has tended to slight the importance of the question when challenging traditional relationships of power through an understanding of the practice and consequences of public relations.

Written by feminist scholars (or those with sympathies to feminist scholarship) with organizational experiences inside and outside of public relations, this volume's significance to both feminist scholarship and critical public relations scholarship derives from its anti-essentialist approaches to both gender and organizations. First, the authors understand that the widespread existence and role of organizations should not be taken as a fact of contemporary life but rather as an issue to be recognized and challenged. Organizations, and more specifically large bureaucratic public and private institutions, generate the fundamental physical and cognitive structures that orchestrate and accomplish daily life, from the production and flow of human traffic to food and energy and consumer goods. These organizations are both the result of systems of meanings and the generators of meaning through routinized and legitimated practices involving deployment of human and environmental resources. In short, organizations are in the business of the organization of meaning. The definition Daymon and Demetrious use to define public relations sets the stage for this important shift in understanding organizations. They define public relations as 'a communicative activity used by organizations to intervene socially in and between competing discourses in order to facilitate a favourable position

within a globalized context'. This non-essentialist approach to public relations and organizations is a first step in their project to understand and disrupt power relations in society, power relations in which gender is a critical linchpin. Contributions that call our attention to alternative organizational forms that challenge the social order, from women's activist groups to labour unions, reveal the shortcomings of the dominant approach to public relations (which assumes corporate public relations as the standard of practice), as well as highlight the difficulty of creating inclusive spaces for the participation of all groups, even where challenges to relations of power are at stake.

Second, the book leads to a greater understanding of how gender, too, is an organized system of meaning. As Christine Daymon and Kristin Demetrious make clear in their introductory chapter, gender is not a pre-given and binary characteristic of human biology and psychology, even if understood to be somehow inflected by race, class, and other contemporary categories of difference. They instead see it as a 'fluid and negotiated process performed through every social interaction'. Chapters that demonstrate how sexuality, race and ethnicity, and class are not additions to an understanding of how gender differences are constructed and carried out but integral to them should challenge our deepest assumptions about gender. Chapters that point to competing discourses about gender should remind us that gender is not only about the self but about a system of differentiation used to make sense of the worlds in which we live – from division of mental, physical, and emotional labour in the home, workplace, and civil society to assumptions about the function and capabilities of all that is living and inanimate.

With these challenges to notions of gender and organizations in mind, we are able to see how the focus of much prior feminist attention on the role of women in public relations has been limiting and inadequate to understanding the full range of associations between gender and public relations. As chapters in this volume point out, even where the role of women in public relations is considered, it is more complex than is often assumed. In addition to re-examining the role of women in the traditional arenas of public relations, we need to look at how women have used public relations, if defined as strategies of persuasion, through their own organizations and collective action. Finally, we need to look beyond women in public relations and women's use of public relations to see the importance of considering women as objects of public relations and gender as an outcome of organizational discourse.

Therefore, this volume rightly urges us to attend to public relations rather than either to embrace it as a lucrative career option or to dismiss it as a tool of oppression utilized by powerful institutions. The editors show us a third way. This volume might be seen, unexpectedly, as having a 'rescue mission': that is, the editors and contributors are not advocating for an abandonment or the overthrow of public relations practices, nor a reform

from within that will make public relations a better career for women, but rather foresee the possibility of rescuing its practices so that they may be put at the service of more liberatory and socially transformative purposes. This is a tantalizing consideration. We should all be thankful that we now have this volume to start us on the path to that transformation.

# Acknowledgements

The act of compiling a book, especially an edited book, is always done in concert with others. In this, we would like to thank our panel of insightful reviewers for their willingness and enthusiasm to read and comment on the many contributions (and various iterations) submitted for inclusion in this collection. Their input – especially that of Beth Pengelly – has been invaluable in shaping our own ideas and arguments, as well as those of our co-authors. We also thank Elizabeth Braithwaite for editorial support.

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# **Introduction: Gender and public relations**

## **Making meaning, challenging assumptions**

*Christine Daymon and Kristin Demetrious*

The idea of compiling an edited collection around gender and public relations was seeded at the 'Radical Public Relations: Alternative Visions and Future Directions' roundtable held at the University of Stirling in 2008. This meeting of international scholars had a shared purpose, paradigmatically, to challenge dominant positivist understandings of public relations and open new research agendas by paying attention to the social and political contexts in which public relations is situated. Thematically, the roundtable focused on the cultural effects and critical power relations in and between public relations and society. This book furthers these aims by exploring gender within and through public relations in order to generate new strands of knowledge that will challenge the status quo. As such, the intention is to open new avenues of research and new ways of thinking about public relations.

Over the last fifty years or so, gender research employing critical feminist approaches has theorized women's experiences and elevated the status of this knowledge to destabilize, and at times rupture, hegemonic beliefs that have invisibly systemized inequality and exploitation. With the social positioning of women (and other under-represented groups) as a core objective of feminist research, it has sought to question the sometimes dormant, underlying values and assumptions that have invisibly served to invest research. In rejecting narrow absolutism and reductionist science, and in seeking to be open to multiple, sometimes competing, approaches to understanding (Reinharz and Davidman 1992: 3–4), research inspired by feminism has contributed to the development of new knowledge and social practices, as well as the nourishment of ideals. In recent times, these have become embedded to a large extent in contemporary social life. Thus the impact of feminist activity, with its focus on gender, has been profound, but at times confronting, and subject to intense resistance and disapproval. For example, early criticism of feminism was based on arguments about the extent to which feminist actions helped or hindered women and whether or not they rotted the social fabric as a consequence. Later criticisms emerged from within the ranks of feminists themselves who objected to the way that only some women benefited from feminism-inspired social change: for example,

the protection of women's sexual rights helped empower white, heterosexual women, but it didn't help sexual or racial minorities; also, improving access to work helped child-free or wealthy women, but not those with large families. At times, feminist activities were subject to considerable entrenched hegemonic resistance, such as in the early 1980s when there was a move in the USA to introduce an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Although the legislation was designed to elevate the legal status of women, it was women themselves who spearheaded a campaign to oppose the legislation. The success of the campaign driven by Phyllis Schlafly was described by the *New York Times* as a 'public relations coup' (Warner 2006):

When it was approved by the House and Senate and sent to the states for ratification in March 1972, its success seemed assured. Thirty state legislatures ratified the amendment within a year. Presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter all lent their support. Yet in 1982 the ERA died, just a few states short of ratification. By then, it had become linked in the public mind with military conscription for 18-year-old girls, co-ed bathrooms and homosexual rights.

(Warner 2006)

Opposition campaigners claimed that sexual 'equality' would lead to a blurring of the differences between the sexes and, among other things, remove women's right to stay at home, to be dependent and to devote themselves to raising a family. In contrast, feminists in support of the ERA (including the prominent legal activist Catharine A. MacKinnon) argued that, rather than eradicating gender differentiation in favour of gender sameness, for them equality meant eradicating gender *hierarchy*:

We stand for an end to enforced subordination, limited options, and social powerlessness – on the basis of sex among other things ... Our issue is not the gender difference but *the difference gender makes*, the *social meaning* imposed upon our bodies – what it means to be a woman or a man is a social process and, as such, is subject to change. Feminists do not seek sameness with men. We more criticize what men have made of themselves and the world that we, too, inhabit. We do not seek dominance over men. To us it is a male notion that power means someone must dominate. We seek a transformation in the terms and conditions of power itself.

(MacKinnon 1987: 22–23)

The ERA example is of interest because it reveals through the arguments and counter-arguments of the opposing and supporting groups (including their public relations activities) that the fundamental social rights of women have been hard fought, and the process of winning has required the careful unpicking of profoundly entwined discourses, laced, among other things,



with differing notions of morality, femininity, race and class. This constructed a powerful hegemonic acceptance in North American society that rendered the social and personal wellbeing benefits of the feminist movement not only invisible but dangerous to and threatening of the social order. It also demonstrates that a deeper understanding of the communicative process around gender is central to the renegotiation of the social and strategic role of public relations – a central aim of this book.

Despite the setbacks, criticism of and resistance to the feminist movement over the years, there is no doubt that gendered power relations were disrupted by feminist activity, including gender research from a feminist lens, with real social consequences that impacted on how both women and men lived and worked. Yet social change that leads to reform is never a closed narrative, nor linear. Fluid and dynamic, it is interrelated to, and responds with, changing contexts, cultures and milieux through which new combinations of thought and action emerge, generating new dilemmas and new challenges. As such, reform is perpetually in motion and must be subject to revision, because at times, despite appearances, thought that was once subject to interrogation may merely return to much the same social space from whence it came. While public relations as an occupation in modernity has been socially and culturally situated alongside the broad thrust of the feminist movement (such as the second wave of feminism which saw women's status in areas like pay and conditions upgraded), nonetheless there remain many hidden hegemonic assumptions around gender in public relations which continue to be both unquestioned and unchallenged. In this introductory chapter, we identify some of these issues and questions, and note how they are addressed by the various authors in this book.

We define public relations as a communicative activity used by organizations to intervene socially in and between competing discourses in order to facilitate a favourable position within a globalized context. This definition highlights the political role of public relations in seeking to influence the meaning making process purposefully. As an occupational domain, the public relations industry exerts significant influence and power in society through the production of meaning, the commoditization of discourse and the creation of consent (Demetrious 2008; Weaver, Motion and Roper 2006). Primarily, it operates on behalf of corporate entities and governments, although it can also be employed by third-sector organizations, such as not-for-profits and ephemeral organizations and individuals.

However, its role and relationship to society is not one that is understood particularly well, either within its own ranks or externally (Demetrious 2013; Coombs and Holladay 2007). Designed to intervene in the decision making process, public relations is intrinsically political and sits uneasily with many of the central tenets of democratic society. Thus, when statements manufactured by public relations circulate invisibly through the public sphere, working through a growing repertoire of media, modes and texts,