

A person is walking away from the viewer down a brightly lit hallway. The hallway is illuminated by a warm, orange glow, and there are colorful light trails in shades of blue, purple, and yellow. The person is a small silhouette in the distance, walking towards a bright light at the end of the hallway.

VACANCY!
Women's
special place
in hell is NOT
REQUIRED

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It was **Madeleine Albright** who used the powerfully galvanising phrase “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women.” She was ostensibly supporting Hillary Clinton’s US presidential candidacy.

However, what she did was to reinforce the Queen Bee myth. By priming the Queen Bee myth, she inadvertently sent the message that women weren’t suitable for leadership roles.

She was attempting to promote the value of women in leadership, so how did she backfire by invoking the spectre of the Queen Bee?

The **Queen Bee syndrome** describes the ‘bitch who stings other women if her power is threatened’. The term denigrates senior women for not supporting other women. Women who are successful, but who are not deemed to be sufficiently warm, attract this **approbation**. Margaret Thatcher, Anna Wintour, and Peta Credlin have all been denigrated this way.

Women deserve a place – but it's not a special place in hell

In “**Queen Bees: the sting isn’t where you think it is**”, I wrote about US research that debunked the myth. Across a 20 year **study** of Fortune 1000 companies, more women were appointed to key leadership roles where the CEO was a woman. Concerted action on the part of female board members also increased the number of female senior leaders. That’s a clear history of female senior leaders who helped other women get leadership roles.

Similar results come from a recently released large **study** of 8.3 million organisations distributed across 5,600 Brazilian municipalities. Where the mayor was a woman, re-elected for her second term, there was a significant increase in senior female leaders. Economist **Arvate** and his research team conclude that rather than a ‘Queen Bee’ phenomenon, there is in fact a ‘Regal Leader’ effect. When women leaders have the discretion to choose their senior teams, they choose significantly more women than men do.

The researchers claim that this is the first research to avoid endogeneity bias. It establishes a causal relationship between women in positions of power, and outcomes related to gender. They conclude that the Queen Bee effect is non-existent or cancelled

out by the role-modelling effects of women in senior roles. Previous research is not causal, and highly flawed. Or not research at all, merely single examples, such as Margaret Thatcher.

The effect is strongest when women are in their second term, highlighting the **time it takes** for leaders to assert their choices.



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Why is the Queen Bee meme so persistent?

Two reasons.

Firstly, it plays into **stereotypes** about the kinds of roles that women 'should' play. For those who don't believe that women are good leadership material, this is evidence for why not. **Bias confirmed.**

Secondly, it accesses unconscious stereotypes that hold that women should be warm while men are competent. Many of us, including myself, unconsciously hold these associations. That women must be **warm** and always support other women is part of that stereotype. **Unconscious bias activated.** By accepting the Queen Bee syndrome without challenge, the stereotype holds.

The issue is not that some senior women are 'cold', 'tough', or 'like men'. That's what some successful male leaders are like; they don't attract the same kind of approbation.

The issue is that women aren't **allowed to be** 'cold', 'tough', and 'like men'. They are not womanly if they are.

Oh for a time when men can be warm and women competent: the best leaders, male or female, are both **warm AND competent**, but that's a pretty tall order.

Let's debug our thinking about women leaders. The Queen Bee Syndrome is a myth. There is no plague of stings. We don't need that space in hell. (Hell knows, there are plenty of others who are more deserving of a reservation.)

Repeat after me, 'Women in senior decision making roles are more likely to support the careers of other women.'

What you can do:

1. Look for, and share, evidence of women supporting each other.
2. Accept diversity in leadership – women might not be warm, men might be – and still be effective.
3. Support, cheer for, and tell everyone about women who trail blaze.

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About Dr Karen Morley

Karen works with executives and human resource leaders to help their leaders realise their potential, to make leadership more inclusive, and to help grow the coaching capability of their leaders. Karen brings to her leadership development work broad experiences, top professional credentials, and a variety of perspectives. She's a registered Psychologist with a desire to align what leaders do with the available evidence for what works. Besides being an Executive Coach and leadership developer, she's held executive roles in government and higher education, and her approach is informed by her experience in these roles.



The most effective leaders use everyone's talents to the full, and Karen's programs promote inclusive leadership strategies and practices. She promotes gender balanced leadership and helps women to succeed in senior organisational roles.

Along the way, she completed a doctorate in leadership, published *Gender Balanced Leadership: An Executive Guide*, and has written numerous other working and white papers. She is an Honorary Fellow of the University of Melbourne.



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