Article

"It's a Man Who Runs the Show": How Women Middle-Managers Experience Their Professional Position, Opportunities, and Barriers

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Abstract

The ratio of women in top-management positions is improving very slowly, even in countries scoring high on gender equality like Iceland. Despite over three decades of research having documented the barriers faced by women seeking top-management positions, understanding is still lacking as to why women are not overcoming these barriers at a greater rate. This study presents the lived experiences of women in middle-management positions in some of the largest organizations in Iceland, aiming to understand how the women experience the barriers and opportunities they face. It is important to give voice to these women as they are the ones who could be in line for top-management positions. Interviews with 11 women were analyzed and interpreted according to phenomenological methodology, revealing four themes. Findings show that the women experience top management as a network that is closed to them. Top-management jobs appear tailored for men and would require the women to take on unbearable responsibilities. They experience their hard work and diligence as unappreciated. Finally, they compare and contrast themselves with the stereotype of the male executive and blame themselves for not fitting the role. Thus, they feel pressured to adapt to the masculine gender role if they are to stand a chance of a top-management position. Not fitting this role further undermines their self-confidence and ambition, rendering them less likely to seek advancement.

All over the globe, women are still in the minority when it comes to seats on corporate boards and executive-level positions (Auster & Prasad, 2016; Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Eagly & Carli, 2007). In the United States, women hold the chief executive officer (CEO) position in 23 of the Fortune 500 companies, or only 4.6% (Catalyst, 2015), and while in Iceland the numbers are somewhat more encouraging, women hold executive positions in only 21.9% of companies (Statistics Iceland, 2016a), and in the country's largest companies, women hold only 9.2% of the CEO positions (Statistics Iceland, 2016b). In Iceland, as elsewhere, women's representation in middle-management positions has improved more than in top management, with 30% of Icelandic companies reporting an equal ratio of men and women in middle-management but in 41% of companies, men are still in the majority of middle-management positions (Rafnsdóttir, Axelsdóttir, Didriksdóttir, & Einarsdóttir, 2015).

The study focuses on the position of women in the Icelandic labor market and what makes Iceland an interesting choice is its role as a Nordic welfare state at the forefront of implementing gender equality and women's rights for more than half a century. Well-known milestones occurred in 1975 when the women of Iceland took a day off from work, in 1980 when Iceland was the first country in the world to democratically elect a woman president, and in 2009 when the first woman became Prime Minister of the country and the ratio of men and women in government was equal for the first time (Centre for Gender Equality in Iceland, 2012). Since then, Iceland has risen to the top of many measures of gender equality, such as the "Best country to be a woman" on the World Economic Forum's measurement of the Global Gender Gap for many years in a row (Schwab et al., 2016), and for best advancing gender equity through parental leave policies according to the Parental Leave Equality Index (Castro-Garcia & Pazos-Moran, 2016).

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Despite these strides, and women's labor force participation rate of 78.2%, which is the highest in the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD; Ministry of Welfare, 2015), Icelandic women's ascent to top-level positions has proven very slow (Loftsdottir & Bjornsdottir, 2015), as the above statistics on the Icelandic labor market attest. It is important to understand why and for what reason Icelandic women are still not making it to the top at the same rate as men. Therefore, it is essential to examine what the barriers are and the reality facing women in middle-management positions. The focus is on women who hold middle-management positions because they are the ones who are in the pipeline, poised to take on executive-level positions. How they experience their options can play a significant role in whether they seek or accept advancement to top-level positions. Surveys identifying barriers to advancement lack the insights into how women in middle-management experience these barriers, and research focusing on the small number of women who have broken through the glass ceiling and attained executive positions lacks the viewpoint of the majority—those who tried and failed or never tried at all.

The objective of this study is to examine the lived experiences of women in middle-management positions in medium and large companies in Iceland to obtain insight into how they feel about their position, how satisfied they are, whether they desire to advance to top-management positions, why they are not there yet, and what is holding them back. Moreover, the objective is to explore the opportunities and barriers that these women middle-managers face with regard to professional development. The research question is as follows:

> **Research Question:** How do women middle-managers experience the possibility of getting into top-management positions and what is holding them back from reaching the top?

We first review the literature on the barriers that women face on their way up the career ladder, often described through metaphors such as the glass ceiling, the glass cliff, the leaky pipeline, and the labyrinth. Second, we discuss the impact of stereotypes and the second-generation gender bias, which have been suggested as explanations for the position of women. Third, we focus on how women feel about themselves and their careers, and review the literature on gender differences in self-confidence and perspectives on promotion. Finally, we review recommendations for women to overcome barriers to professional advancement.

Upwardly Mobile Women and the Barriers They Face

As we review the literature on research seeking explanations for the slow increase in the ratio of women in top management, the complexity and elusiveness of contributing factors in the environment appear evident in the use of metaphors to describe the obstacles (Blickenstaff, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Foley, Kidder, & Powell, 2002; Haslam & Ryan, 2008). The impact of gender stereotypes and second-generation gender bias is seen in both different expectations and assessment of performance (Blair-Loy, 2001; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; Yee et al., 2015), and differences are also seen in self-confidence and career expectations for men and women (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Gino, Wilmuth, & Brooks, 2015). Although limited research of these issues exists in Iceland, studies point to similar barriers; there appears to be a double standard when it comes to the advancement of men and women within the academia, with women advancing more slowly than men (Heijstra, Bjarnason, & Rafnsdóttir, 2015), and further, that although the work of men and women in academia is comparable, the women carry more of the family care responsibilities than the men (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013).

Metaphors Relating to Obstacles

As women attempted to advance beyond middle-management positions during the 1960s and 1970s, they came up against an invisible, insurmountable barrier that kept them from attaining higher positions, or what was termed the *glass ceiling* (Foley et al., 2002; Northouse, 2013). This barrier prevents women and minority groups from reaching the top corporate ranks and takes account of neither their abilities nor performance record. Cracks have now begun to appear in the glass ceiling and women are making it into top positions, although as yet only in small numbers (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Furthermore, the women who have broken through the cracks are more likely than men to be appointed to positions of leadership in companies facing hard times (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). This precarious situation has been termed the *glass cliff*, as it entails higher risk, stress levels, and rates of failure than taking charge of a successful enterprise. Distressed companies furthermore attract attention, and the women in charge may be subjected to undeserved criticism and made responsible for a foundering business before they have had a chance to prove themselves; if they fail to turn the company around, they are more harshly judged than men would be in similar situations (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010).

The lack of women in top leadership positions has been explained using the metaphor of a *pipeline* that staff move through up the organizational hierarchy. According to the pipeline theory, correction of the gender ratio will happen in due time as women and men gain entry-level positions in equal numbers and thus are expected to reach top-management positions in equal numbers. Research in Iceland has shown that the majority of respondents in top leadership positions hold this view (Rafnsdóttir & Thorvaldsdottir, 2012). This is despite studies showing that the change is not happening at the rate that it should if the theory held (Helfat,

Harris, & Wolfson, 2006; Mariani, 2008). The pipeline appears to leak, and at its upper limits, an increasing number of women have been flushed out for one reason or another; hence the term *leaky pipeline* (Blickenstaff, 2005). Research in the Icelandic academia has found that the pipeline is leaking and fewer women reach the position of full professor (Heijstra et al., 2015).

To emphasize that women are still faced with an interplay of diverse and complex factors which may work against them on their journey toward top-management positions, the metaphor of the *labyrinth* was coined (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Finding their way through a labyrinth requires women's constant awareness and resilience, focus on their professional development, as well as the ability to understand the nature of the challenges that lie ahead of them. Those can be either foreseen or unexpected as for example prejudice against women, stereotypes, views on management styles and credibility, or family responsibilities (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The Impact of Stereotypes and Second-Generation Gender Bias

Despite increased gender equality, both in the home and the workplace, traditional values and conservative perceptions of gender roles tend to prevail (Eagly, 1987). So although increasing numbers of women hold managerial positions, they are nevertheless expected to assume the main responsibility for the family and to take on more duties than men in similar positions (Blair-Loy, 2001; Rafnsdóttir & Thorvaldsdottir, 2012). The gender hierarchy relegates women to a lower status than men (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000), and gender stereotypes and the underlying gender bias are formed as discussed below.

The *stereotype* metaphor was first used in 1922 by Walter Lippman to explain how individuals use stereotyping to simplify and order their reality so as to understand it better (Albu, Albu, Girbina, & Sandu, 2011). It has also been defined as a generally accepted public attitude toward certain social groups and the characteristics of individuals within those groups (Judd & Park, 1993).

Gender-based stereotypes can be traced to the origin of gender division on the labor market and to historically assigned gender roles (Eagly, 1987), such as child-caring duties, interests, gender differences in choice of studies and careers, gender bias in organizational assessment methods, social formation, prejudices, and the prevailing gender-segregation in the labor market (Olafsdottir & Rognvaldsdottir, 2015). The impact of all those factors is seen in discrimination, the undervaluing of women's work, and the gender pay gap (Blau & Kahn, 2007; Hausmann, 2015; Olafsdottir & Rognvaldsdottir, 2015). Thus, a woman who is interested in taking on a managerial position might lose this interest after experiencing negative attitudes toward women in such positions (Gino et al., 2015).

Some convergence of the social roles of men and women is evident in women's increased attainment of leadership positions (Eagly et al., 2000). Schein's (2007) review of research on gender stereotypes over three decades shows that women no longer equate the stereotype of the manager with that of a man; however, men show little change in their view of the stereotype of the manager, and what is more, young men are likely to perceive a man as a better fit than a woman for the role of manager. Women are also more likely to choose a manager with a more feminine style of management and the same applies to staff who have been employed under a woman's management or work in a company where a higher proportion managers are women (Stoker, Van der Velde, & Lammers, 2012). However, both male and female interviewees in a study of the Icelandic financial sector perceive the position of the broker as stereotypically male and risk-seeking, whereas the back office functions are characterized by feminine caution (Loftsdottir & Bjornsdottir, 2015).

Stereotypes can also pose a threat and cause stress among women in situations where they are traditionally considered less competent than men. This can affect women's performance; they believe they are less competent than men and thus the stereotype is upheld (Gneezy, Niederle, & Rustichini, 2003). Stereotypes are resilient and even though women work more paid hours than before and men more unpaid hours, men are still seen as the main providers and the maternal role of women is emphasized (Maume, 2016). The stereotype of the male manager prevails (Schein, 2007) and people describe a good manager in terms of qualities which normally characterize men (Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Ryan et al., 2011; Schein, Muller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). Moreover, individuals taking on gender-stereotype-incongruent roles, as for example a woman holding an executive position, meet with significantly harsher criticism if they make mistakes than would be the case with a person in a gender-congruent position (Brescoll et al., 2010).

Women tend to be uncomfortable with attracting attention to their own merit, as it would go against the feminine stereotype (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). Women who flaunt their achievements risk being regarded as arrogant, whereas such behavior is regarded as a normal masculine trait (Hansen, 2009; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Yee et al., 2015). For men, there is a positive correlation between being successful and being regarded as agreeable; for women, however, the correlation is negative. Thus, there is an underlying gender bias; women may be disadvantaged in the workplace by their gender and miss out on opportunities, promotions, or salary increases (Yee et al., 2015).

Gender bias explains the underlying inequality which remains after obvious gender-based discrimination has been eradicated (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; O'Neill, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2015). Ibarra et al. (2013) considered it appropriate to refer to *second-generation gender bias* as the main reason why women still occupy a minority of leadership positions. Subconscious and unintentional

barriers, as seen in day-to-day communication, work procedures, structures, organizational culture, and patterns of interaction, combine to generate and maintain corporate inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). This reduces women's opportunities while increasing opportunities for men (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Barriers are rarely visible, but women sense the bias and feel it working against them (Yee et al., 2015). They have experienced gender-based discrimination in the form of lower pay, under appreciation of their capabilities, having to make a larger contribution to enjoy the same success as men, and not being shown the same respect (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Women believe their gender reduces opportunities for professional development; they are seldom consulted in connection with major decision making, and because of their gender, they are not offered the most attractive types of work, promotions, or pay increases (Yee et al., 2015). The result is reflected in the shortage of women in top positions, thus upholding the status quo and strengthening the stereotypical image of men being better suited than women for the highest managerial positions, perpetuating the gender bias (Ibarra et al., 2013). Companies that force women who seek promotion into the same mold as men may as a consequence lose valuable human resources when women choose to take another path toward increased professional responsibilities than the only one their company appears to be able to offer (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

The second-generation gender bias is further manifest in men's performance generally being exaggerated in comparison with that of women, especially in male-dominated environments (Yee et al., 2015). This may explain why men are appointed or promoted because they are considered promising, whereas women's success is more likely to be based on past performance. They have to prove themselves first. Thus, women are less likely to actively seek promotion because they tend to expect to be assessed on merit and that the best qualified person will be promoted (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Sealy, 2010). It has been demonstrated, however, that the best qualified person is not always promoted; if this were the case, one could expect more equal gender proportions in the highest corporate echelons (Sealy, 2010).

Self-Confidence and Lower Expectations

Research suggests that the uneven gender ratio in top management can also be traced to differences in how men and women perceive their abilities, and in particular, women's lack of self-confidence (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Institute of Leadership & Management, 2011; O'Neill et al., 2015; Rafnsdóttir et al., 2015). According to Bénabou and Tirole (2002), self-confidence comprises belief in one's own merit and spurs individuals toward challenges and the accomplishment of their goals.

Women rate self-confidence among the key prerequisites for gaining top-level positions; yet, they experience lack of self-confidence, and 67% say they need support to build enough self-confidence to feel that they can become senior-level executives (KPMG, 2015). This lack of self-confidence affects many aspects of their career, for example, the willingness to seek promotion.

Women report lower expectations for their career than men (Gino et al., 2015; Institute of Leadership & Management, 2011). There is, nevertheless, no shortage of women with enough ambition to seek top-level positions (KPMG, 2015). However, women have less faith in their own abilities and lower self-confidence, which makes them more cautious and hesitant to grab opportunities to climb the corporate ladder (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2011; KPMG, 2015). They have the will and desire to take charge, but low self-confidence holds them back.

Women who work in a male-dominated competitive environment are even less self-confident and feel they lack support and encouragement (Gneezy et al., 2003). Crampton and Mishra (1999) demonstrated that when both genders are presented with the same tasks, women anticipate less success than men and attribute a positive result to luck rather than their own abilities. Conversely, men accredit success to their own competence (Yee et al., 2015).

As the work environment is gendered, women's self-confidence is assessed using a model based on masculine archetypes. The stereotype of the leader as male persists, evident when a description of a woman is requested, this widely diverges from the specifications for an effective executive, which have much more in common with masculine characteristics (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989). Women receive less praise for positive results and are more likely to be blamed for things that go wrong; this inadequate recognition undermines women's self-confidence and they become less likely to seek promotions (Yee et al., 2015).

Divergent Development and How the Genders View Their Own Career

At the beginning of people's career, the gender ratio is fairly equal, as are promotion expectations, but as time passes, the genders' career development diverges (Davidson & Burke, 2011; O'Neill, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2008). Male employees are more likely to follow a traditional linear pattern to top-level positions, whereas the career development of female employees deviates and may even take the form of horizontal transfers (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Both men and women worry about stress, workload, and the family-work balance, but women are more likely to report that a combination of stress and workload is the main reason they do not seek the highest corporate positions (Yee et al., 2015).

There are indications that men and women have divergent values and objectives; men are more alert to professional opportunities, whereas women emphasize workplace relationships and appear to emphasize professional promotion to

a lesser extent than men do (Davidson & Burke, 2011). Women aim for success in both the personal and professional areas of life (O'Neill et al., 2008). Furthermore, when women are faced with promotion or increased responsibilities at work, they feel tension because of the sacrifices they must make when one particular goal in life demands more energy and attention than others. Compared with men, therefore, women are likely to see promotion as a less desirable goal (Gino et al., 2015).

The Middle-Manager Position and Women's Path to the Top

Women in middle-management positions feel that they do not receive the same opportunities for promotions and that they are less appreciated than their male colleagues (Cooper Jackson, 2001). Despite their ambitions and education, they rarely attain the same level or equal pay as the men (Yee et al., 2015). Male managers are more likely to have higher salaries, have advanced faster, hold higher positions, enjoy greater job security, experience less stress, and are less likely to have experienced gender-based prejudice or discrimination than women (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women must apply themselves twice as hard as men to attain the same success (Hansen, 2009), and during economic downturns, women middle-managers are more likely to be laid off than men in the same positions (Oakley, 2000).

To find the way up through the glass ceiling, researchers have looked to the women who have broken through and attained top leadership positions. These leaders report similar experiences of barriers, such as having to contend with stereotypes, feeling excluded from Old Boys' Clubs, or not fitting the male executive role and management style, having to prove themselves more than the male colleagues, and being taken less seriously (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Holton & Dent, 2016), and they seem to have to some extent adapted to and accepted the male-centered view of the top manager.

The suggestions offered to overcome these barriers also seem aimed at enhancing masculine agentic characteristics, such as being more proactive and strategic in networking (Holton & Dent, 2016), to "invite themselves into network activities such as golf" (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010, p. 570), to create opportunities for themselves and be ready to jump on opportunities that present themselves (Holton & Dent, 2016). Having the support of others, bosses, colleagues, and family is key (Holton & Dent, 2016), but the guidelines do not outline how to establish the support, except to, for example, hire a housekeeper (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010). Finally, the guidelines emphasize the value of feminine characteristics (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010) and having a clear career plan (Holton & Dent, 2016), which women have at the outset of their careers but seems to erode as they adjust to the organizational environment (O'Neill et al., 2008). The guidelines do not address how to avoid this erosion.

These guidelines are in line with much of the popular literature aimed at working women, encouraging them to speak up, lean in, make demands, or be more like men. This line of advice is what Kolb (2009) has criticized as the tendency to correct the gender bias by "fixing the women," meaning, if women could behave more like men then they would conform better to the stereotype of the top manager and thus be able to overcome the barriers. However, what must be kept in mind is that the women who have attained leadership positions through the years tend not to be typical women; they tend to possess more masculine characteristics or have made a conscious decision to adapt their behavior to the masculine stereotype (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010).

This review of the literature indicates that women in middle-management positions face multiple barriers to seeking top-level positions. The objective of this study is to gain further understanding of why the decades of initiatives to close the gender gap have not yet enabled more women to reach the top. As stated above, Iceland is at the forefront of eradicating gender barriers and ensuring gender equality. It is therefore important to examine the phenomenon from the perspective and lived experience of women middle-managers in Iceland.

Method

The aim of the research was to shed light upon the experiences of women in middle-manager positions and to examine whether they desire to get into top-management positions, what hindrances they need to overcome to reach to the top, and what is holding them back? Phenomenology is well suited to enabling the researcher to examine daily life experiences in detail and discover how people interpret those (deMarrais, 2004).

Eleven semistructured (in-depth) interviews were conducted with women in the position of middle-managers in companies with between 50 and 1,100 employees. In-depth interviews give the interviewees opportunities to tell their story and discuss their own ideas or opinions in their own words (Esterberg, 2002; Orbe, 1998). The interviewees were selected by convenience sampling, using the researcher's network of contacts in the selection process. The women were sent introductory letters regarding the research by email. All except one chose to meet the researcher in their own workplace. The duration of the interviews was 55 to 100 min. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed into themes in accordance with phenomenological methodology.

The women are aged 32 to 46, and all but one have completed basic university studies and a few have a master's degree. Eight are employed in the private sector, and thereof four in the pharmaceutical sector, two in a bank, one in a technical company, one in transportation. Three work in the public sector, and thereof two in transportation and one in education. Most of them have advanced to their position within their current place of work. The women have been middle-managers from 1 to 12 years. All of them are mothers

and most of them have a spouse. Their names have been altered as well as the names of the companies where they work to ensure full confidentiality.

The women were asked about, for example, their main strengths, what motivates them in their jobs, and how important career development is for them. Moreover, they were asked what success means for them, what their career goals are, what their experience is of networking, and about their thoughts about their company's efforts to establish gender equality in management positions. Finally, they were asked about their views on why there are still way fewer women in top-management positions and what they believe needs to be done to change this.

The interviews were analyzed in accordance with the phenomenological methodology, and the three stages of analysis were used: description, integration, and interpretation (Lanigan, 1988). The first stage is *description* during which the interview and its transcription take place. At this stage, the interviewer must take care to maintain impartiality (Orbe, 1998). All the transcripts are equally valuable as phenomenological methodology examines lived experience and takes into consideration the uniqueness of every person. The second stage is *reduction*, where the theme analysis begins. Here, the transcripts are read repeatedly until the themes begin to reveal themselves. It may be said that the data begin to speak to the researcher and the themes that are the core of the phenomenon emerge from the data (Nelson, 1989). The main objective in this stage is to decide which parts of the description (transcript) are important and which are not. The objective is not to create consensus about an experience, as in other traditional methods; rather, it is to obtain the essence of the lived experience for each person (Orbe, 1998). The third stage is *interpretation*, during which initial themes are further condensed and interpreted to reveal their core meaning. In the second and third stages, it is important to have the research question be the guiding light to ensure that the emerging themes are responding to the research question. The objective of interpretation is to discover the meaning of the data which is not obvious in the first stages of the research (Orbe, 1998). Here, it is important to find a connection between themes and the objective is to find meaning and purpose that was not discovered in previous stages. This process begins by reexamining important themes and seeing how the themes are interconnected. One important phrase can appear that is interconnected with all other important themes that emerged out of the interviewees' descriptions of their lived experience. In this stage, we need to establish a strong relationship with specific questions and important themes. We are not asking about correct solutions but meaning and purpose that can be understood in depth (Orbe, 1998).

Findings

Four themes, illustrating the women middle-managers' experiences, were generated by the data. The first is "This is a kind of Old Boys' Club"/network; the second theme is "Jobs created by men for men"; the third is ". . . work is not just some place to hang out"; and the fourth theme is "It is a disadvantage not to fit into the superior's stereotyped image."

"This Is a Kind of Old Boys' Club"/Network

The women perceive unequal gender opportunities within the companies, and Dögg, who works for a large transportation company, says, "Oh, this is such a phallic company . . . where no woman is a managing director or area manager and never has been." Some of them do their best to adjust to a male-oriented culture. This, however, causes them anxiety and stress, as Fjóla, who is the only woman in the team of managers at a transportation company, explains,

> if I hesitated all the time . . . they would not want to include me . . . you just have to take . . . quick calls and . . . it takes time to summon the courage to do that.

Some of the women perceive that they have to prove themselves to gain promotions. Elín, who also works for a transportation company, says, "if this were to be offered to me it would be a kind of acknowledgment that I had been doing things well and that people trusted me in this job." Birna, who works for a pharmaceutical company, says, "someone should encourage you . . . somehow offer this to you, make things easier for you." They want their superior's acknowledgment that they have the qualities required for higher positions, and they don't invite themselves into the club. Fjóla says, "I would not apply if my superior said . . . 'I would rather have you there or over here.'" Thus, Fjóla's professional development is to a great extent the responsibility of her superior. Many of them feel it is an obstacle to their career if their superior does not support them, neither trusts them nor points the opportunities out to them.

The women who work under the direction of a female executive, or where the gender balance is more even, experience a higher degree of equality compared with those employed in companies managed by a male executive, or where men are a majority of the workforce. Hildur works in a long-established organization in the education sector where she says that the gender ratio is very uneven, especially at higher ranking levels where women are losing out, especially younger women. She is dissatisfied when she feels that she cannot compete with her male colleagues when opportunities arise, because of her disadvantaged situation. She describes her view as follows:

> . . . it is a kind of Old Boys' Club . . . can work both day and night . . . convenient always to arrange matters in that manner for it brings results . . . because of this, of course, I think some points of view are never heard, nor does this comply with . . . our policies . . . of . . . a more open and democratic . . . handling of the role of groups which . . . cannot work day and night or don't want to . . . this is deeply rooted in the culture and . . . and happens in a subtle manner . . .

Various developments occur when these men join groups of friends outside working hours. Hildur says, "things shift . . . from . . . daily life . . . into the private life." Thus, work shifts to an area from which women are excluded. Women do not belong to the Old Boys' Club and thus lack knowledge of what happens there. Fjóla is often the only woman in higher level meetings and must accept not being addressed, or as she says, ". . . the phrase is always . . . 'what do you say, lads?' . . ." Fjóla tries hard not to cause problems or complain about trivialities; nevertheless, this situation has its effect upon her.

Some of the women feel that the working environment favors men when there is a need for downsizing or restructuring, and others say that during such changes, women tend to be demoted rather than men. They say that this is justified by appealing to feminine values, for example, that women are patient, forgiving, and understanding. Such lack of respect and discrimination breaks down their self-confidence and they feel degraded. Fjóla describes her experiences after being promoted to a position where an office was supposed to accompany the new position:

> . . . I remained in the shared office space . . . no problem, I am just in the shared space and it makes no matter to me . . . then an office becomes available . . . because someone left, so I say, OK, I'll go there then . . . and, the response was, "yes of course," but then another man is hired . . . and I was specifically asked to move out again into the shared space so that he could just move into his office and I was really very offended and . . . hurt, and I just sort of OK . . . for how long . . . the explanation was . . . only for a month or so . . . and I . . . OK always trying not to upset anyone . . . and then . . . time just passed and I ended up staying in the shared office space for another five or six months, the only departmental manager out there . . .

Fjóla is angry and disappointed because she is made to wait and then has to give way to a new male colleague. The discrimination women experience makes them feel insecure, frustrated, and undermines their professional self-confidence. Dögg says in a despondent tone of voice, "the women who make it to the position of a middle-manager have had to fight every inch of the way, whether it's a question of salary, job titles or fringe benefits." Fjóla says of her male colleagues, "both of them have a car . . . I had to . . . fight tooth and nail . . . now it is time you let me have a car as well."

The women agree on the importance of having a network of contacts when it comes to professional development; they say such a network opens up avenues to promotion because positions higher up the ladder are not advertised and therefore hard to go for them without having contacts. Dögg says, "every time a new male managing director appears, he comes from a place where women have no chance of admittance." Many of them have seen how connections help employees scale the career ladder. Jóna, who works for a pharmaceutical company, says,

> of course one has seen people transferred because they are well connected . . . know the right persons. I have . . . not entertained the idea that one should maintain a network of a certain kind in order to get somewhere.

They criticize themselves for not being active enough in building up their network, but at the same time, many of them feel this is not an honest way of operating. They all, however, stress the importance of good personal relationships with their closest colleagues and subordinates, characterized by trust and respect. They make every effort to perform well in their work and they want to advance on the basis of merit rather than connections as many men do.

Jobs Created by Men for Men

Some of the women do not seek jobs that require travel and tough business negotiations because of the nature of the work and the absences involved, on top of all their current responsibilities. They feel that they do not fit into the top manager role, which is in most cases shaped by men and for men. Kristín says, "There are still a lot of men who in the end manage everything . . . it's a man who runs the show . . . and everyone dances to the piper's tune." As she sees it, businesses are fashioned in accordance with men's needs and vision. Birna says,

> I think it would be too much . . . I couldn't do the job or I would have to reduce even further the time spent with the children, which would not have . . . a good effect on the family.

Birna would never consider taking on additional work; she can barely cope with her current workload. The family and work are her priorities.

Fjóla feels it is important to acknowledge and increase awareness of the genders' different opportunities for promotion, and consequently, different methods should be applied depending on whether you are dealing with men or women. When women take on a new job, they need support while they are getting their bearings and gaining confidence in a new environment. Gyða, who recently took on a managerial position in a pharmaceutical company, supports this view; she received a great deal of support from her superior when she took over the job and she says, "it came as a surprise, however, I thought it would be much more demanding." Women in this study don't feel confident enough to seek higher positions; therefore, they need the support and trust of others to take the leap.

All the women declared their interest in accepting managerial roles and gaining power and influence in their work, but although some of them want more power and promotion, they cannot entertain the thought of taking on a position at the highest echelons of their company. Inga, who works in a pharmaceutical company, says, "those two or three top levels in . . . a multinational company are a terribly brutal world." They feel that this is a tough environment, characterized by a fast pace, inequality, and the demand that you sacrifice other

aspects of your life for the job. Fjóla says, ". . . it is . . . very much like being married to your job . . . I want to be able to take care of my family." Most felt that to be able to take on the highest positions in the firm, they would have to sacrifice time with their family. Fjóla says, "you are always on duty, although now I am already on duty most of the time."

The women carry the main responsibility for the home as well as being engaged in a demanding managerial job. Hildur says, "we have to deal with a real problem here . . . the integration of this demanding environment and . . . people's family and personal life." Fjóla says, "I am still mostly responsible for running the home . . . everything just waits for me when I come home . . . we couldn't possibly manage our family if both of us wanted to go all the way." Here, she refers to the fact that she cannot seek any more professional responsibilities, as her husband does, because that would cause problems for the family. Gyða agrees; her husband does not take over more of the domestic duties while she is going through a busy period at work:

> . . . one would have to . . . be able to . . . learn to reduce . . . the demands at home . . . there is always someone who is left out . . . my husband has had demanding periods at work and [I] never . . . wait . . . at home; aren't you going to start making the dinner? . . . if I am having a demanding period at work, I need to take care of everything else as well.

This results in a conflict between work and family and the women feel guilty on both fronts. Birna feels like this:

> . . . when I am at work I really enjoy myself . . . I would be prepared to work every day until six . . . when one comes home and realizes that it is already six o'clock and . . . the children are in bed, you know . . .

Hildur says, "I am also ambitious in other areas of my life, you know, the happiness of our children and our own happiness, you know, the harmony of our family." She says she is aware that she cannot let her job take over everything. Inga has learnt from bitter experience that she needs to prioritize and achieve a balance.

> I myself focus very much on the fact that I only have my children once, I only have my husband once . . . I am not prepared to sacrifice this for work. So I feel that to be able to do well at work I need to have a good family life.

As they see it, they need to sacrifice either professional promotion or family life; they cannot have both. So they are willing to work hard while they are at work but also have time left to be with the family.

"Work Is Not Just Some Place to Hang Out"

The women experience a great deal of responsibility in middle-management jobs. They are ambitious, conscientious, and have a great feeling of responsibility toward the company and its employees. Their goal is to complete all existing tasks meticulously and efficiently. Gyða says, "I try . . . to give . . . always 110% work effort . . . and not . . . look on the workplace as just some place to hang out." Fjóla experiences it thus:

> I want people to be engaged in tasks within their abilities . . . I know that in the end I bear the responsibility for this and sometimes I don't trust myself to let somebody else do what I am responsible for.

Most of the women want to have more time to attend to their subordinates and encourage them.

They take the responsibility for managing human resources very seriously and are keen to ensure that people are shown respect and fairness. Birna says,

> . . . a lot of responsibility, and all kinds of problems arise, so one has to respond in the right way . . . and greater expectation that you always do things correctly. I actually find matters involving personnel the hardest to deal with. . . . takes the most out of one . . .

They measure success not only in numbers but also in the employees' job satisfaction. Jóna says, ". . . that the people working with you are pleased with you as a supervisor; you can't be a successful manager if everything is up in the air and the employees are not content." They assess their job success holistically; it is important to take into account whether the subordinates are satisfied and are given the support they deserve.

Most of the women prefer to make decisions in cooperation with others. An open discussion thus ensures that the best decisions are made, risk taking is kept to a minimum, and the responsibility is shared. Fjóla says,

> . . . I am not the kind of person who . . . just decides on something by myself . . . drive something forward because I just know and believe this to be the only right way to do it . . . I prefer to have other perspectives on the matter, from more angles so that no stone is left unturned.

It is clear that they prefer discussion and cooperation to ensure quality decision making, but at the same time, they have the feeling that their decision-making methods do not chime with those prevalent in top-management circles and it thus does not fit with the stereotype of top-management decision making.

"It Is a Disadvantage Not to Fit Into the Superior's Stereotyped Image"

In the words of some of the interviewees, a certain admiration for the assertiveness, drive, and work procedures among male staff can be discerned. As Fjóla says, "I don't know if the men have, in truth, just become . . . more aggressive and

pushy." The women consider that it is they themselves who must bear the responsibility for the imbalance which is prevalent in most of their workplaces and that men are more efficient, assertive, and better at looking after their own interests. Dögg says,

> . . . he has a car, for example. I don't have one and this has not bothered me. He managed somehow to negotiate this and push it through, and he is good at negotiating on his own behalf; that I know, and I am positive that it's because of this that he is on a higher salary than I am . . . and as long as that is the case, everyone negotiating for himself/herself it comes down to the question of how proficient you are as a negotiator . . .

Many of the women believe that men have more confidence and stand up for themselves more. They are less afraid to voice their opinions and make decisions, as Fjóla describes it:

> . . . they are often unafraid to make decisions and are less likely to be thinking about what others may think . . . just cold hard decisions . . . not thinking about what this person or that might feel or the effect it might have on this or that . . . if this were five women I think . . . that it might go a little slower . . .

This admiration for the characteristics of men seems to be more evident in women who work in a male-dominated environment and are trying to fit in and distance themselves from the female stereotype. These women are measuring themselves against the stereotype of a high-level manager and find that they don't fit this image, which creates a certain insecurity. They all choose to manage with a soft hand and equality but feel that this is a weakness on their own behalf because their management style is more time-consuming.

Some of the women are employed in companies which are rapidly expanding and the work environment is very fast-paced and stressful. Inga says, "there is, in a way, a lot of competition I, of course, just put on a sort of a mask . . . I just put on my coat before I go into work." They try to screw up their courage to fit into an environment which is masculine and inflexible, to meet the criteria for the stereotypically efficient and successful executive. The women find that the time for careful consideration and decision making is often insufficient and decisions are made in a cold, hurried manner. Those women who work in such an environment seem to be more insecure and have less self-confidence than those who work under a female superior. They have doubts about their own abilities, lack support, and try to follow procedures and criteria which to them are unnatural. Elín's experience demonstrates this: ". . . I find it more difficult to get myself into the gear of using ruthlessness to get what I want . . ." Elín is trying to screw up her courage to use those methods like her colleagues even though she does not believe that they are the most appropriate. Many experience a fear of causing disappointment, of not fulfilling expectations; Fjóla says, "an awful lot of perfectionism in us . . . we just want to do things

right . . . and we find this terribly uncomfortable . . . to be told off for something." She continues to explain the differences between the genders:

> my response . . . to mistakes is . . . completely different from that of the men in here and I feel that if men make mistakes here, they somehow always manage to find a logical explanation by saying it was not their fault.

Although she expresses admiration for her male colleagues, she is at the same time aware that they are evading the responsibility for their actions.

Most of the women were surprised at how well they had succeeded in the jobs they had been "lucky" enough, in their opinion, to get or be offered. Like Dögg, who was offered the job of managing a department almost exclusively manned by males, "I was expecting some negative response from them like, what is some girl doing here . . . I was extremely well received and that was unexpected." Many of the women firmly believe that jobs in the upper levels of the organization are too demanding and they would be unable to cope with them, as with Gyða: "still, it surprised me. I thought that it would be much more demanding."

Dóra, who works for a technical company, explains this well when she talks about a challenge she took on, which raised her self-confidence. She says, "I was so ready to . . . pick all the negative bits [up] beforehand which would be barriers, but then I realized that the others were no better than me." Dögg says,

> when I was younger I didn't have much self-confidence but now I've managed to build that up . . . through the jobs that I have held and the opportunities I have been given to take on more demanding projects and seen that I could handle them.

Most of the women agree that their self-confidence has grown by taking on varying jobs and succeeding in them; it has shown them how strong they actually are. They have knocked down the barriers which they were so afraid of at the start. Many agreed that the barriers to their progress were they themselves, and their lack of self-confidence. They all agreed on the importance of feedback and praise for jobs well done and also that their self-confidence was largely built up on the basis of the feedback from their environment.

Discussion

These results show that the women we interviewed are conscious of their position as women in a masculine environment. They experience being outside the circle of power, the Old Boys' Club, and that if they wish to be included, they will have to prove that they are equal or better than their male coworkers. They dislike methods like self-promotion under the guise of strengthening their network. They feel that a fast pace and hard tactics are not necessarily methods that ensure the quality of decision making, and yet they

blame themselves for being overly diligent, for being too slow, and for lacking self-confidence. They carry the majority of the responsibility for the family and therefore feel that they are unable to take on any further responsibility on the job. As a result, most of them can't see themselves seeking top-management positions.

The theme "This is a kind of Old Boys' Club"/network shows that important work-related communication and relationships occur among the men outside the workplace and working hours, as discovered by Oakley (2000) and Tonge (2008). The women need to be able to participate in those influential networks to gain access to more powerful positions, however, their experience reflects the conclusion of Loftsdottir and Bjornsdottir (2015) on Old Boys' Clubs which are "locked, barred and bolted" to women (p. 238).

Most of the women feel it is dishonest to build relationships with people for the purpose of personal gain and prefer them to develop naturally with people they have come across in work and social life. They are ambitious on all fronts and it is important to them to succeed on the basis of their own merit, which could also be the reason for their weak emphasis on networks. All of the women feel performance at work should be the decisive factor and that the best qualified individual should get the job. This is in agreement with results by Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) and Sealy (2010) which showed that, unfortunately, it is not always the best qualified person who is selected and it is likely that the gender balance in top management would be more equal if this were the case.

The theme "Jobs created by men for men" shows that work procedures which exalt fast decision making, being present at work at all times, and the willingness to negotiate on one's own behalf, in addition to addressing the women on the management team as males, are felt to celebrate masculinity but marginalize feminine traits. Women experience gender discrimination in their workplaces, such as disparate fringe benefits and salaries, but also in relationships and discourse, work procedures, and organizational structures. This corresponds to the conclusions of Ibarra et al. (2013) regarding gender bias which is strong, but not clearly visible. The women also agreed that it was difficult to eradicate the problem for the very reason that it is so intangible and so closely interwoven with the environment, and that they really remain stuck under the glass ceiling.

Despite having taken on the demanding positions of middle-managers, the women also have considerable duties to fulfill in their private life which echoes the conclusions of Broadbridge and Hearn (2008). This double workload reduces the likelihood that they wish to tackle a job that is even more demanding than their current position, requiring them to make sacrifices in their private lives as a result of increased responsibilities (Crampton & Mishra, 1999; Yee et al., 2015). This confirms the results of the McKinsey Report (Yee et al., 2015); women's lives are a combination of work and private life and they wish to succeed in both those areas. There is no dividing line between the two as the

structure of organizations often assumes (O'Neill et al., 2008). The women regard their promotions critically which is to a certain extent in tune with the conclusions of Mainiero and Sullivan (2005). Most of the women cite stress and workload as the reasons why they do not wish to seek promotion; those results are in step with the McKinsey report (Yee et al., 2015). One might say, therefore, that the *pipeline* is blocked; those women will not flow into the highest executive level.

The theme ". . . work is not just some place to hang out" shows that as middle-managers, the women experience significant responsibilities and they feel strongly accountable toward the company and their employees. The women also emphasize that important decisions should be taken in cooperation with others, thus minimizing risk and delegating responsibility. This approach to decision making, however, does not conform to the methods generally practiced in top-level management, which call for more work, time, and workload, leading to stress which the women identify, together with workload, as the main reason why they do not seek top-level positions in organizations (Yee et al., 2015). Their first priority is to produce good work; however, as indicated by Loftsdottir and Bjornsdottir (2015), it is not considered sufficient merely to keep working, it is also necessary to "push ahead" (p. 243).

The theme "It is a disadvantage not to fit into the superior's stereotyped image" shows that the women tend to embrace the myth that men are better suited for managerial positions and they, therefore, place greater value on masculine than feminine qualities, as has been identified as a general attitude in previous research (Crampton & Mishra, 1999; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Schein et al., 1996). Just as society trusts men better than equally qualified women to fill a traditional managerial position and believes that women are less capable than men (Eagly & Carli, 2007), the interviewees admire men's energy and daring at the helm and consequently blame themselves for caution and perfectionism. They worry about making mistakes and causing disappointment; in this connection, one might keep in mind conclusions by Brescoll et al. (2010), which showed that women in managerial positions were judged considerably more harshly for mistakes than men were.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that the women lack self-confidence and that those women who work in a male-dominated environment feel they lack support and encouragement (Gneezy et al., 2003). Instead of criticizing the male-dominated system, which expects that employees extol their achievements, act tough, and demand salary increases, they criticize themselves for being too slow and cautious.

These women face a glass ceiling and a blocked pipeline, but most of all, they are fighting their way through a labyrinth (Carli & Eagly, 2016) that is erected and maintained through social and organizational structures that have been created by men and for men, gender roles that still emphasize the superiority of male characteristics, and women's own (at

least partial) acceptance of these roles and structures. Our findings thus support previous studies, such as Baumgartner and Schneider (2010), that women middle-managers have to adapt to the masculine way of managing by making sacrifices and by changing their management style to overcome the barriers on the way to higher positions.

More importantly, though, our findings suggest that the implications of encouraging and expecting women to adopt more masculine ways of managing, such as, being more assertive, adopting faster and more decisive decision-making styles, promoting themselves more aggressively, and networking more strategically, may in fact serve to undermine their self-confidence, making them less likely to seek top-management positions. A further consequence may be less diverse and poorer quality decision making and management in their organizations.

As Baumgartner and Schneider (2010) have suggested, to eliminate the gender inequality, women have to change to adapt to the stereotype of masculine top manager. However, if women middle-managers will not change to a masculine way of managing, the barriers will remain. Kolb (2009) has criticized studies that suggest that women have to be fixed to eliminate the gender inequality and points out that these women who have reached the top are not typical, but are the ones who have determined to adopt the masculine characteristics. The results of this study shed light on the barriers that these women need to overcome and the reasons why Icelandic women's ascent to top-level positions has been slow despite Iceland's position at the top of many measures of gender equality. The women in this study have made a lot of sacrifices in an attempt to adapt to the masculine management culture and reached far. But to eliminate the barriers that women middle-managers experience and establish gender equality in the workplace, the masculine way of managing has to give way and both female and male characteristics need to be equally accepted.

Conclusion

Women's position on the labor market has been extensively studied and the results have revealed diverse barriers facing women who seek top-management positions. There has also been considerable emphasis on demonstrating how successful women have reached their goals and what can be learnt from them. However, limited research exists with regard to women middle-managers and their professional experiences; thus, this study constitutes a significant contribution, throwing light upon the lived experiences of 11 women in the position of middle-managers in Icelandic companies, their status and potential, as well as barriers to professional development.

The limitation of the research centers on the fact that it deals with only 11 middle-managers. Consequently, no attempt is being made to generalize or maintain that all women middle-managers in Iceland have exactly the same experiences and attitudes as the women who participated in this study.

Nevertheless, important and rich data were obtained on these women's experiences and perspectives; the research revealed that considerable barriers still hinder the career progress of women in Icelandic organizations, and the only way that these women see around these barriers is to change themselves to become more like men. Although they accept these masculine characteristics and methods as part of the culture, they cannot abide applying them themselves. Thus, they feel that they are not fit to take on top-level positions.

Those conclusions raise several questions, such as what women will have to do to change or influence the glass ceiling, stereotypes, bias, and masculine organizational culture. Further research is needed into the social and cultural aspects which uphold stereotypes, gender bias, and other elements which contribute to the inequality. It would be interesting, furthermore, to submit the same questions to men to gain a comparison between male and female experiences and perspectives. Finally, the results from this study could be used as the basis for designing a quantitative study to yield generalizable data that could be explored across several industries with a significantly large sample size.

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