Women's Careers in Management: Confronted Problems and Approved Practices

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Abstract

Gender equality has not been achieved anywhere in the world. One persistent, global challenge is that women struggle to advance to management positions in the workplace. This chapter focuses on the area of management as it relates to women's careers. Well-known metaphors that highlight the complexity of the problems women face in their careers are presented. Additionally, two examples of practices that can be helpful to the advancement of women's careers, namely, all-women management development programmes and work-family arrangements are discussed. It is concluded that although there has been progress around women's moving in managerial roles in many places over the years, much still needs to be done now and in the future to overcome the barriers women face in achieving their career goals.

Keywords: *Barrier, Career, Equality, Management, Metaphor, Organisation, Woman*

Introduction

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2021) showed that gender equality has not been achieved anywhere in the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased barriers to building inclusive societies and economies. In particular, the gender gap in labour force participation, to the benefit of men, has widened since the outbreak of the Pandemic. In the Report it is argued that closing the overall gender gap will now take about 135 years; before the Pandemic, it was about 100 years.

Several studies, as well as real-life evidence, have revealed that it is important to advance women's participation in the labour market. Drawing on the business case argument, for society, organisations, and individuals to prosper and succeed economically, full use of women's competencies, know-how, and talents are needed (Hearn et al., 2015; The Global Gender Gap, 2021). As Powell and Butterfield (2015) stated, it is unwise for organisations to constrain people's career opportunities on the basis of features that are not relevant to the job.

Moreover, from an ethical viewpoint, ending discrimination against women is a human right and essential for a sustainable future (The Sustainable Development Goals, 2015). According to the principle of social justice (Greenberg, 1990), it is not fair for women to be treated as a group and have their access to management roles limited due to their membership in this group. The aim of social justice is the equal participation of all groups in a community and to create an inclusive society that strengthens people's agency and their ability to live a meaningful life, and to pursue a career that they value (Robeyns, 2005). Thus, agency among women and opportunities to pursue careers in management are needed to advance women's participation in work life. Finally, it is important for an organisation's reputation that it considers candidates fairly and recruits the best talent (Powell and Butterfield, 2015).

In this chapter, the focus is on women's careers in the area of management. First, based on previous literature, an overview of some metaphors is provided that highlight and help to understand the complexity of the problems around women advancing in the area of management. Second, drawing mainly from the research results, two examples of practices are presented that can support women in having a career in management. The first example deals with all-women management skills development and looks at the perspective of an individual woman and her competency development. The second example relates to work-family arrangements and an organisation's views on the topic.

Metaphors for the Problems Women Face Regarding Managerial Careers

In the literature, women's problems in advancing in managerial careers are often described using various metaphors. The metaphors of 'glass ceiling', 'glass labyrinth', and 'glass cliff' are the most well-known (Morrison et al., 1987; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Klenke, 2011; Ryan and Haslam, 2005, 2007; Powell and Butterfield, 2015; Carli and Eagly, 2016; Lämsä, 2022) and are therefore discussed here.

The metaphor of the *Glass Ceiling* refers to the 'unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements' (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Central characteristics of this phenomenon are that inequality cannot be explained by any job-related feature of the employee (e.g. motivation, education, etc.) other than gender and that the Glass Ceiling effect increases as employees ascend through the workplace hierarchy (Cotter et al., 2001). The Glass Ceiling metaphor describes the invisible barriers to women's (and other minorities') upward movement along the career ladder (Morrison et al., 1987; Klenke, 2011). This barrier is seen as a marker of discrimination, between men who advance in the workplace and women who do not.

According to the Theory of Gendered Organisations, Organisational Processes, practices and structures are gendered in a way that produces a distinction between

female and male, feminine and masculine (Acker, 1990). Drawing on this Theory, it can be observed that the Glass Ceiling that women face in their careers is produced in many ways, such as materially (e.g. work division, work contracts, recruitment announcements, etc.), through symbols and images (e.g. language use, ideology, dress code, etc.), and through patterns of interaction between women and men (e.g. possibility of speaking in meetings, dominance in speaking, etc.). Due to the complex and invisible nature of the barriers, it is often difficult to see, understand, and tackle them. Instead, the barriers tend to be taken as self-evident 'truths', and they are often considered by members of the organisation as part of everyday practices and routines, without any critical reflection on and questioning of them.

Powell and Butterfield (2015) analysed the literature on the Glass Ceiling from the 1990s. They said that explanations for the phenomenon have become more varied and multifaceted, yet the basic nature and understanding of the phenomenon have stayed the same. Powell and Butterfield stressed that in addition to organisational interventions, society-level initiatives are also needed to overcome the Glass Ceiling effect. According to Powell and Butterfield, the success of women in being promoted in their careers also depends on a government's commitment to decisions that take into account, and aim to counteract, biases against women. So, normative regulation, particularly in the form of legislation, is a form of pressure that can advance gender equality in society in general, and which is also beneficial to women's careers. Moreover, Powell and Butterfield asserted that explanations concerning the Glass Ceiling have moved towards a view of social systems such as organisations as gendered instead of individualistic and person-focused, which was the common perception in the past.

The *Glass Labyrinth* metaphor accepts that career barriers for women exist, but suggests that ways to overcome the barriers also exist. So, instead of representing an absolute barrier, this metaphor argues that women's advancement in a career is possible, but that their career trajectories are more complicated and slower than men's (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Carli and Eagly, 2016). Men are accelerated quickly through the organisational hierarchy – as described in the literature, they are on the 'glass escalator' (Maume, 1999). Eagly and Carli (2007) stated that the advantage of the Glass Labyrinth metaphor is that it takes into consideration the complexity of the problems that women experience in their careers. Moreover, the metaphor has a positive tone.

Discussing her experiences as an Associate Dean and a Member of the Executive Team at a business school and often the only woman in a team, Mavin (2009) stressed that for a woman to go through the Glass Labyrinth, persistence, ingenuity, intelligent analysis of the puzzles and challenges related to management, and leadership work are required. Lämsä and Tiensuu (2002), who studied business media texts about women in leadership positions, reported that one identity constructed in the texts is that of 'a woman of cunning', referring to a woman who wants to be successful in a career. To achieve her aims, the woman can deliberately leverage features regarded as traditionally

feminine (e.g. not criticising strongly, hiding her use of direct power, smiling, being polite, being helpful, etc.) as an indirect behavioural means of influencing others, especially men in positions of power. As a result, the men act according to the will of the woman.

Glass and Cook (2016) argued in their study that a problem that makes women's career trajectories slower than men's is gender stereotypes. One stereotype is that women, to be able to advance in a career, experiences pressure to prove to herself and others that she is more competent at handling demanding tasks and performing successfully than her male colleagues. A similar finding has also been reported in other studies (Lämsä and Hiillos, 2008; Lämsä and Savela, 2014). Furthermore, women's careers slow down because women tend to end up in jobs involving people-related 'soft' tasks (e.g. human resources management) rather than positions at the core of business and production, which are regarded as the areas where the 'hard' tasks are. It is more difficult to reach a senior position from a 'soft' role than from a 'hard' role.

According to the metaphor of the *Glass Cliff*, women are more likely than men to find themselves in managerial positions that are linked to a greater risk of failure (Ryan and Haslam, 2005). In their study, Ryan and Haslam found evidence of the glass cliff effect. These researchers showed that when a financial downturn occurred in the stock market, firms that recruited a woman as manager faced poor performance in the months before the recruitment. On the other hand, it was reported in the same study that when the situation was stable in the stock market, companies that recruited a woman performed positively.

Because there are fewer women in management positions than men, women are easily perceived as an exception to the managerial norm, which stresses masculinity. According to Bruckmüller et al. (2014), much research demonstrates that people who are regarded as atypical in a given group are more visible and likely to experience criticism. So, women in management positions tend to experience higher pressure and stricter appraisal than their male counterparts. Moreover, the Glass Cliff has been connected to the gendered nature of management. Women get positive appraisals when the responsibilities of their management roles are defined in traditionally feminine terms. However, when the roles are defined in traditionally masculine terms (e.g. as requiring assertiveness and rationality), women's effectiveness is considered to be lower than that of men (Ryan and Haslam, 2005).

Glass and Cook (2016) studied the Glass Cliff effect on the careers of women who had worked as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a Fortune 500 company. The researchers found clear evidence of the effect on women's careers. The study showed that women, compared to men in a similar position, tend to be recruited to high-risk positions and have little support to accomplish their career aims. However, Glass and Cook also found, quite contrary to the Glass Cliff phenomenon, that women themselves aspired to high-risk positions because such positions provide them with visibility and can lead to them developing a reputation as a transformational leaders and change

agents in a high-risk situation. Glass and Cook noted that women's tendency to aspire to high-risk positions is a result of women's underrepresentation in management and the resultant bias.

Examples of Practices to Advance Women's Careers

Given the problematic effects on women's careers of the phenomena illustrated by the metaphors of the Glass Ceiling, Glass Labyrinth and Glass Cliff, practices to address the problems are necessary. Based on this research, two examples of practices were selected that might assist in tackling the problems. The practices, which are introduced and discussed, are as follows:

- All-women management development programmes
- Work-family arrangements

All-women Management Development Programmes

One significant way to support women's participation in work life and career advancement is to educate women (Nussbaum, 2011). Nussbaum put forward that women's development via various kinds of educational activities is crucial and positive because education is fundamental to a successful life. Being educated contributes to women's ability to have an influence on decision-making in work as well as in community and family, and life in general (Nussbaum, 2001). Education for women has the potential to mitigate the many challenges that women face in their careers, such as discrimination, having to take jobs they are overqualified for, and so on. Education enhances imagination and develops the ability to think critically about issues from many viewpoints a critical competency in contemporary work life (Lämsä et al., 2020). The competencies gained from education are an individual's property and they cannot be taken away even if a woman changes career.

An important way to support women's career advancement via education is to support management development (Lämsä and Hiillos, 2008; Lämsä and Savela, 2014, 2019). Management development refers to a planned process to expand a person's capacity to be successful in a managerial role (McCauley and Van Velsor, 2004; Baruch and Peiperl, 2000). A qualification from a management development programme can help women to break the Glass Ceiling and move successfully through the Glass Labyrinth (Lämsä and Savela, 2014, 2019). However, one problem with management development programmes is that even though they are targeted at both women and men, the majority of the participants in them tend to be men (Simpson, 2006; Ibeh et al., 2008; Kelan and Dunkley Jones, 2010; Lämsä and Savela, 2014). So, the human resources development practices of the employing organisations that send participants to the programmes, and/or the recruitment processes of management education institutions, which provide the

development, may be gendered in a way that favours men. To overcome the problem, it is suggested that women participate in programmes specifically targeted at women (Ibeh et al., 2008; Lämsä and Hiillos, 2008; Lämsä and Savela, 2014, 2019). In recent years, such programmes have become more common; for example, some of the top business schools offer them.

Previous studies have shown that all-women management development programmes can have a positive effect on women's competencies and careers (Vinnicombe and Singh, 2002; Debebe, 2011; Lämsä and Savela, 2014, 2019). A crucial point is that the programmes should not rely on the idea that women have deficiencies as managers, but instead should emphasise the development of their strengths (Vinnicombe and Singh, 2002). Moreover, the programmes, which include not only traditional classroom training but also personal guidance in the form of mentoring, coaching, and counselling are effective (Vinnicombe and Singh, 2002; Betz, 2006; Lämsä and Savela, 2014).

A study by Lämsä and Savela (2014) showed that all-women management development programmes improve women's competencies in planning and doing business successfully. Through the programmes, women's mastery of management language improves and the language becomes more familiar to them. The women mentioned that after completing the programme it was easier to build a clear managerial identity and be more convincing in a managerial role. Lämsä and Savela's findings lend support to the argument that an all-women context is a secure and supportive context for women's development in the area of management. The women mentioned that in this context they were able to share and discuss experiences freely, and discuss ideas and solutions related to management responsibilities, identity, and problems. All this contributed, particularly, to the advancement the women's intrapersonal and leadership skills. The women revealed that in mixed-gender groups men tend to dominate communication and that this constrains women's opportunities and willingness to speak freely in public. A study by Debebe (2011) made a similar finding, revealing that a crucial advantage of an all-women development programme is that the participants' feelings of recognition and belonging increase. Furthermore, the all-women programme was experienced by the participating women as an educational environment where experiences and perceptions could be shared freely and in an atmosphere of trust.

Work-family Arrangements

In many societies, women work long hours both at home and work. Despite the challenges of managing both work and family, many women aim to advance to management positions in their careers. This means they are being asked to balance competing demands (Greenhaus and Kossek, 2014; Wayne et al., 2017). Although family responsibilities are now more commonly shared between parents, there is still a strong preference for the

woman to be the primary caregiver in the family (Heikkinen et al., 2014; Heikkinen and Lämsä, 2017; Pučėtaitė et al., 2020).

Drawing on work-family conflict theory, it can be said that for women work and family roles can be incompatible (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Acting in one role is in conflict with and hinders success in another role. According to this Theory, the time and energy used at home mean that the woman does not have as much time and energy to invest in work and vice versa. Moreover, behavioural expectations at home and work differ. At home, the woman needs to be caring and nurturing, while in a management role these characteristics are not valued (Gherardi and Murgia, 2014). These conflicting demands tend to result in negative outcomes for women such as overload, stress, trade-offs and career exits, and the demands can have undesired impacts on the welfare of the women's families.

Previous studies have shown that when it comes to juggling work and family roles, work-family arrangements implemented by an employing organisation can support women to manage and balance any conflict (Heikkinen et al., 2021). Work-family arrangements at an organisational level mean that the organisation has in place various work-family initiatives that make it easier to combine work and family life (Butts et al., 2013). The initiatives may include flexible work hours, teleworking, leave policies, childcare services, the possibility of working part-time, arranging meetings at convenient times, and ensuring a smooth return to work from parental leave.

Some organisations have taken work-family support to a still more advanced level. They may provide a short period of paid parental leave for new grandparents or sleep-training courses for sleep-deprived families. To date, organisations in many societies have adopted work-family practices. However, the reality can also be that the women who are pursuing a managerial career may find that such initiatives are not particularly helpful. As shown by Heikkinen et al. (2021), one challenge is that despite the good intentions and the existence of an official human resources management strategy in an organisation, the initiatives may not be available or accessible in practice. Moreover, when the practices do not fit with women's needs, they are useless. They can even cause conflicts in the organisations regarding who has a right to use them (Perrigino et al., 2018).

In working life, women who pursue a managerial career need to confront competition, traditional gender norms, and pressure to act in a way regarded as appropriate for women when it comes to combining work and family (Heikkinen et al., 2014). Kossek et al. (2021) stated that to support women's careers, work-family arrangements offered by an organisation should be such that the organisational climate is characterised by high levels of support and low levels of a hindrance. In other words, the organisation should be family-friendly. In such environments all employees, not just women, can and are supported to use work-family arrangements to their advantage without fearing that

using the arrangements will have a negative effect on their career advancement (Lämsä et al., 2021).

Work and family arrangements in work-slife are characterised by a complex interconnectedness between individuals and organisations, as well as the broader societal environment in which the organisations operate (Pučėtaitė et al., 2020; Heikkinen et al., 2021). The traditional idea of gender roles, which stresses a clear and strict division between women's and men's work responsibilities and roles, needs to be made more flexible. As suggested by Kossek et al. (2021), it is important that the work-family arrangements offered by organisations be targeted at both women and men. In particular, an atmosphere that also encourages men to take up the arrangements is necessary. The role of managers as role models and instructors is crucial in this matter (Lämsä et al., 2021). Therefore, in line with a suggestion by Tanquerel and Grau-Grau (2019), one of the most effective ways to ease the work-family conflict for women who are pursuing managerial careers is to also involve fathers in using work-family arrangements to integrate work and family. However, it still seems to us that 'some' work is necessary to make this happen.

Conclusion

This chapter was designed, first, as a presentation of some of the main metaphors that describe women's career problems, especially in the field of management. The metaphors' power lies in their potential to convey complex and difficult phenomena in a concrete way (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), such as women's problems with regard to managerial careers. With the help of metaphors, the complex problems faced by women become more understandable and easier to discuss. Especially for those who are not as well aware of the challenges women face in pursuing managerial careers, the metaphors offer an easy way to make sense of the topic and become familiar with it in a vivid and lively way. Following the suggestion of Lakoff and Johnson, it is observed that the metaphors presented in this chapter engender interest in the topic and may trigger readers to tackle the problems and aim to solve them.

Two practices are also suggested that can be beneficial to supporting women's management careers. One of the practices, all-women management development programmes, highlighted an individual-level practice. As described here, this practice increases the various competencies of an individual woman. The competencies gained from the development programme are owned by the woman and are transferable, meaning a woman can build a sustainable career in a contemporary work environment in which career trajectories are increasingly dynamic, multiple, and changing (Akkermans et al., 2020).

Another practice, the implementation of work-family arrangements, focuses on the organisational level and pays attention to the culture and structure of workplaces.

Work-family arrangements can provide a decent work environment for women if the arrangements are organised and managed successfully and in an appropriate way (Heikkinen et al., 2021). Although the concentration of this research was on women, it should be noted that work-family arrangements implemented by workplaces can also benefit men (Pučėtaitė et al., 2020; Kangas and Lämsä, 2021). There is a risk that traditional gender roles become further embedded if men's role as carer and nurturer is not taken into consideration with regard to work-family arrangements.

Finally, it is also seen that the practices presented in this chapter are only two examples of the possible practices that have the potential to support the advancement of women in managerial careers. Other practices are also needed, for example, in organisational life, standardising recruitment and evaluation processes, building diversity strategies and programmes, forming bodies dealing with equality and equity, organising training in gender equality, and allowing gender quotas in management. All these and other relevant initiatives are important to study and develop. Moreover, it is also observed that the topics discussed in this chapter need more clarification in different societal and cultural contexts. This kind of contextual viewpoint can offer important and interesting insights because women's roles and their participation in work-life differ significantly across the globe (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2021). Thus, it can be concluded that even though women's progress into managerial roles has increased over time in many places, much still needs to be done now and in the future to overcome the barriers women experience in their careers.

Acknowledgements

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