

**The Glass Ceiling: Women's Awareness of Gender Barriers in Career
Advancement**

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Table of Contents

Contents	1
Acknowledgements	2
Title	3
Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Research aims	14
Methods	15
Results	17
Discussion	26
Conclusion	32
Limitations	32
Future Research	32
References	33
Appendix 1	39
Appendix 2	41

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Title

The Glass Ceiling: Women's Awareness of Gender Barriers in Career Advancement

Abstract

This study explores women's awareness of gender barriers in career advancement. The research sample consisted of 5 women, who were employed in the financial sector. Participants were interviewed on a one to one basis. The transcribed data was analysed using critical discourse analysis. Results showed that participants had a high level of awareness of gender barriers in the workplace. Participants' understanding of gender barriers were shown to be consistent with previous research. None of the participants identified a senior management position as a career goal. Results suggest that gendered barriers to advancement and the perceived personal sacrifice inherent in senior management positions resulted in women downsizing their career aspirations.

Introduction

The number of women operating in the labour market continues to increase, yet women are still underrepresented in top managerial roles. Despite the introduction of equality legislation such as the Employment Equality Act, 1998, the number of women employed in senior management positions remains low (Linehan, 2002). There has been a significant volume of research concerned with the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions, which support that theory that gender barriers prevent or restrict women from accessing high level management positions (Rudman, 1998; Leung, 2002; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). The glass ceiling is a term widely used in literature to describe the barriers women face in advancing to senior management. The specific gender barriers identified within the research are patriarchy, gender stereotypes, caring responsibilities and family-work conflict. A review of this research led to the aim of this study, the exploration of women's awareness of gender barriers in career advancement. This study will seek to identify women's awareness of gender barriers in the work place and the potential impact of these barriers on their careers.

Manager Equals Male

The underrepresentation of women in senior management positions can be understood as a consequence of structural inequalities which favour men. The majority of organisations have been created by men and therefore function to accommodate men (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Leung, 2002). The underrepresentation of women in senior management is perpetuated through social and cultural biases that define the role of manager as equating to masculine characteristics and traits (McKinsey, 2007; Hoobler, Wayne & Lemmon, 2009). Within organisations, this is maintained through promotional processes which identify these masculine traits as a requirement for senior positions (Travers, Brockbank & Tomlinson, 1997). Men are seen to be competent and more suited to the workplace, whereas women are

seen to be expressive and nurturing which is more suited to the home (Hoobler et al, 2009). This rigid stereotype can cause a conflict for women as with their female identity being devalued in the work place, they have to reconcile their identity with male characteristics so that they are considered for promotion (Valiulis, O'Donnell & Redmond, 2008; Linehan, 2002).

Research has found that organisational culture promotes long working hours and commitment as requirements for career progression (Young, 2010; Lyness & Thompson, 1997). Starting work early and leaving work late are seen as a sign of commitment to a company. This is also seen as a way for employees to distinguish themselves from others with similar qualifications and experience (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). Senior manager roles are seen to equate with constant availability and mobility (Liff & Ward, 2001). This dominant model in the business world requires a linear career path, with no career breaks and the willingness to accept any geographical moves as required (McKinsey, 2007; Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). This criterion infers that work and family life are incompatible; in order to progress in his/her career a person must be wholly committed to the demands of his/her job. This model assumes that home and work life is separate and places greater value on men and those without caring responsibilities who can be flexible with their availability and mobility (Liff et al, 2001).

Women who do reach senior positions are less likely to be married or have children compared to their male counterparts (Tharenou & Conroy, 1994). These findings support Fels (2005) argument that women working to progress in their careers are faced with a model that is designed to accommodate men with wives who do not work full time. This underlines the argument that the dominant model favours men and women have to make greater sacrifices to pursue professional success (Linehan & Walsh, 1999; Monks & Barker, 1996). The difficulties in achieving success within this model may lead women to downsize their career aspirations (Hewlett, Buck Luce, Shiller & Southwell, 2005). In a study of male and female

executives, Lyness et al, (1997) found that while there were similar compensation packages and work attitudes, women had less authority, received fewer stock options and had experienced less geographical mobility than men. The organisation in the study, used stock options as a long term incentive to kept important employees. As the women in the study were found to have fewer stock options, this suggests that male executives were deemed to be of higher value to the organisation.

Gender Stereotypes

Women are often ascribed the stereotype of caregiver and built in to this stereotype are character traits such as being caring, emotional, expressive and empathic (Young, 2010; Hoobler et al, 2009). These character traits are seen to be in conflict with the ‘ideal manager’ traits, for example assertiveness. Assertive women are viewed as violating feminine standards (Rudman & Glick, 1999). Previous research has recognised that organisational structures and processes favour men and placed the onus on women to adapt to this environment (Morrison, 1992; White, 1992). Although, there has been changes to society’s views of women, gender role expectations remain strong and women who are seen to violate prescribed feminine traits and behaviours are viewed unfavourably (Powell & Mainiero, 1992).

Women who conform to the stereotype of femininity are deemed incompetent in managerial roles whereas women who behave in line with managerial expectations are considered to have lost their femininity (Mavin, 2008). Catalyst (2007) found that gender stereotypes limit and undermine a women’s contribution to her company and her career advancement. As women managers are often assessed against the male model of leadership, they are “left with limited and unfavourable options no matter which way they go, no matter how they might choose to behave as leaders” (Catalyst, 2007, pg 6). Catalyst (2007) identified three

predicaments in which female managers are constrained and potentially undermined by gender stereotypes.

In the first predicament 'Extreme Perceptions', there are negative implications for women who accept or reject gender stereotyping. Women who are consistent with gender stereotyping are seen to be less competent while women who are inconsistent with gender stereotyping are seen as competent but are deemed unfeminine. Predicament two 'The High Competence Threshold' is where higher standards are expected of female managers, who also have to constantly prove that they can lead while managing gender stereotypes. The final predicament 'Competent but Disliked', shows that women can be either competent or liked but rarely both. Women who are viewed as competent behave in ways that are seen to equate with male traits, such as ambition. However, they are believed to be less successful in interpersonal dealing than their female colleagues who behave in line with the female stereotype (Catalyst, 2007).

Sex Integration

The underrepresentation of women in senior positions can have a negative impact on women's social construction of gender and their work identity (Izraeli, 1983; Ely, 1995). Companies which have predominantly male employees tend to have more rigid gender stereotypes compared to companies which have a higher number of women at senior level (Davey, 2008). This highlights the importance for women in having greater sex integration, a greater balance of male and females in senior positions, in the work place.

Ely (1995) found that in male dominated companies women reacted in different ways to their devaluation, some accommodate this and emphasised gender difference, nearly half criticized it arguing that women had value, while others accepted it and blamed themselves for being inadequate. Despite their different reactions to the devaluation of women, women in sex-

integrated organisations show higher levels of dissatisfaction with their gender roles and rated their own attributes for success less favourably compared to men (Choi & Hon, 2002). These findings may explain why women do not apply for promotions or feel unsure about the future of their career in male dominated companies (Ely, 1995).

Women in sex integrated companies have less difficulty with gender identity in the workplace (Ely, 1994). These women are able to draw on stereotypical traits associated with masculinity, while also regarding feminine attributes as strengths rather than weaknesses and were therefore less frustrated by the need to enact masculine roles at work (Ely, 1995). Women in sex integrated organisations are more likely to feel comfortable within their roles and valued within the organisation (Simpson, 2000). The reduction of gender stereotypes constraints may explain the higher levels of satisfaction and positivity about their career development for women in sex integrated organisations (Ely, 1995).

Ambition and Recognition

Ambition is an important requirement for leadership roles however women appear to have difficulty identifying themselves as ambitious. Valiulis et al, (2008) found that women and men had a similar understanding of ambition, yet women had lower aspirations for their own career advancement. One possible explanation for this is that ambitious women are not considered to be the norm and are therefore viewed negatively and with suspicion (Rudman, 1998). This negative perception may explain why women are less likely to be ambitious and make career plans, which can have negative outcomes for career progression (Valiulis et al, 2008).

The ability to promote and assert oneself is also important for leadership roles. A study of MBA students (Eagly, 2003, in McKinsey, 2007) found that women were more modest when rating their own performance. Results showed that 70% of female participants assessed their

performance as equal to the performance of their colleagues, while 70% of male participants assessed their performance as higher than their colleagues. If women are less inclined to promote their performance and ambitions, they may find it more difficult to highlight their achievements, gain recognition and increase their chances for promotion (McKinsey, 2007).

Caring Responsibilities

The current organisation of the labour market seldom accommodates men and women who are trying to balance work with caring responsibilities. Therefore having caring responsibilities can have negative implications for career progression (Russell et al, 2009). As women are primarily responsible for household and childcare duties, they are competing with men in the workplace on unequal terms (Linehan & Walsh, 1999). For women with caring responsibilities seeking to maintain a work-life balance, there is a risk that they will be assessed by their managers as limiting themselves and therefore removing themselves from the competition for promotion (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Liff & Ward, 2001). For many women this may lead to a choice between having a family and obtaining professional success. The double burden of family and work commitment may explain why women in senior manager positions are less likely than their male counterparts to be married or have children. Valiulis et al, (2008) found that 86% of senior male managers in the Irish civil service were married and the same percentage had children, while 56% of female senior managers were married and 53% had children.

The negative impact of having a family on career progression has not been significantly reduced by the introduction of family friendly policies, such as flexi-time or parental leave. Employees with caring responsibilities are aware that devoting time to family demands will have negative career consequences (Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999). Therefore utilizing policies aimed at supporting employees with family responsibilities becomes less of

a viable option, as they risk being viewed as less committed to their organisation (Allen, 2001). Unless organisations and in particular managers show support for family related leave or reduced hours, caring responsibilities will continue to negatively affect career progression (Anderson, Coffey & Byerly, 2002).

Managers' Perception of Family-Work Conflict

Research has found that managers' perception of their female employees family-work conflict could be one reason for the low numbers of women being promoted and attaining managerial positions above middle management (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). The concept of family-work conflict is that combining work and family life is problematic. The main tenet of this concept is that meeting demands in one area will make it more difficult to meet the demands in another (Calvert, Russell, Connell & McGinnity, 2009).

Managers' perception of their employees' family-work conflict can influence their perceptions of employees' commitment and how they fit within the organisation (Hoobler et al, 2009). Perceptions of commitment can have a significant impact on whether managers' considered employee's as suitable for promotion (McFarlane Shore, Barksdale & Shore, 1995; Cable & DeRue, 2002). While Managers' perceptions of organisational fit have been shown to directly influence managers' decisions on who is suitable for promotion (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). Women are viewed as having the primary responsibility for childcare and are therefore viewed as having greater family-work conflict than men (Powell & Mainiero, 1992). Managers have been shown to rate women lower on both job and organisational fit and commitment (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). Despite female employees reporting less family-work conflict, managers believe a greater conflict existed for women rather than men, resulting in the assumption that women are incompatible with the job and organisation and therefore unsuitable for promotion (Hoobler et al, 2009). In contrast men are believed to fit in

with the job and organisation as they are perceived as having less family responsibility (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). These findings suggest that managers' biases for male employees, based on the assumption that they are better fit for managerial roles, may restrict or prevent women's career progression (Young & Hurlic, 2007).

Women's increasing participation in the workforce has been shown to have some negative impact on time pressure and work life balance. However some indicators have shown a decrease in conflict between work and home life while studies of life satisfaction show that the family-work conflict for women is outweighed by the benefits of employment compared to unemployment (Russell, McGinnity, Callan & Keane, 2009).

The Benefits of Women in Senior Positions

Gender diversity is a serious issue for the business industry. If the current employment rates for women continue, there will be a projected shortfall of 24 million people in the European workforce by 2040. This shortfall will be especially evident in the most highly skilled jobs. However if companies were to correctly utilize skilled women and increase their employment rate to that of men, the projected shortfall would be 3 million. A focus on gender diversity would not only increase employment rates but would facilitate corporate competitiveness by tapping into underutilised talent (McKinsey, 2007).

Organisations that are already utilising skilled women are benefiting from increases in performance (Welbourne, Cychota & Ferrante, 2007). Organisations where women are strongly represented at board and senior management level have been shown to outperform organisations with low numbers or no women at top levels of management (Catalyst, 2007). These companies outperformed others in their sector in areas such as equity, operating result and stock price growth. However significant performance increases were only found where a company had reached a critical mass of having at least three women on management

committees which had an average of 10 members (Catalyst, 2007). The success of these companies could be attributed to their ability to adapt to the changes in social and consumption trends. Women today have major purchasing power and continue to increase their consumer base even in industries that were traditionally dominated by men, such as car sales. For companies to remain competitive they need to ensure gender diversity or risk alienating an ever increasing consumer group (McKinsey, 2007).

The Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling is a term that was developed in the early 1980's to describe the invisible barrier that prevents women and minorities from reaching high level managerial positions within the workplace (Monks & Barker, 1996; Baxter & Wright, 2000). The glass ceiling is generally believed to exist at the level of middle management, where career progression beyond that point becomes increasingly difficult if not impossible (Inman, 1998; Frankforter, 1996). This barrier is subtle in that it is not easily identifiable yet strong enough that it prevents women "from moving up in the management hierarchy" (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990, p. 200). The existence of the glass ceiling is evident when we consider the Fortune 500 figures for 2009. The Fortune 500 annually ranks Americas largest corporations based on revenue. The 2009 figures show that of the top 500 American corporations only 15 have a female chief executive officer (CEO). This is just 3% (Hira, 2009). Of the top 1,000 Americans corporations the percentage drops slightly to 2.9% (Women CEOs of the Fortune 1000, 2009). Here one can see the underrepresentation of women in these positions of power and status.

Although some women do move beyond the glass ceiling, the number of women in high level positions is relatively small. When women do achieve high status positions, their presence is often attributed to tokenism (Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Wright & Taylor, 1998). Tokenism

benefits corporations by projecting an image of equality and fairness through placing a small number of women in visible senior positions (Frankforter, 1996). This can also limit the chances of collective action as discriminatory practices are not obvious to disadvantaged groups (Wright et al, 1998). While the glass ceiling appears to be weakening over time, the number of women above the glass ceiling needs to exceed 15-20% to overcome tokenism (Frankforter, 1996).

Conclusion

A review of the literature highlights a number of gender barriers that restrict or prevent women from advancing in managerial hierarchies. The patriarchal organisation of the workplace has been shown to be a considerable gender barrier. The tendency to associate successful managerial traits with masculinity diminishes the value of women in the workplace (Travers et al, 1997). The persistence of rigid stereotypes undermines female managers (Catalyst, 2007) and makes it more difficult for women to gain recognition within the workplace (Valiulis et al, 2008; McKinsey; 2007). The impact of caring responsibilities and family-work conflict has been shown to reduce women's chances for promotion. The underrepresentation of women in senior management positions can be understood as a consequence of these interacting factors.

Research aims

The aim of this study is to explore women's awareness of gender barriers in career advancement. This study will seek to identify women's awareness of gender barriers in the work place and the potential impact of these barriers on their careers.

Method

To explore women's understanding of gender barriers in the workplace participants were interviewed on a one on one basis.

Apparatus

A dictaphone was used to record the interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed, NVIVO 8, software package was used to organise the research data and as part of the analysis process

Participants

The research sample consisted of 5 professional women employed in the financial sector. Participants were selected on the basis of their employment status, ranging from entry level to middle management positions. Participants were between the age of 27 and 35 years old. All participants held either a degree or masters qualification relevant to their occupation.

Research Design

The research design employed was a data-led qualitative study. This design was chosen as qualitative research provides a flexible approach in which to analyse what meaning and values individuals and groups give to social problems (Creswell, 2009). This approach provided the researcher with a framework in which to explore women's understanding of gender barriers in the work place. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to analyse the research data. CDA is concerned with how social inequality is constructed in language. The focus of CDA on dominance, discrimination, power and control within discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) was particularly applicable to the research topic.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed on a one on one basis. Participants were briefed on the research topic before the interview commenced. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes long. The interviews were semi-structured (Appendix 1) to allow for new subject matter that may arise while ensuring that key topics were discussed. A pilot interview was conducted to test the questions and the flow of the interview, no issues were found.

Ethical considerations

Participants were briefed on the research topic to ensure informed consent. Participants and the researcher signed a consent form (Appendix 2) that stated that the interviews were confidential and participants could retract their consent to the study at any time prior to the submission of the research report. None of the participants expressed concern with the research topic.

Results

This section presents the analytic points that emerged from the data analysis. Each participant was allocated a number to differentiate between responses, P: Participant, I: Researcher.

Manager Equals Male

The patriarchal organisation of the work place was a strong theme within the analysis. The value placed on male employees was identified as greater than that for female employees. Men were deemed more competent, authoritative and committed than women.

“P2: Men are just seen as more competent, more in control more, I don’t know I suppose it’s the whole stereotype that men are strong and women are weak.”

Participants reasoned that men progress further and faster within organisations because their prescribed traits are more valued.

“I think definitely men do advance far quicker than that and I think that’s what so stark and that’s so obvious (P5).”

Participants argued that women are not given the same opportunities, as men are more trusted in the work environment to take control.

“I think women aren’t given the same chances even from other women...it’s almost the case that they trust a man in control rather than women in control (P1).”

While all participants recognised that men were more valued in the workplace, they argued that this was a perception rather than a reality. Male and female managers perform in similar ways but they are evaluated differently.

“I don’t know cause I don’t know if I agree with the whole idea that men, in those position are different I just think that they are perceived that way but I don’t think they technically are any different (P1).”

Participants felt that they were devalued in the work place and found it difficult to envision themselves in senior management positions. Men dominated positions of power and regardless of qualifications, achieving the same success appeared unlikely.

“There always seems to be more men, more higher up, more better paid than I would probably be or achieve anyway regardless of what qualification I had (P3).”

The value attributed to men affected participants’ confidence levels, so that new opportunities were not being sought out.

“The men are just seen as more competent, more confident, and its a vicious circle because then in turn even though you are not really conscious of it, you are not really reaching out for other jobs (P5).”

Even though participants were knowledgeable of the character traits and behaviours that were required for promotion to decision making positions, they felt that those characteristics were overtly masculine and therefore are not in a position to convincingly emulate them.

“I don’t think a woman could convincingly try and act like a man because everything is just in her way of doing that, you know, you couldn’t convincingly act like a man (P5).”

Negative perceptions of female leadership style

The construction of female managers as competent but disliked emerged as a significant theme. While participants argued that men are 'seen' to embody particularly valued traits, female managers 'are' unapproachable. When evaluating female managers the majority of participants had very strong and generalised views of women in positions of power.

“P4: I just think that there is a bit more firmness within a lot of women, they (pause) to tell you the truth a lot of women they get a power trip when they're in a managerial position.”

“They have either foregone having families or they've just been complete and utter cows basically so I can't stand them! (laugh)(P3).”

Participants argued that female manager alienate themselves by not conforming to stereotypical gender behaviour.

“They are not approachable, they wouldn't be approachable in any way, like they generally do become outcasts to other women because other women have a tendency to like to get on with other people, not make things hard for themselves, where they have a tendency to make things harder for themselves and make themselves tougher put themselves on a different level than other women (P4).”

Contradictions emerged within individual interviews, female managers were negatively evaluated for exhibiting behaviour outside of gender norms and assessed as having to behave in a certain manner to advance.

“They have always been tough to get to them and they have them kind of grasped a lot of areas in relation to it (P4).”

Female senior managers that were seen to act in stereotypical masculine behaviour were negatively evaluated by participants.

“I: What would you say is the general impression of the female director you spoke of?”

P3: Pretty much from your previous question of do you have to have more male qualities than female qualities to be, she would pretty much fit that persona. She is very very forceful very brash em, good at what she does...but she is very intimidating and that. You wouldn't go there unless you had to, put it that way.”

There was substantial support for view that women in management positions were unsociable.

“P2: From my experience they are horrible! Seriously it's like they have to keep a separation between themselves and the people they are over or something.”

There was some conflict between descriptions of female managers, with small support for gender stereotyping.

“If a women reached that position it would be almost felt that she in some way lost her femininity to get that, in a manner of being overly assertive borderline aggressive or have in some way kinda removed her emotional connections (P1).”

Participant's perceptions of female manager's technical skills were consistently positive.

Female superiors were respected as competent and knowledgeable.

“P5: having said that my boss is a woman, and she is fierce and she has a really fierce reputation, like she is notorious, she is a bull dog, I respect her because you know she has a company and she knows an awful lot.”

Family-Work Life Conflict

A major theme within the research was the role of women as mothers and the impact of motherhood on career progression. Participants believed that there was pressure on women to become mothers and meet the demands of that role.

“P1: Because the role of the woman in Irish culture is that of the mother the carer, that if a women doesn’t succeed on that level than in some way people would think that she has kinda failed as a women.”

This expectation was reinforced in the work place where women came into contact with stereotypical assumptions that constructed women as either mothers or mothers to be.

“P5: I think that men’s perception of a woman is so strong and that the whole construct of going into work and the whole you know, it just so overwhelming I mean for example, a guy in work said to me, but you know you are so lucky you just have to work for like 5 years, and I was like what? And he goes, then sure you will probably have a child, and I was like, I have just finished my masters last year, do you honestly think that I am only going to here for 5 years, leave work when I am 30?! I mean we are now not retiring until we are 68, what 38 years I am going to be at home?! So when you are coming up against that.”

There was also an expectation that once women became mothers they should focus all their energy on that role. For working mothers, they were assessed as not fulfilling their mother role because they spend time in the work place.

“P1: Yeah I think the cultural and the gender implication would come into to it, in that we are told that when we become mothers our priority is to be a mother. And I think that when women don’t, obviously children are still always their priority, but if its not expressed in every single facet of their being, then suddenly they are seen as not to be fulfilling their roles as mother, whereas they could be quiet effectively doing that, probably better because they are providing their children with a good support.”

While participants spoke of the ‘mother role’ as a cultural construction, they reproduced these expectations at different points throughout the interviews.

“It’s definitely more difficult for woman on the family than it would be for a man but that just a given anyway cause they are the ones who obviously do the child raising and the birth and all that kind of thing anyway (P3).”

Family impact on career

Motherhood was universally regarded by the participants as a barrier to career progression.

“P5: It would be career suicide!”

Participants believed that women were less likely to be considered for promotion after returning from maternity leave.

“I think if I was to have one now for example em, it would be extremely more difficult to get promoted and not just because I have just had a child its literally just because of the time you are away from the office (P3).”

Participants acknowledged that caring responsibilities would change their priorities but their career would remain an important factor in their lives.

“P1: I think like most women our priorities would possible change, em (pause) but I don’t think to the extent of some women I know, I think my career would still be extremely important to me, I would not give up my career to be a home, to be a full time mum.”

Only one participant had a child and had experienced the negative impact on her career.

“P4: My career aspects where the same when I went back to work, to start up where I left off, they were back tracked and side tracked... it’s like starting from literal scratch again.”

There was no support for leaving the workplace to focus on raising a family.

“I wouldn’t like to give up my career to focus solely on a family, I don’t think it would be healthy either. I think even though you would have a child, you still need to have your own ambitions you know, something to work towards (P2)”

Family friendly policies

There was a strong theme that taking time off or reducing work hours to accommodate family demands was counterproductive to career advancement.

“P1: I don’t think you would be taken as serious in your position, I think that if you took and it’s predominantly women that do take these flexi positions, and I think that they suddenly lose a lot of power within their job and I don’t think that’s something I would like to do.”

It would be impossible to work reduced hours and perform successfully in a demanding job.

“P5: Well going on what I have seen already, no, you would just be seen as a lightweight, and it would be just unpractical, because the type of work that I am in you’ve got to be there around the clock, if anything happens, and you can’t be always switching off at 2 o’clock.”

Women who work part-time will risk being labelled as uncommitted to their job and unsuitable for promotion.

“P4: No absolutely not, it’s not looked upon well, it’s looked upon, I don’t want to say laziness, but just concentrating on other areas of your life...coming back after working part-time saying I am now looking for a managerial position they will just kinda, I feel that they will look at it and go well won’t give you a managerial position you already took time out, to do part-time therefore your career is obviously not your main focus and I just think it would go against you if you were to look for a position in the future.”

Career progression

The majority of participants were confident that they could fulfil the requirements of the position above them.

“P2: yeah definitely, I would be pretty confident that I could do it.”

All participants expressed the desire to continue progressing in their career. Promotion was associated with personal satisfaction.

“P2: I wouldn't be happy staying the position that I am in, I think you get bored if your constantly doing the same thing. Plus every time you get promoted its gives you a bit of a boost you know and you do feel like its something that you've achieved. I can never understand people who can just sit at the same level year after year.”

“P3: I would like to be higher than I am, I would like to be promoted more... I wouldn't see myself being the director of a company but at the same time I wouldn't be happy staying at the same level as I am now.”

Participants had invested time and money into their education so that they could build a career.

“I think a lot of that has to do with the fact of the amount of effort I have put into my education as well, and you know career development (P1).”

“I have put an awful lot of money and an awful lot of energy into getting where I am (P5).”

There were also patterns of uncertainty within the analysis. None of the participants had a career plan or a particular position that they were aiming to achieve. Senior management positions were seen only as a possible consideration for the future.

“P4: not extreme senior, no, I just, I wouldn't personally handle to pressure, the, I don't deny that I mightn't be good at it cause you would obviously have to work your way up, and each step up the ladder makes the previous job seem easy! Em, so maybe it might be something I would look at in the future but initially no.”

“I don’t know. I mean I suppose you just keep at it and see where you go, things can change (P2).”

Some participants were trying to figure out where to go with their careers.

“P5: I don’t know I mean I am still at a place where I am trying to find my niche.”

There was a greater focus on achieving the next promotion.

“My main sort of aim is getting into a higher position and getting the wage that I need now (P3).”

“P1: possibly, I think if you got to that level (middle management), and you notice the hypocrisy that is there...dealing with that every day you would want to go higher again to kind of not be controlled so much, would be more in the decision making position at the top.”

Too much sacrifice

Senior management roles were regarded as requiring too many personal sacrifices.

The benefits of the position were outweighed by the perceived requirements.

“I suppose you do get the rewards out of it but like if your working constantly what a ten hour day or something how surely can you get any benefit from that at all, once you get there you still have to maintain that level, I can’t see a em, happy personal life if your are constantly in the work environment (P3).”

Some participants referenced female managers in their workplace as an example of the personal costs of career success.

“I mean it takes too much from your personal life and the only other head kinda of our region that was there, that retired last year, was a woman, but no partner, no children and now she’s retired what sort of life is she going to have at 55 60 years of age, does she have family around? Is she going to? I mean you have to look at your life as well, I mean it’s not all about work (P4).”

Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore women's awareness of gender barriers in career advancement. This study aims to understand women's awareness of gender barriers in the work place and the potential impact of these barriers on their careers. This study found that women had high levels of awareness of gender barriers in the workplace. Participants identified the patriarchal organisation of the workplace, rigid gender stereotypes, caring responsibilities and requirements of senior management positions as barriers to women's career advancement. While participants identified themselves as ambitious they did not identify senior management positions as a career goal. Results suggest that gender barriers to advancement and the perceived personal sacrifice inherent in senior management positions resulted in women downsizing their career aspirations

All of the participants worked in organisations where the majority of senior positions were held by men. The patriarchal organisation of the workplace was identified as a significant barrier to women's career progression. Men were seen to dominate positions of power and authority within the work environment. Participants recognised that within the gendered organisational context of the workplace, organisational norms perpetuate the value of men over women. The propensity to equate successful managerial traits with masculinity was seen to play a significant role in maintaining the glass ceiling. These findings correlate with previous research which showed that the organisational structure of the workplace particularly benefits men (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Leung, 2002). Participants concluded from their observations of male counterparts that the dominant perception of masculinity, equated men with competency. Participants thought that men were deemed competent and authoritative, and more committed to their careers. This perception resulted in men advancing faster and further up the managerial hierarchy than women as 'ideal manager' traits are stereotypically associated with masculinity (Travers et al, 1997). Women were not afforded

the same opportunities as they were seen to embody traits that conflicted with the 'ideal manager' construct. These observations have been reflected in research where promotional processes have been shown to strongly associate masculine traits with the construct of the 'ideal manager' (McKinsey, 2007; Hoobler et al, 2009). Women's advancement opportunities and career outcomes are significantly reduced by widely held beliefs that men are a better fit for managerial positions.

Participants questioned organisational tendencies towards valuing men over women. They argued that women are equally capable of meeting the demands of senior management positions and felt confident in their own ability. These findings are similar to Ely's (1995) study where nearly half of the female respondents criticized the devaluation of women and contended that there were equally competent. However, awareness of the value placed on prescribed male traits did appear to have some effect on participants' career aspirations. A number of participants found it difficult to envision themselves in positions of power and felt subconsciously they were not seeking out opportunities to advance. Research has indicated that gender diversity in the workplace is an important factor in determining women's career progression (Ely, 1995). Women feel more comfortable and valued in organisations with greater gender balance in top management positions (Simpson, 2000). As participants worked in male dominated organisations this may explain why participants felt unsure about the future and were not actively seeking advancement opportunities (Ely, 1995).

A significant theme that developed within the analysis of the interviews was the construction of the female manager as competent but disliked, an outcome predicted by Catalyst (2007). Participants argued that gender stereotypes unfairly place men in positions of power and authority however they were found to reproduce gender stereotypes within their appraisals of female managers. Throughout all of the interviews, there were negative descriptions of the management style of female managers. Female superiors were described as unapproachable

because they exhibited behaviour that was intimidating and offensive to the participants. The interviewees inferred that their female managers adopted a direct leadership style, describing them as 'fierce', 'forceful' and 'brash'. Evaluations of managers have been shown to be influenced by gender bias. While female managers engage in the same behaviour as their male counterparts, they receive more negative evaluations (Rudman & Glick, 1999).

While all participants describe female superiors as unlikeable, there was some conflict within their approach to the issue. The first approach was to blame women who acted outside of social norms. This inferred that women who acted differently choose to and therefore played a part in attracting negative evaluations. These results are consistent with literature which found that women who deviate from stereotypical gender behaviours are more likely to be negatively assessed than their peers (Mavin, 2008). The second approach accepted that women had to behave in certain ways to progress they had to be 'tough' to reach management level. Participants demonstrated their awareness of rigid gender stereotypes by arguing that while women in management are perceived as behaving differently to their male counterparts, this is a gender biased evaluation (Powell & Mainiero, 1992).

Despite participants' unfavourable appraisals of their female managers' interpersonal skills, they expressed positive evaluations of their technical skills. Participants' perceptions of female managers reflect the double bind that women in leadership positions face (Catalyst, 2007). Female managers have to consistently balance expectations of professional behaviour with expectations of stereotypical gender behaviour. If women conform to gender stereotypes they risked being classified as incompetent, whereas if they act in accordance with 'ideal manager' traits they are classified as competent but socially inadequate (Mavin, 2008). The contradictory demands of being feminine and displaying 'ideal manager' traits means that women in positions of power will be negatively evaluated no matter how they choose to behave (Catalyst, 2007).

A recurring theme within the interviews was the incompatibility of caring responsibilities and full time employment. Participants acknowledged that cultural norms prescribe the role of caregiver to women. Within this role is the expectation that women will become mothers and prioritise that role at the expense of other pursuits. These attributes position women in the home where they can fulfil the role of caregiver (Hobbler et al, 2009). These expectations are reinforced in the workplace as illustrated by one participants' anecdote of a male colleague's perception of her career span. While participants identified the characteristics of the caregiver role as a cultural construction, they also referred to women as being the primary caregiver within the family. This shows that even though women are in full time employment they continue to feel responsible for work in the home (Powell & Mainiero, 1992).

All participants said that having a child in their current position would have a detrimental affect on their careers. This assertion is supported in the literature which has found that family and caring responsibilities negatively correlate with career progression (Russell et al, 2009; Thompson et al, 1999). Valiulis et al, (2008), in a study of ambition and gender, found that maternity leave had a negative impact on career progression. Participants agreed with these findings, maintaining that maternity leave would significantly reduce the likelihood of future promotion. The time spent away from the workplace was considered the main factor in delaying women's career advancement. This shows that women are aware that the dominant work model requires a linear career path with no interruptions (McKinsey, 2007). Even though participants recognised that motherhood would change their priorities, they asserted that their careers would continue to be an important factor in their lives. None of the participants planned on leaving work to focus solely on childcare. This shows that while gender stereotypes orientate women towards home and family life, women do want maintain their careers if they choose to have a family (Linehan, 2002)

Family friendly policies provide employees with the option to amend their work hours to accommodate caring responsibilities. Altering work hours to accommodate family responsibilities was seen as a significant barrier to career advancement. Participants contended that by availing of such policies, they would lose respect and power within the workplace. Participants were aware that if they were assessed as committing more time to their family responsibilities, they risk being viewed as unsuitable for promotion (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Liff & Ward, 2001).

Promotional processes endorse long working hours and commitment as requirements for advancement (Young, 2010; Lyness & Thompson, 1997), as managerial positions are seen to require constant availability (Liff & Ward, 2001). Commitment and perceptions of organisational fit have been shown to directly influence managers' perceptions of employees suitability for promotion (McFarlane Shore et al, 1995; Cable & DeRue, 2002; Lyness & Heilman, 2006). As women are viewed as the primary caregiver, with caring responsibility viewed as incompatible with the workplace, they are more likely to be rated lower on fit and commitment (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). Participants were aware of these factors and dismissed family friendly policies as a viable option, a similar outcome to that found by Allen (2001). Regardless of participants' motivations to maintain their positions within the workplace, gender stereotypes may still hinder their career progress. Managers have been shown to perceive female employees as having greater family-work conflict, despite female employees reporting less family-work conflict than their male counterparts (Hoobler et al, 2009).

All participants expressed ambitions to further their careers. They had invested in their education with the aim of achieving professional success. However, none of the participants could identify an ultimate career goal. Their career approach was to focus on one promotion at a time. Valiulis et al (2008) established that career plans play an important role in career

success. This suggests that women maybe hampering their own career advancement by not planning their careers.

Senior management positions were not identified as a career goal by participants. These findings may be explained by participants equating senior positions with great personal sacrifice. Participants concerns are supported by previous research which found that women have to make greater sacrifices in their personal life to pursue professional success (Linehan & Walsh, 1999; Monks & Barker, 1996). These findings suggest that women's awareness of gender barriers may reinforce the glass ceiling. As women perceive the difficulties in accessing senior management positions as too great, they may dismiss such positions as an unrealistic option. A contributing factor to participants' lower career aspirations may be women's negative perceptions of female managers. Participants observed that female manager where less likely to have children and questioned the quality of their personal lives. These observations are consistent with literature which found that women in senior management positions are less likely than their male counterparts to be married or have children (Tharenou & Conroy, 1994; Valiulis et al, 2008). Therefore women maybe downsizing their career aspirations because they are not prepared to make the personal sacrifices that they believe senior management positions require (Hewlett et al, 2005; Valiulis et al, 2008).

Conclusion

The underrepresentation of women in senior management positions is a serious issue, not only for women but the business world as a whole (McKinsey, 2007). There is a great deal of research evidence which highlights the existence of gender barriers within the workplace and their impact on women's career advancement (Linehan, 2002; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; McKinsey, 2007; Hoobler et al, 2009; Liff & Ward, 2001; Valiulis et al, 2008). This research

study has found that women have a high level of awareness of the different gender barriers that they may face in their careers. Results also showed that participants had no aspirations to advance into senior management positions, despite their commitment to career progression. These findings suggest that women do not aspire to senior management positions because the demands are perceived to be greater than the rewards.

Limitations

The small sample size in this study means that the generalization of results is problematic. As the findings in this study were strongly supported by previous research, this suggests that future research with a larger sample size may report consistent results.

Women are often ascribed the stereotypes of caregiver which has a number of consequences for career advancement (Hoobler et al, 2009; Powell & Mainiero, 1992). As this study only included one woman with caring responsibilities there was insufficient data to analysis women's experiences of family demands conflicting with work demands.

Future Research

The findings of this study suggest that women's awareness levels of gender barriers in the workplace may reinforce the glass ceiling by diminishing their career aspirations. Future research into the different strategies that organisations can employ to increase women's numbers in senior management positions may prove beneficial.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview questions

Can you tell me a bit about your self and your job?

General

Do you think either gender has skills that the other does not?

Do you feel you need to work harder than men to prove yourself?

Do you think that some women behave like men to advance in their careers? Do you think it would benefit women if they did?

What personal characteristics do you think are needed to succeed in your workplace?

Ambition

What is professional success to you? How important is it?

Would you consider yourself ambitious? If no, what is your opinion of ambitious women?

Equal treatment

Has your work has ever been unfairly assessed?

In your opinion are women and men treated equally in your job?

Do you think your gender influences your career? If yes, how?

Have you ever experienced gender discrimination in your career?

Have you experienced any barriers to promotion? If yes, please provide examples.

Perception of senior positions

What do you think are the important characteristics of a manager? Would you say that any of those characteristics are particularly male or female?

Does senior position require any additional characteristics?

Would you be confident that you have the skills to do a senior job?

What do you see as the downsides/upside of a senior position?

In you company is there an equal gender divide in senior management roles?

- How does this impact on your experience of your job or your career aspirations?
- Are senior women viewed differently then men in your company?

Family

Do you think having a family will (has had) impact on your career progression?

Do you think women need to make a choice between raising a family and being successful in their career?

In your opinion is there a conflict between senior management jobs and active parenting?

Would you feel comfortable requesting flexi-time or part time from your manager if you had children? If yes, how do you think this would affect your career?

What do you think of women who decide not to have a family and focus on their careers?

Promotion

Is there a position you currently are working towards?

Is working long hours seen as a major indicator of commitment where you work?

What do you think you would need to get promoted?

Does the promotion process influence whether you apply?

Have you been supported or/and encouraged to seek promotions?

Have you been given the opportunities to get the necessary experience required to advance in your career?

Would you apply for a promotion if you did not have all the required experience as set out in the job specification?

Do you think the demands and rewards of being promoted are worth it?

Is there a particular person or persons senior to you that you think would need to support you, if you wanted to go for promotion?

Do you think that a middle manager who worked 3-4 days a week would be in an equally strong position as their colleagues to achieve a promotion?

Final

Is there anything I haven't covered that you would like to discuss?

APPENDIX 2

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM:
FINAL YEAR RESEARCH PROJECT**

Dublin Business School requires that all persons who participate in research studies give their written consent to do so. Please read the following and sign below if you agree.

I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the research project on the topic of women's perception of the glass ceiling to be conducted by Zara Lafferty as principal investigator, who is an undergraduate student in the School of Arts at Dublin Business School. The broad goal of this research study is to explore women's approach to their careers and their understanding of the glass ceiling. Specifically, I have been asked to attend an interview, which should take no longer than one hour to complete.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can decline to answer any questions I wish. I am free to withdraw from this study at any stage. This interview is confidential and my name will not be linked with the research materials. I will not be identified or identifiable in any report subsequently produced by the researcher.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the interview, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been informed that if I have any general questions about this project, I should feel free to contact James Brunton at james.brunton@dbs.ie.

I have read and understand the above and consent to participate in this study. My signature is not a waiver of any legal rights. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to keep a copy of the informed consent form for my records.

Participant's Signature

Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the respondent has consented to participate. Furthermore, I will retain one copy of the informed consent form for my records.

Principal Investigator Signature

Date