The Position of Women Employees in Organizations: A Desk-Based Research of Past Studies for the EU and Greece

Marilou Ioakimidis[1*], Panagiota Antonopoulou[1]

1. Assistant Professor, University of Peloponnese, Sparta, Greece.

* Corresponding author

Abstract

In previous years, many developed countries, firms and other organizations have given job opportunities to women, but in most cases have kept them in the lower- or middle-level managerial ranks. In Greece the corporate doors had not opened to women, as much as in other countries, and only an extremely small number of the women who had managed to pass through them had advanced to the upper levels of the managerial ladder. In this paper we review and examine past studies that confirm this disparity in order to provide an adequate basis to future research in this field, for companies in the EU and Greece.

Keywords: Literature review, Past surveys, Women, Organization culture, EU, Greece

1. Gender mix and organizational fit

Simpson (2000) explored the impact of the numerical distribution of women at different levels of the organization on the experiences of women managers. She aimed to build on work in this area, which argues that gender imbalance creates an organizational culture that is hostile or resistant to women. The research has been built on work in this area by Kanter (1977), Marshall (1984) and Ely (1994). Organizational fit, as defined by Cassell and Walsh (1994), is taken to refer to the level of comfort or discomfort experienced by women in their organizations. Data has been collected through questionnaires and interviews. The sample of 90 women managers was established through the alumni of management development programs of university business schools in different regions, and 11 business schools were involved. Managers had all taken courses part-time and, having graduated, had been in full-time employment for at least two years. They came from a wide range of sectors and different management levels.

The project followed two main stages. First, based on quantitative data, "token" and "non token" women managers were compared along the lines of Kanter's original definition. Token women were identified as those who worked in organizations where they formed less than 20 per cent of the total. A comparison was made between women working in organizations that were imbalanced at all management levels (level 1), that were imbalanced at the top but more integrated further down the hierarchy (level 2) and which were integrated at all levels (level 3).

In each case, key factors that were likely to influence "organizational fit" were compared. These include career barriers, attitude of the employing organization to women managers, key work pressures/problems encountered and the nature of the organizational culture. In this way three degrees of "organizational fit" were identified which relate to the three levels of gender imbalance above.

Results from the survey data indicated that gender mix has an important impact on career progress, barriers experienced and women's sense of "fit" within the organization. Token women occupy less senior positions and are more likely to experience career barriers. They are also more likely to see the organization as having negative attitudes to women managers and to experience problems in their working relations with men. This, together with the high proportion of token women experiencing the men's club as a career barrier, suggests that the numerical distribution of women has an important impact on organizational culture and practices, which are detrimental to women.

Gender mix has emerged from this study as a critical factor defining women managers' sense of fit within the organization, the pressures they experience and barriers they are likely to encounter. While the small sample size - particularly in terms of the qualitative data - suggested a need for caution in relating gender mix to different levels of organizational fit in a generalized way, the findings do indicate that the hierarchical nature of gender imbalances may be a factor to consider. Simpson's study has shown that when gender imbalance at the top (with men in the majority) is combined with greater sex integration further down the hierarchy, women may experience greater "fit" within the organization than when that gender imbalance permeates all management levels. If this is the case, then the small gains women have made at junior and middle management levels, may help to create a more hospitable atmosphere for those token women at the top. As more and more women move into management, the cumulative effect on culture and practices may, over time, neutralize one of the key barriers to women, namely attitudinal and cultural barriers.

2. Gender culture in organizations

Itzin (1995) carried out a major research project in a local authority as part of a long-term initiative to improve

the position of women within the organization. A five-part methodology has been used to explore the culture and the practices of the organization and to collect data that could be used to support proposals to create a more women-friendly workplace. Three departments were researched: the housing and development departments included a range of occupations in which women are generally under-represented, and the social services department was chosen for the range of its work traditionally done by women. A self-completion questionnaire was sent to all women in the social services, housing and development departments. 487 questionnaires were returned, producing a response rate of 40 per cent. The questionnaire contained 57 questions covering personal details, education and training, work history, career progression, caring responsibilities and discrimination. In depth interviews were conducted with most first, second and third-tier officers and with a selection of women and men in middle management in the housing, social services and development departments. These interviews were designed to collect information on work history and career development, women's career progression, domestic roles and responsibilities, division of time between home and work, childcare responsibilities and sexism in the organization.

The results showed that in the non-manual staff nearly two-thirds of the total staff were women and one-third men. Of these women, nearly two-thirds were located in the administrative and clerical grades. Women were massively over-represented in the lower grades and massively under-represented in senior grades by comparison with men.

3. Culture as a mean of closure

Rutherford (1999) in her study examines the possibility of seeing culture as a mean of closure. Two large private sector organizations were selected for case studies, an airline and an investment bank. The airline had a developed equal opportunities policy, whereas the bank had a minimal policy. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to collect the data, using interviews, questionnaires and observation. Initially, questionnaires were sent to a stratified sample of employees in both organizations, these contained over 100 questions, roughly divided into sections of the constituents. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted, which reflected the same kind of questions as the questionnaire and were analyzed by themes. Some senior staff were also shadowed, in order to provide an opportunity to witness day-to-day work, particularly in respect to management style. The three different types of data provided a broad and rich source of information about culture in both organizations. The first case study was a large national airline, which was spit in to five divisions: cargo, cabin services, marketing, finance and human resources. Based on the model, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers (8 men and 16 women) and 97 questionnaires. The second case study was an investment bank, where three main divisions were studied: broking, corporate finance, and fund management. A total of 20 managers (7 men and 13 women) were interviewed and 58 were analyzed.

The results showed that the airline was overtly gender aware, with a highly developed equal opportunities policy, whereas the bank had largely ignored gender issues. In the airline, women's grievances were channeled through the discourse of equal opportunities and were accepted, up to a certain point, as organizational issues. In the bank there was no such available discourse and women's grievances were individualized. The hegemonic discourses of biological and psychological difference prevailed in the bank to justify the scarcity of women and this was accepted by many of the women themselves. A culture, which represents women as "naturally" wanting to be at home or "exceptional" to work in certain areas -like corporate finance, or at senior levels or combining work and family -, is exclusionary to women. Divisional analysis has been proved to be important and this might have provided some explanations as to why women fare better in some areas of organizations and not others. It has been noticed there were fewer women in the most prestigious, powerful and élite areas of organizations. These cultural barriers are hard to identify however Simpson's study aimed to pull the many different barriers excluding and marginalizing women managers in organizations together under the umbrella of a feminist theory of patriarchal closure.

Desk-based research has shown us how women are classified in organizations and how gender mix has an impact in women feeling comfortable and equal in their workplace. As previously seen mainly in the past international literature, women tend to have low-level positions where they are likely to experience more carrier barriers. Although in an organization having gender equal-opportunities policy women are facing fewer carrier barriers and are more accepted, in non gender-aware organizations they tend to be occupied in less prestigious areas of organizations maybe due to their own will.

4. Participation of women in management in Greece

Kottis, A. (1996) conducted a survey among the largest firms in Greece concerning the participation of women in management. In order to investigate the problem, she used a sample of 280 firms when firms with different names but belonging to the same owners and under the same board of directors, or firms that had ceased operating, were eliminated. She sent a questionnaire, with a cover letter, to the president or the chief executive officer of each firm, asking for information concerning women's participation in management, particularly in the

top managerial ranks, and the person's views about it. Of the 280 questionnaires sent, she received 107 replies. The results showed that women's participation in management, particularly at the higher levels of the hierarchy, is non-existent or at best minimal and symbolic. The answers to the questionnaire sent, indicated that a significant part of the respondents subscribed to preconceptions and gender stereotypes that are likely to raise strong attitudinal and perceptual barriers to women's advancement. It seems that in Greece, as in many other parts of the world, men in the higher ranks of the managerial ladder find it difficult to accept women in management as equals. Although most respondents said that women's performance was not inferior to men's, they held several outdated stereotypes and biases against women in management. With the information that was available it was impossible to establish how these opinions and attitudes were formed and why they were sustained, despite the drastic changes in Greek women's attitudes, aspirations and achievements in recent years. The responses to the questionnaire suggested that the preconceptions and biases against women in management were more severe and overt in Greece compared to other parts of the developed world. In addition, the results showed that the Greek firms did not take full advantage of the talents and possibilities of women, that is, of half of the population of the country.

5. EU position on work and life balance and flexible working arrangements in Greece
The European Community (EC) had promoted the equal treatment of women in employment. Early "Action Programs" adopted by the EC Council of Ministers focused on equal pay and improvement in legal provisions, while other initiatives have strong work and family themes. The EC's *Third Action Program on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 1991-95* suggested that equal employment policies should take into account the interrelationships between work, the family and other aspects of everyday life. In other words, the objective of increasing equality in employment cannot be achieved unless accompanied by action to increase equality in other areas, such as family responsibilities.

The need for reconciling work and family appeared quite intense in Greece as it may help in three of the major problems facing the country. These problems included developments resulting from demographic changes associated with a decreasing birth rate and the ageing of the population; high unemployment rates of about 10 per cent, with particularly high rates among young people; and economic problems resulting from slow growth rates and an urgent need to raise competitiveness. Flexible working arrangements, were suggested as one way of dealing with these issues by the Association of Greek Industries, a body to which most large Greek companies belong (Papalexandris N., 1996).

Flexible work arrangements were common in many small and medium size Greek firms, which were owned, and run by family members. They take a variety of forms and vary across industries. Work at home in the form of *façon*, similar to the French term "outwork", or home working in the UK, was a very common source of employment for women workers sewing clothes or producing handicrafts, jewellery and toys. These workers were paid on a piece basis. About 225,000 people were employed in this way in Greece. Flexibility in tasks was also very common and was considered one of the major advantages of small companies, allowing them to survive and face the competition of larger firms. Part-time employment was established officially in Greece in 1990 with Law 1892, although under the form of the fixed-term contract it had been practiced since 1925 (Papalexandris N., 1996).

It has been acknowledged in Greece that in order to effectively reconcile work and family responsibilities and possibly encourage women to bear more children, a number of policies, including flexible working hours, need to be introduced. Other policies suggested by the General Secretary for Equality are the development of an infrastructure to care for children and the elderly and a change in the prevailing models of male and female roles in the workforce and in the family (Pantazi, 1996).

6. Conclusion
Whereas European Union had promoted equality for men and women, this review of surveys and studies has shown that in practice this was not always applicable in the past years. Large Greek organizations have focused on policies towards work and family, whereas results from research in Greek organizations showed similar results as in the rest of Europe; women's participation in management was unequal compared with men and what is more, stereotyping results in a disapproval of women's abilities in management from their male colleagues. This review of studies and their results offers considerable value to future research. It can be used as a good base, in order to further investigate whether the above results appear still in Greek and EU companies.

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