

**Mitigating the Fallout of Women in the
Workplace:
Dynamics of the First Executive Role, and What
Employers Can Do**



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Background

This study concentrates on why women are not progressing into senior management positions in Ireland/UK, by examining transitional challenges present in the mid-career paths of women in the business sector. The research identifies the factors militating against the advancement and retention of women in the management stream. It identifies the inhibitors/enablers for women graduates at a crucial mid-career time in their first 'executive' or 'management' role when they may not have access to the support or skills to take ownership of their own advancement. The study reviews the main findings of international studies and presents the qualitative data from two focus groups (conducted in-person) and Skype interviews with 9 women graduates who had entered the management stream in Ireland/UK.

International Literature Findings

A number of key factors emerged in the literature that act as inhibitors and (potential) enablers to the advancement of women into senior management posts. These are reviewed under *personal* and *institutional inhibitors* and *personal* and *institutional enablers*.

International Literature - Personal Inhibitors

Research on women's under-representation in the labour market in general, and within management specifically, places a strong emphasis on personal inhibitors, some of which stem from the social environment and conditioning, e.g. adherence to **traditional gender roles** as a woman 'wife/mother' versus man 'breadwinner/worker'. These expectations and stereotypes are still pervasive in society, albeit in a less exaggerated, subtler form. It is no longer 'normal' to see 'working mothers' pilloried in the national media. However, lingering attachment to the underlying beliefs/values surfaces repeatedly in critiques of 'successful women' in politics and business where their ambitions and achievements are questioned and treated differently from their male counterparts.

During the entire education process, the overwhelming evidence is that girls and young women are high achievers. Girls are less likely to drop out of second level education without qualifications, outdo boys in the CAO points race, secure more places at third level, and graduate with better degrees. This competitive edge now extends right up to Doctoral level and is observed across the EU¹.

Despite these apparent advantages and access to unprecedented further educational opportunities, upon entry to the labour market, even as graduates, young women exhibit traits and behaviours that inadvertently disadvantage them, especially in the private sector and highly competitive job market. **Women's lack of confidence and lower career aspirations** are noted in the literature.

A **gender pay gap** among comparable graduates is evident within 6 months of graduating (controlling for employer and degree held). The Higher Education Authority report² confirms that though women are more likely than men to be awarded honours degrees, twice as many men as women were earning over €45,000 as their starting salary. This aberrant

¹ SHE FIGURES 2015 *Gender in Research and Innovation Statistics and Indicators*, European Commission https://ec.europa.eu/research/swafs/pdf/pub_gender_equality/she_figures_2015-leaflet-web.pdf

² Higher Education Authority, *What do Graduates Do? The Class of 2013*, HEA

outcome, which departs from the merit principle, is ascribed to the fact that women do not bargain for a better starting salary (and fringe benefits) to the degree that their male counterparts do³. Thereafter, those women enter the realm of management one or more steps lower on the corporate ladder and will experience '**cumulative disadvantage**'⁴ at each move towards advancement and promotion. What was once a 'small pay gap' is accentuated into a glaring pay discrepancy, multiplied across the labour market.

Further disadvantage materializes from adherence to women's socially desirable (but economically suspect) **values and priorities**. The first of these is the need to prove themselves and match the high standards they set – before considering career moves and upward mobility. It has been shown that there are major differences in how men and women value their **abilities and achievements** – exemplified by the 'stretch factor'. Where a job specifies 10 desirable requirements – men will apply if they hold 3 or 4 of them, while women would feel uncomfortable applying without at least 8 - "*I'll wait until I'm ready...*" whereas for men it is "*I'll give it a go*". Evidence of career mobility reinforces this, indicating that men shift jobs more times than women who display more loyalty to their employers. However this loyalty may also be fuelled by **insecurity and lack of self-confidence**. In its extreme form, women exhibit the '**Imposter Syndrome**'⁵ expressed as "*the more education and professional skills women acquire, the less confident they seem to feel*".

The effects of social conditioning also influence the career choices of women and men in radically different ways. Before leaving school/university, gendered preferences are being explored and expressed: for women to take the '**mommy track (female)**' while men follow the '**careless worker (male)**' route, thereby mapping out radically different management career pathways. The male imperative seeks to further managerial horizons by being mobile, ambitious and embracing challenges. In part, this is helped by **sports achievements**: leading teams and aiming to win. Sport is one of the societal areas in which women hold secondary to non-existent roles – all reinforced by media coverage of sporting events. Affiliations and tribal attachments to local (football, rugby) teams and joining clubs (golf) further separate men from women (since golf is played on different days/events by men/women). This in turn contributes to 'homosocial behaviour' whereby all groups seek to work and socialize with people 'who are like them' "*[A]s white men dominate executive positions, women and racial minorities will not achieve the same levels of promotion from networking due to homosocial reproduction*"⁶.

International Literature - Institutional Inhibitors

Institutional inhibitors represent the 'other side of the coin' from women's personal inhibitors yet they act to reinforce them, with the effect of undermining women's confidence, experience and achievements, leading to discouragement and the message that 'senior executive' roles are for men only. The **lack of mentoring** (formal and informal) is observed to hold women back, while informal (and often strong 'buddying systems') mentoring encourages men to progress. This is often referred to as the '**old boys club**' that helps to perpetuate the '**glass ceiling**' for women. **Homo-social behavior** reinforces the need

³ Babcock, L. and Laschever, S. (2009) *Why Women Don't Ask*, Princeton University Press

⁴ Valian, V. (1998) *Why So Slow?*, MIT Press

⁵ Young, V., (2011), *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Imposter Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of it*, Random House

⁶ Elliott, James R. and Ryan A. Smith, (2004), *Race, Gender, and Workplace Power*, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 69, No. 3, pp. 365-386.

to appoint/retain and progress 'people like us' and extends into dress/speech codes, social activities and general conformance to 'what is acceptable'. Underlying homo-social behavior is the phenomenon of unconscious bias that permeates human behavior and reinforces racial and gender stereotypes.

Interconnected with this lack of mentoring support for young women entrants is the visible **absence of senior women at the apex of organisations**. Such women could act as **role models** for upcoming women in junior/middle management. Sponsorship, increasingly used to extend/overtake mentoring through the active promotion of candidates to key positions, remains in its infancy for women - who may find that the **pool of sponsors** (male and female) is very small.

Management styles also serve to reinforce, or correct/reverse, the impact of personal and institutional factors that hold women back. The adherence to **task-driven management**, in a highly competitive economic environment where **bonuses** (awarded confidentially) are dependent on **'performance' and self-promotional criteria**, can work to women's further disadvantage. Purely **'bottom line' values** and **lack of attention to people skills** by managers can alienate women who may seek a broader range of values, including corporate social responsibility, sustainability and adherence to ethical principals in business life.

Perpetuating an organisational **'long hours' culture**, almost as a badge of honour to reflect commitment to the company, acts to further discourage women (and some men) from climbing the (often steep) management career trajectory. **Lack of work/life balance** is noted extensively as a major reason for women exiting from high-powered executive positions, or never seeking to attain them. Even in companies that parade a range of **WLB policies** (such as part-time working, flexitime, parental leave), individual managers (male and female) tend to regard these as **'off-bounds'** and **incompatible with their managerial careers**.

The combined impact of these inhibitors is seen in the perpetuation of men in senior executive positions and the vulnerable situation experienced by the trickle of women who make it to the top. This review of literature has concentrated on business life but exactly the same inhibitors exist for women entering politics, academe and the public sector. The next section examines whether interviewees observed these inhibitors and how they sought to overcome them, drawing upon their own and institutional enablers.

Personal Inhibitors – by Interviewees

All of the women interviewed testified to the existence of major personal inhibitors that held them back in their careers. Perhaps the most forceful example was cited by one woman who had graduated in 1992. On attending a class reunion in 2015, she observed that among her mixed-sex class, the male graduates had almost all progressed more rapidly as Partners or senior executives whilst her female cohort had **"plateaued"**. When asked the reason for this pattern, she confirmed that **parenthood** had blocked their advancement, even though all her contemporaries (male and female) had remained in the labour market.

Confidence, or lack thereof, emerged as an undercurrent theme under personal inhibitors – reinforced by social conditioning and societal expectations: *"I think I wasn't confident enough at the time. It was my first job, I was very young, I didn't know what was normal"*. The role of **interviewees' mothers** was mentioned. One of them had encouraged her daughter to embark on a 'safe' career path in teaching. She was 'disgusted' that her offspring was abandoning this role by emigrating to a job in the private sector, working from

the bottom up, starting as a PA (to eventually become a Partner in a consultancy company). In contrast, another mother was cited as being instrumental in encouraging all her daughters to get a degree and follow their chosen career path. Still another mother was an ideal 'role model' by being a successful entrepreneur.

A further significant inhibitor, recognised by female managers only at later stages of their careers, was the phenomenon of '**seeking perfection**', driven by the feeling that "*being good isn't enough*". The phenomenon of striving for perfection held across sectors and further contributed to a **lack of confidence** and the '**imposter syndrome**'.

Institutional Inhibitors – by Interviewees

One interviewee mentioned that, apart from one female HR representative present, she had been **interviewed by men-only** for all the jobs she had applied for. She knew her CV was excellent and that she was right for a number of the jobs that she had sought, but felt that her **family status** (as a mother) counted against her. Other women testified to experiencing **class (alongside gender) bias and ageism**, or simply "*I didn't have the right face*". Several women had adapted their accent and/or dress code (for black/navy/grey pant suits) in order to blend into their working environment.

Corporate culture was acknowledged to have been built around **male behaviours and preferences** (which in investment management extended to entertaining clients in strip clubs). In all institutions and sectors, the '**men's club**' was referred to, accompanied by '**long working hours**' and, with few exceptions, a **managerial style** that was less than nurturing towards them. This was felt most acutely by one young woman whose **appraisal feedback** involved finding a 'How to....' book left on her desk (anonymously).

Asked about the presence of **women role models** among senior managers, the women were pushed to recall any that they might emulate, indeed some were turned off by the implication exuded by the few women they observed that "*you could only succeed in this business by behaving like a man*" which held little appeal to the women interviewed.

Despite these negative inhibitors, all of the women interviewed regarded themselves as (justifiably) **ambitious** and all wanted to pursue careers in management. Two had exited to **set up their own businesses**, one in large Irish town, the second in Sydney, Australia. A third had freelanced as a sole trader for an interim period, while her children were young. Interviewees (including those without family commitments) voiced their concerns about the difficulties of **reconciling a demanding management career with being a mother**. All sought some degree of **work/life balance**. This was possible for four of the interviewees by **changing careers** through further study, seeking academic posts and setting up a business. However, a further two had negotiated flexibility by **working from home/four-day week**. Another interviewee, employed in a law firm, had taken a **sideways career shift** into a part of the firm that allowed her to work a reasonable and compatible (with home demands) schedule.

Not all interviewees had attained such positive outcomes. One described how her male boss informed her that he ate breakfast, lunch and dinner at his workplace. Initially shocked, she ended up replicating this behavior before leaving the advertising sector entirely. Another woman found that, despite being her family's sole earner, she was not entitled to full pay whilst on maternity leave, and her family had to survive on a meager State **maternity allowance** for six months. It was clear that this, and other examples of bad management

practice, had contributed to **“the crying game”** in which they were vulnerable and unable to assert themselves. **Feelings of isolation, lack of peer support and sometimes disapproval for any flexibility concessions**, also contributed to this.

Another woman, during her career in investment management, had expressed concern about potentially failing to get every aspect of her (financial) job right in managing pension funds. She was advised to *“think of the numbers as telephone numbers... it’s the only way you will survive”*. She opted out of the sector for a less lucrative academic career, with no regrets.

So what were the Enablers – personal and institutional that helped them remain in the Management stream?

Personal Enablers by Interviewees

The common thread that women expressed was that the following personal enablers led to higher levels of confidence and performance:

Professional Training and Further Education

Interviewees mentioned undertaking Masters courses or other postgraduate studies with a view to furthering their career prospects. For one, taking an MBA had been a challenge but had also given her the confidence she needed – via peer support and recognition. Others had undertaken professional training in confidence-building, negotiation skills and communications courses. Several referred to leadership training programmes that they had embarked upon or were planning to pursue.

Mentoring/Sponsorship

Lack of a mentor was mentioned as a serious disadvantage by several interviewees. A graduate programme trainee in advertising had received considerable initial support from managers/mentors, which she later missed upon rising within the company. A management consultant referred to the loss of her mentor (who experienced a career change and relocation). Mentors could be of either gender but were regarded as making an important contribution towards enhancing mentees’ careers. One interviewee, who had recently changed jobs, entered a mentoring programme in her company and was already planning to mentor more junior women managers.

Career Planning

Taking responsibility for career direction was evident among a number of the women interviewed, most notably those who had leaked into entrepreneurship or exited from their sector. Sometimes this had been forced upon them by redundancy, but in all cases it led to some soul-searching and the need to move into alternative/emergent sub-sectors (like academe, renewable energy, data analytics) which required considerable planning and investment e.g. through researching and networking the sub-sectors they wished to enter or acquiring additional qualifications. For entrepreneurs, it involved producing business plans and believing in their product.

Self-advocacy/Validation

In response to two identifiable ‘female traits’ (a) the need to prove oneself (perfectionism) and (b) feeling that they were not achieving their full potential and never would, a number of interviewees mentioned the enlightening realization that they no longer had to strive for 100% performance. Indeed, these women had learned that this only contributed to holding

them back, once they could see that 50% or 80% were enough (100% would be akin to winning the lottery – not something to even strive for on a daily basis). These women used the terms “self advocacy”, through endorsement by their line manager/mentor, or “validation” from peer support (while studying).

Institutional Enablers by Interviewees

A substantial number of enablers identified by interviewees lay within the remit of employers and companies and, if implemented, would improve the corporate culture and environment for not only female but also male managers:

Collegial/Team Spirit

All of the women interviewed expressed a preference for working in a challenging but also supportive environment that valued team spirit and endeavor but not in a cut-throat manner.

Leading Gender Equality from the Top-down

Interviewees were in no doubt that for women to succeed in their progression to senior management it requires that top-level commitment be signaled publically with steps/targets set out that can be achieved. *“I think the people at the top....they’re usually the people who give the statements, who are interviewed on the media. So they’re the ones that need to be constantly pushing it as an [gender equality] agenda issue”.*

Work/Life Balance – not just on paper

If one inhibitor/enabler could be singled out as most referred to and essential to the pursuit of gender equality in business, it would be work/life balance. However, it was emphasized that this did not mean simply *“having a WLB policy”*. It meant that men and women should be urged to avail and show, by their example, that this is an important element of good corporate practice, contributing to business excellence and the retention/progression of valued staff at all levels.

When asked about why they had opted out, the women who had taken an academic or entrepreneurial exit route from their management careers were emphatic that lack of WLB had been important. Conversely, when pressed to say what might entice them back, practical flexible working arrangements emerged as a potential motivator *“the flexibility is not there....it’s still the presenteeism, it’s still the long hours. It’s still really tough being a mother and working in that sector”.*

While seen as highly desirable for managers with family commitments, WLB was also valued by a younger woman graduate with no partner/children. She was justifiably proud of her employers’ policy and also the level of take-up among employees, including members of her team. Another interviewee, who planned to work from home 1-2 days per week in her new job, cited the good practices of WLB as a reality in IKEA and Marks and Spencer.

More Diverse Role Models among Senior Managers towards Critical Mass (30%+)

The presence of diverse female role models (including those with children) was regarded as highly desirable to point the way for middle/junior managers. Some interviewees referred to the need for women to constitute a critical mass of c. 30% required to radically change the prevailing corporate culture.

Leadership Training for Women

A number of interviewees mentioned the existence of leadership training and its importance. Availability of such opportunities marked out the good employer companies – reflecting their desire to support and develop women for future leader roles.

Supportive Male and Female Bosses

The critique of poor managers crossed the gender divide – neither having any monopoly on good/bad management practices. Women interviewees sought managers who took an interest in their progression – one quoted a good manager as saying how he saw his future progression reflected in how she had progressed. Another referred to her boss allocating one hour per week to each of his staff to discuss their upcoming work programme.

A further excellent example was voiced by a young female manager whose manager had told her *“I’d like to work for you as my manager”* which she found extremely empowering. Other women cited how having good managers brought out the best in them and allowed them to believe that they could reach their potential.

Overall, the implication is that good managers need to develop their people skills along with the emphasis on task and performance that would, in tandem, lead to better business outcomes.

Transparency in Promotion Process and Bonuses

Bonuses were mentioned by a number of women managers as contributing to and accentuating the gender pay gap. This also highlighted the reluctance of women to ask for higher salaries. However, the award of bonuses was only part of the wider issue of lack of transparency in the entire promotion process. In the absence of transparency, women did not believe in the fairness of the system and its ability to ensure that their interests would be upheld.

Sanctions for Homo-social Behaviour

One interviewee raised the issue of homo-social (self-replication) behaviour that excludes women (and racial/ethnic minorities) at entry and thereafter: *“... actually making sure that when people behave inappropriately there is a sanction and it’s seen and it’s visible, so that women can see that they don’t have to put up with sexual discrimination and things that are considered normal in the sector, that aren’t normal, that aren’t acceptable”*.

Unconscious Bias Awareness

An alternative response would be to encourage good employers to adopt Unconscious Bias training to remind all managers of their propensity to prefer to deal with (appoint, retain and develop) people who look/speak and behave like themselves.

Stressing the Business Case for Gender Equality - Diversity increases profits

Another emergent suggestion from one interviewee is often lost in the debate about the ‘costs’ of equality and work/life balance that frequently overlook the costs of not ensuring that they are upheld. By alienating, and subsequently losing, valuable women managers, companies are driving up their costs of recruitment and incurring the loss of human capital. For example, what are the costs of sickness and leave that are triggered by lack of WLB? Equally what are the costs of not appointing/retaining and advancing the most meritorious/talented/able persons – at a conservative estimate 50% of whom are women? If such calculations were ever conducted they would represent an alarming ‘wake-up call’ – that corporate business can no longer afford to ignore.