



**Doctoral School of
Sociology and
Communication
Science**

SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

Katalin Oborni

**The Gender Perspective of Constructing
Managerial Career**

The Gender Regime of a Large Financial
Organization in Hungary

PhD Thesis

**Supervisor:
Nagy Beáta, PhD**

Budapest, 2021

Department of Sociology and Social Policy

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1. Introduction

The dissertation contributes to scholarship on gender regime by advancing the in-depth analysis of mid-level women managers' career trajectories and the role of the gendered organizational processes in it. Data collection is based on an organizational ethnography research conducted at a multinational company in Hungary. The case of mid-level women managers working in the finance sector was chosen to explore what particular organizational processes and how they define and impact managerial career construction.

1.1. The Research Problem

Despite decades of progress regarding the situation of women (Catalyst, 2020; EC Report, 2019), their increased educational attainments, targeted equality policy and work-life balance programs, gender-based inequality is still manifest at workplaces, progress is slow, and women managers still face persistent inequalities during their career development (Padavic et al., 2019; Pryce–Sealy, 2013). Empirical findings confirm that the majority of women managers are concentrated in the lower and middle levels of the organizational hierarchy (ILO Report, 2018; Powell, 2012). Career trajectories have highly gendered characteristics in organizations, offering women managers seemingly similar opportunities to men managers, but still involving numerous manifest and potential obstacles that hinder women's progression

in their careers (Acker, 2012a; Calás et al., 2014; Cuzzocrea–Lyon, 2011; Padavic et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2012). The disproportionate burden of family responsibilities and unpaid domestic chores is one of the crucial factors influencing women’s career development (Acker, 2006a; Carli–Eagly, 2007; Hochschild, 2001; Padavic et al., 2019). In addition, the trend of a ‘culture of long hours of work’, which requires employees to engage in work for as long as possible, and in an uninterrupted way, is also reported to be a salient issue (Hochschild, 2001; Holth et al., 2017; Kvande, 2009; Williams et al., 2013).

While a vast amount of international literature has been produced about the careers of women managers, little is known about high-skilled Hungarian women managers who work at large organizations. Only a few exceptional cases have examined large organizations and demonstrated the importance of the organizational culture and structure in defining managers’ careers chances, work-life balance strategies, and the acceptance of women as managers (see, e.g. Glass–Fodor, 2011; Kalocsai, 2010; Nagy–Vicsek, 2014; Primecz et al., 2014). The case of women managers is also interesting because, although Hungarian society has already had long experience with women managers over the last decades (Fodor, 2003), their position in work organizations is hindered by traditional gender relations and conservative attitude about gender roles in Hungary (Nagy–Vicsek, 2014; Saxonberg–Sirovátka, 2006; Takács, 2008). Finally, there is a lack

of exploratory organizational research that has applied a gender perspective to explore organizational processes focusing on the mid-level managerial hierarchy.

1.2. Research Aims and Questions

A primary aim of the analysis was to understand how contemporary careers are constructed in a large organization where women managers have a long history of working in their professional fields and how it connects to mid-level women managers' career experiences and opportunities. A central intention was to explore the complex organizational (gendered) processes and the mechanisms of the gender regime forming mid-level women managers' career construction and opportunities and identify how and to what extent career construction is gendered. With the purpose of making a link between the organizational processes, constraints and the individual agency and attitudes, I relayed on the combination of Acker's (1990, 2006a) theoretical framework for gendering organizational processes and the capability framework (Hobson–Fahlén, 2009).

Second, it was also an aim to make a novel contribution to the scholarship about the gendered nature of managerial careers in the particular setting of large organizations in Hungary, which will also deepen our understanding of gender equality issues on leadership in Hungary as a particular case of being a post-socialist country.

The third contribution of the thesis relies upon its methodological novelty. The presented dissertation is an example of a detailed organizational study. The dissertation is the first attempt to empirically document what happens in an organization in the finance sector regarding career construction.

Based on the intention to explore how and to what extent career construction is gendered in the organization under investigation and to reveal the gendered organizational processes that define and impact mid-level women managers' career construction, I formulated three main research question and several subquestions:

1. To what extent does the organization support equal opportunities for men and women managers in terms of their careers?

- a) What kind of career development system (tools and programs) has the researched organization established to support managers' careers?
- b) How does the organization under analysis interpret the personal contribution of mid-level managers (e.g. responsibilities and roles) in relation to career construction?

2. How do organizational processes define and impact mid-level women managers' career construction?

- a) What kind of organizational processes define the career activities of managers, and how do these processes influence mid-level women managers' career patterns?
- a) What are the organizational requirements and conditions for career promotion, and how do women managers fulfil them?
- b) How do the organizational processes of career construction impact mid-level women managers' intentions in relation to supporting a family?

3. How do the work-life balance tools offered by the organization reproduce mid-level women managers' capabilities in relation to constructing their careers?

1.3. Methodology

Data collection was based on organizational ethnography research conducted between February 2016 and January 2017 at a multinational financial organization in Hungary. A ten month-long period of participatory observation were implemented.

The empirical basis of the research comprises expert interviews with 3 HR personal, 19 semi-structured career interviews with 17 female managers and 9 career interviews with

8 male managers, the majority of them working at the mid-level of the organization investigated. Additionally, I had shadowing days which means that I spent whole days with 4 female and 2 male managers. Shadowing is not a widely-used research method in Hungary; therefore, I added a subchapter on how shadowing was conducted and how it enriched the picture of women managers' career development derived from the interviews. The third type of sources comes from participant observation of a project work initiated by the HR department of the company. The project sought to examine and improve employees' satisfaction with their work-life balance and lasted for four months. In addition, during the ten months, while I was doing the research, I had other opportunities to gather data by participating in company events and through informal conversation developed between the employees and me.

Following the recommendations of the corresponding literature (Cunliffe–Karunanayake, 2013; Gill, 2011), I reflected on the processes of access to the research site, participants' involvement in carrying out the research plan and collaborations enhanced data collection. I also elaborated on a few ethical concerns relevant when conducting ethnographic organizational research.

2.Introduction of the Findings

2.1. Organizational-level Support for Careers

In the first chapter of analyzing findings, I provided an overall summary of the career-supporting system of the researched organization. This was further detailed with the organizational narrative about individual-level career construction, which was then compared to the actual presence of women and men managers in the various levels of the organizational hierarchy.

The researched organization appeared to have a well-established, unified system of career support, although it was not a standardized process at all, as it involved personalized opportunities for development; therefore, superiors played a defining role in the individualization of careers.

A widely held belief was found that career support is provided on an equal basis for men and women. Three narratives appeared in relation to women managers' career construction. First, the company was presented as an organization where relatively well-balanced gender equity in leadership positions had been achieved, which was often justified by the (seemingly) balanced proportion of women and men managers at the middle level of the organization. Second, it was also a strongly held perspective that the organization does not need to apply positive discrimination to improve equality in relation to career opportunities. The third is the organizational perspective that

women's decision about their career-related activities and work-life balance are based on personal preferences.

All these organizational attitudes strengthened the view that career construction at the company is based on gender-neutral terms. Furthermore, none of the former was understood as entirely negative or discriminative concerning the careers of women managers. Organizational narratives, instead, demonstrated that women were valued and accepted as managers at the middle level of management. Moreover, women managers were perceived to be congruent with managerial positions, which explains why career development was not understood as an organizational process reserved only for men managers.

Contrary to the view on existing gender equity in the number of women and men managers, I found numerical facts that gender imbalance already existed at the mid-level management, where the equal share of power between men and women at the middle level was only seemingly equal. The most definite and visible vertical segregation appeared at the top level. A closer examination of the middle-level organizational hierarchy showed that men managers numerically dominate the upper rank of the middle level, thus comprise a pool that is twice as big for selection into top positions. The lower number of female managers in top positions was not considered problematic, and in general, women's good representation at the middle level justified the perceived equal situation.

In summary, although the proportion of women in leadership positions was acknowledged positively by organizational members, the uneven distribution of power between men and women is strong evidence for the gendered substructure of the organization (Acker, 1990). This underlying assumption of denying the existence of gender inequality in career structured the organizational understanding of inequalities related to women managers (see the similar case presented by Nielsen, 2017). In this way, the whole issue around gender equality is eventually treated as an individual-level problem.

2.2. Organizational Processes in Career Construction

In the second empirical chapter, I explored the more concrete processes forming career construction at the middle level of the organization and looked at how the organizational processes create gender distinctions, hence producing a divergence between rhetoric on and practice in gender.

Consistent with international literature (Benschop et al., 2013; Hochschild, 2001; Kumra, 2010; Nagy, 2016), several differences and constraints have been found that are evidence that gender inequality is embedded in career construction at the mid-level of organizational hierarchy, although managerial careers were not reserved exclusively for men at all. Even women who awarded central value to career development received

support (both from their family and the organization) and was high achieving, experienced numerous difficulties and challenges.

The first subchapter examined how organizational processes define mid-level managers' career patterns. I found that gender differences arose from the beginning of career progression, showing that women and men managers do not experience the same patterns, timing, or decisions in relation to their careers. Therefore, women and men arrive at the upper-middle management level with different career stories and conditions, ultimately affecting career progression towards senior positions.

The differences included the followings. Men did rotation between departments more often than women did, and they take on more positions due to their going through rotations, while the number of positions women managers hold increases due to the number of steps they take to reach the upper-middle level or senior positions. Women managers typically built their careers systematically, and instead of taking rotations at various departments, they preferred to have power-related positions outside of headquarters. Women tended to spend more time in positions compared to men, especially when they had relatively higher-level positions within the middle-level management.

The second subchapter looked at the organizational processes and circumstances that define the opportunities for promotion. The analysis revealed that the higher women

managers were promoted, the more they had to prove they already had the right knowledge, talent, and attitude or professional experience prior to obtaining that particular position. As we can see, women and men managers arrive with slightly different conditions to the upper-middle and senior management level that includes a long career-building process for women, and hence the career trajectory of women managers slows down due to their step-by-step career development. Also, women employ different skills and competencies obtained during the career trajectory and a different power situation. The career pattern of women managers shows that it is more similar to a linear career model, as women are more likely to experience a one-way selection practice, in which they are selected as potential aspirants and receive offers for new positions. In contrast, men managers' career patterns may be described more as a spiralist model (see also Guillaume–Pochic, 2009).

The findings also show that networking and adapting a work-centred culture were relevant and essential determinants of successful career progression. In the case of women managers, it seemed that informal relations were not of the same significance as their performance and professional knowledge. This finding aligns with the literature that explains that women tend to rely less on their networks to prove their commitment to the organization and determination for career development (Carli–Eagly, 2007; Kumra, 2010; Pryce–Sealy, 2013; Williams et

al., 2012). Maintaining an ambitious career was also connected with having a work-centred mind committed to working long hours (Hochschild, 2001; Kumra, 2010). I found that this organizational requirement not only created a problematic situation for women managers because of the need to be responsible for managing family and domestic chores but also in relation to the organizational disbelief in the possibility of reconciling career/work and life, especially when connected to positions at the higher echelons of the hierarchy.

I dedicated the third subchapter to exploring the relationship between women's managerial careers and family. The majority of managers agreed that mid-level management could provide the opportunity to have a desirable career while also having children. Furthermore, they indicated that senior management excludes a preferred way of parenting. The stories of women managers provided clear evidence that the planning to have a family, then having a family is still detrimental for women managers' career construction (even when having older children), which is well-known from the literature about Hungarian women managers (Geambaşu, 2014; Kispéter, 2012; Kalocsai, 2010; Nagy, 2001; Takács, 2013; Tóth, 2005; Primecz et al., 2014). Particular examples reported by women managers include all kind of day-to-day difficulties related to fulfilling the organizational norm of long working hours, the societal expectation of intensive parenting, and the blurred boundaries between work and family

that involved women actively caring for family members while working. The age at which to start a high achieving career ranged from 30 to 35 years, which coincides with the period when women managers often have their first child.

As we see, not all of the women managers wanted to withdraw from their prosperous careers when they had small children. However, despite the variations in their career trajectories, but corresponding with the Hungarian literature (Geambaşu, 2014; Kispéter, 2012; Kalocsai, 2010; Takács, 2013; Tóth, 2005; Primecz et al., 2014), they continuously faced the inherent contradictions between work and life, independent of the age of their children and the position they held, related mainly to the challenge of balancing career/work and family. As a result, three different ways of reconciling career/work and family emerged; all of them are well known in the literature: (1) being on a temporary mommy track, (2) adapting to the long hours working culture while trying to maintain and fulfil the societal expectation of intensive parenting, and (3) continuously maintaining a career with extended parenting and a family life organized around careers (very close to being a superwoman).

Woman's career stories also revealed that they considered themselves ambitious managers, although their perspective of ambition did not include orientation towards upward mobility. Instead, they associated ambition with developing oneself, deepening knowledge, doing high-quality work. They had

concerns and plans about their careers and viewed work as a principal, identity-forming activity in their life. Accordingly, work and career appeared as a central component of their life. In this relation, mid-level management was presented as the level that allows development in work and fulfilling the ideal mother role at the same time. The differences in the way men and women approach ambition clearly signify that career construction is gendered.

I found in the organization a sophisticated career system, support for work-life balance, and a general belief in equal chances (and hence in meritocracy) for developing a career. In this view, those women who do not have ambitious career plans in terms of reaching senior positions seem to make their decisions based solely upon individual preferences (i.e., the lack of power-driven ambition) and with the assumption for having their full capabilities to make decisions. Hence, the patterns and roots of gender disparities, the context of the organizational structure and the societal expectations on gender roles may be challenging to see (Hobson–Fahlén, 2009; Nielsen, 2017; Williams et al., 2012). This explains, in the case of this research too, why I found gender blindness about the situation of women managers in terms of career opportunities. Hence, the notion of gender equality was instead connected to women's individual problems, decisions and life situations - as it was admitted that they face several difficulties along the way of careers advancement.

2.3. Work-life Balance and Career

The third chapter explored the relationship between working culture, work-life balance and career, and pays particular attention to how women managers manage to work long hours. The findings demonstrate that the organization's work-life balance tools reproduce mid-level women managers' capabilities in relation to constructing their careers.

The organization made a great effort to improve employees' work-life balance, at the same time required managers to be available to a great extent. Similarly, to other findings of multinational companies in Hungary (Geszler, 2016; Kalocsai, 2010; Tóth, 2005), overtime and constant availability was an integral part of the organization's working culture to such an extent that the majority of respondents referred to overtime as a natural part of a competitive working culture. Even part-time manager and professional mothers internalized the culture of working long hours. As a consequence, many employees reported difficulties with reconciling work and life, and in line with this, experienced intensive working, constant overtime, and the invasion of work into the private sphere.

The findings show that neither flexible working nor part-time work improves work-life balance per se. It turned out that both the efficiency and use of these tools (part-time work, flexibility) depended on other factors: the level of the employee's position, relations with superiors, previous employment story, and

the social role of being a mother. These results align with the theoretical approach, which argues that the efficient use and opportunity to use work-life balance tools do not depend entirely on individuals' preferences and personal decisions (Hobson–Fahlén, 2009).

I found evidence that the gendered nature of the organization is intertwined with the traditional perspective of society about gender social roles: views about social roles were a strong determinant of the experience and use of organizational work-life balance tools. For instance, men managers were more likely to report difficulties in relation to a heavy workload to better fulfil the role of the 'ideal worker' and rarely talked about not spending enough time with children. However, women managers, including part-time mothers, more often reported feeling guilty due to not spending enough (quality) time with children. Accordingly, the women expressed their need to take advantage of those work-life balance tools, including part-time work and home office, which would increase time devoted to family life. Part-time work also stands as an example of reinforcing the traditional perspective in Hungarian society that it is women's role to be the primary caretaker (Takács, 2013; Hobson et al., 2011).

Similar to the few results that are available about part-time work in post-socialist countries (Formánková–Křížková, 2015; Glass–Fodor, 2011; Primecz et al., 2014), it turned out that

the formal existence of part-time work was limited to a particular group of women. Also, a key finding of the research is that each of the mothers communicated a favourable attitude towards the opportunity to do part-time work, despite their difficulties maintaining an excellent work-life balance. The positive attitudes were connected with the possibility of engaging in intensive parenting. In this way, part-time work provides the opportunity for highly qualified, middle-class women to avoid having to choose between work and taking care of the family, and they can fulfil both social requirements about intensive parenting and the role of a working mother.

Interestingly, the organizational logic that part-timer mothers are not devoted to work was not applied to part-timer women managers and professionals at the middle management level. More precisely, their career plans did not change, and in general, there were no negative outcomes for their careers because of their working part-time. Thus, part-time work was not taken as straightforward gender discrimination in the career advancement for women managers (see similar findings, Benschop et al., 2013). In general, part-time working mothers remained ambitious, career-oriented women on their own terms that did not disrupt the organization norms about how to construct a career. From the perspective of Hungarian society, these women managers are nonetheless considered to be ambitious, career-oriented women, as they returned to their workplaces

earlier than the average Hungarian women. It emerged that part-time arrangements were a way to induce high-skilled women to adapt to ideal worker norms, at least partially at the mid-level organizational hierarchy.

3.Summary of Conclusion

The analysis shows that women managers were not entirely powerless in terms of making progress with their careers at the mid-level of the researched organization; they appeared to be empowered managers who had obtained their leadership positions based on their abilities, performance, and personal preferences. However, it is also valid to argue that many of the organizational career practices and norms, and also social expectations and norms, implicitly and sometimes quite explicitly contributed to the high value awarded to male-type career building, thus the normalization of the masculine experience of reaching top positions (Williams et al., 2012). In line with the previous statement about male-type career building, the men managers in the sample were more likely to have senior positions, despite women managers' relatively equal presence, high level of acceptance, and embeddedness at the middle-level of the organization.

The findings contribute to the literature of 'gender, organizational and work' in three ways. First, the findings add to

the existing literature on analyzing gender regime (Acker, 1990, 2006a; Benschop–Doorewaard, 2012; Nielsen, 2017; Williams et al., 2012). In the case of the present research, a seemingly gender-equal level of middle management was identified, but a gendered organizational substructure was found to exist behind the contemporary career-making practices (Acker, 2006a, 2012a; Williams et al., 2012). Second, the analysis of the gender substructure provided a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind the organizational-level gender processes of career construction (see, i.e., invisible processes) that incorporate the interplay between structure and agency (Nielsen, 2017; Williams et al., 2012). Third, as part of the mechanisms behind reproducing gender regime, strong narratives can be identified that strengthens gendered assumptions of how women managers maintain their career adequately. These strong narratives are connected to the assumed gender roles of women and men in the society: woman's primary caretaker role, women's task/duty to deal with work-life balance issues within the family, women managers not wanting to aspire to top positions. Independently of the organizational level of women managers' positions, the acceptance as leaders was interpreted in the context of the social gender role. In connection with it, women remained ambitious on terms that did not violate the organizational norms about who belongs in senior management ranks. This adaptation implied that the majority of

mid-level women managers interpreted senior management as an undesirable ambition instead of seeing it as an unattainable aim.

Second, the research contributes to the scholarship by providing empirical evidence on the gender regime of a large organization in the post-socialist context of Hungary (second theoretical contribution of the dissertation). It notably offers a critical reflection on the local contextual factors of Hungarian mid-level women managers' career situation and, in relations to it, the workplace inequality. The research documented a discrepancy between the strong organizational-level narrative of equal opportunity and the actual gender differences between careers. Previous studies on organizational gender regimes have already demonstrated that gender inequalities can be portrayed as legitimate inequalities in the organizational culture (Acker, 2012a; Benschop–Doorewaard, 2012; Halrynjo–Lyng, 2009; Tomlinson–Durbin, 2010; Williams et al., 2012). In the present research, a mix of two organizational discourses contributes to the legitimization of women managers' paradoxical career situation, namely that their well-embedded situation at the middle level is also a limitation of their empowerment for further career advancement: the backlash against gender equality policy (Fodor, 1997) and the post-socialist version of business feminism (Fodor et al., 2019). It is a specificity of this Hungarian case that the two discourses are not in contradiction with each other. On the contrary, they contribute to the embeddedness of women

managers at the mid-level organizational hierarchy at the cost of limited career opportunities and the legitimization of the unequal and constrained career construction for women. In addition, both normalize the organizational standpoint that women managers career support should be treated as individual empowerment instead of making steps towards structural changes and making provisions for policy on gender equality.

Finally, the third contribution of the thesis to the literature relies on the organizational ethnography used as the research method. Thus, the study makes a methodological contribution by widening the local experience of conducting organizational ethnography.

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