

**ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS AND THE FEMALE
MANAGERIAL CAREER: SOME EMPIRICAL
EVIDENCE FROM IRELAND**

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ABSTRACT

The dearth of women in senior management positions internationally has been the subject of much debate and research in recent years. While the question regarding the small number of senior female managers has been posed for decades, it has been of particular significance in Ireland in recent years as a result of the emergence of the “Celtic Tiger” and the associated rise in female labour force participation. Building on this background, the current study investigated the impact of organisationally created barriers on female managerial career progression in Ireland in an effort to increase our understanding of this familiar issue. The findings reveal that despite the introduction of employment equality legislation, the rapid changes in human resources (HR) practices, and the changes in social attitudes in Ireland, women believe they are still faced with a set of insurmountable obstacles in the workplace. As a result, many of the female managers in this study feel pressurised into not pursuing their career aspirations of attaining senior management positions in the short to medium term.

INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed unprecedented change taking place both in the world economy and in the composition of workforces globally. According to a recent report from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), more women work today than ever before. The report highlights the fact that in 2006, 40% of the world's 2.9 billion workers were women. This represents a worldwide increase of nearly 200 million women in employment in the 10 years to 2003 (ILO, 2004; ILO, 2007). The increase evidenced globally in the number of women entering the paid labour force is mirrored in the Irish situation. In 1971, Irish women's labour force participation rate was very low, at just 28%. Since the 1970s, the number of women in paid employment in Ireland has been increasing steadily, with the majority of this increase occurring in the last 15 years. In the 1990s, Ireland experienced an economic boom, referred to as the Celtic Tiger. The result was that between the years 1991 and 2001 there was a total labour force growth of more than 30%, with approximately 60% of this accounted for by women (European Commission, 2003). Today, the numbers of women employed in all sectors of the economy have reached numbers never previously experienced, currently standing at a participation rate of almost 59% (CSO, 2007).

Despite the rapid increase in female participation in the paid labour force outlined above, considerable evidence has been gathered internationally that documents a dearth of women in senior executive level positions. There has been a rapid growth of interest over the last two decades in the question, *why are there so few women in senior management?* by many researchers (Adler, 1993; Wirth, 2004). This question, while crudely stated, is unequivocal. As Adler (1995) has resolutely stated, the single most uncontroversial, indisputable statement one can make about women in management is that there are very few of them. An analysis of the statistical evidence of the number of women in managerial positions worldwide highlights the fact that women's increased involvement in the labour force is not paralleled within the management levels of organisations. This is also true in the Irish situation.

The research presented here is part of a larger study investigating the career progression choices of women at the middle-management level in Ireland. While the extant literature abounds with studies attempting to address this question, there is a paucity of qualitative studies that explore the experiences of women at middle-level management positions. Studies have focused on samples of women at senior management levels (see Linehan, Scullion, & Walsh, 2001; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich, 2003) and at all management levels (Kirchmeyer, 2002; O'Neill & Bilimoria, 2005; Schneer & Reitman, 2002). While a limited number of studies have specifically examined women in middle-level management positions (Cooper Jackson, 2001; Veale & Gold, 1998), none of them have examined the Irish context. Research on women at this middle-management level is, therefore, timely, specifically because it is

individuals at this organisational level who are the successors to the current senior executives.

This article is based on one of the key themes to emerge from the data, namely, the impact of two particular organisationally created and maintained obstacles that negatively impact on female managers' career progression. The first is the long work hours culture in which management levels operate. The second is organizational policies, and in particular, work-family balance policies. This article begins by briefly examining the Irish context, which forms the rationale for this study, then identifies the methodology employed to conduct this study. The results are then examined, and a discussion of the key findings aims to illustrate how these organizationally created obstacles impact on female managers' career progression in Irish organisations.

THE IRISH CONTEXT

It is clear that women are not progressing into senior managerial positions at rates comparable to those of their male counterparts in Ireland. In the only comprehensive study of managers in Ireland, which surveyed 6,000 managers, women comprised just 8% of chief executives and 21% of senior managers, despite a female participation rate of 50% (Coughlan, 2002). More recent data examining the occupational employment categories of workers in Ireland (CSO, 2007) highlight the fact that women comprise just one third of the broad category of managers and administrators. Statistics such as these have led to considerable, sustained academic interest regarding the low number of women reaching senior managerial positions (Adler, 1993; Davidson & Burke, 2000; Oakley, 2000; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004; Wajcman, 1998; Wirth, 2004).

Research on this issue is of particular interest in the Irish context as a result of a number of key factors, including the following: the fundamental changes in the numbers of women entering the paid labour force since the advent of the Celtic Tiger; the change in social attitudes; the rise in foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ireland since the 1990s and the subsequent emergence of multinational companies (MNCs) as significant employers; and the introduction of employment equality legislation. During the decade of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland experienced unprecedented economic performance, resulting in both a significant increase in the number of women working in the paid labour force (54%; CSO, 2008) and the arrival of near full employment (Heraty & Morley, 2003). In this tight labour market, the retention and development of managerial talent became a particular focus of organisations, with a resulting increase in the volume of management development taking place (Garavan, Hogan, & Cahir-O'Donnell, 2009). The Celtic Tiger economy also resulted in Ireland experiencing exceptional growth in FDI in manufacturing and services. Ireland was classified in the early 2000s as the most globalised country in the world because of the prominence of foreign-owned MNCs (Kearney, 2002). In 2003, Ireland was seventh in the global league of

countries attracting FDI (UNCTAD, 2004). As the MNC sector has expanded, foreign-owned MNCs have imported employment relations practices with a country of origin effect (Collings, Gunnigle, & Morley, 2008). These MNCs have been able to introduce their own preferred HR practices into Irish firms (Geary & Roche, 2001), resulting in an increase in the use of sophisticated HR practices (Turner, D'Art, & Gunnigle, 2001). Coupled with these developments is the recognition of the need to strategically manage an increasingly diverse workforce to raise organisational effectiveness and efficiency (Benschop, 2001; Johnson & Rivera, 2007; Ng, 2008).

With the introduction of employment equality legislation such as the Equality Act 1998/2004, the Maternity Protection Acts 1994/2004, and the Anti-Discrimination Pay Act 1974, women may not be discriminated against in relation to access to employment, promotion opportunities, payment for work done, conditions of employment and training, and work experience. This has provided Irish women with a series of workplace rights. Interestingly, however, the proportion of women in senior managerial positions has changed little since 1971, when women comprised just 4% of all company directors and managers. When we take all these developments together, this provides an interesting backdrop against which to investigate the perceptions and experiences of female managers.

METHODS

Sample and Data Collection

Thirty middle-level female managers were selected for inclusion in the study. While it would have been interesting to include the perspectives of male respondents also, it was felt that this would have been possible only if a case study had been the chosen methodology. As our aim was to gather data from a variety of organisations, it was deemed to be more feasible to concentrate on female managers only. Due to the difficulties involved in establishing a sample frame for the sample, initially the *Irish Business* top 100 companies list provided the starting point for targeting interviewees. Initially, an introductory letter was sent to the chief executive officers (CEOs) of these companies, detailing the criteria for inclusion in the study. The criteria for inclusion in the study were as follows. First, the female respondents had to be part of the *middle-management team*. The specifics of this were that the women had to have a *direct reporting relationship* to the senior management team and also had to have people reporting to them. Second, they had to have held this position for at least *two years*. This was deemed as an important criterion, as the two-year period would have allowed the women time to appreciate the dynamics associated with promotion to the senior management team. Seventy letters were sent in total. Twenty-four responses were received. This figure was then augmented by the use of snowball sampling, which, given the absence of any adequate population frame to sample, seemed the most feasible

method for gathering data. Snowball sampling is a technique for finding research subjects where one subject gives the name of another subject, who, in turn, provides the name of a third, and so on (Vogt, 1999).

The thirty female middle-level managers who participated in this study were representative of a broad spectrum of industries including software, pharmaceutical/chemical manufacturing, financial services, the hotel and hospitality industry, electronic component manufacturing, recruitment consultancy, international retailing, telecommunications, the leisure industry, computer manufacturing, education, the Irish Civil Service, and the not-for-profit sector. This number allowed the generation of a rich data set potentially reflecting different perspectives and experiences. In relation to the marital and familial status of the respondents, 16 were married, 11 were single, and 3 were either separated or divorced. Fourteen women had children and the remainder did not. Women ranged in age from 25 to 60 years (see Table 1). In-depth face to face interviews were chosen as the most appropriate data collection tool. All 30 interviews were recorded on tape. Direct quotations from the interviewees are included in the article in order to give new insights into the working experiences of female middle-level managers.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed by means of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The collected data were coded, allowing the researchers to retrieve and organise data by devising a system for categorising the various chunks in order to cluster the segments relating to a particular research question or theme. Coding involved indexing the interview transcripts, reducing the data-equivalent classes and categories, and in some cases expanding and teasing out the data in order to formulate new questions and levels of interpretation. Coding the data according to categories (such as work-family conflict) was essentially a data reduction task. Segmenting and coding the data according to categories allowed the author to characterise what each stretch of the interview was about in terms of general thematic content. These categories allowed a number of sub-categories to be generated and utilised in segmenting the data. Some of the more detailed codes came from the respondents' own words, for example, codes like "work-life balance," "support," and "flexibility." These more detailed sub-categories overlapped with one another; the same sub-category was applied several times in a single interview, and the same segment had more than one code attached to it. These overlapping sub-categories are characteristic of code maps of qualitative data. In conversational talk, when we segment the data by attaching codes, topics run into one another and we may need to concern ourselves with multiple issues simultaneously (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). When the authors had decided which aspects of the data to tag with codes, codes of varying degrees of generality were used to provide links between particular segments of data and the categories that were used in order to conceptualise those segments.

Table 1. Demographics of the Sample

Industry sector	Job title	Marital	Children	Age
Private sector: education	Assistant principal	Married	Yes	35-39
Pharmaceutical	Learning and development manager	Single	No	25-29
Call centre	Call centre manager	Married	Yes	30-34
Hospitality	Regional HR manager	Single	No	30-34
Aeronautics	HR manager	Single	No	25-29
Financial services	IT manager	Married	Yes	30-34
Accountancy	Practice manager	Single	No	30-34
Business advisory service	Manager	Single	No	30-34
Telecoms	Marketing manager	Married	Yes	35-39
Public sector: health	Development manager	Separated	Yes	45-49
Public sector: health	Finance manager	Married	Yes	40-44
Leisure	Centre manager	Divorced	Yes	50-54
Retail	Store manager	Single	No	25-29
Manufacturing: electrical	Production/quality manager	Married	No	35-39
Manufacturing: computer	HR manager	Single	No	35-39
Telecoms	Project manager	Married	No	30-34
Public sector: library	Manager	Single	No	55-59
Finance	Customer service manager	Married	No	35-39
Recruitment	Commercial manager	Single	No	35-39
Call centre	Account manager	Married	Yes	35-39
Voluntary sector	Regional manager	Married	Yes	35-39
Manufacturing: electronic	Project manager	Married	Yes	35-39
Public sector: voluntary	HR manager	Married	No	30-34
Hospitality	Six Sigma manager	Single	No	30-34
Manufacturing: electronics	Supply chain manager	Married	Yes	40-44
Financial services	General manager	Married	Yes	35-39
Public sector: environment	Manager	Married	No	35-39
Software	Finance manager	Separated	Yes	40-44
Finance	Manager	Single	No	40-44
Public sector: education	Senior post	Married	Yes	45-49

RESULTS

The impact of the senior manager in the organisation on the development of the organisational culture was noted by the majority of the female managers in this study. It was clear that the style and personalities of men in the most senior management positions essentially create the organisational culture that permeates all

levels. In this study, the managers identified both positive and negative effects of this situation, with more negative than positive accounts. The impact of organisational culture on female career progression was particularly evident in the long work hours and “presenteeism” culture of the organisations in which the respondents worked. Respondents indicated the need to be “present” in the office, rather than to be “productive.” This practice of spending longer hours at work than are contractually required was a feature of managerial life for the majority of the managers in this study, as illustrated in the following quotations:

Yes, there would be certain expectations that you are at your desk early in the morning till late in the evening. The senior management themselves do work very hard, and if they are sitting at their desk at 8 p.m. . . . , it is very difficult for one of us to get up and walk away from our desks, when they know the work has to get done. So I think at times that level don't understand what kind of influence they are having. I come in every morning between 7 am and 7:30 a.m. That is habit, but it's so much of a habit now that my phone starts to ring at 7:15 a.m. . . . because people know I am at my desk. And I am not the only one. It's almost like if you come in now at 8:30 a.m. you are late, even though you don't start officially until 9 a.m. . . . I mean I've booked my holidays for ages, but I have to come back two days before I am officially due back, for compulsory training. I know they said, don't bother coming, but it is compulsory attendance. It happened by mistake, I believe, but nobody has come to me and said, “We will do everything we can to move it.” (manager, business advisory service)

I guess it's the kind of company where you are not just working 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is expected that you work additional hours outside of core hours. I used to work phenomenal hours years ago. Now I would start about 8:45 a.m. and I would be here until around 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. But generally what I do is bring my laptop home in the evenings. I would work at home for an hour or two, every night. (project manager, manufacturing telecoms organisation)

The standard time for a manager would be from 8 a.m. till 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. You could not be seen to arrive at the start time of 8:30 a.m. or leave at the supposedly end time of 5 p.m. That's frowned on. You also have to be available to take conference calls from the U.S. at times that suit them, not you, so your day can be as long as after getting home at 7 p.m., then taking a call for an hour at 10 p.m. (finance manager, computer software organisation)

The impact of the CEO in this regard was particularly evident in the discussions with the respondents, as highlighted in the following response:

A guy on the senior management team recently went to the CEO and said his wife was having a baby in April. The CEO's response was . . . “Well, you're going to be in Germany at that time—there is a meeting on.” And the guy said, “Well, that's why I'm coming to talk to you. I won't be able to attend the meeting because I will have to be here because of the baby.” The CEO couldn't understand why the manager couldn't go over to the meeting and

come back the following day. I think the senior managers are always aware that they don't want to upset the CEO, so I think they feel they had better not be seen taking too many holidays, or finishing early too many days. The CEO expects people to lead by example. He himself, even when he's travelling—if he arrived back at the airport at 4:30 p.m. after being away for a couple of days, he would come into work. He would then work for a couple of hours catching up. That culture then has been created within the company. (HR manager, aeronautics organisation)

The impact of senior managers on the creation of this type of corporate culture was again noted by the interviewees. As one respondent highlighted, if senior managers are sitting at their desk at 8 p.m., they are creating the long work hours culture, because, as she indicated, "It is very difficult for one of us to get up and walk away from our desks." She added: "I think at times managers at that level don't understand what kind of influence they are having." The respondents indicated that this type of corporate culture acts as a barrier for women, more than for men, who are seeking to progress to the senior management team.

The women highlighted situations in which it was impossible for them, or for other female managers in their organisations, to meet the significant time demands placed on them as ambitious managers, once they had children. Interestingly, this was true both for the women who already had children and for those who did not yet have children. The women without children were already very concerned about how they would meet the requirement of the long work hours culture for career progression, once they had children that needed to be collected from a crèche or a childminder, as represented in this quotation:

There is no way I could do my job if I had children. Absolutely no way. I'm 31 years of age and I'm in a long-term relationship and I'm going to get married soon, but there is no way I could do what I am doing now if I had a child. I don't think it is possible to balance the two in the manufacturing business in Ireland. I don't know anybody who does it successfully. What would I do if I had a child who was in primary school and who was off for the summer? I wouldn't be able to drop off or pick up a child in my current role. If I dropped off a child to a childminder at 8 a.m. I wouldn't get to work until 9 a.m. and I wouldn't be leaving until 6:30 p.m. or 7 p.m. So it's just impossible. (learning and development manager, pharmaceutical organisation)

Interestingly, both the respondents with children and those without children argued that they could not see how working the number of hours required by an organisation for a senior management role could be compatible with having a family and young children, for a woman. The expressions used by the respondents in this regard were "impossible," "not compatible at all," "don't know how you would do it," and "it's an impossibility." The respondents also noted that they were expected to be on call while at home, to take work home, and to take calls from overseas in the evenings, thus extending the working day beyond the normal 6 p.m., often to 8 p.m., as highlighted in the following response:

Your availability is key. With our company when you are at a certain level, you would be liable to get a call at 10 p.m. on a Friday night, or Saturday or Sunday, if there was an issue that came up. It's almost a sense of that you are always available for the company. All managers have blackberries, supplied by the company. (marketing manager, telecoms organisation)

The second theme to emerge from the findings relates to organisational policies, and in particular to promotion policies and work-family balance policies. Almost all of the respondents (26) identified "visibility" to the senior management team, whose members make the promotion decisions, as critical in achieving promotion. The female managers in the current study believed that the lack of a transparent, objective promotions policy works to the detriment of women, more than to that of men. As one of the respondents said, "If you want to be promoted, you need to be visible. The senior management team need to know who you are." This point was raised by women both across all industry sectors and across the private and the public sectors. The respondents indicated that despite the operation of strict guidelines in the public sector regarding appointments, those who are not known to the senior management team are unlikely to get promoted. The following quotes are representative of their views on this issue:

When you think about it, if you are working on a lower management level, and say you were aspiring to a higher management level, all of the decisions are made at the senior management level. If you are not somebody that the senior managers know, or that they are aware of, or . . . they have worked with you, they have some sort of interaction with you, your name is never going to crop up. And it's not as if you are going to have the opportunity to participate in any of the meetings they are going to be at. So if you want to be promoted, you need to be visible. They need to know who you are. There is no point in doing a great job if nobody knows you are doing it. (project manager, manufacturing telecoms organisation)

The whole visibility thing is a big issue. If you are not seen to be there, you are not seen to be committed. (practice manager, accountancy organisation)

Taking time out of a career for maternity leave was also viewed by the respondents as being detrimental to the career of female managers. This is because women are not visible for the period while they are on maternity leave, and this lack of visibility during the "promotion race" delays career progression. One respondent succinctly captured the views of the respondents on this issue: "That's something that guys don't have to think about. If they do have a child, they might take a week or two off—but not six months." Almost all (28) of the respondents clearly indicated that a conflict exists between their careers and their home life, and that this is a more significant issue for them than for their male colleagues. All the women viewed balancing family life and a management career as essentially a "juggling act," one that, because of the stereotypical attitudes displayed by society, affects women much more than men. The effect of this balancing act, they

believe, works to the detriment of female managers. For male managers, balancing work and family has “nowhere near the same” level of impact, as illustrated in the following responses:

When you take a senior position you need to be available 24 hours a day. There is no two ways about it. Lots of meetings take place at 8 a.m. or 7 p.m., so if you have family responsibilities you just can't attend those meetings. As your children get older it gets easier in the sense that you don't have the school runs and the kids are better able to look after themselves. So it does have a huge impact. (development manager, public sector health organisation)

When the kids get too old for a childminder it's difficult. I don't want to leave them on their own either. I have never taken term-time. I'm not even sure if term-time leave is something that's negotiable or not. It is very attractive when you have a family. You want to spend the couple of months of the summer holidays with them. But I don't know how practical it would be work-wise for me. I'm not sure. I would lose a good 10 weeks of what is happening here, and it's not easy to make up for that because so much happens and you are out of the loop. Even six months later you are saying, “When did that happen?” and it happened when you were away. You'd lose your relationship with everybody and you are building it again when you come back. It's hard work building up those relationships. They need consistency more than anything. I don't know what people would say if I took two months out. Half of them would probably say she has a great life, she's not a bit interested really in moving up. (account manager, call centre)

The pressures felt by the female managers in this study to find a way to manage both their work and their family life in a way that is acceptable to all the parties involved (namely, themselves, their partners/husbands, and their children) were clearly evident. Over half of the women with children (16) indicated that they would like to work a reduced working week to enable them to spend more time with their children. They strongly believed, however, that working a reduced week of any kind was taken by the decision makers in their organisations to indicate that they did not have “the commitment to move to senior management.”

Continuing with this issue, the findings in this study reveal that the majority (85%) of the respondents believe that although work-life balance policies and parental leave policies are available in their organisations, it is essentially frowned on for middle and senior-level managers to avail themselves of these arrangements. Respondents noted that although family-friendly policies were a feature of their organisations, the CEO “frowned on” “his” managers availing of these policies. The respondents articulated a fear of negative outcomes from choosing to avail of work-life balance policies. The visibility issue was raised once again by the respondents in relation to making use of these policies. Twenty percent of the female managers identified that the nine months away from work when on maternity leave, like the 14 weeks out of the office when taking parental leave in a block, are detrimental to career progression. They strongly believe this is because “you

are forgotten about,” you “miss out on so much,” and you “have no visibility whilst on leave,” and this overtly affects your career progression opportunities. Respondents also believe that this lack of visibility places them at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to their male counterparts, who cannot take maternity leave and who do not take parental leave. This is an important issue, as the female managers in this study strongly believe they are disadvantaged in their careers simply by taking maternity leave, as a result of the criticality of visibility in the promotion race.

The long work hours culture and the pressures of trying to achieve a balance between work and home life resulted in over half of the interviewees (17) *not* actively pursuing promotion to the senior management team. The respondents highlighted that while they had previously considered attaining this career goal, they no longer wished to work toward it. These managers believed it was easier to remain at their current level in their current organisation and had no plans to move to the senior management level.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

While many of the findings in this study echo previous research, which emphasises that female managers face a series of organisationally created and maintained obstacles to progress in their careers, the most interesting fact is this: despite the myriad of changes that have taken place in the Irish labour market in recent years, as outlined earlier in this article, female managers in Ireland are still encountering indirect discrimination in the workplace. Our findings reveal that a culture of long work hours exists for those in both middle- and senior-level management. The emphasis on long work hours was viewed as being particularly problematic for women, more than for men, by the respondents in this study. As a direct consequence of the work-life conflict experienced by women, they are less able to comply with the requirement to work long hours than their male counterparts. Work-life balance policies that are designed to assist with managing conflict between career and home have been found in this study to actually add to the conflict for female managers, rather than to assist with the elimination of the conflict. Availing of work-life balance policies is perceived as being interpreted by senior management as reflecting a lack of career commitment. Women, therefore, are unwilling to avail themselves of these policies, due to the likelihood of a negative impact on their careers. Additionally, those in middle and senior managerial roles (mainly men) do not take advantage of these policies, essentially negating their usefulness, and those who do take advantage of them can be dismissed by senior managers as less serious than their male colleagues, which effectively takes women out of the competition for senior positions. Our findings also highlight the fact that the majority of organisations have male senior managers, thus reinforcing a culture that, regardless of being family-friendly, is not *female-friendly*. Organisations should be cognisant of this element of their

organisational culture, regardless of its intentionality, as it is likely to result in retention issues among managerial employees.

One of the most unsettling issues to arise from the interviews is that all but two of the female managers who did not yet have children were already concerned about the effect of having children on their career progression. Despite the advances in Ireland in equality legislation and the changing HR practices brought about by the arrival of MNCs, particularly the introduction of work-family policies and diversity training, the respondents in this study expressed the view that looking to the future, they believed they would face significant career obstacles due to the incompatibility of having children and the established organisational culture of long working hours for those in senior management positions. The majority of the respondents believed that in the future, their careers would indeed be negatively affected, as “only so much balancing of work and home” could be achieved once they were in a senior management position. It is clear that the realities of work-life balance are still not being addressed by organisations, despite the rhetoric of HR practice and policies. The result is that the women in this study feel pressurised to the extent that they believe the answer is effectively to impose a glass ceiling on themselves, by virtue of their decision not to pursue senior management careers in the short to medium term. Significantly, this decision actually perpetuates the prevalence of stereotypical attitudes toward men’s roles in child rearing and housework. While women continue to allow the unequal division of household and childcare duties, and to downgrade their career aspirations, they are effectively responsible for perpetuating these attitudes.

In Norway, in 2008, a new global record was set. Norway now has, at 40%, the highest proportion of female nonexecutive directors in the world, an achievement engineered by the introduction of a compulsory quota (Kothari, 2008; Roberts, 2008). After many years of voluntary compliance, the Norwegian government introduced a quota system for nonexecutive directorships in publicly quoted companies, with penalties attached. Only 12 companies failed to comply with this new quota, and they now risk dissolution. In Norway, in contrast to Ireland, the law allows for such affirmative action. Interestingly, the quota was presented not as a gender-equality issue but more as one driven by economic necessity. The government argued that diversity creates wealth, and therefore the country could not afford to ignore female talent (Reier, 2008). It would be interesting to see if a similar system would yield similar results in Ireland. It is clear from the findings of our study that despite many attempts at introducing equality for women over many years, both through legislation and through the adoption of progressive HR policies and practices, Ireland still has much work to do in this area. The reality remains far removed from the rhetoric. The voices of the female managers in this study illustrate the difficulties they still encounter in today’s “diversity aware” organisational environment and remind us that there is still much that organisations can do to address the managerial imbalance.

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