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Women and inter-organizational boundary spanning: A way into upper management?[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the presence of gender segregation in Spanish exporting firms. Both women's access to managerial positions (vertical segregation) and women's achievement of managerial roles that are socially associated with communal attributes (horizontal segregation) are tested. We argue that boundary-spanning (henceforth, boundary management) in export interfirm relationships benefits from relational and communal skills and therefore could not only offer an opportunity for women to gain access to management positions but also put them at risk of falling into a rut before achieving other control-based managerial roles. This empirical study examines the characteristics (personal and firm-level) of Spanish female managers in charge of export management through independent channels. A multivariate analysis has been performed to compare female managers with male managers both in boundary management and in the position of finance director, a control position closer to a socially stereotyped masculine role. The results show that women have slightly higher access to boundary management jobs than finance management jobs, as well as a significantly lower promotion time than male colleagues, but they also corroborate that there is a smaller percentage of women than men in any management positions, with female managers working in younger firms with fewer resources for export activity.

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1. Introduction

Following the question of whether organizations and occupations are gender-neutral or not, debate on access for women and men to managerial roles is a much-discussed but incomplete question in management literature (Acker, 1990, 1994; Lewis, 2014). From a classical feminism perspective, gender stereotypes are considered barriers for equal opportunities that affect women's chances of rising in corporate executive hierarchies; as a result, women are excluded from opportunities related to managerial roles that are identified with 'male' characteristics (Schein, 2007). Most recently, post-feminism has moved the focus to the way women and feminine points of view are being included in contemporary organizations, giving value to the skills and leadership styles

associated with feminine traits and raising the notion of feminine management (Kelan, 2008; Lewis, 2014). This discourse derives from a liberal feminism of 'difference' (in contrast to the original liberal feminism of (masculine) 'sameness'), which considers the ways in which masculine and feminine traits in organizations can potentially complement each other (Calas, Smircich, & Bourne, 2007).

As women have increasingly moved into managerial positions, vertical and horizontal segregation has been densely reported by the literature. Several reasons have been identified to occupational segregation in management jobs. Because jobs are thought to be gender typified based on requisites that are believed to be gender-linked (Heilman, 1983, 1995), different management styles have been identified with characteristics assigned to societal gender stereotypes¹ (Calas & Smircich, 1993; Fletcher, 1994). The masculine norm has dominated much of the gendered management literature, which emphasizes the need for individuals to build a

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¹ Gender stereotypes refer to social beliefs about the characteristics and attributes associated with each sex (Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968).

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masculine identity to fit the organizational requirements of control, competition, leadership, or success orientation. Therefore, female managers confront the existence of these stereotypes, which generate a conflict between social expectations of female gender roles and the traditional managerial role, which is stereotyped as masculine.

In contrast to this masculine style of management, a new ideal of manager has emerged in recent years that enhances a range of abilities and skills socially associated with women such as empathy, affectivity, sensitivity or assistance (Adkins, 2001; Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Kelan, 2008; Mueller & Dato-on, 2013; Rosener, 1990). Such a feminine management style is particularly welcomed in contemporary organizations that require less hierarchical and more flexible, intuitive, communicative, cooperative, and participative leaders to face markets in constant flux (Pounder & Coleman, 2002; Stelter, 2002).

As a result, the traditional masculine-stereotyped manager, based on hierarchical power and control, would be particularly adapted to intra-organizational management settings (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). However, in current inter-organizational contexts, control and authority are not deemed hierarchical. In these contexts, boundary-spanning (henceforth, boundary management) is characterized by (1) direct involvement in managing the relationship with the partner, entailing intense and extensive ongoing interaction with staff and managers of the other party (Friedman & Podolny, 1992) and (2) serving as the interlocutor in the relationship (Luo, 2006), making decisions about operational and strategic issues. As a result, interfirm management gives primacy to flexibility, communication, mutual sacrifice, trust, relationship commitment, and the need to share information among partners as keys to the success of collaborative agreements (Sahin & Robinson, 2002). These attributes have been found to be closer to managerial traits that have been more commonly associated with women than men (Burke & Collins, 2001; Maxwell, Ogden, & McTavish, 2007; Trinidad & Normore, 2005). However, to our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence that specifically analyses the influence of gender in accessing inter-organizational management positions.

Considering such a gap, this paper is intended to analyze the occupational vertical and horizontal segregation that is currently in place in Spanish organizations where both control-based and boundary management positions coexist. We have chosen the international inter-organizational context for three main reasons. Firstly, the role of gender in international trade has scarcely been explored (Orser, Spence, Riding, & Carrington, 2010), so results will provide a better understanding of the role of gender in export management, particularly in the SME context. Secondly, traditional export management, i.e., without attention to the direct management of a relationship with another independent company, has been largely considered a male occupation because it includes business strategy and sales responsibilities (Theodosiou & Katsikea, 2007) and demands skills traditionally considered masculine, such as high technical knowledge about product design, specifications, features, and manufacturing (Katsikea & Skarmeas, 2003); but before such a view, the inclusion of relational skills required to manage foreign interfirm relationships introduces a new dimension to the export management position, enhancing the suitability of a feminine style of management. Thirdly, export arrangements are among the most common inter-organizational relationships, a fact that could make this study's findings more generalizable to other positions in which interfirm relational skills are needed.

To analyze the impact of gender stereotypes when accessing managerial positions, we first compare women's access to both finance and boundary management positions. The former is a control-based post whereas the latter is analyzed regarding a particular type of inter-organizational relationship, namely, export

management in firms exporting through independent channels. To identify potential causes of segregation, we examine (1) the characteristics of women and men in management positions, specifically education and experience and (2) the features of their companies, specifically firm age, firm export experience, and the size of the teams engaged in export activities. Our quantitative analysis is based on an online questionnaire administered to SMEs located in Andalusia (Spain) that export regularly and employ independent channels. In our main findings, we observe that women face vertical segregation but also exhibit some characteristics that suggest horizontal segregation. While facing a significantly lower admission to any management jobs, women exhibit slightly greater access to boundary management positions than to finance director positions, have a shorter promotion time to export management than their male colleagues, but manage smaller teams than men do and exhibit less experience in export activities.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The theoretical framework is presented in Section 1, including a literature review of gender segregation in management positions; research hypotheses are developed building on a Social-Role Theory point of view. Section 2 includes the methodological approach followed in our empirical study. In Section 3, univariate and multivariate results are discussed. Conclusions and research limitations are summarized in Section 4.

2. Theoretical framework

Given the controversial debate on the interactions between gender, gender role orientations, and management styles, we use Social Role Theory as a framework (Eagly, 1987). This theory postulates that while managers' behaviour is primarily affected by their formal organizational role, gender affects them in two ways that promote segregation: on the one hand, people react to managers in terms of social gendered expectations; on the other, managers have internalized gender roles that affect their own behaviour in organizational settings (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). As a result, we postulate that the 'think manager, think male' association is still embedded in organizational structures, which is detrimental to women accessing any management role and leads to vertical segregation. Vertical segregation or 'glass ceiling' refers to difficulties of women in accessing top senior positions in the management hierarchy, leaving them stuck in lower managerial levels than men (Instituto de la Mujer, 2008; ISOTES, 2012; Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Thornton, 2012). Moreover, the relational attributes associated with boundary management could increase women's access and promotion to these sorts of managerial jobs compared to intrafirm positions related to hierarchical power and control, which leads to horizontal segregation. Horizontal segregation has also been reported, particularly in large firms where control-based management jobs are held by men, while women are stuck in administrative posts and face barriers to moving laterally into more powerful managerial positions; this point could be of a particular significance because experience in such control-based, powerful positions could be key for advancing to the senior jobs that feed vertical segregation (Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 2002; Lyness & Heilman, 2006). Finally, gender segregation is expected to be particularly entrenched when the firm is more consolidated and larger (Berenguer, Cerver, de la Torre, & Torcal, 2004).

2.1. Gender influence on management styles

Managers play organizational roles defined by their hierarchical position in the firm but simultaneously behave under the constraints of their socially based gender. As a result, the influence of

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