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Women and leadership: Gender barriers to senior management positions

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to show the representation of women in corporate leadership positions. It also aims to identify the key factors that determine the lower presence of women in senior management, as well as policies to achieve gender balance in decision-making positions.

Design/methodology: In order to show the representation of women in senior positions, the information contained in the European Commission database *Women and men in decision-making* has been analyzed. This database contains information on the presence of women in key positions in the largest publicly-listed European companies. The analysis has been completed with the *Economically Active Population Survey* of the Spanish National Statistics Institute and Catalyst census, including *Fortune 500* companies. A literature review was also conducted to find factors explaining the current situation of women in decision-making positions and to propose strategies that promote more women in senior management. The literature review was carried out by means of searches in Google Scholar and in the databases *ABI/INFORM Global*, *Emerald* and *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences*, which permitted the analysis of several journals.

Findings: This study highlights the gender imbalance in decision-making positions. Most barriers to senior management are related to gender stereotypes. Therefore, we propose combining short-term measures to provide the required support for women in order to access

management positions with other long-term measures to boost analysis and the learning process throughout society.

Originality/value: The research assesses the magnitude of the gender imbalance still present in leadership positions today. It also highlights the need for short- and long-term measures.

Keywords: Leadership, Gender balance, Senior management, Career development

Jel Codes: J24, J71, M12

1. Introduction

Both gender differences and leadership are topics on which a large body of literature exists. However, the combined analysis of both phenomena has not been as common. It could be said that serious studies and scientific research in relation to this topic were first developed at the beginning of the 1970s. In this work, we intend to analyze the association of these two phenomena, focusing our interest on “female leadership”, considering both whether a special female style of leadership exists and the possible barriers that women must overcome to reach positions of maximum responsibility in organizations.

It is interesting to observe how in any auditorium, when both women and men are asked to name a leader, most people generally answer with the name of a male leader. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill and Barrack Obama, among others, are names that are associated with the word leadership and all are male. Even though throughout history, certain women such as Joan of Arc, Marie Curie, Simone de Beauvoir and Mother Theresa have become important figures and leaders, in general, women have lacked the freedom to be able to develop their beliefs and ideas. This lack of freedom has served as an obstacle for the emergence of women with the same qualities and potential as many male leaders. “Power” belonged to men, and they took advantage of their power and freedom to implement their thoughts and ideas, both politically and economically.

Leadership is a concept that is closely related to the management or administration of organizations. According to Northouse (2012), both leadership and management involve working with people and are related to the influence over groups of individuals and to the achievement of goals. However, different authors coincide in mentioning the importance of distinguishing between the two ideas (Kent, 2005; Kotter, 1990; Northouse, 2014; Simonet & Tett, 2012; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2005). Generally speaking, while management and administration are related to discipline, order and stability, leadership is

associated with creative thought, tolerance of ambiguity and the impulse to generate constructive change. This work focuses on the study of the participation of women in management positions in organizations, in which a great deal of leadership capacity is required. We will use both terms practically interchangeably, without insisting on the differences that exist between them.

It is currently a fact that women are scarcely represented in senior management positions in private companies and public institutions in the Western world, although it can also be stated that in the intermediate levels of the job ladder and in positions with a medium level of responsibility, there is a greater balance between men and women. In this work, following the approaches indicated by Hoyt (2012), we will attempt to identify the factors that can have an influence on the scarce presence of women in the upper levels of management. We will employ a thorough literature review to attempt to explain some of the reasons behind this situation.

Over the course of history, an argument that has been presented to explain the scarce presence of women leaders is that the objectives or purposes of male and female lifestyles are different. According to this idea, men have generally channeled their leadership method to focus on the task, while women have done so to focus on people or the relationship. Male task-centered leadership has been more visible, more formal and official, and female people-centered leadership, on the other hand, has been considered a leadership of support. However, it is essential to analyze whether women universally tend to “focus on relationships” in their leadership style, and whether men tend to “focus on tasks” (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Hoyt, 2010).

In this sense, different studies have supported the hypothesis that there are gender differences in leadership styles and that leadership by women is more effective in contemporary society (Book, 2000; Helgesen, 1990; Rosener, 1995; Vecchio, 2002). Some studies maintain that women lead and direct in a more democratic and participative manner than men (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Van Engen & Willemssen, 2004). Likewise, several authors have proposed the idea that women more often and more effectively use a transformational leadership style than men (Ayman, Korabik & Morris, 2009; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt & Van Engen, 2003).

In the area of entrepreneurship, research has also been conducted that examines the influence of the gender variable on entrepreneurial activity (Brush, 1992; González Serrano, Valantine, Pérez Campos, Aguado Berenguer, Calabuig Moreno & Crespo Hervás, 2016; Minniti & Nardone, 2007; Ruizalba Robledo, Vallespín Arán, Martín-Sánchez & Rodríguez Molina, 2015; Ventura Fernández & Quero Gervilla, 2013). These works also reflect the existence of differences in the behavioral patterns in entrepreneurship according to gender.

In this first introductory point, we would like to suggest some important questions that arise when analyzing female leadership, whose answer or explanation should be found in our Western world. Specifically, we ask ourselves whether it is possible to universalize the idea that women have a different way of leading or one that is differentiated from that of men and, therefore, whether it is possible to identify a male and a female leadership style. Throughout this work, we will attempt to provide an answer to and reflect upon these matters.

The objectives of this research are, therefore, the following:

- To reflect the evolution of the representation of women in the senior management positions of organizations.
- To propose the barriers that must be overcome by women in order to access senior management, as well as the relevance of a possible female leadership style.
- To suggest possible changes and policies aimed at increasing the female presence in management positions in organizations.

The work is divided into six parts. The following section describes the current situation of women in the senior management of organizations in the Western world. Next, we mention some of the factors that can condition this situation. In the fourth section, we present some measures that could favor the gender balance in different decision-making areas. We also dedicate a section to the debate generated by the gender quotas in decision-making bodies. The last section presents the main conclusions of this work.

2. Evolution in the representation of women in senior management positions

The presence of women, in both the field of education and in the world of work, has undergone substantial changes in recent decades. Currently, most women encounter no obstacles to accessing higher education, and the increase in their level of education has been noticeable in recent years. However, it must be mentioned that the preferences of men and women are still different when deciding upon higher education.

As indicated by Pons Peregrort, Calvet Puig, Tura Solvas and Muñoz Illescas (2013), even though women are present at universities in greater numbers than men, in some scientific and technological degree study programs the percentage of men continues to be greater than that of women. Likewise, the Statistics on University Students from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports for the 2014-2015 academic year reveal that for all degree study programs, the percentage of women is higher

than that of men, but that this trend is inverted in the case of the fields of engineering and the sciences. In this sense, in the world of business administration, it is common to find businessmen who have completed technical studies, while the education of business women tends to focus more on economics, administration or sales and marketing (Junquera Cimadevilla, 2004).

The presence of women has increased not only in the field of education, their participation in the workforce has also expanded, in both lower-level positions and those with a medium level of responsibility; however, women are still poorly represented in higher positions. The study conducted by Martínez Tola, Goñi Mendizabal and Guenaga Garai (2006) reveals the scarce presence of women in leadership positions and reflects the differences that exist among different countries. In the following paragraphs we will attempt to update this information and verify the extent to which the “gender gap” separating men and women in terms of opportunities and access to management positions still continues even today. We will focus on some of the data collected for Europe and the United States.

2.1. Europe

The European Commission has developed a database that collects information about the participation of women in the decision-making bodies in different areas, such as politics and the economy. The aim is to provide reliable statistics on the evolution and current situation of women in different contexts. The business section of the database provides information about the gender balance in the decision-making areas of large companies in different countries. The companies considered are the major companies that are traded on the stock markets of each country. The figure below reflects the presence of women in senior management positions in the most important companies in some European countries in 2016.

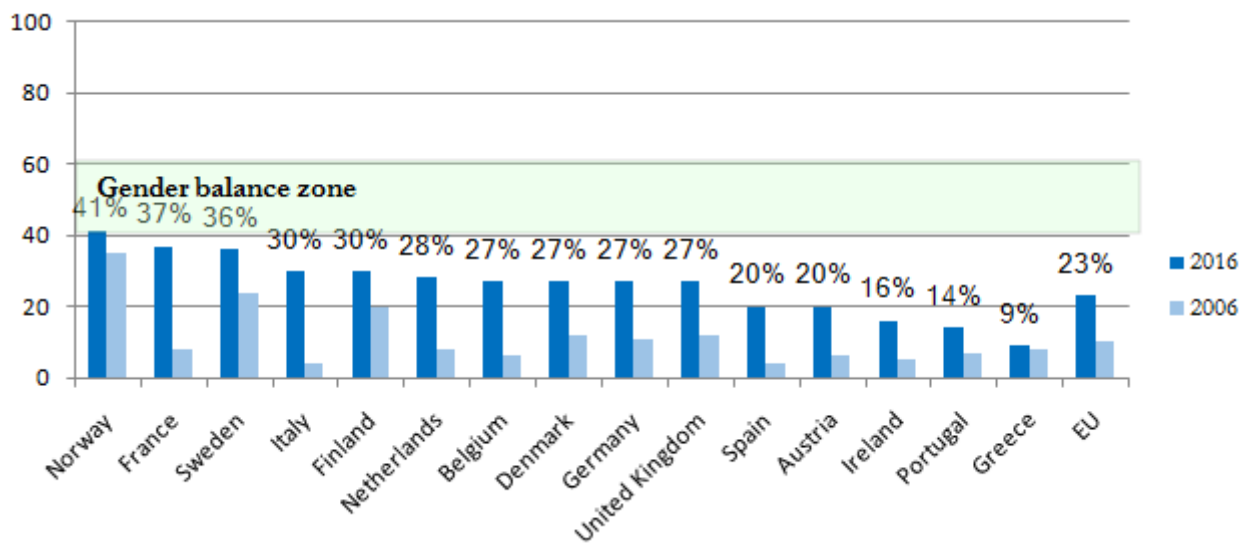


Figure 1. Women in management positions in major companies in European countries, 2006-2016
(European Commission, 2016)

The data presented for the different countries show that during the last decade, a substantial improvement has occurred in the female presence in senior management positions in many European countries. However, in most of the countries, women still do not represent even a third of the senior management positions. It should also be stressed that the figures vary considerably, according to the country. In the Nordic countries, the situation of women in decision-making positions is generally better than in the rest of the European countries. Norway especially stands out in this regard, with 41% of women in senior administrative positions; it thus can be considered to be in an area of reasonable gender balance at the decision-making levels of large companies. Likewise, it seems important to point out the impetus towards greater gender balance in countries like France and Italy.

The report by the European Commission on the participation of men and women in leadership positions (European Commission, 2013) recognizes the importance of both political and legislative initiatives to promote the change towards a gender balance. According to this report, the most important advances in terms of the female presence in corporate leadership positions have occurred in countries that have adopted binding legislation in this regard, such as France, the Netherlands and Italy. Along the same lines, the report drafted by the European Commission on the situation of women in areas of economic decision-making (European Commission, 2012) refers to the changes in legislation adopted in France, and the positive evolution in this country.

In general, the figures on the representation of women in administrative positions in large European companies reflect that the measures adopted in the different countries have had positive results.

However, even though considerable progress has been made, the average percentage of female executives in the most important companies of the European Union is still far from a situation of gender balance. Likewise, in agreement with the survey of the working population carried out by Eurostat in 2015 of all the people in the European Union in executive positions, women represented 33%, a figure that has remained practically constant since 2006 (Eurostat, 2016).

In the aforementioned database on the participation of women at different decision-making levels, the European Commission also offers information on the presence of women in positions of maximum responsibility in an organization. In 2016, only 5% of the executive director or managing director positions in the large companies in the European Union were held by women. The working document on the gender balance in corporate leadership drafted by the European Commission (2011) reveals the importance of increasing the presence of women in these positions, in order to strengthen the leadership chain and facilitate access by other women to senior management positions. This report also mentions the need to develop a bottom-up focus that ensures that women have the same opportunities as men in all stages of the executive promotions process.

At political decision-making levels, the participation of women is also lower than that of men: the female representation in the parliaments of the countries in the European Union is 28%, and the percentage of women in the governments of these countries is 27% (European Commission, 2016). The European Commission's database on the participation of women at decision-making levels also refers to the gender balance in the judicial branch, as well as in high-level civil servant positions. According to the aforementioned database, women represent 40% of the members on the supreme judicial bodies in the countries of the European Union. In the ministries or governmental departments, 34% of the top level civil servant positions and 40% of the second highest level civil servant positions are held by women.

2.2. Spain

In the case of Spain, even though significant progress is evident over the last decade in terms of the presence of women in corporate leadership positions, the current situation is still far from a situation of gender balance. The following figure shows the evolution of the presence of women in senior management positions in major Spanish companies over the last ten years. Major companies were understood as those included in the IBEX 35 index.

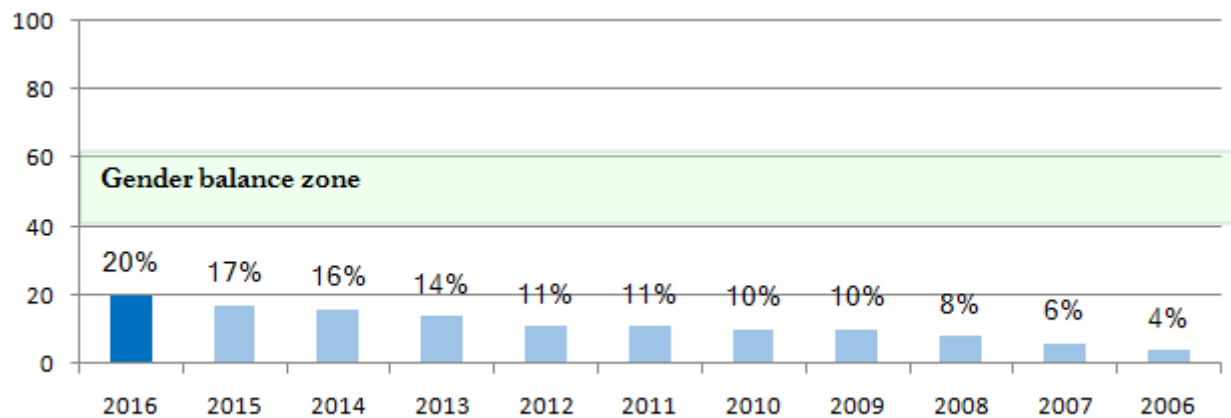


Figure 2. Women in management positions in major Spanish companies, 2006-2016
(European Commission, 2016)

The data reflect an increase in the representation of women in management positions in large Spanish companies over the last decade. However, this progress has occurred relatively slowly and the presence of women in corporate leadership positions in Spanish businesses is still below the European average. This situation does not meet the objective proposed by legislation promoting equality between men and women, approved in 2007 (*Ley Orgánica 3/2007*), which suggests that Spanish companies should increase the representation of women on the boards of directors in order to reach a balanced presence of both men and women within a period of eight years. In this sense, albeit within the scope of collective bargaining, the authors Torres Martos and Román Onsalo (2012) also identify an insufficient impact by the regulations promoting equality between men and women.

On the other hand, if we consider the total working population in Spain, the representation of women in administration and management positions is above that observed for senior management positions in large companies. The following table shows the evolution of the participation of women in the Spanish

labor market over the last five years, as well as the percentage of women in the category of directors and managers.

| | 2015 | 2014 | 2013 | 2012 | 2011 |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| TOTAL EMPLOYED | 45.37% | 45.56% | 45.65% | 45.51% | 44.89% |
| DIRECTORS AND MANAGERS | 31.37% | 30.88% | 30.76% | 30.21% | 29.95% |
| Members of the executive branch and legislative bodies; directors in the Public Administration and organizations of social interest; executive directors | 32.26% | 29.05% | 25.94% | 29.13% | 28.83% |
| Administrative and sales and marketing department managers | 36.73% | 32.19% | 33.64% | 33.67% | 33.65% |
| Production and operations directors | 25.75% | 27.35% | 26.82% | 25.04% | 23.58% |
| Directors and managers of hotel, restaurant and retail establishments | 34.11% | 32.44% | 32.69% | 31.06% | 31.87% |
| Directors and managers of other service companies not included in any other category | 30.95% | 35.61% | 34.16% | 35.93% | 37.24% |

Table 1. Presence of women in the working population and in the category of directors and managers, 2011-2015 (Spanish National Statistics Institute, 2016a)

In quantitative terms, it can be said that there are practically no differences between men and women in terms of participation in the labor market, with more than 45% of women among the working population in Spain. This high percentage is not reflected, however, in management positions, in which women represent slightly more than one third. While it is true that the presence of women in this category is higher than that observed for senior management in large Spanish companies, it is also evident that it does not match the data on the participation of women in the labor market.

The works by Martínez Tola et al. (2006) and by Martínez Tola (2009) reflect that the presence of women in management positions increases as the size of the company decreases; they also make special reference to the presence of female directors in companies without any salaried staff. Similarly, Junquera Cimadevilla (2004) mentions a lower percentage of business women in companies with salaried staff. According to these authors, the gender differences in leadership positions are more noticeable as the size of the companies increases, and therefore the size of the business is an essential variable when analyzing the presence of women in management positions.

With regard to the political realm, according to the information collected in the European Commission's database on the participation of women at decision-making levels, the percentage of women in the Spanish parliament is currently 39%, and the percentage of women in the government is 25%. In the judicial branch, even though the representation of women on the Supreme Court is 13%, a total of 52% of the members of the judicial service and 43% of the members of the General Council of the Judiciary are women (Institute of Women and Equal Opportunities, 2016). Furthermore, in the

highest level positions of the General Government Administration, women represent 35% of all civil servants (European Commission, 2016). Likewise, the percentage of female executives and managers in the public sector is 41%, as compared to 30% in the private sector (Spanish National Statistics Institute, 2016b).

Therefore, in the political realm and in the public administrations, as compared to large Spanish companies, a generally more balanced representation is seen between men and women in leadership positions. This may be linked to regulations on electoral quotas and the fact that the professional career and access to certain positions in the public administration are regulated through objective exams (Ramos, 2005).

2.3. United States

The situation is similar in other countries in the Western world, such as the United States, where women represent 16.9% of the managerial positions in the country's major companies and 4% of the positions of maximum responsibility in said companies (Catalyst Knowledge Center, 2016a, 2016b).

In the case of the United States, the non-profit organization Catalyst conducts an annual census in order to show the representation of women in senior management positions in the country's main companies. The population of said census is made up by companies on the Fortune 500 list, as besides being the largest companies in terms of turnover in the United States, they are also widely recognized as the most powerful and influential companies. Even though the information collected in this census is not entirely comparable to that presented above for European countries, it gives us an idea about the situation of women in corporate leadership positions in the United States. The following figure presents data on the participation of women in the management positions of the main U.S. companies over the last ten years.

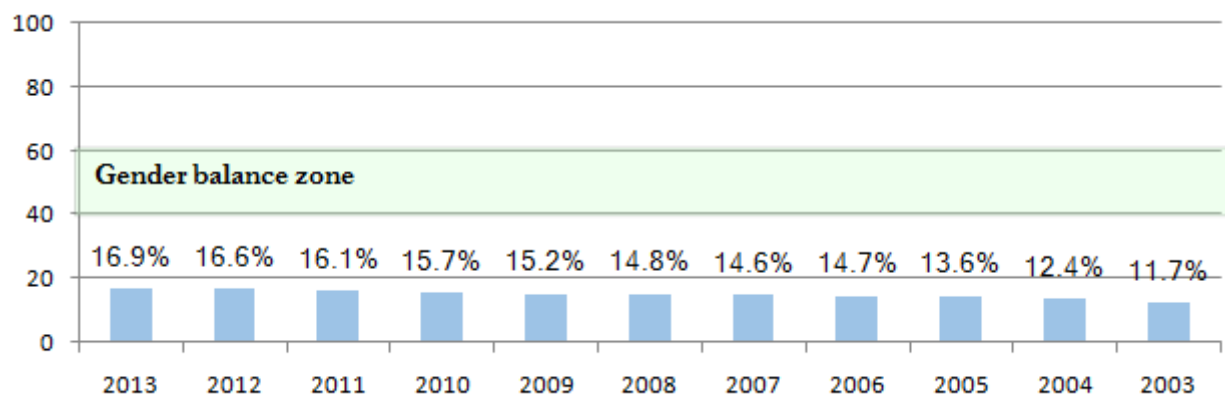


Figure 3. Women in management positions in major U.S. companies, 2003-2013
(Catalyst Knowledge Center, 2016a)

According to the data presented, it can be said that the progress made in terms of the presence of female executives in large U.S. companies is occurring at a very slow pace. The participation of women in executive positions in the most important companies in the United States during 2013 was 16.9%, showing barely any improvement over the previous year, in which the percentage of women in senior management positions was 16.6%.

As occurs in the case of Spain, the figures for the representation of women in senior management in the most important companies in the United States do not match the data on the participation of women in the labor market, nor do they correspond to the percentage of women in the executive category. Statistics on the U.S. labor market reflect that during 2015, women represented 46.8% of the total working population and the percentage of women in the management and professional category was 51.5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

In senior positions in U.S. politics, the representation of women is also lower than that of men. During 2016, women held 19.6% of the seats in the United States Congress and 30.4% of the positions in the federal government. On the state level, women represented 24.4% of the members of the legislative branch and 24% of the executive positions overall in the 50 states (Center for American Women and Politics, 2016).

In the United States, as in the European Union, the representation of women is higher in leadership positions in the field of politics than in senior management in the economic sector. However, as compared to Spain and other countries in the European Union, the increase in the participation of women in management positions in large companies in the United States has occurred very slowly. In recent years, the increase in women executives in the main U.S. companies has been moderate, while the

percentage of women in senior management positions in the most important companies in the European Union has doubled. In this sense, special mention should be made of the level of commitment shown by some of the countries in the European Union to achieve a greater balance at decision-making levels, as well as the effectiveness of the measures adopted.

3. Gender barriers to senior management

The data presented clearly show the scarce presence of women in management positions in the main European and U.S. companies. The participation of women in senior management positions in large companies is far below that of men, and it can be said that in the business sector, there is still a long way to go before gender balance is reached. In this section, we conduct a bibliographic review and suggest some factors that may be conditioning this situation of gender imbalance at the highest levels of business administration and management.

We carried out the review of the literature based primarily on searches in Google Scholar and in the *ABI/INFORM Global*, *Emerald* and *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences* databases, which enabled different journals to be examined. During the search, we use terms such as *leadership*, *management*, *leadership theory*, *leadership styles*, *transformational leadership*, *women*, *gender*, *female*, *discrimination*, *gender gap* and *glass ceiling*, in both English and Spanish. Among the different studies obtained, we selected those that contributed to a greater extent to reaching the objectives proposed in this work. In this sense, we analyzed studies related to the leadership styles of men and women, along with gender stereotypes and obstacles faced by women in order to reach leadership positions. We completed the recompilation with a review of the bibliography included in the selected studies.

One of the expressions most commonly used to explain the reasons for the low representation of women in management positions is the metaphor of the glass ceiling. This term was made popular in 1986 in an article published in the Wall Street Journal on women executives (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). According to this concept, women are confronted with a set of invisible and impenetrable barriers as they get closer to the top positions in the corporate hierarchy.

In 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor defined the glass ceiling as a set of artificial obstacles based on arbitrariness that prevent qualified individuals from being promoted to management positions in their organization (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). The report drafted in 1995 by the Commission in charge of identifying these obstacles mentioned three levels of barriers: social barriers, such as prejudices and gender stereotypes; organizational barriers, such as those related to selection processes or the corporate culture; and governmental barriers, such as a lack of committed monitoring of legal

compliance (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). This report stresses that these barriers contradict one of the most important beliefs in American society: that education, dedication and hard work lead to a better life. In terms of corporate competitiveness, it also recognizes that diversity in senior management and the elimination of the glass ceiling would benefit companies.

Even though the metaphor of the glass ceiling enables us to clearly see the problem of gender imbalance in the senior management of organizations, we believe that it may have some limitations. This concept is based on the hypothesis that both men and women have the same possibilities to access certain positions, until women encounter an invisible barrier that is difficult to overcome, and which men do not encounter throughout their careers. Currently, while some women access positions of great responsibility in organizations, the path they must take to reach these positions is complicated and implies overcoming a great number of difficulties. The idea of the glass ceiling supposes a single, homogeneous barrier at the highest professional levels and ignores the complexity and diversity of the obstacles that women in high positions must face (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Carli, 2007). The metaphor of the labyrinth of leadership, on the other hand, shows that access to leadership positions, especially for women, represents a series of obstacles that form part of a process and that are the reason behind the poor representation of women in senior management in businesses and organizations.

Hoyt (2012) refers to the labyrinth of leadership and proposes a classification of the different types of barriers that complicate access by women to higher level positions. According to this author, the factors explaining the under-representation of women in executive positions can be classified into one of three large groups: those related to human capital, those related to gender differences and those linked to prejudices. This classification makes it possible to present in a structured manner the set of obstacles that must be faced by women who access senior management. Taking into account this grouping, in the following paragraphs, we will attempt to suggest the reasons or barriers that might explain the lesser presence of women in leadership positions.

3.1. Human capital

The focal point of the theory of human capital is that by investing in themselves, individuals succeed in increasing their production capacities. The main sources of investment in human capital are education, training and work experience. According to this theory, one of the factors that complicates the job promotion of women is their smaller investment in human capital (Barberá Heredia, Ramos, Sarrió & Candela, 2002; Jacobs, 1999). This approach suggests that many women, who do not have time

available outside working hours to invest in training, are excluded from job promotion. Similarly, it is usually women who interrupt their professional careers or work part time in order to take care of their families, which means they have fewer years of work experience and more interruptions, which slows down their professional progress (Eagly & Carli, 2004; 2007; Hoyt, 2010; Keith & McWilliams, 1999; Pons Peregort et al., 2013).

Different studies have indicated that there is a negative relationship between decisions regarding fertility and the participation of women in the labor market (Alonso Antón, Fernández Sainz & Rincón Díez, 2015; Álvarez-Llorente, 2002; Álvarez Llorente & Otero Giráldez, 2006; Ariza & Ugidos, 2007; Carrasco, 2001; Davia & Legazpe, 2014; De la Rica & Ferrero, 2003). The research conducted by Kaufman and Uhlenberg (2000) reveals the influence of traditional gender roles on the participation of men and women in the job market. According to this study, women with children are less likely to participate in the labor market than women without children, and those who do participate do so for fewer hours. Men with children, on the other hand, show a greater tendency to participate in the labor market and to work more hours than men without children. Along the same lines, Sánchez Sellero and Sánchez Sellero (2013) confirm that the increase in family size reduces the probability of being employed by others in the case of women, while this probability remains unchanged for men.

In an analysis of the division of household responsibilities and child care, Biernat and Wortman (1991) studied the presence of traditional gender roles in some spheres of life of professional women. According to these authors, in spite of the traditional inequality in the division of chores, women are more self-critical than men.

On many occasions, when faced with the difficulty of combining their work and personal lives, women decide to cut back on their professional responsibilities and interrupt their professional career or choose part-time jobs (Bowles & McGinn, 2005). However, women who do decide to rejoin the workforce often encounter difficulties that prevent them from returning to their posts, and are sometimes forced to accept a lower post than that which they originally had, which complicates their job promotion to a great extent (Belkin, 2003; Ehrlich, 1989; Nieva & Gutek, 1981; Wadman, 1992).

Soler i Blanch and Moreno Pérez (2013) propose that companies which implement measures aimed at favoring the balance between personal and professional time obtain positive results for both employees and the organization. This type of measures make it possible for both men and women to juggle their work life and other activities of their personal life, such as childcare and household chores.

On the other hand, women, possibly due to prejudices regarding their experience in work situations, usually have fewer opportunities for development than men and fewer incentives at an organizational

level, the importance of which is also essential in terms of self-promotion (Fernández Palacín, López Fernández, Maeztu Herrera & Martín Prius, 2010; Hoyt, 2010; Powell & Graves, 2003; Ramos, Barberá & Sarrió, 2003).

With regard to the investment in education, it can be said that the situation is balanced at all educational levels. In the case of higher education, which is more closely related to higher decision-making positions, in many countries women enjoy an advantage over men (Barberá Ribera, Estellés Miguel & Dema Pérez, 2009). Currently in Spain, in quantitative terms, no differences in the educational level are evident between men and women, however, the proportion of women in senior management positions continues to be lower (European Commission, 2016; Spanish National Statistics Institute, 2016a; Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, 2016).

Taking into account all of the above, it can be stated that the differences in work behaviors originate in the maintenance of stereotypical gender roles and functions (Barberá Heredia et al., 2002). The traditional focus on the division of work, according to which the responsibility for caring for the family falls on women, represents an important barrier to their professional advancement. These gender roles, present in the corporate culture of many companies, establish that women should take primary responsibility for taking care of their families, and thus questions are raised, especially in senior management, about whether it is possible to fulfill this role alongside a professional career. As a result, women receive fewer offers for management positions and less preparation for said positions (De Luis Carnicer, Martínez Sánchez & Pérez Pérez, 2003; European Commission, 2011).

3.2. Gender differences

The focus based on gender differences suggests that women and men have different leadership-related traits that can explain the reduced presence of women in higher decision-making positions. In accordance with this idea, women are not represented in senior positions due to the differences in leadership styles between men and women. In general, the traits associated with men have been more highly valued for leadership positions. However, different authors indicate that effective leadership requires a combination of characteristics associated with both men and women, such as emotional intelligence, risk-taking, empathy, integrity or the capacity to persuade, motivate and inspire people, among others (Eagly & Carli, 2003; 2007; Fernández Palacín et al., 2010; Hoyt, 2010; Powell, 1990; Vecchio, 2002).

Taking into account the gender differences in the division of household responsibilities, it has been suggested that women are less motivated to seek out leadership positions, thus explaining their scarce

presence in senior positions. Nonetheless, several authors claim that women and men show the same level of commitment to their jobs and the same motivation towards seeking out leadership positions (Bielby & Bielby, 1988; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hoyt, 2010; Thoits, 1992).

According to Bowles and McGinn (2005), the main gender differences in relation to leadership occur in the demand by men and women for executive positions. In general, men demand and keep a greater number of leadership positions than women. Women are less likely to initiate negotiations to access the desired positions and opportunities and generally have greater social costs than men when they do (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Bowles, Babcock & Lai, 2007; Small, Gelfand, Babcock & Gettman, 2007).

In human resource selection and promotion processes, men receive better scores than women for management positions, since as a general rule, leadership is linked to traits associated with masculinity (Fernández Palacín et al., 2010; Northouse, 2012; Powell, Butterfield & Parent, 2002). When women challenge social norms and try to access leadership positions, a certain contradiction occurs between traditional leadership and gender roles, and they often must face social rejection (Bowles & McGinn, 2005; Eagly & Karau, 2002; García-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Moreover, the effectiveness of the leadership depends on the attitude of the followers towards the leader, and in the case of female leaders, the followers are usually reluctant to accept the influence of a person who does not match the ideal image of a leader (Hoyt, 2010). As a result, men are more likely to assume an official position as a leader, while women usually adopt informal leadership roles, such as that of a facilitator, organizer or coordinator (Andrews, 1992; Bowles & McGinn, 2005; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Fletcher, 2001).

Research on female and male leadership styles reflects that women are no less effective than men when performing leadership tasks (Hoyt, 2012). Furthermore, it has not been observed that they are any less motivated to perform leadership functions or less committed to their jobs than men. However, when they attempt to access upper level positions, they must often confront gender stereotypes and shoulder the social dissent that this implies.

3.3. Prejudices

In line with the above, it can be stated that the barriers that most complicate the job promotion of women are those related to prejudices and stereotypical gender expectations. A stereotype is a set of beliefs about the characteristics of a group of people, regardless of the real diversity in the traits of those people (Hamilton, Stroessner & Driscoll, 1994; Heilman, 1997; Powell, 2011). In addition to influencing perceptions of the general characteristics of men and women, gender stereotypes also indicate the appropriate traits and behaviors they should have (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002; García-Ael, Cuadrado & Molero, 2012; Heilman, 2001; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan & Nauts, 2012). With regard to the characteristics associated with leadership, stereotypes still persist that establish that women take care of and assist people, while men take control and focus on the task (Heilman, 1997; Hoyt, 2012).

The social role theory of gender attributes the differences in the behavior of men and women to the different social functions that they have traditionally performed (Eagly, 1987). According to this theory, in a certain productive social structure, people take on different gender roles and are coherent with the requirements of said roles. Accordingly, men would have individualistic values and agent-instrumental traits linked to assertiveness and domination, due to the practice of traditional roles that have developed in society. Women, in turn, would have collectivist values and expressive-communal traits related to the concern for others, derived from the functions that are usually associated with them (Cuadrado, 2004; García-Ael et al., 2012; Martínez Tola et al., 2006). Through role assignment, the skills and motivations of men and women are oriented towards these stereotypes (García-Leiva, 2005).

Taking into account gender stereotypes, it is possible to match different leadership styles with men and women. Stereotypically masculine traits are associated with an authoritarian, managerial and task-focused leadership style, and stereotypically feminine traits are linked to a democratic, participative leadership style focused on interpersonal relations (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Fridell, Newcom Belcher & Messner, 2009; Gartzia & Van Engen, 2012; Oakley, 2000; Post, 2015; Powell, 2011; Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Along the same lines, a transformational leadership style, based on aspects such as the motivation, guidance, stimulation and training of followers, is associated with the way women lead (Barberá Heredia & Ramos López, 2004; Dodd, 2012; Evans, 2010; Hoyt, 2010; Trinidad & Normore, 2005).

Different authors have associated a transformational leadership style, frequently used by women, with greater effectiveness in leadership (Brandt & Edinger, 2015; Burke & Collins, 2001; Eagly et al., 2003; Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Furthermore, the current globalized economic context in constant

change seems to demand a transformational style of leadership. In this sense, several authors mention its suitability in the environment of extreme competitiveness and uncertainty in which organizations operate, which demands participative, flexible structures capable of innovation and adapting quickly to changes (Powell, 2011; Psychogios, 2007; Ramos et al., 2003; Rosener, 1990; Tuuk, 2012).

However, current data on the participation of women in senior management continues to reflect a considerable gender imbalance. Women continue to face prejudices and negative expectations about their leadership capacity (Hoyt, 2010). Some authors associate a more participative and democratic female leadership style with credibility problems that women face when trying to employ a hierarchical and authoritarian leadership style (Carli, 2001; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Ridgeway, 2001). In general, women face greater resistance than men when they try to exercise leadership, especially when they use styles that go against traditional gender roles. The research conducted by Schein (2001) reflects that, in the different countries analyzed, the qualities necessary to hold management positions are associated with men, regardless of which traits are perceived as masculine or feminine in the different cultures. In other words, even though the characteristics required for corporate success vary from one country to another, these characteristics are still considered to be primarily associated with men.

Cultural differences do not seem to affect the perception of women as less likely to have the traits required for corporate leadership, and this represents an important obstacle for their career development in management positions. Among other aspects, from a psycho-sociological perspective, stereotypes can exert a profound influence on the behavior of the people they affect (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002). In other words, the mere interpretation of the capacities or behavior of people can significantly influence the way they act (Kray, Thompson & Galinsky, 2001; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2003). In the case of female leadership, the traditional gender stereotypes that suggest that women do not have the required characteristics for leadership, besides influencing the attitude of their followers as indicated earlier, can also negatively affect the behavior and career development of female leaders.

According to Rudman et al. (2012), gender stereotypes serve to reinforce the gender hierarchy that assigns higher status to men, as well as greater access to power and resources. These authors propose that behaviors which challenge this gender hierarchy are censured and women who present the stereotypically masculine traits required for promotion in most high-status professions run the risk of being economically and socially sanctioned.

Along these same lines, Heilman (2001) proposes that gender prejudices and stereotypes explain the scarcity of women in upper level positions in organizations. According to the views of this author, the

descriptive and prescriptive dimensions of these stereotypes produce different types of prejudices. The descriptive aspects, which indicate what women are like, and their discrepancy with what an upper level management position implies, promote the idea that women cannot perform this type of work effectively. Prescriptive aspects, which dictate how women should behave, can lead to social rejection when they prove to be competent. In short, gender stereotypes can halt or hinder to a great extent the career development of women in senior management, given that when any ambiguity exists about their competence, they are likely to be judged as incompetent and when their competence is beyond reproach, they run the risk of being penalized socially.

4. Strategies aimed at achieving gender balance in leadership positions

In line with the view of Pons Peregort et al. (2013), we understand that the barriers that prevent women from accessing positions of great responsibility in both public and private organizations represent a considerable cost for all of society, which has invested in the training and preparation of these people. The imbalance between the high educational level of women and their career development implies a waste of abilities and human resources in a global economy where human capital constitutes a key factor for competitiveness (European Commission, 2011).

From a corporate perspective, several studies confirm that organizations which take advantage of diversity in upper level management positions can obtain better performance (Cox & Smolinski, 1994; European Commission, 2011; Nielsen & Huse, 2010; Post & Byron, 2015; U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Wittenberg-Cox & Maitland, 2009). Nielsen and Huse (2010) analyzed a group of Norwegian companies and confirmed that there is a positive relationship between the proportion of women directors in a company and its effectiveness. Cox and Smolinski (1994) present diversity in work groups as an important economic opportunity, as it allows competitive advantages to be obtained in the areas of marketing, creativity and problem solving, and it favors better performance of the organizations. In this sense, Forsyth (2010) suggests the variety of experiences, knowledge, perspectives and ideas that diversity provides work groups and mentions a greater capacity to identify new strategies and solutions in heterogeneous groups. According to Wittenberg-Cox and Maitland (2009), given the complexity and diversity of the current global market, companies that recognize the potential of women in senior management can obtain an advantage over the rest.

Therefore, it would seem, from a strictly economic perspective, that it is beneficial for both companies and society as a whole to promote equal opportunities for the career development of all people. Along

these lines, there are multiple measures that can contribute to eliminating gender barriers and achieving a balanced representation of men and women in leadership positions.

Companies that are aware of the benefits that can be provided by the participation of women in senior leadership positions try to implement policies oriented towards reaching a gender balance in these positions. In this regard, some changes, such as flexible scheduling or work calendars that permit greater compatibility between one's work and personal life, can favor access by women to leadership positions (Cooper & Lewis, 1999). When proposing a model of compatibility and flexibility, it is important to prevent these policies from being seen as exclusively oriented towards women. It is a matter of improving work conditions for both men and women so that they can engage in other activities in their personal life without having to sacrifice their careers.

Likewise, actions aimed at providing the support necessary for women so they can access management positions, especially with regard to those aspects in which organizations currently have the greatest shortcomings, such as the building of professional networks and guidance in career development, can favor the gender balance in upper level corporate positions within companies. It is essential to offer women adequate preparation for leadership positions, through training and practical experience. This type of actions contribute to making women visible and including them in the promotional channels, and increase the likelihood that their skills and talents will be taken advantage of. In this manner, companies committed to diversity send a positive message both inside and outside the organization, especially to highly qualified women who can access management positions. It is also important for the implemented action or change plans to be evaluated. Among other aspects, it is a good idea to measure the perception of women regarding the usefulness of the training plans or improvements in development options.

We believe that the public administrations play an important role in making companies aware of the benefits that gender diversity can provide on management teams. It is crucial for governments to establish policies to persuade the corporate sector of the importance of improving career development opportunities for women. In this sense, in recent years, public administrations have carried out different initiatives aimed at supporting women in accessing executive positions (European Commission, 2011). Besides campaigns to introduce gender perspective in human resource management, build professional networks and provide guidance for career development, it is important to stress codes of good corporate governance, and in the case of some countries, even legislation that establishes a minimum percentage of women at the decision-making levels of organizations. Likewise, all measures aimed at business entrepreneurship by women represent an important advance in the participation of women in leadership positions (Wirth, 2001).

The policies adopted by some countries in the European Union to promote gender balance, as reflected by the data presented in the second section, have had a considerable impact. The case of Norway, which establishes by law a minimum representation of 40% women on the boards of directors of companies, is especially remarkable (European Commission, 2011; Matsa & Miller, 2013). These quota regulations affect both companies in the public and private sector and any failure to comply with them can result in sanctions and even the liquidation of the companies affected (European Commission, 2012). Following the Norwegian model, some countries such as France, Italy and Belgium also apply quota laws that carry sanctions in cases of non-compliance. In Spain, regulations to achieve gender balance in management positions are less strict and do not include any sanctions (Ley Orgánica 3/2007).

However, even though gender equality policies have been extended to promote the access of women to positions of power, improvements in this area have occurred at a very slow pace. In this regard, it is important to stress that a large number of the obstacles mentioned in this work are closely related to gender stereotypes and the expectations that these generate about what women are like and how they should behave. Specifically, it has been indicated that stereotypical gender roles produce certain workplace behaviors, and in some cases, a corporate culture that is less oriented towards the career development of women. Likewise, women must deal with prejudices regarding their leadership ability, and on many occasions when they access upper level positions, they run the risk of being economically and socially sanctioned. As indicated, it is a matter of beliefs and attitudes firmly established in society that can constitute one of the most obstinate obstacles to the personal and career development of people, and which are not quickly transformed.

The elimination of prejudices that prevent the access of women to leadership positions requires the adoption of structural measures, the impact of which is only noticeable over the medium to long term. It is essential to promote a reflection that delves deeper into the processes that cause situations of imbalance and that proposes new ways of confronting them. The transformation of gender stereotypes also involves a learning process on the part of all of society that can be promoted, among other ways, by incorporating gender perspective at the different levels of the educational system, in the media and in the workplace.

Therefore, in order to accelerate the change from a situation of imbalance that affects all of society, we propose the need to intensify all the actions to incorporate a gender focus in areas of power over the short term. At the same time, it is important to promote a deeper process of reflection and learning that enables progress to be made in eliminating the barriers related to gender stereotypes that complicate the career development of women. Research, especially in the area of the humanities and

social sciences, can enhance this analysis process and provide solutions that make it possible to attain greater social well-being. We believe that better comprehension of the factors that hinder the gender balance represents a step towards possible solutions to achieving it (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hoyt, 2010). In this same sense, education that includes gender perspective can be a determining factor in transforming the perceptions of society and making progress towards the construction of a fairer social model.

5. Controversy surrounding gender quotas in decision-making bodies

Among the measures aimed at achieving a balanced representation at decision-making levels over the short term, some of the most controversial are those that establish a quota or minimum percentage of women in the decision-making bodies of organizations. Generally, legislation on gender quotas is aimed at larger companies and is implemented alongside other voluntary measures intended to stimulate the career development of women. The countries that have adopted binding legislation in this sense have shown considerable advances in matters of gender balance (European Commission, 2013).

However, there is an opposite view to this system, which argues that this type of measures contradict the principle of equal opportunities and prioritize diversity over knowledge and experience. According to this idea, gender quotas are unnecessary, given that qualified women can access positions of power on their merits alone. Quite the opposite, the posture that defends a gender quota system suggests the need to transform a reality in which the level of qualification of women and their presence in leadership positions are not balanced in the least.

As mentioned throughout this work, women who try to access leadership positions must overcome a set of barriers that complicate to a large extent the gender balance at decision-making levels. This situation prevents taking advantage of the abilities and talent of women whose level of qualification is currently equal to that of men. Many of the gender obstacles which women must overcome are not easy to identify and some require long-term measures and time in order to be permanently eliminated. While it obviously does not eliminate gender barriers, the quota system can serve to compensate over the short term for what is initially an unequal situation that represents an important cost for all of society. Furthermore, even though the effect of these measures can be appreciated primarily over the short term, the greater presence of women in leadership positions can also contribute to generating reference models for other younger women and to transforming traditional gender stereotypes (European Commission, 2011; Pons Peregrort et al., 2013).

6. Conclusions

The present work shows the situation of gender imbalance in corporate leadership positions in Western countries. Currently, even though women have the same level of preparation as men, they are still less present in senior management positions. The scarce representation of women in senior decision-making positions in large companies throughout different countries demonstrates that the current situation is far from a situation of gender balance.

Among the barriers that hinder the participation of women in senior management, we have detected those related to gender stereotypes and the prejudices they generate. In this sense, we have mentioned that stereotypical gender roles produce differences in certain workplace behaviors of both men and women, which can result in a corporate culture that is less oriented towards the career development of women. As a result, women often have fewer opportunities and incentives for promotion on an organizational level than men. Likewise, expectations about what women are like and how they should act often call into question their leadership ability and can socially and economically penalize women who access executive positions.

A great deal of the research on leadership styles links women to a democratic, participative leadership style focused on personal relations. Likewise, several studies mention the tendency for women to use a transformational leadership style, which is often related to more effective leadership. However, some authors defend that this type of female leadership owes to the negative reactions and the social rejection that women must face when they use a directive and authoritarian leadership usually associated with men. In any case, current data on gender balance in management positions show that the effectiveness of supposedly female leadership does not seem to be important enough to overcome the obstacles that complicate access by women to positions of responsibility.

This scarce presence of women in upper management positions represents an important cost for society as a whole. The imbalance between the educational level of women and their career development implies a waste of human resources that prevents taking advantage of the talent and abilities of highly qualified people. Furthermore, in terms of business competitiveness, organizations with low numbers of women represented in senior management positions are foregoing benefits that gender diversity can provide for managerial teams.

For all of the above reasons, we believe that it is essential to increase awareness in the corporate sector of all the advantages there are of increasing the participation of women in senior management positions. The intensification of measures aimed at improving opportunities for the career development of women can accelerate change towards a situation of gender balance that would benefit

all of society. All actions aimed at promoting the compatibility between one's personal and professional life, as well as those focused on providing women the support they need for leadership positions, can produce positive results.

Likewise, it seems important to combine these measures with other more long-term measures aimed at eliminating prejudices that hinder access by women to decision-making levels. In this regard, we suggest increasing efforts dedicated to attaining greater knowledge of all the processes that result in situations of gender imbalance. We also propose the need to incorporate gender perspective in different contexts, such as education and the workplace, in order to be able to transform the social perceptions that prevent women from accessing executive positions. In short, it is a matter of promoting, from both the field of research and of education, a process of reflection and learning on the part of all of society that would enable progress to be made in building a fairer social model, and thus attaining greater social wellbeing.

Finally, in terms of future lines of research, we propose an analysis of the effectiveness of the different measures aimed at increasing the presence of women in executive positions. Likewise, with regard to the proposed recommendations, we believe it is essential to delve deeper into the social and cultural processes that prevent a permanent transformation towards gender equality in our society. Besides studying the way in which gender stereotypes are constructed that hinder the job promotion of women, it is crucial to identify the discourse logic behind said prejudices and social norms and the possible causes for their persistence.

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