

# **The Unintended Consequences of Role Modelling Behaviour in Female Career**

## **Progression**

### **Abstract**

Much of the literature identifies the positive nature of role models in career progression. In this paper we take the contrary perspective and explore whether role modelling behaviour of senior female managers can be unintentionally interpreted as negative, with an associated negative impact on career progression decisions of female managers. To address this issue we took a grounded theory approach and thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with female middle-level managers in a wide range of organisations. The results of the interviews illustrate that role-modelling behaviour has the potential to negatively, rather than positively affect female career progression choices. The unintended consequences of role modelling behaviour of senior female managers both highlights the concept of negative role-modelling behaviour, and identifies its impact on female managerial career progression. This paper also offers new insights into the construction of the global role model by introducing two new elements – the realistic role model and the departed role model.

**Keywords** Role models; Women in management; Middle-level managers; Ireland; Organisational Culture.

# **The Unintended Consequences of Role Modelling Behaviour in Female Career Progression**

## **Introduction**

Despite significant increases in the levels of female labour market participation over the past several decades, the percentage of women occupying senior management positions remains stubbornly low. The EU average for female board members is 13.7 percent (Catalyst, 2014). It is in this context that we investigate one of the key elements identified as necessary for female career progression, and consequently, for an increase in the numbers of women in key decision making roles - that of role models (Kanter, 1977; Nauta, Epperson and Kahn, 1998). The lack of female role models has been identified as one of the most significant barriers to female career progression (Coughlan, 2002; Wirth, 2004). This determinant continues to be cited as detrimental to the development of senior female managers (Sealy and Singh, 2008), yet limited empirical research has been conducted on the impact of this on the career progression decisions of female managers. Both Sealy and Singh (2009) and Gibson (2003, 2004) have called for further research on the use of female role models at senior levels.

Our study addresses these calls by exploring how organisational culture and the interpretation of role modelling behaviour within that context impacts on the career aspirations of females in middle management roles. Role model research generally focuses on identifying positive behaviours that individuals deem worthy of replicating or imitating and the impact of such role models on career aspirations. In contrast, the aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of observing behaviour that individuals view

negatively, or which can foster doubts in aspiring to be similar to that role model. Our central research question therefore asks, if role modelling behaviour is identified by the 'imitator' as negative, and therefore, not to be copied or emulated, how does this subsequently impact on the career progression decisions of women in middle level management positions?

Our focus is on women in middle-level management positions, given the relative dearth of research on this group with the exception of Veale and Gold (1998), Cooper Jackson (2001), and Pannowitz, Glass and Davis (2009). This paper aims to contribute to that research gap. Indeed Singh et al., (2006) called for research on the way in which role models are used at the threshold of senior management, the glass ceiling in many organisations (generally the point at which female career progression stalls). Research on women at middle-management level is, therefore, timely, because it is individuals at this organisational level who are the immediate successors to the executive suite. Recent laboratory studies by Hoyt and Simon (2011) revealed that high-level female leaders can actually have a relatively deflating impact on women's self-perceptions and leadership aspirations compared to high-level male leaders or non-elite female leaders with whom women identified. As a laboratory study, this indicated a potentially negative side to female leaders as role models. In this paper, taking a qualitative research approach we explore empirically the extent to which senior female leaders (whom one would typically regard as role models) through their exhibited behaviour can actually have a negative impact on women's career aspirations.

The paper is structured as follows; we outline the context of women in senior management positions globally, we then examine the importance of role models in

female career progression and consider the concept of negative role modelling. Our methodology is then presented, followed by the findings from the thirty in-depth interviews conducted with participants from a variety of industry sectors across Ireland. The final section of the paper examines the implications for organisations.

### **Female Career Progression to Senior Management Roles**

Although women now comprise a greater proportion of managers than in any previous era (Wacjman, 2013), the situation remains one of significant imbalance. When we examine the most senior board level positions in the Fortune 500 companies in 2013, just 4.6 percent of CEOs were women (Catalyst, 2014). Catalyst (2014) found that in Europe women receive fewer critical responsibilities necessary for advancement in organisations. Based on the US workforce McKinsey (2015) report found that a majority of manager-level women hold line roles i.e. positions with profit-and-loss responsibility and/or focused on core operations, but by the VP level more than half of women hold staff roles (positions in functions that support the organization like legal or human resources). In contrast, a majority of men hold line roles at every organisational level. The type of work and roles that women work in are therefore critically important in promotion and advancement decisions.

It has been argued that in senior management roles, the prevailing culture is one which is far more suited to men than women (Drew and Murtagh, 2005). While much of the research and debate on gender focuses on the lack of female representation at boardroom and executive suite level, it is important to keep in mind that females are underrepresented at more junior and middle management roles also. Recent research by

McKinsey (2015) from the US found that women continue to be underrepresented at every level in the corporate pipeline, as well as a perpetuating assumption that the reason for this lies in women leaving companies at higher rates than men or due to difficulties balancing work and family. However, the McKinsey (2015) Women in the Workplace report found that a lack of female advancement in the corporate world is more greatly aligned with the barriers to advancement that females experience within their organisation and a steeper path to senior leadership. The first assumption, that women leave organisations at a higher rate than men was found not only to be untrue but that in fact women in leadership are more likely to remain with their company than their male counterparts.

Two specific aspects of organisational culture have been identified as particularly difficult for female middle and senior level managers, the concept of a long-hours culture and management attitudes towards work life balance policies. Time is central to professionals and executives' demonstration of commitment and success in their chosen fields with long hours regarded as a proxy for, and taken as prima facie evidence of, commitment (Stone and Hernandez, 2013; Williams, 2000). Rutherford (2001:377) posits that long hours culture acts as a 'means of closure to exclude women' because fewer women are able to comply with it.

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) conclude that work-family conflict exists when time devoted to the requirements of one role makes it difficult to fulfil the requirements of another; when strain from participation in one role makes it difficult to fulfil requirements of another; or when the specific behaviours required by one role make it difficult to fulfil the requirements of another. As Evans (2000) indicates, organisational

policies such as work-life balance policies that alleviate the tensions faced by female managers, should be likely to improve the access of women with family responsibilities to senior positions. Many organisations do provide policies such as parental leave and flexible working arrangements. Yet, a number of studies have indicated that both male and female employees, particularly those focusing on advancing their careers, feel unable to avail of work-life balance policies within their organisations (Williams 2005; Cross and Linehan, 2005) feeling it would signal a lack of commitment.

Hoobler et al., (2014) outline that some authors have explained the dearth of women leaders as an “opt-out revolution”, that women are making a choice not to aspire to leadership positions. This of course, is a choice made by some and must be recognized as such. However, for those women who aspire to senior decision making roles, it is important that organizations recognize the structural factors that impinge on female career progression. The structural perspective submits that deeply held beliefs and cultures of organizations create a unique environment which facilitates the career progression of men over women. One structural impediment cited is a lack of female role models. We move now to identify what we mean by role models, how role-modelling impacts on learned behaviour and the relevance of role models for female career progression.

### **Role Models: A Brief Overview**

The concept of role models which has gained popularity in modern discourse is credited to Robert K. Merton's socialization research in the science field. Merton hypothesized that individuals compare themselves with reference groups of people who occupy the

social role to which the individual aspires (Merton, 1973). Building on this early work, role models have been described as individuals whose behaviours, styles and attributes are emulated by others (Shapiro, Haseltine, and Rowe, 1978) and as people whose lives and activities influence another person in some way (Basoc and Howe, 1979). Gibson's more recent work (2004:136) defines a role model as "a cognitive construction based on the attributes of people in social roles an individual perceives to be similar to him or herself to some extent and desires to increase perceived similarity by emulating those attributes".

The concept of role models draws on two theoretical constructs. In the first, role identification theory (Stryker, 1968), role modelling assumes identification on the part of the observer with the model (Gibson and Cordova, 1999). The second draws on Bandura's (1986) social learning theory and is useful in explaining how this role modelling process operates. Bandura outlined four factors which contribute to individual levels of efficacy about performing future tasks or roles: performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback. While verbal persuasion (the extent to which an individual receives encouragement or indeed discouragement with regard to task outcomes) and physiological cues (positive or negative symptoms) influence levels of self-efficacy, it is performance outcomes and vicarious behaviour which are of concern to this paper. With regard to performance outcomes or mastery i.e. experiences where an individual has succeeded, Bandura argues this will contribute to the development of increased self-efficacy regarding the achievement of future goals.

However, for middle managers the tasks performed by senior management are

often viewed as being significantly different and more challenging, therefore while mastery of tasks at middle managerial level will increase self-efficacy, many will look to the vicarious experiences of others to supplement their knowledge and perceptions of efficacy. Consequently, it is in relation to vicarious performance that role models are of central importance. Bosma et al., (2012) argue that people are assumed to learn in a social context through the observation of others with whom they can identify and who perform well in an area in which they, themselves, also wish to excel i.e learning by modelling. Bandura argues that individuals can develop low or high levels of self-efficacy vicariously through watching others (that they deem similar to themselves) performance in a given task or area. Therefore, taking the example of a female in a senior management role who successfully navigates both work and family commitments should result in raising the self-efficacy levels of female middle managers with similar lifestyle and career aspirations. Bandura also refers to the importance of associational preferences in observational experiences, arguing that the functional value of behaviours displayed by different models is highly influential in determining which models will be closely observed and which will be ignored. Bandura highlights that models that possess certain qualities are sought out while those who are lacking pleasing characteristics are ignored or rejected even though they excel in other areas.

While research has indicated that role models are critical for successfully developing young aspiring female managers (Kanter, 1977; Nauta, Epperson and Kahn, 1998; Ibarra, 1999; Cross, 2009; McKinsey, 2010; Drury, Siy and Cheryan, 2011) the area has received limited empirical attention in recent years (Singh, Vinnicombe and James, 2006), as research has focused on mentoring as a more generic concept, often



encapsulating role models. Interest in role models within the women in management literature stems from the belief that where there are few women at senior levels in organisations it is more difficult for junior female employees to develop gender roles that are satisfying to themselves and consistent with the company's norms and expectations (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008). The importance of role models for female managers is highlighted by researchers such as Vinkenburg and van Engen, who note that women holding senior organisational positions unconsciously act as role models and encourage younger women to 'fulfil their potential as leaders of the future' (Vinkenburg and van Engen, 2005:102). Research indicates that individuals tend to seek role models who are similar to them in some easily identifiable way, such as gender or race (Bandura, 1986; Karunanayake and Nauta, 2004). Indeed, supervisors, teachers and mentors are often used as role models (Kram, 1985). Importantly, in role modelling, individuals select their own role models and also choose how deeply or intentionally they will emulate these role models (Gibson, 2003).

Recent work by Gibson (2003, 2004), Singh et al., (2006) Sealy and Singh (2008) has addressed the concept of role models specifically in relation to the female managerial career. Gibson (2004) has applied a dimensional framework that characterizes role models along both cognitive and structural dimensions. Within these two broad categories he identifies two sub-dimensions which are related to both the 'how' and the 'who' of role-modelling behaviour – positive/negative role models and close/distant role models. The 'close' dimension refers to someone well known to the individual, while the 'distant' dimension is a role model outside normal interactions. In the organisational context, 'close' would refer to role models personally known to the individual. A similar

theme is noted in a study conducted by Singh et al (2006), where they highlight that 'most of the sample had multiple role models, and preferred close or near role models to those more distant and not personally known to the user' (Singh et al, 2006:78). It is the classification of positive/negative role models that is our particular focus here, as this distinction assists us with understanding how role-modelling behaviour can have an effect on the imitator, which may not be positive.

Blau et al., (2006) argue that the visible presence of females at top levels of organisations serves to challenge the stereotype that male managers are more capable than female managers, therefore contributing to ease the advancement of more women in organisations. Kurtolos and Tomaskovic Devey (2012) research confirmed that that an increase in the share of female top managers is associated with subsequent increases in the share of women in midlevel management positions within firms. According to social learning theory, role models facilitate the acquisition of moral and other types of behaviour (Brown and Tevino, 2014). Through demonstrating the behaviours associated with a given role or job, those individuals which women identify as career role models, aid the processes of visualisation i.e. the ability to form a mental image of future events or behaviours. While visualisation is most often associated with imagining positive future scenarios, in this paper we examine the extent to which role models can also contribute to negative visualisation about the future and in fact lead women to take actions which seek to reject rather than emulate the behavior of those in senior positions with which they are familiar.

La Pierre and Zimmerman (2012) highlight that presence of a family and work interruptions associated with that impacts on promotions and advancement for females

(Judiesch and Lyness, 1999; Tharenou, 1999). They also highlight research that female senior managers are more likely to be single, or married and childless compared to their male counterparts. Guillaume and Porchic (2009) study also found that some women with particularly pioneering careers in male dominated fields had paid a price for their career orientation, usually being single, childless or divorced. Therefore in looking at role models, it is important to look not only at the gender and level of those perceived to be role models in the workplace but to look also at the family circumstances of women in senior roles when exploring the impact of these role models on others.

### **Negative Role Modelling**

In his conceptualisation of role models Gibson (2004) describes *positive* as referring to a role model having attributes which are perceived by the individual as similar, admirable or sought out for possible emulation. However, he also identifies that role modelling can operate in a *negative way*, referring to a role model having attributes which are primarily observed by the individual as examples of how not to behave in a particular situation. Gibson (2004) argues that individuals may observe role models whom they perceive as similar on some dimensions for the purpose of learning how to avoid certain attributes or behaviours; and that for some individuals these represent negative role models. While other studies have identified the possible negative effects of role modelling behaviour (c.f. Ibarra, 1999, Liff and Ward, 2001) Gibson's work brings a new focus to the concept.

The concept of a negative role model is an important one for female career progression, as studies have shown a relationship between role model influence and a variety of career-related outcomes, including career aspirations (Nauta, Epperson, and

Kahn, 1998). As Ibarra suggests (1999) role models can define negative behaviours or characteristics, in that the role model represents a feared possible self, a negative role model. Yet, if role modelling behaviour can be identified by the observer as negative, and interpreted as not to be emulated, can this have an impact on career progression choices for women in middle management? The following section outlines the qualitative approach used in this study to address this question.

### **Research Approach, Sample and Data Collection**

A qualitative approach was adopted for this research as recommended by Patton (2002) when the phenomenon to be studied involves complex human and organisational interactions. In-depth interviews were conducted with thirty middle-level female managers in a variety of organisations across Ireland, and lasted on average, for seventy-five minutes. The respondents were representative of a broad spectrum of industries (Table 2). While it is acknowledged that the sample in this study is small, qualitative research, however, allows for small sample sizes, as the focus is on analysis of insights, rather than providing a representative, statistically accurate representation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

*[Insert Table 2]*

There were two key criteria for inclusion in the study. First, female respondents had to be part of the middle-management team, specifically they had to have a direct reporting relationship to the senior management team and have people reporting directly to them. Second, they had to have held that position for at least two years, as it was

expected that a two-year period would allow the respondents' time to appreciate the dynamics associated with promotion to the senior management team. Given the difficulty in identifying such a specific sample, snowball sampling was used. In this method one subject gives the name of another subject, who, in turn, provides the name of a third, and so on (Vogt, 1999). An interview guide was created to provide a structure for the questions to be used in the interviews. Questions focused on personal career progression aspirations; obstacles faced and obstacles overcome; and organisational context and culture in relation to female career progression. In relation to the marital and familial status of the respondents, sixteen were married, eleven were single, and three were either separated or divorced. Fourteen women had children. All thirty interviews were recorded and transcribed, word for word. Direct quotations from the interviewees are included in this paper in order to give insights into the working experiences of these Irish female middle-level managers.

### **Data Analysis**

A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and to identify key conceptual categories (Suddaby, 2006). The empirical analysis for the paper involved repeatedly reading and interpreting the transcribed face-to-face interviews and observation notes made during interview. Recurring themes from the interviews that seemed to suggest negative or positive views about senior managers and thus enhance or impede the desire for career progression were grouped together in coded categories. This allowed the researchers to retrieve and organise data by devising a system for categorizing 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 (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). These categories allowed a number of sub-categories to be generated and utilized in segmenting the data. Some of the more detailed codes came from the respondents' own words, for example, codes like "work-life balance," 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.

### **Identifying Role Models**

We begin by examining who the respondents identified as a role model. The findings highlight firstly, that these female managers refer in the first instance to role models inside their organisations, rather than from outside their respective organisations. This echoes the work of Sealy and Singh (2009) and is in line with the categorization by Gibson (2004) of role models as 'close'. The result of this choice is that the search for a female role model is restricted as a result of the shortage of women on the senior management teams in their organisations. In only three of the organisations in this study was the position of General Manager/CEO held by a woman. When discussing the issue of role models the respondents' recounted incidents in relation to female managers who had already left their organisations, as well as those that were still working in their organisations. The lack of female role models in their organisations led these respondents to identify a new constituent in the construction of who is used as a role model. Gibson

(2003) identified a 'global' role model, created as a composite, where specific and mostly positive aspects from different role models are combined. Here, respondents identified 'departed' role models as an additional element we can now add to this configuration. These were senior women who had already left their organisations. Senior women identified as role models were also referred to as 'realistic' role models. This finding extends the initial conceptualization of the 'global' role model. We move now to examine the organisational culture in which interpretations of role modelling behaviour took place.

### **Organisational Culture**

A common theme running through the accounts from the respondents was the organisational culture within which career progression decisions were being made. In agreement with Rutherford (2001) the 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:

*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 work very hard, and if they are sitting at their desk at 8pm in the evening, it is very difficult for one of us to get up and walk away, 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.*

(Manager, Business Advisory Service, Leinster).

The interviewees also believed that lack of flexibility around working hours at both

middle and senior management levels acted as a significant barrier for both men and women in those positions, particularly those with children. This was true even when there were organisational policies with regard to work-life balance policies in place:

*Maybe I could see myself moving into senior management in a smaller company which is more flexible. Here, I couldn't go home early though to collect the kids (Learning and Development Manager, Pharmaceutical, Munster).*

*When the CEO was trying to organise a meeting, this guy told him he was leaving early to take his child to a birthday party and the CEO just couldn't understand why he had to take the child and miss the meeting. I think that maybe if the CEO had a family he may be a little bit more understanding. I think that will be an issue for me if I am promoted to the senior management team. I think it is something that will become an issue if I do have a family or children (HR Manager, Aeronautics, Munster).*

*There is no director going home to pick up a child from school, and there is no director taking parental leave. We did have a quality manager who was a very talented woman, who, when our quality director left she went into the role temporarily, but turned down the position when it was offered to her. I believe the reason she didn't take that job is because she wanted to have a family, and she knew there would be no possible way she could do both at that level (Learning and Development Manger, Pharmaceuticals Industry).*



Wirth (2004) and Wellington et al., (2003) caution against this type of organisational culture as it acts as a barrier for women, more so than for men who are seeking to progress to the senior management team. Next, we identify the implications of the behaviour of those identified as role models in this study.

### **Implications of Role-Modelling Behaviour**

As learning can occur in a social context (Bandura, 1977) much of what is learned in an organisational setting is gained through observing and interpreting the behaviour of other employees in the workplace. One of the clear messages from the respondents in this study in identifying the behaviour of senior female managers was the difficulty inherent in the dual role of senior manager and mother/carer. Their stories highlighted the unintended consequences of the observed behaviour of those identified as role models. Interestingly, there was a strong weight placed on the interpretation of remembered behaviour of senior women who had already left their organisations. The combination of the use of current and 'departed' role models combined to present an overwhelming negative picture of the impact of role modelling behaviour. While the respondents were able to give only their subjective perceptions and relate anecdotal evidence of the reasons why these senior female managers had left their organisations, their overwhelming interpretation was succinctly captured in the following quotation:

*They left because they were unable to successfully combine family responsibilities with their management careers* (Regional HR Manger, Hospitality).

The outcome of their interpretation of the inability to combine a senior managerial career

with family responsibilities and the impact on these respondents' career progression decisions is revealed in the following quotations:

*I can't remember one case where having a child has not had an impact on a career. The most ambitious people come back after having a child, and their ambition has been slashed by about 50 or 60%. So, if it happens to them, I am pretty sure it would happen to me (Manager, Finance Industry).*

*Since joining the company, a position on the senior team has become available. On three occasions I was asked to become a senior manager. I had to say 'no' each time, because of family reasons. I wouldn't be physically able to do the job to the utmost of my ability. You have to put in the necessary man-hours, you have to work weekends if a crisis arises, you have to be able to leave your children when they are sick. I don't think I would be able to do that (Assistant Principal, Education).*

The word that was used by respondents to describe the attempt to balance a senior management career with family responsibilities was '*struggle*'. Interestingly, the respondents were re-examining their own career ambitions as a result of the difficulties they had seen these women face in their senior management positions. Significantly, this was true for both those who already had children, and those who did not yet have children. The findings here highlight that having observed the manner in which other senior women endeavoured to match career demands with the demands of their families, the clear signal received was that the two positions were effectively incompatible:

*In the management group there is one woman with a child. That very definitely has a huge influence on what she can do work wise. She now has constraints on her time that she would never have had before..... I couldn't imagine having children and working in this job. The two are not compatible at all (Manager, Business Advisory Service)*

The respondents talked about senior women in their organisations who we would expect to be acting as positive role models, as holding positions they did *not* aspire to. As a result of observing these senior women search for a balance between their family responsibilities and the long hours required when working on the senior management team, the respondents were clear that they did *not* want to find themselves in the same situation. For these women, this meant a realization that it may not be possible for them to find a way to attain the senior management positions which would be the next logical career move for them. These respondents highlighted that the senior female managers they had observed had to essentially 'make their career their number one priority', at 'the expense of their family' hence, the respondents argued, this was a situation they did not want to find themselves in.

## **Discussion**

Role models and role-modelling behaviour are acknowledged as being an important component in the career development of young aspiring female managers (Ibarra 1999; Wirth 2004; Davidson and Burke, 2011). The purpose of this study was to explore if role

modelling behaviour can be interpreted by the 'imitator' as negative, and thus not to be copied or emulated, can this have an impact on the career progression choices of women in middle management positions? We initially identified who the respondents recognised as role models. It is clear from the findings of this study that there were few senior women in their organisations for the respondents to use as role models, as only three of the organisations had female CEO/general managers. Those being used as role models in this study included senior women in the respondents' own organisations; however, this incorporated both past and present holders of the position. Stories about senior women who had left their organisations were regularly recounted by current female managers, some of who had not even worked there at the same time as these previous senior female managers. Organisational narrative had maintained stories about these past employees and more particularly, why they had left the organisation. Thus, those being used as role models by many of the respondents in this study included the 'departed' role model. This finding contributes to the global role model construct as described by Gibson (2003) and provides an additional feature to the construct.

The second area we explored with the respondents related to their interpretation of the observed role modelling behaviour. The findings here suggest that these women, currently in middle-management roles are using their interpretation of the role modelling behaviour in the career progression choice process. In effect, their interpretations of the observed behaviour of senior women can act in a negative, and unexpected way, rather than a positive manner for women at this management level. This diverges somewhat from previous research on role models which tends to highlight the positive nature of role models, particularly for female career progression (c.f. Collins and Singh, 2006;

Vinkenburg and Van Engen, 2005). During the course of the interviews the respondents situated the discussion of role models in organisational culture and work family conflict. They argued that the culture of their organisations was one that did not accept that those in senior management positions should avail of work-life balance policies. Interestingly, the combination of these two factors - the use of 'realistic' role models and the male orientated organisational culture associated with senior management roles, regardless of the existence of work-life policies, resulted in over half of the respondents having already made decisions not to pursue a senior management position as their next career move, in the short to medium term.

Work-life balance policies were perceived as being little more than 'window dressing' by the majority of respondents when discussing how these policies could assist female managers in balancing work and life commitments. Availing of any of the work-life balance policies offered in their organisations (most commonly discussed were parental leave and flexi-time) was believed to be interpreted by senior management as a lack of career commitment. While this issue has been raised in previous studies here, the impact of having a commitment to anything other than a senior management position, regardless of the existence of organisational work-life balance policies was seen as incompatible with future career progression. The female role models within their organisations who were interpreted as attempting to balance work-family conflict were perceived to be unable to find a way to balance this conflict, providing little hope to those female managers in middle-level positions that they would be able to manage this issue any better. This finding is significant for those concerned with increasing in the numbers of senior female managers. This issue raises interesting questions about how role models

can unintentionally negatively affect career progression decisions, an area which has received little attention in the relevant extant literature. **It is important to note that the negative career outcomes discussed here are not being identified as the fault of the women themselves. Structural inequality, which refers to the inequalities that are systemically rooted in the normal operations of dominant social institutions, is the dominant explanation here for the decisions being made by these female managers, both those in the study and those identified as role models.**

The women in this study did not perceive their organisational cultures as discriminatory. Rather, they accepted that such an organisational system operated at middle and senior management positions. They accepted that they would either have to make changes in order to adapt to meet organisational requirements, or make decisions not to pursue their careers any further. It is worth noting that the organisational culture with regard to senior women availing of work-life balance policies was identified by some respondents as being ‘much more positive in the public sector’ than in the private sector. Hence the use of ‘realistic’ role models had a more positive perspective when respondents were discussing work-life balance issues in the public sector.

Indeed returning to the idea of work-family conflict, Baaker (2000) cited in Doherty and Murphy (2007) refers to the concept of a “double life perspective between career and children”, suggesting that for women a choice often must be made between a career or children (or-or situation) whilst men invariably seem to demonstrate the “and - and” situation in combining both careers and children. The empirical findings in this paper highlight not only the continued prevalence of this issue, but importantly that where many women in middle management roles believe that more senior females in

their organisation are in an “or-or” situation. Our findings indicate that this negatively impacts on their aspirations of senior management jobs. Furthermore, it calls into question whether females in senior roles can actually negatively rather than positively affect the likelihood of females opting to advance within their own organisations.

For those concerned with increasing the number of women in senior management positions it is somewhat alarming that perceived negative role-modelling behaviour by senior female managers may be contributing to middle level female managers re-evaluating possibility of a senior management career. In light of the changing demographic profile of Europe, and particularly in Ireland, this does not augur well for organisations that will need to strategically plan their future human resource requirements.

### **Implications for Practice and Conclusion**

This research study has identified the lack of female role models and the unintended negative consequences of role modelling behaviour as significant barriers facing women in their pursuit of careers in senior management. As a result of so few women occupying senior management positions many middle-level managers will not be able to benefit from positive career development support through role modelling. This suggests that one of the most significant problems facing women seeking senior managerial careers can be found within the organisational culture. While organisational culture rewards male behaviours, such as not availing of work-life polices, women will remain embedded in the lower and middle levels of management. Until Human Resource Management policies and practices proactively deal with the entrenched male culture which exists in senior management teams it is likely that little real progress will be made in advancing

the careers of female managers.

One approach could be that Human Resource Management practices are customized to meet the very different needs of various groups of female managers and developing human resource strategies, which are geared to an understanding of what drives female managers' career paths. This approach suggests the application of basic marketing principles in segmenting employees, understanding their requirements and customizing Human Resource Management policies accordingly. This segmentation and customization could usefully be extended to women seeking to progress their careers in senior management. In light of the findings of this study, it appears that women will remain a small minority in senior management until organisations re-examine and reassess their Human Resource Management policies and practices in these areas. Many of these practices are not gender neutral, but rest on a set of gender-based assumptions about what senior managerial competence looks like and how it should be quantified.

In examining the impact of role models for women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), Cheryan et al., (2011) highlight the issue of role incongruence, women embodying characteristics that contrast with the female gender role. They argue that when women embody STEM stereotypes, they may evoke in other women feelings of dissimilarity despite their shared gender. Furthermore, when female role models embody stereotypical traits associated with working in a particular role, they may be just as powerful of a deterrent as when males embody them. Therefore, from a HRM perspective organisations should consider not only gender representation at senior levels but look in tandem at gender and family status as well as paying attention to the manner in which senior executives appear to manage their work and family commitments



since this behaviour is clearly noted by women at lower ranks.

Finally, this paper has extended our knowledge relating to the unintended negative impact that senior female managers can have on the career progression decision-making process of middle-level female managers. This study suggests that there is a need for further empirical and theoretical work on the area of negative role modelling in order to examine the unintended consequences of female role modelling behaviour for future generations of junior and middle-level managers. Additionally, the issue of the construction of global role models and the inclusion of two additional elements – the realistic role model and the departed role model - has been raised and is one which requires more nuanced study to more clearly establish their existence and their impact.

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**Table 2 Demographics of Sample**

<b>Industry Sector</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Children</b>
Private Sector: Education	Assistant Principal	Married	Yes
Pharmaceutical	Learning and Development Manager	Single	No
Call Centre	Call Centre Manager	Married	Yes
Hospitality	Regional HR Manager	Single	No
Aeronautics	HR Manager	Single	No
Financial Services	IT Manager	Married	Yes
Accountancy	Practice Manager	Single	No
Business Advisory Service	Manager	Single	No
Telecoms	Marketing Manager	Married	Yes
Public Sector: Health	Development Manager	Separated	Yes
Public Sector: Health	Finance Manager	Married	Yes
Leisure	Centre Manager	Divorced	Yes
Retail	Store Manager	Single	No
Manufacturing electrical	Production/Quality Manager	Married	No
Manufacturing computer	HR Manager	Single	No
Telecoms	Project Manager	Married	No
Public Sector: Library	Manager	Single	No
Finance	Customer Service Manager	Married	No
Recruitment	Commercial Manager	Single	No
Call Centre	Account Manager	Married	Yes
Voluntary Sector	Regional Manager	Married	Yes
Manufacturing Electronic	Project Manager	Married	Yes
Public Sector: Voluntary	HR Manager	Married	No

Hospitality	Six Sigma Manager	Single	No
Manufacturing Electronics	Supply Chain Manager	Married	Yes
Financial services	General manager	Married	Yes
Public Sector: Environment	Manager	Married	No
Software	Finance Manager	Separated	Yes
Finance	Manager	Single	No
Public Sector: Education	Senior Post	Married	Yes