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GENDER AND MANAGEMENT – CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES†

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Abstract

The paper is proposing a study on subjective factors (as changing attitudes or expectations) that continue to influence female participation in decision making structures. The main objective of our research is to reveal some profound, less obvious causes of perpetuation of the gender imbalanced structures of most Romanian organizations. Expected influences of modernity on the relationship between the two genders are also questioned in order to verify the perpetuation of some social relations. We are also searching for consistency with other studies and reports on the similar subjective factors influencing the Romanian (or European) female representation in different power structures.

Keywords: Gender Diversity, Changing Attitudes, Modernity and Gender Balance, Gender and Management

1. Introduction

The importance of gender diversity in modern organizations is stressed out by many recent studies or classic literature. The way gender discourse has changed over the time turned out to be more adequate in terms of final objectives pursued by organizations. The rational approach is now preferred as it enhances the efficiency of using human potential entirely, at the level of organizations as well as the society's one.

The quality, innovation and globalization requirements have determined organizations to acknowledge the value of heterogeneity of employees in order to remain competitive. Thus, the challenge for the management of organizations is to cultivate diversity and create an environment in which every employee has the opportunity of expressing and performing at his/her entire physical and intellectual potential. The final economic effect of diversity is conditioned by its positive aspects (for example creativity and innovation, determined by the multitude of perspectives of solving problems), and the negative ones which are to be minimized as much as possible.

As for gender diversity, necessary and natural in almost any organization structure and in the leadership teams, similar to the demographic diversity, this represents a desirable situation, which has never been reached. The segregation phenomenon (not just occupational), having gender as criterion, is still to be found in any region, political system, level of economic development or religious, social or cultural environment.

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In order to diminish the effects of the segregation phenomenon, specific measures have been set. The well-known practices, of American origin, for indiscrimination (EEO – Equal Employment Opportunities), and intentionally favouring practices (AA – Affirmative Action), have been adopted, sometimes with the same name, in many countries and cultures. These practices are often confused with diversity management. Certainly, although they do not coincide, the efforts made in all three directions do not exclude one another, but, ideally they can support each other. It has been shown that while EEO and AA mainly serve some social goals, diversity management is justified by the economic finality, therefore it differs from the first as far as objective and approach are concerned. (Pollar and Gonzales, 1994)

Many studies had shown that women's participation in positions of high responsibility is still limited in almost all regions and countries of the world. Taking into account the cultural roots or specific background of every nation, researchers have to adapt their approaches and investigation instruments in order to capture the reasons for this lack of women's representation in their country. Therefore, import practices or theories on gender topics are rarely useful when someone is trying to reveal the specific situation of a geographical region.

Modernity have made some improvements in the way women are perceived in our society, but still, some cultures (as the Romanian one) remain basically traditional, or even profound patriarchal. Some changes are only about transforming one form of domination of men into another, much more subversive, despite the presumed and desirable equality. Therefore, any research on this sensitive and often controversial issue about sharing power between men and women is provocative and it may conduct to interesting results.

2. Literature Review

There is a critical need for indistinguishable use of talents, as many authors insisted. Peters (2005) argued that women are a real source of talent for leadership. He insisted (almost a decade ago), among other arguments that the so-called women's fortress (broadly defined as special capabilities of women) satisfies to a surprisingly degree the leadership needs of the new economy. Therefore, accelerating the incorporation of women in leadership became a strategic imperative, of a higher rank.

There is a constant interest on gender diversity issue, from different perspectives as applied psychology, sociology, legal approach, managerial or leadership perspectives etc. This interest is legitimated by the competitiveness requirements and by that need of discovering any source of talent (as Peters argued).

Some important researchers or authors that dedicated their studies to gender diversity are: Allen *et al.* (1997), Berdahl (1996), Vinnicombe and Colwill (1998), Cox and Smolinski (1994), Fagan and Burchell (2002), De Anca and Vega (2005), Peters (2005) and so on.

The impact of individual attitudes and beliefs on gender diversity was stressed out by Martins and Parsons (2007); Campbel and Miguez-Vera (2008) reveals that greater gender diversity in firms board of directors actually generate economic gains; Adams and Ferreira (2004) found that gender diverse boards can be more effective than homogeneous boards; lots of researches were focused on workforce diversity and performance: van Knippenberg *et al.* (2004), Herring (2009) etc.

3. Research Description and Results

Romanian society continues to be characterized as traditional or patriarchal as gender diversity in management is concerned. Gendered uneven participation in top positions is generalized in politics, companies or even entrepreneurship, as many studies have already shown. We consider that plausible causes of this (among others) are the way women are perceived in our society and their lack of self-confidence. Starting with this assumption we explored the attitudes of young subjects towards women managers. In essence, we aimed to identify a possible attitudinal model, built on a (relatively) common pattern of thinking of young people, in relation to this subject.

We also began with the premise that young people represent the population segment that is more likely to produce major changes at the level of society, including by the improvement of women's representation in power structures. Moreover, we have assumed that the permanent changes and modernization, which are taking place in our society, also produce in time changes of perceptions and mentalities at the level of individuals. In an environment in which modernity induces a permissive way of thinking, women managers or leaders are no longer considered as exceptions or rarities, but only the expression of equitable society.

Previous results of a longitudinal investigation carried out on a sample of young population, highlighted some interesting and relevant aspects regarding generalized perceptions and attitudes towards women. Those results determine us to continue the investigations, with the same questionnaire, in order to make possible comparisons. A twenty items questionnaire was used to measure the attitudes of student sample of "Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu-Mureş. The instrument is the Women as Managers Scale (WAMS), designed and used by professors Nancy Papalexandris and Dimitris Bourantas, from Athens University, Greece. They also conduct several studies on this topic with interesting results.

The scale includes twenty statements to which respondents had to reply by using a seven-point Likert-type scale. The maximum point in the scale expresses the total agreement of the statement and the minimum point – total disagreement. For an easy evaluation and interpreting of the data we treated the WAMS scale in a different manner than Greek professors, by splitting it in two halves: ten positive statements which express the most positive attitudes when receive maximum score (10x7), and the other ten negative statements which express the favorable attitudes when receive minimum score (10x1).

Our longitudinal investigation includes three periods of investigation: 2003-2004, 2008-2009 and 2013-2014 for gathering data on attitudinal pattern.

The students' samples were structured in Table 1:

Table 1. Students' samples by sex

	2003/2004 (N = 322)		2008-2009 (N = 258)		2013-2014 (N = 355)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Men	162	50.3	95	36.8	97	27.3
Women	160	49.7	163	63.2	258	72.7

Beside male/female categories, age was also taken into account as an important variable that influence the respondents' attitudes towards women managers. Some differences in attitudes by groups of ages were found, but without statistical relevance. Variance analysis with One-way ANOVA (SPSS Package for Windows) shows no significance between the three groups of ages that we consider.

Out of the twenty items of WAMS questionnaire, ten positive statements were coded as follows: evaluation, instruction, skills, accept, recognize, compete, pregnancy, emotions, femininity and confidence. This group of statements generally refers to the desirable situation of equal opportunities for men and women regarding managerial careers, and to the relationship between certain female characteristics (pregnancy, femininity, emotional feelings) and managerial activity. As mean scores of the respondents on these items are getting near maximum score 7, which demonstrates more favourable attitude towards women managers.

Comparing mean scores of the subjects' responses of the three investigations, separately for the two sexes, it is evident the more favourable situation of the first investigation (2003-2004), in the case of male subjects, with mean scores significantly more close to the highest note 7. In the second study (2008-2009), they inverse their overall attitudes being less favourable towards women managers, and the third study (2013-2014) shows important improvement of responses, comparing with the second one (Figure 1), in 6 out of 10 statements.

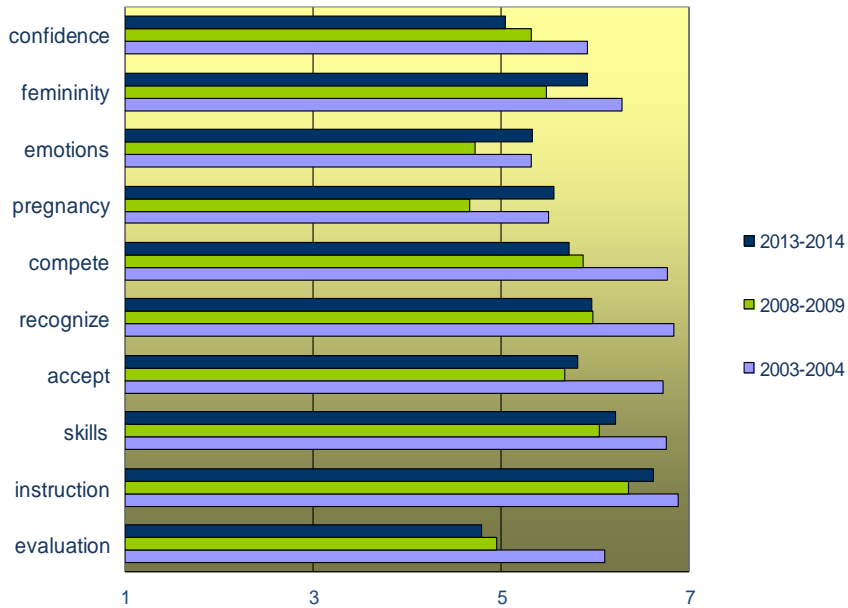


Figure 1. Differences of opinions – positive items - men

As female respondents are concerned, Figure 2 reveals how they have responded to positive items, in the three studies. The evolution of opinions was different from that of men, with significant improvements from the first to the second period of investigation, and the third study marking reconciliation between the two previous studies. The mean scores of the third investigation were less favourable towards women managers compared to the second study in 8 out of 10 statements.

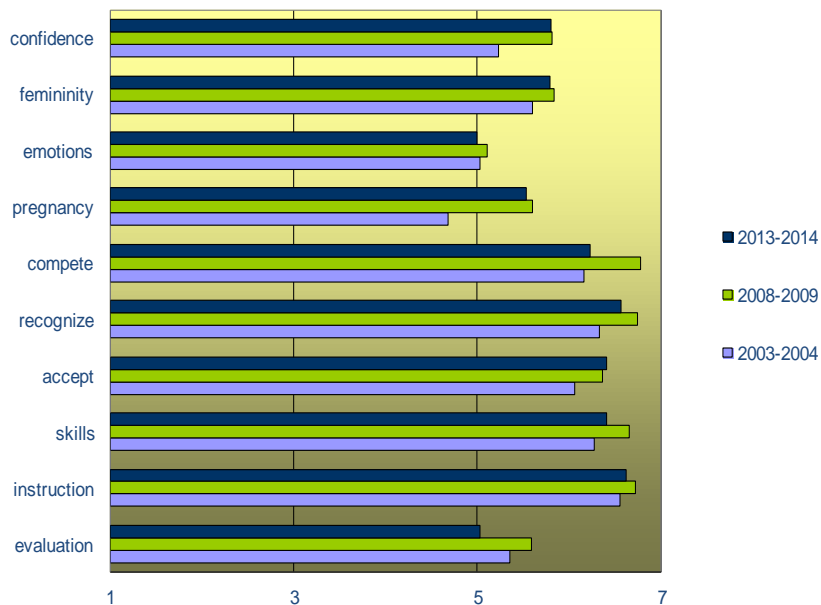


Figure 2. Differences of opinions – positive items - women

The ten negative statements of WAMS were coded as follows: responsibility, importance, capable, roles, mama, mathematics, ambition, assertive, success and aggressive. Maximum overall mean score to this statements (70) demonstrates hostile attitudes towards women managers, and minimum score (10) is for complete disagreement with negative statements about women managers, which is the most favorable situation.

The content of these statements (formulated as negative sentences) generally refer to women's ability and motivation to respond effectively to the role of manager or to women's possession of desirable characteristics which are considered linked to managerial success.

As shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4, the tendency of changing opinions and attitudes of the two sexes from one study to another is confirmed, with more dramatic figures. The sense of those changes is also the same: half of the negative statements get worse mean scores (with differences about more than 1 point), from the first to the second study, in case of male respondents. In case of female subjects the negative statements get better mean scores, also with important differences, from the first to the second period of investigation.

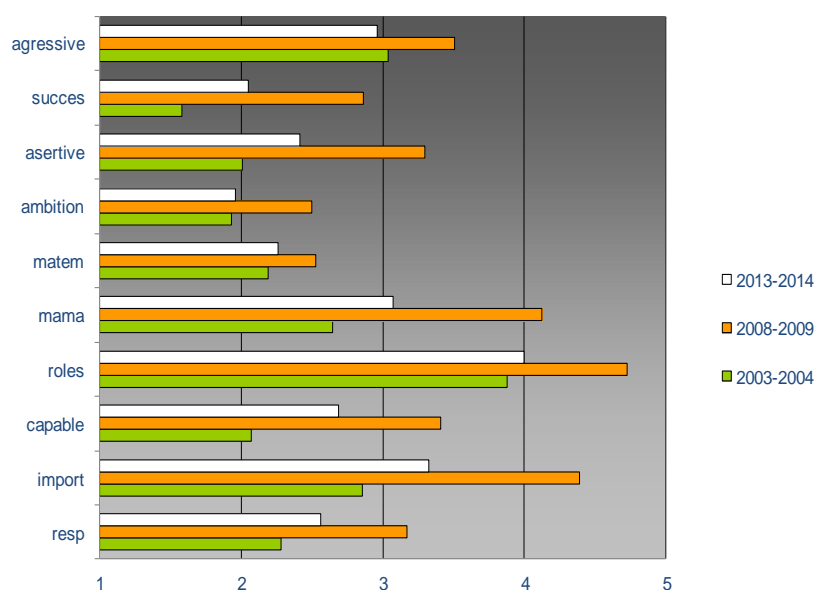


Figure 3. Differences of opinions – negative items – men

The third study (2013-2014) brings mean scores that diminish the differences between the previous ones. In case of male respondents the sense of the change is to more favourable attitudes, compared with the second study, and respective to female respondents the sense of change is to less favourable attitudes, compared with 2008-2009 investigation.

Attempting to evaluate these changes of subject attitudes when the first and second studies were analyzed, we tried to find some explanations although it seemed to be a peculiar situation to explain. We considered natural that women respondents have turned more favourably disposed towards other women in managerial positions, as result of some similar changes in the society's understanding and approach respective to gender diversity. But this presumed evolution of Romanian society couldn't explain the reverse tendency of changing attitudes of male respondents. While female respondents improved their perceptions, in the same period male respondents became less favourable towards women managers.

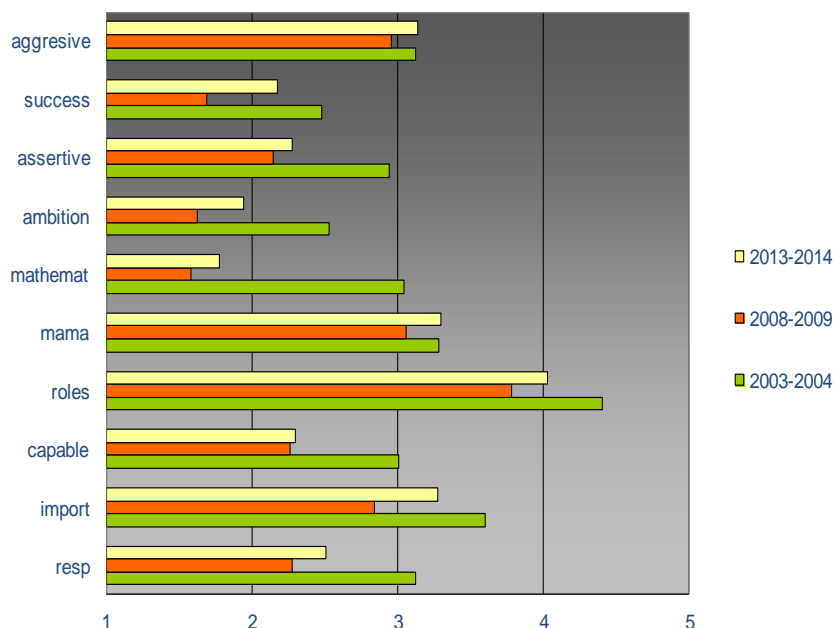


Figure 4. Differences of opinions – negative items – women

A possible explanation of this situation that we have formulated at that time was that female respondents became more open and courageous in expressing their opinions, while men weren't so generous in opinions (as they were in the first study), embracing more neutral, cautious positions. In absence of any open debate or exposure to management gender diversity issue, a great deal of conformism or social desirability was activated to conduct to good responses. Identity with what is considered correct, good or acceptable responses is fairly high when using questionnaire like WAMS. When expressing opinions in writings on men/women issue, individuals tend to avoid categorical opinions, choosing a neutral position where they cannot be considered neither feminists or extreme liberals, nor sexists. Almost everyone tends to choose a global trendy path, accepting that modern societies means diversity in all kind of aspects.

Another possible explanation of shifting attitudes was the absence of important public female leader, playing the role of a model in our society. The impact of a small number of Romanian successful women managers on people was so poor that perceptions were rather insignificant or negative. Really competent female managers remain somewhere hidden, avoiding publicity, aiming low objectives and small successes which all mean reinforcing stereotypical perceptions about their lack of managerial capabilities.

The third study reveals some moderation of opinions, for both male and female respondents, with mean scores situated between those of the previous studies. The overall interpretation is that male subjects have improved their attitudes and female subjects have worsened their attitudes, compared with the second study.

Evaluating these changing attitudes we can say that mental barriers still exist at individual level of perceptions. We could expect more heterogeneous changes of responses of both male and female subjects from one investigation to another. Some items normally could receive better answers and some items worse. Instead, data reveal homogenous improvements or worse responses for almost all items, from one study to the next one. Furthermore, the direction of shifting men attitudes was opposed to women's one, in every investigation.

4. Conclusion

The most important conclusion of our longitudinal investigation is that young Romanian respondents have instable or somehow volatile attitudes towards women managers, depending on the context or the moment when the investigation is conducted. None of the possible explanation is satisfactory on its own, and we may not identify the real reason for attitudinal volatility. A high level of conformism of respondents when answering to some questions, the lack of exposure of young people to the topic of gender diversity (related subjects discussed within families or in schools), the perpetuation of traditional gender stereotypes (which still represent real barriers in women's advancement despite the impression of overall friendly environment), the lack of real feminine models on the public scene or the absence of self confidence of women in their own capabilities – are plausible explanations that influences the global perceptions on women managers.

All of these causes can be reduced or eliminated with greater exposure of people to female leadership and with quantitative and qualitative data on the effectiveness of women managers. Schools should bring further light in this subject and expose students to the vast amount of literature on gender equality in society and in the workplace. Despite the high percentage of women in universities, higher education has not succeeded in controlling sexual stereotypes and in influencing attitudinal change.

Based exactly on the volatility of young generation's perceptions and attitudes, schools can make significant changes by putting a greater accent on students, not only by transferring to them large amounts of knowledge but also by identifying and developing students' abilities, designing attitudes, teaching more about modernity or democracy, celebrating and promoting diversity etc.

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