Social Perceptions of Women Executives at Work

Bachelor Thesis for Obtaining the Degree

Bachelor of Science

in

Advanced International Management

Submitted to Ass.Prof. Lidija Lalicic

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Vienna, 05 February 2020

Affidavit

I hereby affirm that this Bachelor's Thesis represents my own written work and that I have used no sources and aids other than those indicated. All passages quoted from publications or paraphrased from these sources are properly cited and attributed.

The thesis was not submitted in the same or in a substantially similar version, not even partially, to another examination board and was not published elsewhere.

05 February 2020

Date

Abstract

The number of female employees occupying top executive positions has slowly but continuously been increasing during the past years. This year, the last standing all-male board on the S&P 500 companies accepted women in their ranks. The changing public sentiment, pressure from investors, and various legislations have incentivized organizations all over the world to add more women to their executive boards. Furthermore, research has shown that board gender diversity is also related to improved financial performance. However, achieving a leadership position is not automatically connected to the level of education, skills for innovation, nor professional achievements. Many studies have shown that leadership ability is wholly subjective, depending strongly on how your colleagues see you. There are unique challenges that women face when it comes to being perceived as leaders. Even though not many people would consciously support the idea that men are better leaders, when asked to draw a portrait of a leader, it is almost always a male figure.

The literature review identified three social phenomena that are Imposter Syndrome, the Double-Bind Paradox, and Unconscious Bias. This project will investigate the presence of this phenomenon in Austrian public companies. Although there are many studies about the diversity gap in executive positions in Austria, none of them analyze the reasons behind the difference.

With the help of structured questionnaires, primary data was collected from women occupying various positions in large companies with branches in Vienna. One hundred women holding positions in different levels in publicly listed companies in Austria are invited for the survey study. Eighty-nine of the invited persons participated in the survey by giving 84 valid questionnaires. After the data is analyzed, the results show the presence of all three social phenomena in all the participants of the study. Although on the bright side, most of the companies have started to notice these issues and take measures against them.

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1 Introduction

The first section starts by providing a brief overview of gender inequalities in the workforce. After, the differences between males and females who aspire for leadership positions are analyzed. Then the situation of gender diversity in high management and leadership positions in Austria is discussed. Based on the analysis, the research questions are developed, and the aim of the study is clearly stated.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Women in Leadership and Senior Management Position

The involvement of females in the workforce has continuously been increasing worldwide in the last decades (Sojo et al., 2016). The gap between males and females in health outcomes or levels of education attained has wholly faded in some countries. In many developed countries, women have even surpassed men when it comes to education and many other fields. Particular programs like business, medicine, and law have experienced waves of gender desegregation, which has enabled females to build reliable human capital (O'Connor, 2019). O'Connor (2019) also argues that this improvement has been the main contributor to the increase of female participation in the workforce, and to a significant reduction in the gender wage gap.

Nevertheless, the gap between men and women in occupying high-level management positions in publicly traded companies has not been closing at the same rate, and today remains significantly large. Evidence from multiple recent studies has shown that the share of women and men who get appointed or elected into executive leadership roles is not equal at all (Ezzedeen et al., 2015; Siemiatycki, 2019; Sojo et al., 2016). OECD Stats (2017) show that in 2016 on average, only 22.3% of the share of board seats of the largest publicly traded companies were occupied by women. Although there has been clear and evident progress from 2014, with women representing only 10% of the board seat share, there is still a wide gap (Sojo et al., 2016).

The pre-preliminary literature review suggests that there are additional challenges that women face in order to advance in their leadership careers compared to men. Most of these impediments are related to the general social perceptions of women in leadership positions (Kumthekar & Swaroop, 2018; Swart et al., 2015). For the

purposes of this study, Imposter Syndrome, Double-Bind Paradox, and Unconscious Bias were selected as the most influential phenomena that result from these social perceptions. These three reasons lead to several barriers for career women, referred to as the Glass Ceiling. The reason for choosing the three phenomena mentioned above is simply because these were the most frequently mentioned hardships that contribute to the absence of women in leadership.

1.1.2 Governmental Action in Austria against Gender Imbalances

Austria is classified as a conservative welfare state where the male breadwinner model continues to be the main ideology (Bergmann et al., 2019). Bergmann et al. (2019) explain that although partly modernized, the male breadwinner model and strong corporatist structure are the two main factors that shape the working conditions in Austria. At the same time, governmental provisions and policies are based on by also determine many gender-related beliefs, assumptions, and norms that have a significant effect on collective bargaining and job valuations (Bergmann et al., 2019). The institutional frameworks that are in place strongly influence the income opportunities between men and women.

In 2000, the Austrian Government decided to implement the gender mainstreaming strategy and sep up a proper institution to monitor its development (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2017). This strategy was aimed at achieving equal treatment of women and men in all aspects of life. It relies on the utilization of gender budgeting policies, a fiscal tool for fighting gender inequalities (Marx, 2019). Marx (2019) explains that by giving Austria an outcome-oriented budget management procedure, authorities in all levels of government are obliged to implement effective equal treatment for both genders. In simpler words, public funds should be used in the fairest way possible in order to achieve equality between men and women.

In 2009, gender mainstreaming was constitutionally established during the Austrian Federal Budget Reform (Marx, 2019). In 2013 this strategy became more dominant in the Austrian outcome-oriented budget management (Reichard & Küchler-Stahn, 2019). Since then, the highest national bodies and all Federal Ministries are obliged to present e number of objectives regarding the usage of the annual budget. And one of these objectives should address gender issues (Marx, 2019; Reichard & Küchler-Stahn, 2019). Marx (2019) adds that at the same time, these governmental institutions are

required to define specific strategies for achieving the objective regarding gender equality, and appropriate measures to evaluate the results. In the same year, it became law that all laws, regulations, and major governmental projects should be examined in regard to their outcome in terms of fixing gender imbalances (Marx, 2019). This means that all significant plans and projects should be assessed before implementation. Within a limited timeframe, the responsible authorities must judge if the desired outcomes are achieved.

The measures mentioned above resulted in shifting the focus of policymakers and federal legislators towards the gender-related consequences of direct payments, employment and educational policy, and public revenues (Reichard & Küchler-Stahn, 2019). In direct payments, processes like funding of businesses or subsidies were evaluated more carefully regarding gender inequalities. In public revenues, the gender-related consequences of tools like taxes, charges, and levies have to be carefully considered too (Reichard & Küchler-Stahn, 2019).

1.1.3 Women in the Austrian Labour Market

The employment rate of women has been slowly rising in Austria. Within a decade it increased from 63% in 2017 to 68% after ten years (Fritsch et al., 2019). Also, the number of women employed in part-time jobs rose, from 41% to almost 48% in the same time frame (Fritsch et al., 2019). Fritsch et al. (2019) suggest that for most traditional low-earning positions in the labor market gender equality has been achieved. Both in the relative share of the genders and their levels of income.

Nevertheless, there are still considerable differences between the proportion of men and women in atypical employment (Fritsch et al., 2019). The same study shows that in 2017, the number of women working in subcontracted, freelance, part-time, and marginal employment was three times higher that of men, respectively with 53% and 17%.

The governmental measures mentioned above have produced significant improvements in diminishing gender inequalities and assuring a fairer treatment between women and men. Clear progress has been made in education, politics, and governmental employment (Rezaee & Fogarty, 2019). Nevertheless, Austria continues to have a noticeable underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and decision-making bodies in the area of business. In 2018, a study of the 200 Austrian

companies with the largest turnover showed that the share of women in their executive boards and senior management positions was only 8,4% (Mensi-Klarbach, 2017). The female percentage of supervisory boards is only a bit more than 18%. The situation for the Austrian publicly listed companies is almost the same. In their case, 18% of the supervisory board members and only 5% of the executive board members were women (Rezaee & Fogarty, 2019).
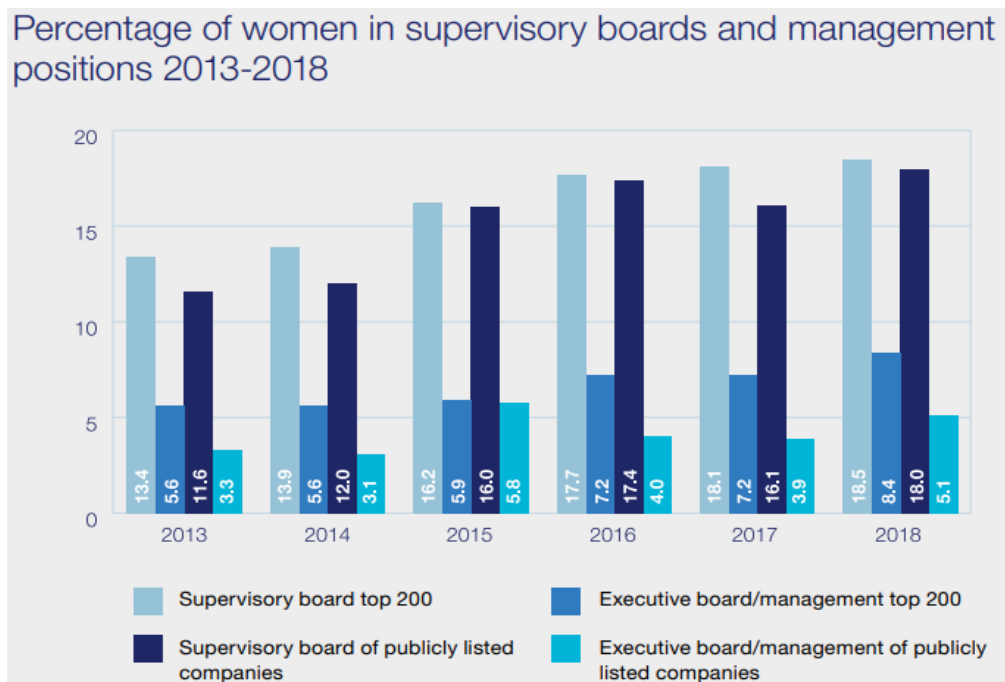

Figure 1. Share of Women Leadership Positions in Business (source: AK Frauen.Management Report.2018)

In 2017, the Austrian government adopted the Act on Equality between Women and men in Supervisory Boards (GFMA-G) with the objective of raising the representation of women in leadership positions (Rezaee & Fogarty, 2019). This act implies that supervisory boards of publicly listed companies, as well as companies with over 1000 employees, should be composed of at least 30% men and 30% women (Rezaee & Fogarty, 2019). It was a vital step in achieving equal and balanced representation of men and women in positions with high economic decision-making responsibility.

With the establishment of the two mandatory measures, Austria has signaled a strong commitment to improving gender imbalances in and the representation of women on boards. Although both the quotas have led to meaningful improvements towards gender equality, they have done so not in the pace that was originally envisioned (Fritsch et al., 2019). Fritsch et al. (2019) argue that this has happened mainly due to the limited number of companies that the 2018 quota applies to.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The author herself aims to have a successful business career working with the largest companies in Austria. Therefore, it is particularly interesting to investigate the challenges that women have to conquest to achieve the top levels of the management ladder. As one of the first studies, this study will focus on Austrian publicly listed companies. Although there are many studies about gender diversity in executive positions in publicly listed companies, not any of them looks at the reasons behind the slow progress of gender desegregation compared to other areas of business. Many of the studies available aimed only at identifying the share of women on boards or the benefits that diversity brings to the firms (Buchwald & Hottenrott, 2015; Kuhlmann et al., 2017; Velte, 2016). Other articles looked into the factors that support and help women in achieving high-level management roles (Cimirotić et al., 2017; Mensi-Klarbach, 2017).

To fill the literature gap, the thesis will analyze whether the three reasons mentioned in the previous section have also affected women aspiring for high management positions or executive boards in Austria. In order to guide the author towards reaching that aim, the following research questions are developed:

- Is Imposter Syndrome a barrier that women aiming for leadership positions face in Austria?
- Is the Double-Bind Paradox a barrier that women aiming for leadership positions face in Austria?
- Is the Unconscious Bias a barrier that women aiming for leadership positions face in Austria?

The target group of the study is composed of only female employees occupying various roles or holding board seats in publicly listed companies in Austria. More than one hundred such women will be approached with a request to fill a short questionnaire. The author expects to have at least 70 to 90 persons willing to participate in the study. The choice of only one hundred persons is mainly due to time & resources limitations. In doing so, the research aims to provide new insights over the presence and role of social biases and prejudice in lowering the chances of women achieving high management positions in publicly listed companies in Austria. The results of the paper can also be relevant for women and corporations in other countries in the region, with similar general market conditions, like Germany.

1.3   Outline of the Thesis

This section provides an outline of the complete thesis. It does so by providing the content of each chapter with only a few sentences. This bachelor thesis is composed of the following chapters:

- Chapter 1: This chapter provides an introduction to the research topic. It explains the motivation of the author to study the subject. The research questions that guide the author throughout the thesis are developed here.

- Chapter 2: The second chapter provides all the required background knowledge and theories that are necessary to make sense of the study. It starts by presenting the general hardships that women have historically faced and then it analyses the most discussed challenges of our current times.

- Chapter 3: Chapter three is intended to present the reader with the research methods and tools selected for conducting the research. After, an introduction into the three main research methodologies, surveys are explained in more detail.

- Chapter 4: In this chapter, the findings of the study will be presented. The results are displayed in a structured form, with multiple visual tools that support them, with the purpose to make the reader understand the topics discussed almost effortlessly.

- Chapter 5: The fifth chapter of this study initially highlights the main findings. Then it discusses the practical implication that the results of this thesis introduce. In the end, some of the limitations of the study are presented together with potential directions for future research.

- Chapter 6: This chapter presents the bibliography of this thesis. All the articles and other scientific works utilized for this study are cited alphabetically using the American Psychologic Association (APA) style of referencing.

- The Appendix chapter of this thesis includes a blank copy of the questionnaire used to acquire the primary data for the study.

2   Literature Review

The first section of the literature review presents the most debated ideas concerning gender and the participation of women in the labor market. This part is intended to provide the knowledge necessary to understand the study and the concepts discussed in it. The second section of the literature provides the theoretical background of the three phenomena chosen to be investigated by this thesis. This section will serve as the basis for developing the questionnaire.

2.1   Theories about Women in the Workforce

This section provides an introduction into the main debates found in the literature that discuss the inequalities and injustices that women face in the workplace due to gender. The first idea discussed is tokenism, which is not a women-specific type of discrimination but has been initially used to explain the challenges that women face in the workplace. After, the concept of the glass ceiling is explained. The glass ceiling is a term used to describe the barriers that women or minorities face when progressing in their careers. Although the term is used for both gender and racial discrimination, the majority of the literature and the one selected for this study refer to a gender glass ceiling. Lastly, more current theories regarding the reasons that lead to the emergence of the glass ceiling phenomenon in organizations are discussed.

2.1.1   The Concept of 'Tokenism'

Tokenism was one of the first ideas widely used to explain many of the barriers women face when they are involved with work positions that are generally perceived as male occupations (Kanter 1977, as mentioned in Kanter, 2010). This theory was used for a long time to explain many of the negative experiences that women go through in workplaces with higher percentages of male employees (Kanter, 2010). In particular, the theory explains that the main reason for the gender inequalities on the job is attributed to this token status of women, their low share in an environment dominated by men.

The term 'token' has been used in sociological literature quite often to refer to a specific form of discrimination (Yoder & Sinnett, 1985). It is used for members of minorities (or women) who are hired, appointed, or admitted to a group, especially

because of their difference from other members. In many cases, mainly to serve as proof that the organization does not discriminate against these groups of people (Yoder & Sinnett, 1985).

Kanter (1977, as mentioned in Kanter, 2010) suggested that organizations should implement programs and strategies aimed at shifting the ratio of women and men in various areas of the organization to fight tokenism. By using new hirings, promotion policies, and affirmative actions, companies can achieve a more equal proportion of men and women. Once in the same numbers, Kanter (1977, as mentioned in Kanter, 2010) states that new forms of relationships emerge, and peer culter changes significantly. These can lead to better working conditions for women.

Although that was and continues to be partially the case for many injustices that women face, the concept of 'tokenism' does not explain all the gender inequalities in workplaces (Zimmer, 1988). Zimmer (1988) was the first to suggest that increasing the number of women in an organization does not necessarily translate in better working conditions for them. He argued that organizations had to properly address the sexist attitudes that are embedded in most male-dominated environments. A gender-neutral theory such as tokenism is inadequate for analyzing and answering gender issues in the workplace because it does not take into account the gender stereotypes that are shared by a society, which Zimmer (1988) describes as "plagued by sexism." Although there are many reasons for hiring more women and having a more diversified workforce, there is not much evidence that these strategies do actually have any effect on the working conditions of women in highly dominated male environments (Zimmer, 1988).

Yoder and Sinnett (1985) also state that society-wide sex-role stereotypes influence male and female tokens in different ways. In an experiment of using male tokens in a female environment, as well as female tokens in a male environment, Yoder and Sinnett (1985) proved that there are conclusive differences in the experiences of both. The male tokens did not experience the adverse effects of tokenism, but they gained even more recognition and praise than their non-token counterparts (Yoder & Sinnett, 1985).

Therefore, underrepresentation alone does not explain all the challenges that women face in the job place. It is a simple concept that can not grasp all the theories and factors that form obstacles in women's professional careers. The dominating theory

2.1.2 The Glass Ceiling Effect

The Glass Ceiling effect is not merely a more colorful way of describing what is already meant by gender inequality. It is a specific type of inequality that can be distinguished from other forms of discrimination (Davidson & Cooper, 1992). The term refers to all the invisible and unnoticeable processes that prevent minorities or women to reach high positions in their careers (Cotter et al., 2001; Ezzedeen et al., 2015). They do not suggest that it is more unjust or more important than other types of inequalities. It is different as it implies that the barriers and challenges that women face due to gender are stronger when getting closer to the top of the hierarchy (Cotter et al., 2001).

The glass ceiling concept is based on four criteria (Cotter et al., 2001). First, the idea represents inequalities that can not be explained by other job-relevant factors of the employee, which means that it reflects a job inequality that is not a consequence of a person's past achievements or experiences (Cotter et al., 2001; Davidson & Cooper, 1992). It is a form of labor market discrimination, and not just inequality. Thus, inequalities that derive from nonmarket factors, such as family time, leisure preferences, etc. in general are not considered as reasons for the glass ceiling.

The second criterion by Cotter et al. is that the glass ceiling represents a gender difference that is more significant at higher levels of an outcome. For example, in an organization with a gendered glass ceiling, the number of proportion of female CEOs is lower than the proportion of women in higher management, the proportion of women in higher management should be lower than the proportion of women in middle management, etc. In a normal earnings analysis, there needs to be a greater gender effect on the higher-earning positions than compared to lower-earning positions. If varying shares of men and women in different management levels can explain this difference, then the gender effect is a pure manifestation of gender inequality, not the glass ceiling (Cotter et al., 2001).

The third criterion of glass ceiling refers to inequalities in the opportunities and chances of advancement in higher positions within the organization, and not to current inequalities in proportions of each gender at those higher positions (Cotter et al., 2001). Davidson and Cooper (1992) suggest that the proportions are not enough to give the whole idea. Together with the second criterion, this promotion criterion explains that the glass ceiling effect is stronger for promotions to higher levels of management than promotions to lower levels of management.

The fourth criterion that distinguishes the glass ceiling form other forms of inequalities is that it represents a form of workplace inequality that increases as a person progresses in her career (Cotter et al., 2001). The composition of the term itself implies that some upward movement in the management level has been made in one's career, but later more severe discrimination has blocked further progress.

2.1.3 Reasons for Current Gender Imbalances

The reasons and factors that contribute to the creation and the manifestation of the situations that work against women are multiple and much different (Kuhlmann et al., 2017). These reasons might come from an individual, a social group, or society as a whole. The glass ceiling theory, as mentioned before, is one of the most well-known concepts used to describe the challenges that career women face in organizations (Cotter et al., 2001; Ezzedeen et al., 2015; Mensi-Klarbach, 2017; O'Connor, 2019). Cotter et al. (2001) suggest that the glass ceiling is a phenomenon that is specific to women and does not apply to other discrimination forms like race.

Ezzedeen et al. (2015) argue that the lack of women in high management positions is a result of not enough women entering the managerial pipeline. In their study, they provide scant evidence that such a pipeline exists. Per-career women are discouraged to enter this pipeline and pursue high positions due to theories of social role, work-life balance culture, and stereotype threats (Ezzedeen et al., 2015). The study identified that often women blame their personal limitations and their choices as reasons that make them face such barriers in their careers. For example, women are aware of the discrimination issues and believe that they are eased by legislation, high-profile female success stories, and social progress. Still,

the remaining barriers lead many women to not consider reaching these high roles in management (Ezzedeen et al., 2015).

When we look at the various social groups in our societies, it is notable that class, race, and gender diversity are the building pillars of inequality. The development of employees' skills and leadership capabilities are some of the most crucial processes and practices of the workplace that can differently affect diverse groups within an organization (Broadbridge & Fielden, 2018). Although these diversity concepts are embedded deeply into our society, they often seem relatively invisible and subtle in nature. At the same time, they are stable and very difficult to challenge or change.

Broadbridge and Fielden (2018) describe gender as a complex social construct. Through identity perceptions and power relations in organizations, this construct is created, modified, and contested. The trials that women face in terms of their personal identities and self-concepts are important for their leadership capabilities (Fielden & Cooper, 2002). Women's management style is stereotypically regarded as one that encompasses care and sensitivity. In a man dominated environment, such characteristics are not desired in leaders.

2.2 Main Theories Selected for this Study

After reviewing the available literature about gender discrepancies in leadership and high management positions, three phenomena were mentioned more often as the cause of additional barriers that women face based on gender. Although the three occurrences have many similarities, they refer to different situations characterized by various factors.

- The first phenomenon described is the Imposter Syndrome, which refers to perceptions that women have about themselves (Pedler, 2011).
- The second is the Double-Bind Paradox, which explains the contradicting attitudes of society regarding women and leaders (Weiner & Burton, 2016).
- Lastly, Unconscious Bias explains how many biases that are formed without our knowledge, affect our decisions (Elsesser & Lever, 2011).

2.2.1 Imposter Syndrome

The impostor syndrome is defined as a long-lasting feeling of fraudulence and inadequately, even though there are many accomplishments and clear proof of competence (Broadbridge & Fielden, 2018). Broadbridge and Fielden (2018) argue that this is one of the main factors that prevent women from progressing in their professional careers. They do not try hard enough to get promoted simply because they feel as they do not deserve it.

Clance and Imes (1978, as mentioned in Broadbridge & Fielden, 2018) were the first to study imposter syndrome in women. They argue that imposter syndrome showcases itself in various forms and behaviors in women. As they often feel unworthy, women overwork to not be discovered. They often choose conformity over originality and authenticity. In many cases, women use charm in order to gain approval and use other feminine behaviors to avoid societal rejection (Clance & Imes, 1978, as mentioned in Broadbridge & Fielden, 2018).

Having a closer look at ideas and phenomenons such as the imposter syndrome is argued to help and shed more light on the women's well-being in their professional lives (Fielden & Cooper, 2002). They can better understand the distinct set of experiences that are related to this concept and, therefore better cope with similar future situations (Broadbridge & Fielden, 2018). Fielden and Cooper (2002) say that it is known that one of the biggest challenges that many members of modern society face, is to find a balance between private and professional life. On one side, many women struggle to be authentic, original, and true to themselves, and on the other side, while in many situations, mostly in the workplace, they have to fit into and obey the organizational contexts and stereotypes of society. Since work is an integral part of human life and takes up most of the day of an average person, it is quite understandable that it plays a crucial role in the construct of a person's identity (Broadbridge & Fielden, 2018).

Considering the work-life dilemma that both genders face in their careers, women can experience the phenomenons that affect identity much differently than men. Pedler (2011) in his study, concludes that most professional women do actually suffer from imposter syndrome and have issues with their confidence. And due to this fact, they often do not take the opportunities that are presented to them

because they feel they are not ready for them (Pedler, 2011). Broadbridge and Fielden (2018) too, mention that women who aim to build a successful career in a large company often described their career experiences in terms related to feelings of non-worthiness and imposture. These can also come as a result of feelings of isolation in the work environment due to being surrounded by mostly men (Pedler, 2011). Or the lack of proper role models, as there are not many women occupying high-risk, precarious leadership positions (Broadbridge & Fielden, 2018). On the other side, Ezzedeen et al. (2015) argue that even though in some cases there are more female role-models, these senior women are not able to sponsor other women as much as their male colleagues can support their peers due to another social perception. Senior women as expected to be good team players and among the top performers at their workplace, even more so in high management positions, leaving them with no time to care and support other women (Cotter et al., 2001).

2.2.2   Double-Bind Paradox

The Double-Bind concept explores the contradiction of how women are expected to behave in a feminine way associated with shared views about their appearance, while also demonstrating the traits of masculine behavior that are supposed to be part of the identity of those who occupy high management positions (Flynn et al., 2013). Various studies by many researchers and companies, in multiple countries, have confirmed that gender stereotypes make it hard for female leaders to feel comfortable in assuming a leading position that requires a commanding stance (Fielden & Cooper, 2002; Mensi-Klarbach, 2017; O'Connor, 2019; Swart et al., 2015). Flynn et al. (2013) explain that women are either perceived as competent or as liked, but almost never both.

In psychology, the double-bind paradox refers to an impasse when contradictory requests are made to an individual, in a way that no matter which option is selected, the response will be judged as incorrect (Catalyst, 2007). When women attempt to reach a leadership role, they face a double bind. They can either suffer the risks of breaking gender stereotypes by taking a masculine leadership orientation or fail to reach the role and act in ways that go against their desires and expectations (Weiner & Burton, 2016). It is a contradiction between group stereotypes, meaning behaviors and attributes unique to a group of people like in

our case leaders, and social role stereotypes, referring to behaviors and attributes developed by social traditional values regarding gender.

Essentially, if women exercise a strong leadership style, they are perceived as 'too masculine' or not 'real women'. In contrast, they are unable to fulfill the idea of an adequate leader if their leadership style is 'too feminine'. Another double-bind that women face depends on the personality traits and stereotypes of women and men (Keck, 2019). Keck (2019) suggests that career progressions do often depend on advocating for oneself and taking risks, which are traits that girls are discouraged from exhibiting. Women are socially penalized for expressing ambitions (Sandberg, 2015). Sandberg (2015) urges more women not to get discouraged but instead to take control of their careers, to develop their ambitions, focusing more on leadership. She believes that most women lack leadership ambitions as a consequence of the social perceptions they have to face.

An important aspect of the double-bind paradox impacting women's ability to reach top positions is also appearance. In general, appearance is regarded as a significant determinant in judging the social position of a person (Swart et al., 2015). When it comes to looks, women are expected to dress nicely and in a delicate and attractive way, but leaders on the other side should dress in a way that expresses power and assertiveness.

2.2.3 Unconscious Bias

A study by the International Labour Organization in 2017 confirmed that women are still underrepresented in corporations and that the share of women goes down with each step up the organization's hierarchy (ACT/EMP, 2017). The reasons that cause this gap, among the ones discussed until now, include unconscious bias. Unconscious bias is defined as automatic and unintentional mental associations that are based on gender but come as a result of norms, traditions, values, experience, and culture (ACT/EMP, 2017). These automatic assumptions feed into the decision-making process and therefore enable a quick assessment of a person according to stereotypes, in our case, to gender stereotypes.

In our society, a stereotypical female is automatically associated with roles that include caring, nurturing and sensitivity (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). On the other side, the stereotypical male is supposed to occupy roles that are more agentic, as men

are considered more ambitious, aggressive, assertive, and direct (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). Elsesser and Lever (2011) argue that individuals who do not act according to their stereotypes tend to receive a negative evaluation. Based on these social prejudices, women aiming for a successful career face two forms of biases, descriptive and prescriptive(Elsesser & Lever, 2011). Descriptive biases are assumptions that present women as having less leadership potential than men. Prescriptive biases occur when actual women leaders are evaluated less favorably than men because men are thought to want the position more.

Elsesser and Lever (2011) conclude in their study that the level of prescriptive bias has reduced significantly and is minimal. But there is still a high grade of descriptive bias when one person images the ideal leader. They also proved that gender bias studies show much larger bias in studies about abstract or hypothetical leaders, and small or no bias in studies of actual bosses (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). This should serve as e reminder that differences should be taken into account when using results based on hypothetical versus actual bosses.

Unconscious bias is a direct effect of social role theory (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). This theory provides a social structural account for gender stereotypes. Basically, it means that current social structures in a particular society contribute to the definition of gender stereotypes in that society. The theory of social role postulates that unconscious biases related to gender, are rooted in the tasks that society has assigned to men and women (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). In most societies, women are traditionally encountered in the role of house-career or in occupations similar to domestic roles, as nurses or kindergarten teachers. Whereas men, on the other side, are most often found occupying the role of breadwinner and are found in higher hierarchal positions in organizations (Eagly & Steffen, 1984).

3   Methodology

The following chapter presents the research tools and methods selected for the purposes of this study. An overview of the three main categories of academic research studies is provided in the first section, followed by the definition and description of survey studies in the second. The third section explains the development of the actual survey structure used to acquire the primary data for

this study. The last section describes the sampling procedures followed in selecting and reaching the respondents.

3.1 The Three Academic Research Methods

When it comes to conducting scientific research, there are several strategies and designs that can be used qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Babin et al., 2019). A qualitative research question provides answers to questions that cannot be answered by means of quantification (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009). In this paradigm, the researcher must capture in detail the perceptions and experiences of the participants who are involved in the phenomena which are under investigation. Liamputtong (2009) explains that qualitative methods are better than quantitative methods for obtaining necessary preliminary insights about the topic of interest.

These research methods enable the researcher to collect information about issues that are generally unknown. Qualitative methods make use of multiple images and carefully selected words that seek to interpret and understand explanations and meaning of the ways that people act and behave, resulting in a deeper understanding of the social constructs (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009). Patten and Newhart (2017) argue that the primary advantage that qualitative methods present is its ability to collect deep, rich, and meaningful data.

There are many researchers that favor quantitative methods over qualitative ones (Bryman, 2016; Jean Lee, 1992; Plonsky & Gass, 2011). Quantitative methods are centered on values like validity, reliability, and other scientific principles. Lee (1992) defines quantitative research as an objective inquiry into social problems by testing a theory or hypothesis composed of variables, expressed in numerical values, and are analyzed using statistical techniques. Quantitative methods are designed with the sole purpose of capturing reality, free from personal opinions and biases (Plonsky & Gass, 2011).

The literature shows that quantitative methods are mostly concise, mechanistic, uncompromised, and, therefore adequate for testing already existing theories (Bryman, 2016). The most commonly used quantitative research methods are structured surveys, structured interviews, physical experimentation, and symbolic models (Sale et al., 2002). These methods conduct significant investigations on

natural phenomena in a controlled, systematic, and empirical ways (Plonsky & Gass, 2011). In quantitative approaches, the researcher is usually distant from the participants (Bryman, 2016). He or she utilizes deductive methods, involves theory testing, and assures a high level of measurement.

Mixed methods research has been increasingly accepted as the third primary research approach and has been used in multiple various fields (Creswell, 1999; Sale et al., 2002; Zohrabi, 2013). According to Creswell (1999), research employing the mixed approach can work towards providing answers simultaneously to both qualitative and quantitative questions. The mixed-method study combines features of both the qualitative and quantitative approaches and all their corresponding tools and techniques in one single study, sequentially or concurrently (Creswell, 1999). This method tries to consider different perspectives, viewpoints, positions, or standpoints using both types of research. It aims to make the best of what both methods have to offer and disregard the weaknesses of each. Although using a qualitative methodology, the study provides in-depth, eloquent insights through subjective interpretations, mixed-method research minimizes the dependence on quantitative tools (statistical data) to analyze social processes and experiences that are subjective in nature (Zohrabi, 2013).

For this study, the quantitative research method was selected as more adequate. The main reason for this choice is that the outcome of quantitative studies is objective and straightforward to measure. By assuring objectivity, the results are directly more consolidated and harder to dispute than compared to qualitative or mixed-method studies. Since the data is numerical, a quantitative research method makes comparisons and analyses easier.

3.2 Survey Studies

For the purposes of this paper, a survey study will be employed as an inquiry method to acquire the primary data necessary from the study participants. Fowler (2009) argues that a survey design offers a quantitative description of attitudes, opinions, and trends of an entire population by analyzing an adequate sample of that population. Surveys have been utilized for a long time as a primary tool for acquiring data from individuals of groups of people (Fowler, 2009). Fowler (2009) adds that there are many strategies and designs that a researcher can select while

developing a survey study. For example, surveys that aim to acquire behavior and preference related information regarding a specific activity, e.g., perceptions of the buying process of a particular good, are called simple surveys (Fowler, 2009). These simple surveys utilize a small number of selected questions in order to get the information required. More scientific studies that investigate more complex phenomena, e.g., types of social discrimination, are more complex and make use of several reliable instruments (Fowler, 2009).

Survey research represents a rigorous scientific approach to data collection that provides researchers with a wide range of instruments and tools to achieve their research purposes (Das et al., 2019). At the same time, surveys are not difficult to develop as they do not require much time and many costs. With the new technologies introduced by the internet, survey studies are nowadays even more time and cost-efficient (Das et al., 2019). Das et al. (2019) further explain that the internet has also enabled the emergence of new distribution and communication channels for the researcher that are faster and cheaper, regardless of the geographical position of the respondents.

On the other side, the reliability of the results of the survey study can be threatened by several factors (Bryman, 2016). For example, the participants of the research might provide the answer which best represents their beliefs. Or they can choose not to give answers, which would make them feel bad (Bryman, 2016). The questions and language selected also play a vital role (Fowler, 2009). The questions can be too scientific and complicated. Thus, that they could lead to mistakes in interpretation, resulting in lower response rates or incorrect answers.

3.3   Survey Development

The primary purpose of the survey research is to obtain the necessary data required for accurately answering the research questions developed in the previous chapters. Keeping in mind that goal, the questionnaire is developed based on the literature review. The design of the questionnaire is composed of six parts, focusing on the main theories about women in the workplace. The first part of the questionnaire includes inquiries about four demographic factors that are believed to have a strong relation to the results of the research. Fowler (2009) explains that

including a number of selected demographic questions can help in making better sense of the data.

The second part of the survey is composed of four 'yes' or 'no' questions that are aimed at investigating the presence of the glass ceiling phenomenon in the participant's organizations. The questions are developed based on the articles by Cotter et al. (2001) and Ezzedeen et al. (2015). The first paper provides a detailed view of the concept, while the second paper provides a managerial perspective to the issue. Using the details of the glass ceiling identified in those articles, the four questions are developed.

The third and fourth parts of the questionnaire are about the firs two main factors causing the glass ceiling, imposter syndrome and double-bind paradoxes. These parts are composed of four 'yes' or 'no' questions each that investigate the experiences of the respondents related to the two factors. Pedler's (2011) paper was used as a foundation to construct the questions of the third section. As for the fourth part, the articles from the organization Catalyst (2007) and the authors Weiner & Burton (2016) guided the question development.

The fifth part of the questionnaire is about unconscious bias. This part too utilizes four inquires, but instead of being 'yes' or 'no' questions, they are presented in the form of statements. For these statements, the respondent is required to express the level of agreement on a four-point Likert scale, rather than just a 'yes' or 'no' confirmation. It was done so because the concept of unconscious bias is more complex and almost invisible to detect (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). The sixth section aims to investigate whether the organizations where the respondents work are aware of these gender problems and if they are doing anything to address these issues.

All four parts corresponding to the main theoretical concepts of the paper firstly provide a brief description of the idea, to avoid confusion and misunderstanding by the respondents. The last part of the survey study is composed of only two 'yes' or 'no' questions that are interested in knowing is any measures are being taken by the organization to address these gender issues.

The respondent is provided with proper guidance and instructions before and through the questionnaire on how to complete the study. Following the

suggestions of Fowler (2009) to avoid and limit the risk of confusion, the survey is developed using a simple and understandable language. The structure is intended to ease the completion of the questionnaire. To better understand the argument, a copy of the questionnaire utilized in this study is included in the appendix.

3.4   Sample

The questionnaire was distributed in a physical form to 97 female employees of publicly listed companies with branches or offices in the city of Vienna. The largest part of the respondent comes from Erste Group AG, Reiffaisen AG, OMV AG and Post AG. The participants were approached in their workplaces during the lunchbreaks or afternoons. The questionnaires were personally delivered to the respondents by the author and gathered at a later time, usually in the front offices. The questionnaires were sent out during form the 13th until the 18th of January in branches and headquarters located in the city of Vienna, of the Austrian publicly traded companies. The response rate was rather high as 78 out of the 97 women approached chose to complete the study. Out of the 78 submitted questionnaires, only 73 of them are considered as valid because five of them have missing or wrong data in one or more of the fields.

4   Results

This chapter presents the findings of the research study by following the same structure of the questionnaire. The first section discusses the demographical factors of the respondents regarding age, marital status, employment level, and having children. The second section provides the results of the glass ceiling phenomenon. The next three parts display the answers regarding the main theoretical concepts that this thesis investigates, imposter syndrome, double-bind paradox, and unconscious bias. The last section shows the results regarding the organization's reaction to these issues. All the findings are summarized in the fifth chapter.

4.1   Profile of Respondents

The results of the questionnaire study show that the majority of the participants in the survey are unmarried. Out of the 73 participants, 38 of them were single and 35 were married, as shown in Figure 2. Since the participants are distributed equally between the two categories, the results should not hold any marriage related bias in them.
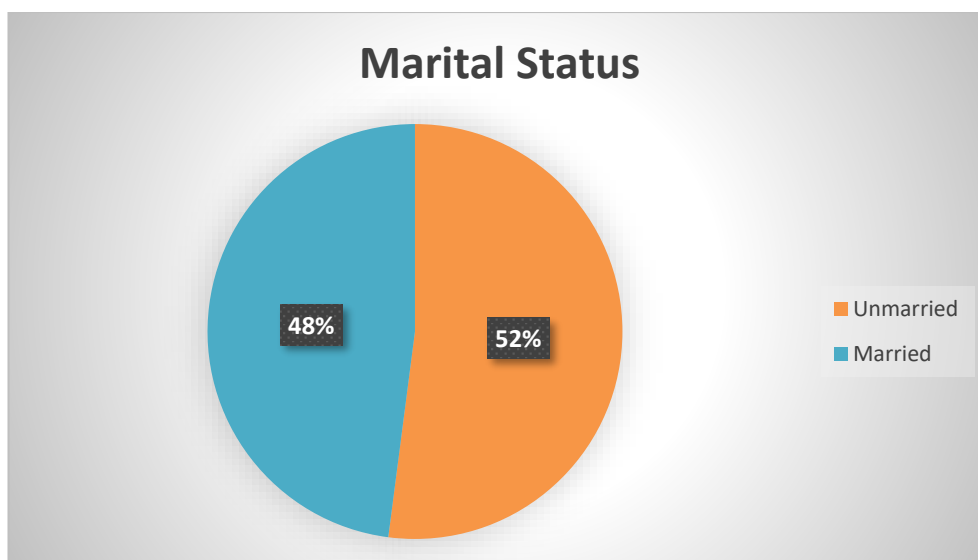

Figure 2 Marital Status of Respondents (source: own creation)

Regarding age, as seen in Figure 3, the participants represented all age groups. Even though most of the majority of them were on the younger side. Twenty-four participants were under the age of thirty, 32 of them were between thirty and forty,

and only 17 were above the age of forty. The majority of the respondents are at an appropriate age to have career goals and objectives.
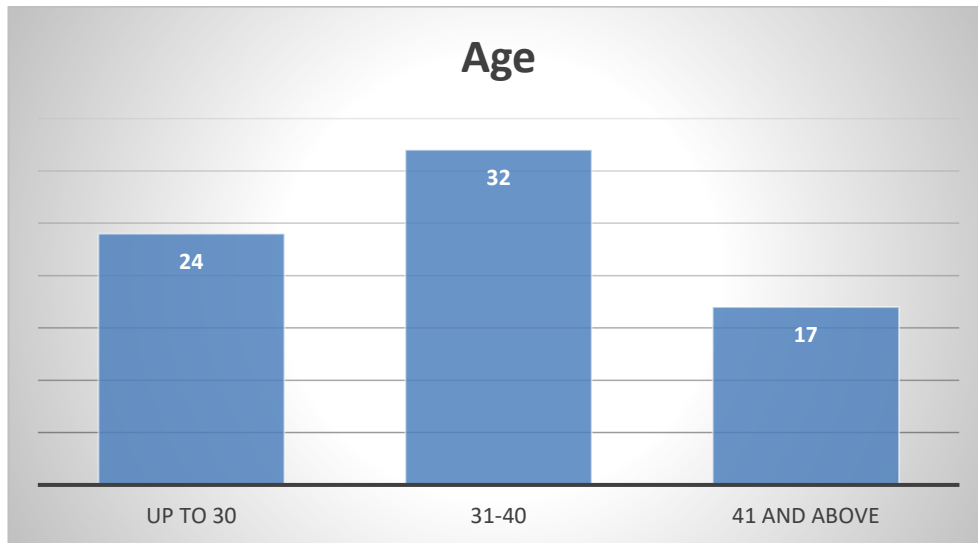

Figure 3 Age Proportions of the Respondents (source: own creation)

Almost three-quarters of the women who participated in the survey study had children. Having children means that women might have to take more often career breaks than men in order to take care of their kids. In our study, only 19 women did not have children in their families. It is important to notice that not all women with children were also married or the other way around. Out of the 54 women with children, 29 of them were married and the rest were unmarried.
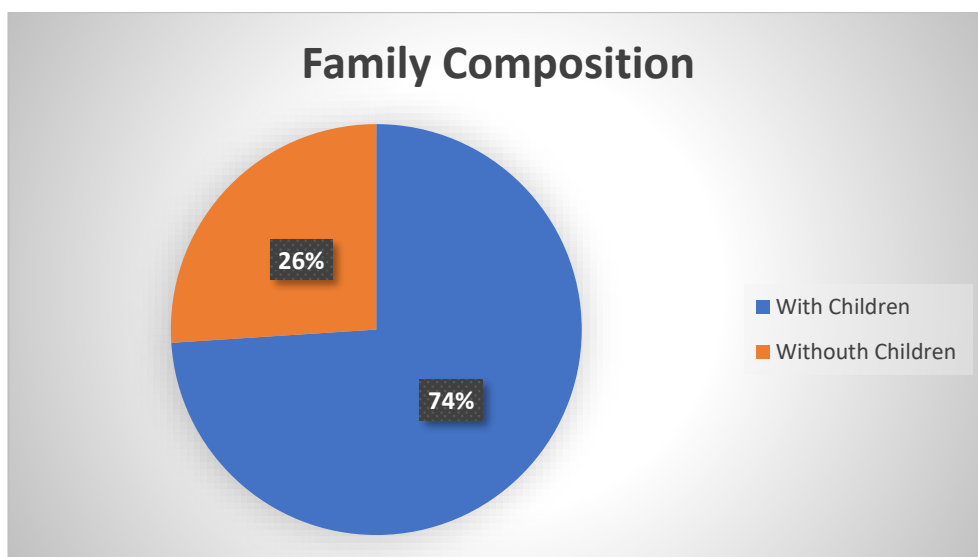

Figure 4 Family Composition (source: own creation)

The largest share of the women who participated in the study were simple employees. Only 40% of the respondents held management roles, 21 in first-level

management and the remaining eight in mid-level management. None of the respondents were employed as a senior manager. The results are displayed in Figure 5. Unfortunately, not board members or senior managers participated in the study.
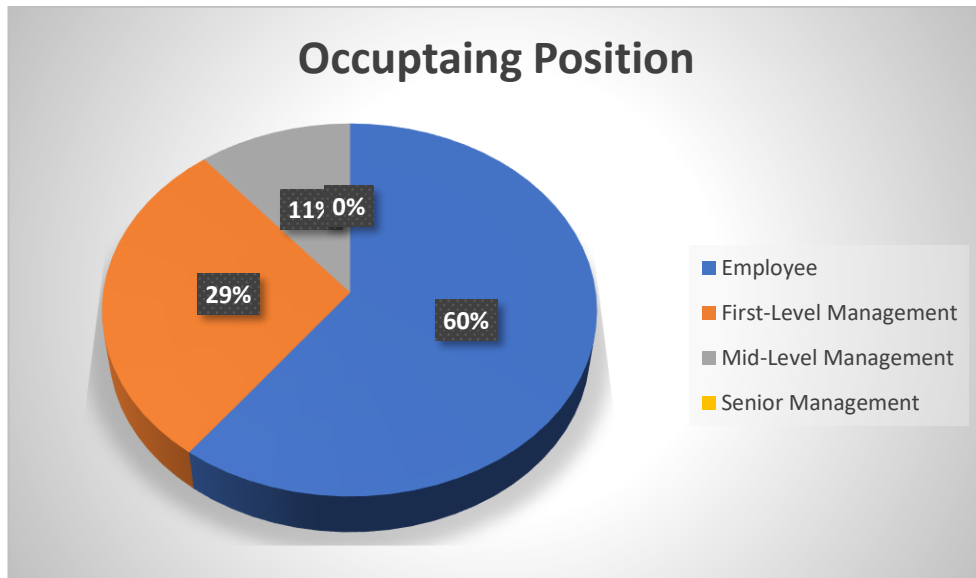

Figure 5 Positions Held in the Company (source: own creation)

4.2 The Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling was the first concept investigated by the study. The results of this section of the study are quite pleasing as the information acquired provides proof of the presence of this phenomenon in publicly listed companies in Austria. Without a doubt, all women who have participated in the study do acknowledge the presence of gender barriers in their workplaces. As expected, women of older age groups and women already in the management position do feel the presence of the glass ceiling more. This goes in line with the four criteria of the glass ceiling that Cotter et al. (2001) describe. Surprising to see are the results for the fourth question, where the majority of the respondents voted 'no'. This question asked whether the respondents intended to pursue a successful career up the management ladder. The results are presented in Figure 6.
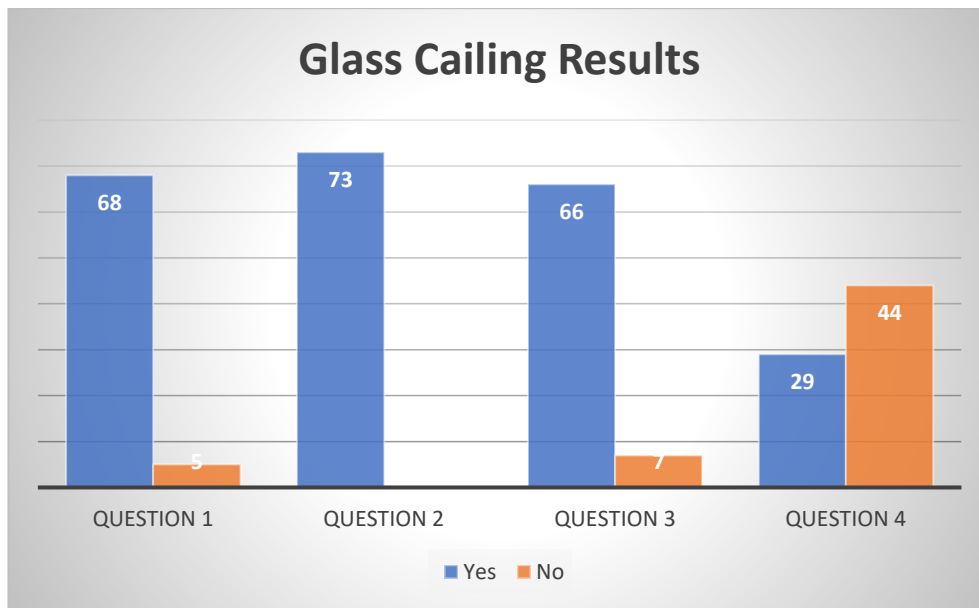
Figure 6 Results of Glass Ceiling Presence (source: own creation)

4.3   Imposter Syndrome

The first question of this section showed that only around half of the women participating in the study believed that they were treated differently than men in their workplace. The next three questions ask questions that investigate the confidence of women in their skills and competences. We see here that a significant share of the participants does have self-doubt.

For example, in question 7, thirty-four of the respondents answered with 'yes.' Meaning that they believe that they do not possess all the required skills for the position that they are holding.
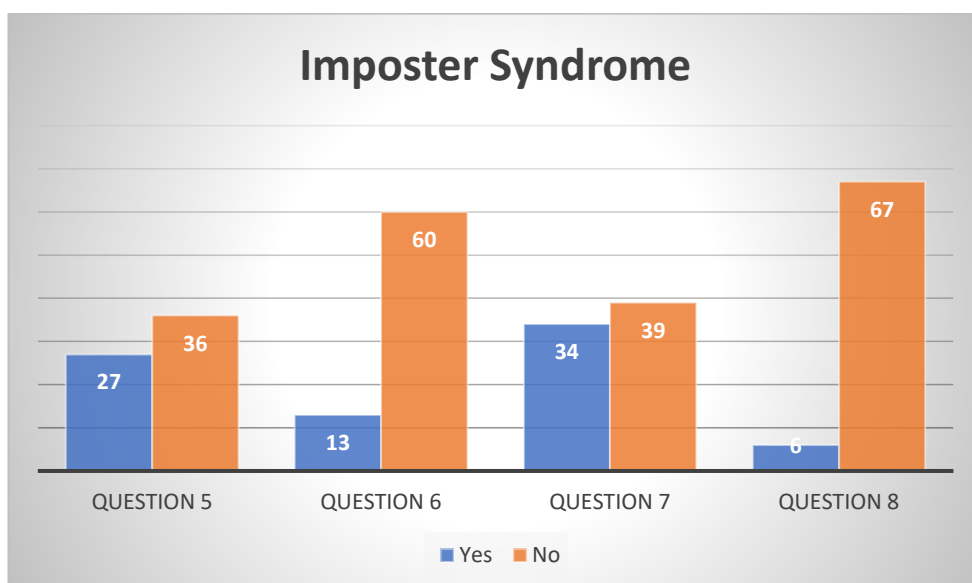

Figure 7 Results of Imposter Syndrome (source: own creation)

According to question 6, a considerable number of women believe that the gender wage gap is partially justified because women have to take career breaks. Six women even believe that men are more suited and capable to serve in high management and senior executive positions.

To answer the first research question: Yes, Imposter Syndrome does present barriers for women in the workplace.

4.4 Double-Bind Paradox

The results regarding the double-bind paradox are presented in Figure 8. The majority of women participating in the study believed that strong ambitions are not adequate for women with families, that have children to take care of. Only 27 of them believed that having a family should not intervene with career ambitions.
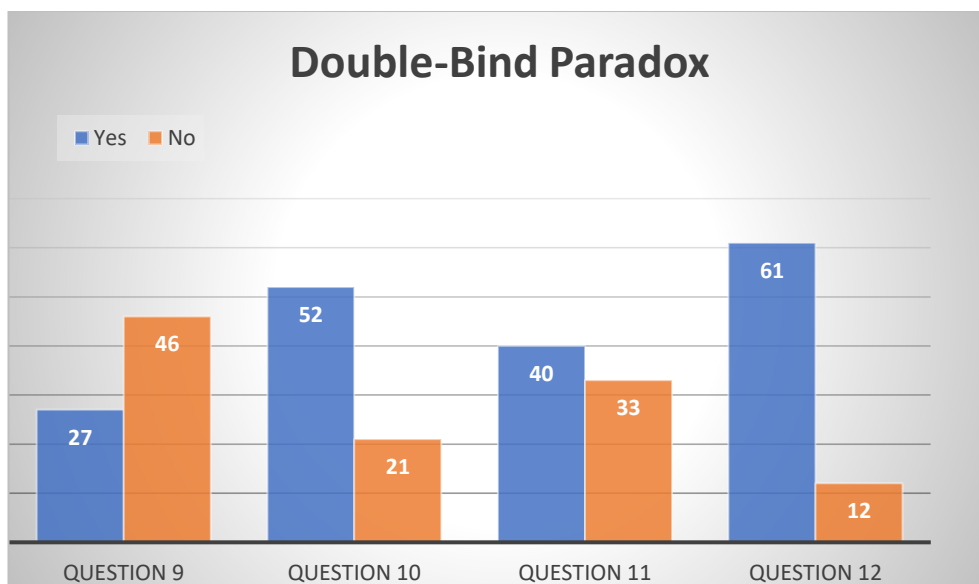
Figure 8 Double-Bind Paradox (source: own creation)

The results of the following three questions are quite pleasing and provide stronger evidence than the imposter syndrome. Here the majority of the respondents appear to suffer from the double-bind gender paradox. Questions 10 and 12 are the ones that generated more positive answers, respectively fifty-two and sixty-one. These two questions are about the personality traits and the ways that leaders should present themselves.

To answer the second research question: Yes, The Double-Bind Paradox does present barriers for women in the workplace.

4.5 Unconscious Bias

As previously mentioned, the questionnaire section regarding unconscious bias was constructed with statements with a four-point Likert scale. Almost uniformly, except for the last question, all respondents are influenced by unconscious bias concerning their workplace. The first three questions show the strongest results with almost all answers agreeing or strongly agreeing to the statements.

Only seven women disagreed with the first statement, twenty to the second, and just four with the third one. The last statement is the only one to have gotten the 'strongly disagree' option. For this statement, although the majority of the respondents agreed, it was a close call. Twenty-five of the respondents disagreed with the statement and nine of them were strongly against it.
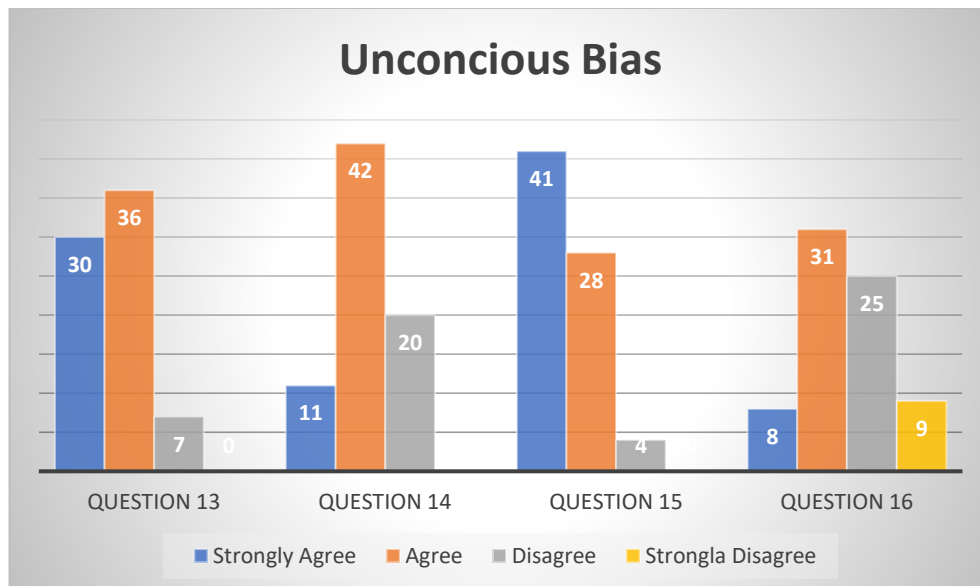
Figure 9 Unconcious Bias (source: own creation)

To answer the last research question: Yes, Unconscious Bias does present barriers for women in the workplace.

4.6 Organization

The last section of the survey showed that the majority of the participants of the study believe that their companies are aware of at least some of the gender issues presented in this thesis. Only less than a quarter of their share do not think that their organizations know about these challenges. The second question of this section is concerned with the response of the companies to such an issue. Here,

more than 40% of all the respondents do not think that their company is taking the right measures to address these problems.

Figure 10 Awareness of Organization (source: own creation)

5 Conclusions

This chapter is composed of three subchapters that conclude this thesis. The first one summarizes all the findings of the study and discusses their implications in the real world, the Austrian labor market. The second part mentions the practical implications that this study has introduced to stakeholders and decision-makers in publicly listed companies in Austria. The last section gives the reader future potential research ideas that the author finds interesting and relevant.

5.1 Findings

This paper identified three main concepts that contribute to the creation of the glass ceiling, the bottleneck that prevents women from achieving high management positions in their companies. The three concepts identified are Imposter Syndrome, Double-Bind Paradox, and Unconscious Bias. the study investigated the presence of these three phenomena in women employees of publicly listed companies in Austria. Women employed at different levels of management provided their thoughts and experiences about gender stereotypes and gender discrimination. Furthermore, the author aimed to determine if the situation overall is favoring women to follow their careers.

The results of this study provide significant value to young women who would like to consider a successful career in the management ladder of large companies, or policymakers that are in charge of correcting this imbalance. The study provided clear proof of the presence of glass ceilings in Austrian publicly listed companies that prevent women from advancing in their careers differently than men. The Double-Bind Paradox and the Unconscious Bias appear to be the most influential social phenomena that produce barriers for women in their workplace. Imposter Syndrome is found to also have a significant effect, even though not as influential as the other two. This is a very important find, as imposter syndrome explains that one of the main reasons for the creation of the bottleneck is women's own perceptions of their personal skills and capacities.

The study also identified a number of relations between the selected demographic factors and the phenomena investigated. Female employees that were married and with children tended to suffer more the consequences of the glass ceiling. At the same time, at older ages, social gender stereotypes are even stronger. Not

surprisingly, the women who already held management positions did identify the bootle neck but did not blame themselves for it. Showing that the imposter syndrome goes down as women progress in their careers.

Women with no children seemed to be quite more emancipated than their colleagues with kids. They did notice and were aware of these issues slightly better than the rest of the participants. Also, when it comes to the adverse effects of the imposter syndrome, like low self-esteem and lack of confidence, unmarried women seemed to cope better than married ones.

These issues are important to address for a great number of reasons, fairness being the most apparent. It does so not only to create a just and fair system that allows more women to compete in the leadership ladder. But, more importantly, to unravel the reasons that rob women of their confidence and squash their ambitions and desires to jump into the competition and become leaders. We need the best-qualified women to step up to these roles, and women, in general, should learn to find their way through these most difficult challenges.

Still, the fact is that these phenomena will not disappear in a year or two. Therefore, solutions for the short term are also important. In order to deal with in the short-run, women have to tackle these issues on an individual level. They have to remain true to their own leadership style, unaffected by social expectations. Women naturally bring to organizations a set of skills that all leaders should possess, like a talent for listening, a collaborative style, and the ability to manage interpersonal relationships. Female leaders do not need to imitate men in order to be authoritative and persuasive like gender stereotypes suggest. They simply need to be authentic.

5.2   Practical Implications

The results show obvious issues in the progress of women in the managerial hierarchy. This can be considered as a disadvantage for the organization as many recent studies stress the point that diversity in the workforce, including high-level management, leads to increased benefits for the firm (Galbreath, 2018; Godwyn & Stoddard, 2017; Noland et al., 2016). Noland et al. (2016), based on a survey of more than twenty thousand firms concludes that the presence of the female gender in corporate leadership positions can have direct effects on the firm's

performance. This better performance comes as a result of abolishing discrimination and increasing the firm's skill diversity.

Galbreath (2018) argues that board gender diversity is indirectly linked to the financial performance of the largest publicly traded firms. Specifically, based on stakeholder theory, suggest that the presence of female members on corporate boards always translate in higher levels of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR, in turn, is positively related to financial performance.

Therefore, all companies listed in the Viennese Stock Exchange should implement various tools and strategies to combat the barriers that prevent women from fairly participating in their professional careers. They should first do so for their own benefit, in order to improve performance. Second, they need to offer equal development opportunities for both genders, regarding skill development, training, workshops. As O'Connor (2019) explains, it is important for a company to provide equal playing fields for both women and men, to foster fair competition between the genders. Also, the language used inside the organization should be gender inclusive. Meaning that in all the texts produced by the organization, both directed internally and externally should have equal usage of pronouns belonging to both genders.

5.3   Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This thesis was initially intended to interview women holding board seats in Publicly listed companies in Austria. While keeping that in mind, the management boards of all companies listed on the Viennese Stock Exchange were analyzed to identify female members. That pre-research identified only 12 such women. Given the limited number of the population and the time limitations to complete this thesis, made the initial research hard to achieve. It would be of particular interest to the author too if the same study was conducted as initially planned because in that way, the research can derive in more reliable conclusions. Conclusions that are based on more personal experiences, explained and described by individuals that give high importance to these issues, are far more dependable than findings that come from opinions and beliefs.

Another possible avenue would also be to include male participants in the study. Even though the phenomena described and analyzed in this thesis produce

challenges and obstacles that are women-specific, men also play a role. Men are part of the society that sets these social perceptions about gender roles and stereotypes. They do contribute to the creation and maintenance of these hardships for women. Therefore, also when talking about governmental programs or training aimed at solving these imbalances, they shouldn't focus only on female audiences, but aim to reach an adequate share of both genders.

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Appendix

Social Perceptions of Women Executives at Work
(Questionnaire)

We are living in a golden area where people all over the world are raising their voices and standing up for their rights. Governments are taking action and changing legislation every year in order to make the world a better and fairer

place for everyone. Still, there remains a big gap between the treatment of men and women in the workplace.

The purpose of this survey is to gain in-depth knowledge over these imbalances in the treatment of women in their working environments. Its primary aim is to identify the presence of several social phenomena that render women from progressing in their careers. The questionnaire presents a series of questions that relate to potential gender discriminations.

All the information provided by the respondents in the survey study will be treated carefully and will be held with the strictest confidence. No individual participants will be identified, and all data will be reported in a summarized format.

The survey can be completed in less than 10 minutes, as all the questions have predefined answers that the respondent can choose from. In case of any question or interest in the study, do not hesitate to contact me at my e-mail: keisi.koni@hotmail.com.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey!

Keisi Koni

Part 1 – Profile of Respondent

- **Marital status:**
  Married (   )   Unmarried (   )

- **Children:**
  Yes (   )   No (   )

- **Age:**
  Up to 30 (   )   31-40 (   )   41 and above (   )

- **Position level in the company:**
  Employee(   ) First Level Management(   ) Mid-level Management(   )
  High management(   )

Part 2 – Glass Ceiling

(the glass ceiling theory says that women face more difficulties than men when aiming to progress in their careers)

1. Have you struggled to get a promotion in your current organization?

Yes ( )

No ( )

2. Do you believe that the percentage of women in high management and leadership positions in your organization is **unequal** to the male percentage?

Yes ( )

No ( )

3. Do you believe that the percentage mentioned **varies** in different levels of management?

Yes ( )

No ( )

4. Do you aim to achieve a high management position?

Yes ( )

No ( )

Part 3 – Imposter Syndrome

(impostor syndrome is defined as a long-lasting feeling of fraudulence and inadequately, Even though there are many accomplishments and clear proof of competence)

5. Do you feel that you are being treated **unequally** compared to your male employees in your workplace?

Yes ( )

No ( )

6. Do you think it is right that women should be paid less for doing the same job as men because they have to take career breaks?

Yes ( )

No ( )

7. Do you often feel like you do **not** have all the skills required for the position that you are currently holding?

Yes ( )

No ( )

8. Do you believe women are **not** as capable as men of serving in senior executive positions?

Yes ( )

No ( )

Part 4 – Double-Bind Paradox

(The Double-Bind concept explores the contradiction of how women are expected to behave in a feminine way associated with shared views about their appearance, while also demonstrating the traits of masculine behavior that are supposed to be part of the identity of those who occupy high management positions)

9. Do you think that career ambitions are adequate for a family woman, who has children to care for?

   Yes　(　　)

   No　(　　)

10. Do you believe that women with masculine traits are more probable to move into higher positions?

    Yes　(　　)

    No　(　　)

11. Have you ever felt judged in your workplace based on your appearances (like clothes and make-up)?

    Yes　(　　)

    No　(　　)

12. Do you think that professional women and leaders should always present themselves in a traditional professional way (suit and tie)?

    Yes　(　　)

    No　(　　)

Part 4 – Unconscious Bias

(Unconscious bias is defined as automatic and unintentional mental associations that are based on gender but come as a result of norms, traditions, values, experience, and culture. For example "women are good with numbers" or "men are better at sports")

**For this section of the questionnaire, please provide the degree to which you agree with the following statements:

13. Women focus on the negatives of any given critique, while men remember mostly positive feedback.

    Strongly Agree(　) Agree(　) Disagree(　) Strongly Disagree(　)

14. Women phrase requests in forms of questions, while men speak in directives, e.g., women use phrases like "Can you provide me with the

market research by Monday morning?" and men more like "I'll expect that market research by Monday morning!"

Strongly Agree( )   Agree( )   Disagree( )   Strongly Disagree( )

15. During teambuilding activities and other collaborative situations, women are more predisposed to share, regrets, thanks, and praise among the other members, while men do not share such thought and do not take part in these talks.

Strongly Agree( )   Agree( )   Disagree( )   Strongly Disagree( )

16. Women thrive in collaborative situations, while men connect better through competition.

Strongly Agree( )   Agree( )   Disagree( )   Strongly Disagree( )

Part 5 – Your Organization

17. Do you think your employer is aware of these issues?

Yes ( )

No ( )

18. To your knowledge, does the company have a strategy, or has it acted, to close the gender gaps identified?

Yes ( )

No ( )