



An approach to Headhunters. Gender inequality in the recruitment systems of top management positions

Una aproximación a los Headhunters. La desigualdad de género en los sistemas de selección de personal en los cargos de alta dirección

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Abstract

This short article is part of a research that focuses on the study of women's leadership in business sphere from a philosophical viewpoint. Therefore, this contribution will focus on an ethical reflection about the women's access to top management positions. Specifically, beyond the invisible barriers that professional women face in climbing up organizations, we want to reflect about the role of the recruitment systems in the perpetuation of business gender inequality. Thus, we focus on the figure of the headhunter in that recruitment process. Studying this figure is interesting for the academic field, because it directly intervenes in the hiring process of senior managers of large companies. Their work, based on networks of contacts, influence and recommendations, can shed light on how women are also at a disadvantage in this regard, by not being part of these networks.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, recruitment systems, headhunters.

Resumen

Este breve artículo parte de una investigación sobre el liderazgo de las mujeres en el ámbito empresarial desde un punto de vista filosófico. En este sentido, esta contribución se centrará en una reflexión ética sobre el acceso de las mujeres a los cargos de alta dirección empresarial. Específicamente, más allá de las barreras invisibles que enfrentan las mujeres profesionales en el ascenso dentro de las organizaciones empresariales, reflexionaremos sobre el papel de los sistemas de selección de personal (de altos cargos) en la perpetuación de la desigualdad de género en el mundo de los negocios. Esta reflexión se realizará a través de la figura del/la cazatalentos en ese mismo proceso de reclutamiento. Estudiar esta figura resulta interesante porque interviene directamente en el proceso de contratación de altos cargos directivos de grandes empresas. Su trabajo, basado en las redes de contactos, de influencia y recomendaciones, puede aportar luz sobre cómo las mujeres también se encuentran en desventaja en este sentido, al no formar parte de dichas redes.

Palabras clave: Estereotipos de género, sistemas de selección de personal, cazadores de talentos.

INTRODUCTION

This short article focuses on an ethical reflection about the women's access to leadership business positions. Specifically, beyond the invisible barriers that professional women face in climbing up organizations, we want to reflect about the role of the recruitment systems in the perpetuation of business gender inequality. The methodology used in this work consists on a qualitative review and analysis of specialized bibliography about the subject, elaborated from a feminist perspective. In this sense, we focus on the figure of the headhunter in the recruitment process, because we consider that the tendency of headhunters to recommend people similar to them (Blommaert & van den Brink, 2020), can harm the access of women to positions of relevance.

For this reason, it is key to reflect on the role of executive search consultants (also known as headhunters), because they act as gatekeepers in the hiring process, so, headhunters' biases might influence the women's under-representation in business organizations. Previous studies have demonstrated that the headhunting process is influenced by contextual constraints, cultural beliefs, economic, and political factors, and they produce gendered results (Hamori, 2010; Tienari et al., 2013; Yan, 2020). Before we start this reflection, there is a need to refer to the context of the unequal presence of women in the field of labour relations and, more specifically, in the fields of business management in large companies.

THE COPTION SYSTEM

Nowadays, it may seem that equality between women and men has been achieved because several international agencies, such as the EU, incorporate and promote this premise. Yet when we look at what is actually happening, we can observe that inequality still remains because, although moral principles exist and are specified in declarations of rights, this problem is structural, and changing structures in society is hard work. So, the occupational sexism we find in the business world is merely a reflection of the patriarchal domination features of our society. This statement does not imply accepting women's under-representation; indeed, the exact opposite is true. This evidences the need to incorporate this problem into the business management.

For this reason, we need to start by recognising women's under-representation in leadership positions in Spanish and other European companies. According to figures provided by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (INE) (*Mujeres en cifras*, 2020), in 2020 there were 27.7% of women in the presidency and boards of directors of IBEX 35 companies, a figure higher than 16.4% (2014). Among EU Member States, the largest share of women at managerial positions in 2020 was recorded in Latvia (45%) and Poland (44%), followed by Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovenia and Sweden (all 42%). At the opposite end of the scale, there are Croatia (24%), the Netherlands (26%) and Cyprus (27%). Although progress has been made, these percentages are still insufficient to talk about the achievement of gender equality in leadership positions in companies.

In this sense, the "glass ceiling" concept (Segerman-Peck, 1991) attempts to make this situation visible through

a metaphorical allusion to invisible obstacles that difficult professional women's climbing to leadership positions. Thus, gender inequality in the business domain is a structural and multidimensional problem based on sex-gender exclusion. Given this reality, we can state that the obstacles that women face when climbing business organisations are harder than those that men face because the female stereotype presupposes them skills relating to housework, which are devalued in the public domain. Among these difficulties are the hiring systems.

Related to this idea, it is worth to highlight the work of philosopher Amelia Valcárcel (Miyares, 2003: 186), who points out the existence of two subsystems of the organizational power system in choosing the people who will occupy power positions: the free competition and the cooption system (Valcárcel, 1997). On the one hand, the free competition consists in proving the existence of an expertise which can be objectified. The experience of women in the last ten years guarantees that their access to power positions is bigger on this way. On the other hand, there is the cooption system which reveals that the major obstacle for women's leadership is the recruitment process. Valcárcel argues that the selector forms part of an ideological framework that belittles women's merits, by ignoring their curriculum adjustment to the job profile. Thus, ideological prejudices based on gender stereotypes become the central core of selection, and it is a contaminated ideological element that overlooks the merits of an adequate candidate profile.

So, in those social relevant positions where the experience and capacities of the candidate is the primary selection criterion women have more facilities to achieve the job. While, in the subjective selection systems that involve influence and reputation networks, women have not the same opportunities than men. Usually, the cooption system is based on contacts networking where women are constantly rejected. This reveals that one of the major barriers for women to develop leadership in business sphere is the recruitment system itself.

Thus, companies are part of the society and they are crossed by the same gender bias that exists in society (Wajcman, 1998). Consequently, it is probably that people responsible for dealing and selecting candidates participate in an ideological framework that belittles the merits and abilities of women, ignoring their possible adequacy to the offered position. In the case of top management positions, this reality is serious because of the perceived incompatibility between women's abilities and leadership requirements (Watts, 2009). Indeed, for such positions, the "very essence of gender stereotypes defines men as more instrumentally competent and agentic compared to women" (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001: 707), leading to a larger perceived lack of fit between female characteristics and the characteristics required in such jobs. In the case of headhunting process, "women exclusion from informal working networks, and the organizational structure and processes" are key to understand the lack of visibility of women in top management positions (Larrieta et al., 2015). So, there is a need to reflect on the management discourse about headhunters from a critical perspective that allows us to identify the perpetuation of gender inequality in this recruitment process (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Fernández Rodríguez & Medina-Vicent, 2017).

RECRUITMENT SYSTEMS AND HEADHUNTING: GENDER BIAS IN BUSINESS DOMAIN?

When we talk about headhunters, we are talking about the senior executive recruitment consultants (Jones, 1989). They are responsible for searching and selecting high level workers, with very specific capabilities to achieve their business responsibilities (Finlay & Coverdill, 2000, 2002). These agents have the expertise, socio-professional contacts and the reputation necessary to find the ideal candidate without wasting time and money. Thus, their task starts when the company comes to the headhunter, usually a multinational which needs people to fill positions of great responsibility. These firms have previously well-defined what kind of person need, their profile, their capacities, their level of education, work experience, etc. Once defined the profile, headhunters use their contact network build through years of executive research (Westphal & Zhu, 2018). Then, they interview executives asking opinion about a concrete candidate, in order to verify its capabilities through the opinion of other professionals. Consequently, the esteem and reputation networks are very important in this process. If you're not into the professional circle, you'll hardly be considered for the job.

The product that headhunters sell is people, matching candidates with jobs and companies with candidates. Consequently, headhunters work affect the professional lives of employees, and their work has a profound, though hidden, effect on the employment picture in the United States (Finlay & Coverdill, 2002). Consequently, as the sociologist Florencia Luci (2009, 2012) says, the headhunter has a great power in shaping the top management labour market. However, in our research, we asked ourselves how influences the gender variable in headhunter's decision. In this sense, we believe that headhunters have the power to perpetuate gender inequality in the company, but also the capacity to promote equality as the same way. So, headhunters are an ambivalent figure that, in some occasions, reproduce gender stereotypes and same-gender preferences, perpetuating gender inequality in business domain (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998; Gorman, 2005; Siegel et al., 2020); but in other occasions, acts as a change agent, promoting diversity and gender equality (Doldor et al., 2016; Fernández-Mateo & Fernández, 2016). From a gender perspective, the first question that raises about headhunter's activity it's what follows: if their decision and working process is focused on a subjective criterion based on their relationships with senior management, how does this fact affect professional women?

Firstly, we keep in mind that the lack of women in senior managerial positions means itself an obstacle to be recommended for their colleagues to headhunters. The reason is that the fewer women are, it's less probable that they would be recommended. Secondly, we have to consider the difficulties of women at the time of joining highly masculinized professional networks, which in turn, could facilitate their access to reputation and esteem networks. If women form part of these networks, there are more possibilities that some colleagues recommended them for the job. Therefore, one of the constraints faced by women to be recommended to a headhunter would be a poor relationship with these networks.

Thus, we must start from the recognition that "the lack of women in management positions shows that the gender issue is an explanatory factor to access to top management" (Luci, 2010: 30). This means that when we talk about executive recruitment consultants we talk about a gender issue. Moreover, these difficulties are joined to the predominant idea of the perfect manager in Western societies. Three decades ago, Virginia Schein popularized the phrase, 'If you think of a leader, you are thinking of a man', and it remains true. Especially in the business world, the image of success has been associated with men, and the image of male executive remains alive in mass media. In both cases, these factors are measurable. For this reason, we believe that the recruitment process conducted by headhunters has a great risk, because it can perpetuate the stereotype of male managers, making it harder for women to develop their career. When those interviewed by headhunters think about their ideal image of a leader, they are more likely to think about a man, because management positions are associated with masculinity. Moreover, there is a portion of this ideal candidate's profile often not provided by the client, what has been defined as the "Hidden Profile" (Baldo, 2014), which includes all the client's biased perceptions about a group of candidates who may have a specific race, gender, education, etc.

In short, one of the main conclusions that we can draw is that the selection process conducted by the headhunters is not neutral; it is crossed by gender bias. This leads us to ask if gender is one of the variables defined in the profiling. From different readings, we have found that many headhunters argue that gender shouldn't be an important profiling variable. In our opinion, this idea "is based on the assumption that the client is not interested in the gender of the candidates but their competence" (Tienari et al., 2013: 50), more than the fact that gender really does not influence the election.

Normally, the gender question is not specified in the meetings of the headhunter with the company. It could be that these two agents believe that the selection process is truly neutral. They consider that gender is not an important variable, so they focus on the experience and the curriculum of the candidate. However, they know that when they are keeping the gender issue silenced, they are leaving to act the inertia of structural gender inequality. We understand that any recruitment process involved in esteem and reputation networks cannot be neutral. For this reason, by addressing gender openly and critically with the company can be a step to expose the problem and speak out about the business gender inequality.

In conclusion, gender is a key factor in the headhunter's recruitment process as a matter of power. Therefore, there is a risk that the power relations of men over women tend to reproduce itself. Because the female stereotype based on motherhood, caring, intuition, etc. play a decisive role here, giving women an inferior position in the business world. Thus, social expectations and headhunters perceptions influence on the hiring profiles of women, almost always in their detriment. But this is a reality that, from our perspective, could be changed. And it is because the figure of headhunter contains a change potential, if they integrate the premises of gender equality and social justice. But to achieve this, certain

prejudices and limitations based on gender stereotypes must first be left behind.

PRECONCEPTIONS: THE IDEAL EXECUTIVE

On the other hand, a very interesting line of research arises considering how to influence the headhunter's decisions in building the image of the "ideal executive" like a male being. This issue is studied by Susan Meriläinen, Janne Tienari and Anu Valtonen (2013) from the University of Lapland, who says that "executive search consultants or headhunters play a prominent role in determining what constitutes an "ideal" executive body". That is, recruitment practices can promote the primacy of the male, white and Western body in business leadership positions. Because the socially constructed image about who is able to develop the business management responsibilities, has historically been built by and for men.

Judith Butler's (2004) work is vital to understand the importance of gender in the process of recruiting executives. His theory reveals its importance through the concept of performativity. The genders are inscribed on the bodies through gender statements. These are performative acts that recreate a social convention those enforce gender identities. Thus, gender would not be substantial, but the performative effect of cultural conventions of femininity and masculinity. In this regard, we believe that the decisions of the headhunters have to play the heteronormative masculinity referred to social convention.

To the extent that the performativity refers to "the power of speech to produce what it states, this allows to the reflection on how the heterocentered power acts as a creator of cultural realities" (Duque, 2010: 87), we understand that in the area of senior management, the normative corresponds to the male body. That is, the statements and discourses launched from the business world and the actual practice of headhunters, reproduce this male notion of management as the norm.

Consequently, the decisions of such agents may contribute to perpetuate the heteronormative reality, playing a male model of an "ideal executive". This would mean that any candidate who is out of the standard will be excluded from the process, or at least, their merit will be undervalued. It could be the case of women or different ethnic groups. Moreover, the majority of consultants in business are men. Thus, organizations interested in more women managers need to carefully consider who they hire as their executive search consultants (Siegel et. al, 2020).

On the other hand, although the capabilities sought by headhunters may seem neutral, they are evaluated differently if the person is man or woman. For example, if a male candidate has a family, this is interpreted as being settled, and if he does not, this is interpreted as dedication for work (Tienari et al., 2013: 52). If she has a family, it is perceived to have many more problems to reconcile family life with work, and if not, she is accused of not being a real woman. Thus, both candidates have families; but that reality is perceived as good or bad for the company from a gender bias.

In this sense, Meriläinen, Tienari and Valtonen (2013) say that the physical body also influences the chances of

getting a charge of business management. The physical marks like size or shape are interpreted as signs of capacity or not capacity for leadership positions. Even the tone of voice plays a central role in the construction of the ideal executive body.

As mentioned above, the search for senior management itself determines the values, meanings and images that make up the ideal executive body. Authors such as George F. Dreher, Jeong-Yeon Lee and Thomas A. Clerkin (2011), indicate that headhunters are guardians of elite labor markets, because they reinforce the dominant position of white men, by perpetuating stereotypes of age and physical appearance of executives. In their research they have found evidence that issues of race, gender and minorities are not recognized forms of bias: "white males are more likely than their female and minority male counterparts to be contacted by representatives of executive search firms" (Dreher et al., 2011: 666).

In summary, the body, looks, gestures, dress, etc. all these components come into play in the recruitment process, to the extent that shape gender identity as performative acts. At the same time, we want to make clear that any recruitment process that is based on the subjective judgment of an agent such as the headhunter can't be neutral, as it is based on a preference that can reject anything that doesn't fit into the preconceived idea of the normative leadership. In this case, women are in greater disadvantage.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality is a valid social justice demand currently in force, and all social domains are crossed by an androcentric bias that hinders equality between men and women. One manifestation of this reality can be found in power, mainly monopolised by men, whereas women come across hurdles, when attempting to occupy relevant posts, in social responsibility. The business domain is one of the areas in which inequality is most clearly perceived and is, therefore, one of the most suitable areas for reflecting to seek gender equality. Going deeply into the business and economic context implies identifying the pillars of our society, and the role that companies play in its development to unveil all the details of the processes and structures that essentially support social inequalities.

In conclusion, social practices that seem neutral, as the executive recruitment process, are completely subjective and even with a gender and race bias when we go deep on it. Because beyond the discourse that gender is not an important variable in these processes, the reality is the opposite. At this point, we can say that the role of headhunters in order to prevent or promote the advancement of women in leadership positions is vital. They are labour market guardians, so they have the power to promote one profile or others in corporate leadership positions. These actors can contribute to promote change in institutional fields and diversity management (Doldor et al., 2016). Thus, a proactive approach to diversity by such agents may suppose that many professional women have the opportunity to access for relevant positions in equality to their colleagues. By addressing gender openly and critically with the company can be a step to expose the problem and speak out about the business gender inequality and integrate this as a good practice in companies (Velasco

et. al, 2014).

In addition, the lacking presence of women in senior managerial positions itself reveals the false discourse of the “neutrality” in the management world. In addition, the social image created by the media around the idea of “ideal executive”, both symbolically and physically, causes that the executive abilities are considered masculine and the body which is able to embody them too. This idea assumes that the body of the candidate that doesn’t fit the generally held idea in the business world about who is capable of leading a human group and who is not, left out of the process. In the case of women, it blocks the consideration of women to fill these positions.

In short, what is clear is that the practice of executive recruitment made by headhunters, is not neutral but it involves stereotypical gender beliefs, conditioning the access of women in senior managerial positions. The creation of an egalitarian society goes through the achievement of gender equality in company. For this reason, all the actors involved in these processes have a moral responsibility to provide equal opportunities to all candidates. So, when we speak of headhunters, we are talking of agents whose practice entails risks for gender equality in the company, but also a figure with great potential for social transformation if they assume their moral responsibility.

This scenario invites us to reason about the need to build an ethics that applies to the economic-business domain, and about one that enables today’s problems with justice to be dealt with from gender perspective premises. Dialogic-type business ethics (Cortina, 2003; Conill, 2006; García-Marzá, 2004) will allow a given business management model to be established, whose main tool will be the company entering dialogue with society. Morally basing the decisions made by business organisations and headhunters implies recognising their moral nature and their responsibility for the inequalities perpetuated with the activity they undertake, also in the case of headhunters (Medina-Vicent, 2016).

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