

## **An Exploratory Study of Vertical Gender Segregation and the Irish Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) Sector**

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### **Abstract**

*Prior research on the lack of women in senior corporate decision-making roles has focused on large organisations ignoring small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), who in Ireland generate over 70 per cent of job creation. The purpose of this paper is to address this research gap by examining the gender imbalance at managerial decision-making levels of Irish SMEs and to explore the feasibility of engaging in workplace flexibility practices in SMEs as a means of providing greater opportunities for women in management. This study adopts a mixed methods methodological approach conducted over two phases of investigation. First, a headcount measure is calculated to establish the gender imbalance at senior decision-making levels in the SME sector using data on the top financial performing SMEs in Ireland in 2017. Second, data is gathered from 133 surveys administered to employees, junior and senior managers, owners and directors of SMEs located in the South-East region of Ireland. Results show significant gender imbalance exists at top decision-making positions of Irish SMEs. Findings from the survey identify that continual conflict between home life and workplace responsibilities due to a lack of workplace flexibility can substantially impact the career progression of women.*

*Keywords: Women in Management, Gender Imbalance, Workplace Flexibility, Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs).*

### **Introduction**

Vertical gender segregation where there is a lack of women at senior corporate decision-making levels has gained much academic attention (Einarsdottir et al., 2018; Stumbitz et al., 2018; Cross et al., 2017; Kirrane et al., 2016; Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012; Cross, 2010; Woodhams and Lupton, 2006; Lavoie, 2004; Cassell et al., 2002; Blackburn et al., 2002). The inability of women to progress to senior decision-making roles is concerning as it was traditionally argued that vertical gender segregation would organically disappear overtime as the number of women in employment increased (Cross et al., 2017; Cross, 2010; Blackburn et al., 2002). Presently women work outside the home in unprecedented numbers. Despite this, women globally remain underrepresented at the top decision-making levels in business (Einarsdottir et al., 2018; Cross et al., 2017; Cross, 2010). Across the 28 member states of the European Union (EU) women hold 25.3 per cent of President, Board Member and Employee Representative positions. In Ireland this figure is even lower with 17.6 per cent of these positions being occupied by women (EIGE, 2018).

The focus of this paper is on the position of women at decision-making levels within the Irish small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector. The SME sector is of significant economic importance both to the EU as a whole and to its member states individually (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012; Eurostat, 2018). Within the EU approximately 99 per cent of enterprises may be defined as an SME, accounting for just over 66 per cent of job creation in the labour force. Similarly, in Ireland the SME sector accounts for approximately 99 per cent of enterprises and is responsible for over 70 per cent of job creation in the Irish labour market (European Commission, 2017). Yet despite the high volumes of individuals employed by SMEs both in the EU and in Ireland, there exists a gap in research with regard to vertical gender segregation within the SME sector (Stumbitz et al., 2018; Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012; MacKeith et al., 2010; Woodhams and Lupton, 2006; Lavoie, 2004; Cassell et al., 2002).

The distinct differences in labour resources, human resources management practices and availability of capital between SMEs and larger firms, which subsequently generate the unique key characteristics of the SME, may prevent research undertaken on larger firms from adequately explaining experiences of those employed within SMEs (Cassels et al., 2002; Stumbitz et al., 2018; MacKeith et

al., 2010; Psychogios et al., 2016; Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012). Therefore, to understand the experiences of SME employees it is necessary to conduct studies on them and not apply the findings from studies conducted on larger firms. Similarly, any statistical measurements undertaken to establish the level of vertical gender segregation existing in a country may insufficiently portray the situation in the SME sector when data is based on larger organisations. The objective of this study is to quantify the level of vertical gender segregation occurring in a sample of top performing Irish SMEs. The experiences of SME employees, managers, owners and directors were captured through an analytical survey, investigating if the identified barriers faced by women in larger organisations are experienced in the Irish SME sector. Respondent's attitudes on workplace flexibility are also explored.

### **Vertical Gender Segregation and SMEs**

The literature identifies that gender stereotyping and a conflict between home life and workplace responsibilities arising from a lack of workplace flexibility have generated obstacles for women who aim to advance into the main decision-making roles (Cross et al., 2017; Waldfogel, 2016; Hoyt and Murphy, 2016; Folbre, 2012; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Kanter, 1977). Studies show this is visible in the stereotypical beliefs held towards the educational capital of women and their capability and commitment to work (Einarsdottir et al., 2018; Pal and Waldfogel, 2016; Hoyt and Murphy, 2016; Van der Steen, 2010; Richard et al., 2004; Kanter, 1977).

### **Educational Capital and Commitment to Work**

The historical expectation of women as holding the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic duties has contributed to a conflict in commitment for women regarding both their education and their work (Pal and Waldfogel, 2016; Folbre, 2012; Becker, 1985; Kanter, 1977). Data from 2016 demonstrates that 54.1 per cent of those studying at undergraduate level in tertiary education were women (Eurostat, 2018). Despite statistical data proving otherwise women continue to face what is referred to as a 'stereotype threat' regarding their investment in their education and career leading to a biological disadvantage evident in both the gender pay gap and the underrepresentation of women in the main decision-making roles (Hoyt and Murphy, 2016; Pal and Waldfogel, 2016). Bohnet (2016) proposes that where a discernible stereotype exists individuals to whom they apply expect to be judged by them. This phenomenon results in women self-generating barriers to their own progression towards decision-making roles in their own organisations. The lack of flexibility in how these roles are structured in organisations is a primary influencer in this trend (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Cross, 2010).

### **Flexible Work Practices**

Engagement in flexible work practices offers both organisational and personal benefits to both male and female employees (Kalysh et al, 2016; Taneja et al., 2012 Butts and Casper, 2012; Breaugh and Frye, 2008; Rogier and Padgett, 2004). Flexible work practices, such as reduced hours, restructuring of hours and working from home, allow employees the opportunity to combine work and family responsibilities. In practice the organisational culture and the attitudes held by both the organisation and individual employees toward flexible work practices and those who avail of them will significantly influence both their uptake and success (Chung, 2018; Lyness and Kropf, 2005). This has given rise to a 'flexibility stigma' where, instead of helping to eradicate the barriers, flexible work practices in their current form may actually reinforce the 'stereotype threat' experienced by women (Chung, 2018; North-Samardzic and Taksa, 2011; Lyness and Kropf, 2005).

### **Method**

This study adopts a mixed methods methodological approach conducted over two phases of investigation. First, a headcount measure is calculated to quantify the gender imbalance at senior decision-making levels in the SME sector using data on the top financial performing SMEs in Ireland in 2017. Second, data is gathered from 133 surveys administered to employees, junior and senior managers, owners and directors of SMEs located in the South-East region of Ireland.

**Stage One: Headcount of Men and Women Found in Decision-making Positions of Top Financial Performing Irish SMEs**

The percentage of men and women found at decision-making levels in the top financial performing Irish SMEs in 2017 was computed. The sampling frame chosen for the headcount was the Irish Times Top 1000 Companies 2017 listing. For the purpose of this research both foreign owned and non-profit organisations were excluded leaving 311 Irish owned companies in total. Using the European Commission’s definition of an SME as having less than 250 employees, 136 of these Irish owned companies were identified as SMEs across 15 industrial sectors as presented in *Table 1*.

**Table 1:** Irish Times Top Financial Performing SMEs by Industrial Sector 2017.

Industrial Sector	n=136	%	Industrial Sector	n=136	%	Industrial Sector	n=136	%
Construction	28	20.6%	Transport	10	7.4%	Agribusiness	17	12.5%
Pharma	5	3.7%	Food & Drink	6	4.4%	Resources	6	4.4%
Technology	8	5.9%	Health	3	2.2%	Financial Services	5	3.7%
Manufacturing	11	8.1%	Retailing	20	14.7%	Tourism	1	0.7%
Energy	8	5.9%	Professional Services	4	2.9%	Media & Marketing	4	2.9%

To facilitate international comparisons a measure from the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) based on the Women in Decision-Making Index for the corporate decision-making positions was used. The corporate decision-making positions as identified by EIGE are; President and Board Members including Employee Representatives (EIGE, 2018). The individuals in each of the previously mentioned decision-making positions were identified in 2017 using a number of sources including the Irish Times Top 1000 database, the company’s own website, MarketLine database, the Irish companies and directors database SoloCheck, Bloomberg, and Reuters.

**Stage Two: Survey of 133 Irish SMEs Employees, Managers, Owners or Directors in the South East Region of Ireland**

Stage two involved gaining the insights of male and female SME employees, managers, owners and directors. This was achieved through administering a survey to SME employees, managers, owners and directors following the approach used in previous studies on vertical gender segregation (Psychogios, et al., 2016; Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2016; North-Samardzic and Taksa, 2011). The main themes surrounding vertical gender segregation were identified from the literature; gender stereotyping and a lack of workplace flexibility. An analytical survey was designed and delivered to a non-probability purposive sample of both current and former SME employees, managers, owners or directors attending evening, flexible and part-time programmes in various business disciplines in the Faculty of Lifelong Learning in the Institute of Technology Carlow. This sample was chosen as it had one of the highest level of evening students from the Irish SME sector. Students who were currently, or previously had been, either an employee, manager, owner or director of an SME were asked to complete the survey. The total number of registered students across the business programmes was 217 students of which 133 students met the qualifying criteria for participation in the survey. All of the 133 students chose to complete the survey resulting in a response rate of 100 per cent. Analysis of the survey, which contained six sections, involved both thematic and cross-thematic examination to establish if gender stereotyping and conflict between home life and workplace responsibilities due to a lack of workplace flexibility have generated obstacles for women as identified in previous research on larger organisations. For the purpose of this study the decision was taken to only include the responses of those participants who identified their gender as male or female. A summary of the key characteristics of the participants are presented in *Table 2*.

**Table 2:** Key Characteristics of Survey Participants.

Variables		n=133	%	Variables		n=133	%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	66	49.6%	<b>Organisational Size</b>	Less than 10 Employees	32	24.1%
	Female	64	48.1%		11-50 Employees	40	30.1%
	Other	3	2.3%		51-250 Employees	61	45.9%
<b>Age (years)</b>	18-24	20	15.0%	<b>Level of Academic Qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)</b>	NFQ Level 4 & 5	15	11.3%
	25-34	36	27.1%		NFQ Level 6	25	18.8%
	35-44	43	32.3%		NFQ Level 7	25	18.8%
	45-54	30	22.6%		NFQ Level 8	44	33.1%
	54-64	4	3.0%		NFQ Level 9	13	9.8%
<b>Occupational Role</b>	Employee	61	45.9%		NFQ Level 10	1	0.8%
	Owner	7	5.3%		Professional Qualification	5	3.8%
	Junior Manager	36	27.1%		Other	5	3.8%
	Senior Manager	24	18.0%				
	Director	5	3.8%				

**Findings and Discussion on Gender Imbalance in the Irish SME Sector 2017**

The measurement of vertical gender segregation occurring in the 136 Irish SMEs included in the headcount identified a total of 784 individuals, of which 674 were male and 110 female, occupying the top decision-making positions. This gives the overall percentage of women found in the top decision-making positions in the Irish SME sector of 14 per cent, 3.6 percentage points lower than EIGE’s (2018) percentage generated using larger organisations. Analysis of the 15 industrial sectors finds six sectors, Manufacturing, Energy, Professional Services, Resources, Financial Services and Media and Marketing to be above the EIGE (2018) percentage. While the Food and Drink and Health Sectors were found to be close to the EIGE (2018) rate at 17 per cent. The eight remaining industrial sectors were below the EIGE (2018) percentage rate to varying degrees. *Table 3* presents the gender ratio for each of the 15 industrial sectors. While the measurement conducted for this research was limited to only 136 of the top performing Irish SMEs the data does demonstrate that vertical gender segregation as observed in larger Irish organisations is just as prevalent in the SME sector which displays a significant gender imbalance towards men. This is interesting as SMEs are often regarded as having a more informal, family friendly working environment, thus providing the perfect setting for equal opportunity practices to thrive.

**Table 3:** Gender Ratio of Top Decision-making Positions for Industrial Sectors.

Industrial Sector	Male %	Female %	Industrial Sector	Male %	Female %	Industrial Sector	Male %	Female %
Construction	93%	7%	Transport	87%	13%	Agribusiness	87%	13%
Pharma	95%	5%	Food & Drink	83%	17%	Resources	75%	25%
Technology	89%	11%	Health	83%	17%	Financial Services	80%	20%
Manufacturing	81%	19%	Retailing	89%	11%	Tourism	100%	0%
Energy	78%	22%	Professional Services	82%	18%	Media & Marketing	72%	28%

**Findings and Discussion on the Experiences of SME Employees, Managers, Owners and Directors in the South East Region of Ireland**

The main objective of the survey was to establish if the obstacles identified in the literature were experienced in Irish SMEs and to examine the attitudes of participants towards the use of flexible work practices in the SME sector.

**Educational Capital and Commitment to Work**

To capture the beliefs the participants held towards the educational capital and commitment to work possessed by women the survey presented three statements to which participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. The three statements and the responses of the male and female participants are presented in *Table 4*.

**Table 4:** Educational Capital and Commitment to Work Survey Statements.

No.	Statement	Gender	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
1	Women due to childcare and other domestic responsibilities invest less in their education and the time spent in the labour market	Male (n=66)	21.1%	39.4%	30.3%	9.1%
		Female (n=64)	18.8%	46.9%	26.6%	7.8%
2	Women, due to childcare and other domestic responsibilities, are not as interested in progressing in their careers as their male colleagues	Male (n=66)	6.1%	16.7%	57.6%	19.7%
		Female (n=64)	9.4%	17.2%	45.3%	28.1%
3	Women with children are less capable and committed to their work than those women without children and men	Male (n=66)	6.1%	18.2%	45.5%	30.3%
		Female (n=64)	4.7%	12.5%	23.4%	59.4%

Data revealed some interesting findings on the beliefs held by the participants with regard to the investments made by women in their education and their commitment to work. The majority, 60.5 per cent of men and 65.7 per cent of women, either strongly agreed or agreed that women invest less in their education due to childcare and other domestic responsibilities. The high percentage of both genders who either strongly agreed or agreed highlights the extent to which the stereotype has been accepted. However, contrasting this when asked about the interest held by women in progressing in their career and their commitment to their work the majority strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statements; 77.3 per cent and 75.8 per cent of men and 73.4 per cent and 82.8 per cent of women. Participants held the belief that, while women are as interested in progressing in their careers and are capable and committed to their work, it is childcare and other domestic responsibilities that prevent them from investing in both their education and career. Furthermore, when participants were asked to rank the level of importance they would attach to two considerations when applying for a promotion, as detailed in *Table 5*, the majority, 92.4 per cent of males and 84.4 per cent of females, found the compatibility of the responsibilities of the new position with existing home/family commitments as important and very important. 89.4 per cent of males and 92.2 per cent of females ranked the working hours associated with the new position and the flexibility in how those hours are structure (e.g. starting/finishing times, ability to work from home) as important and very important considerations. Although both considerations were deemed to be important or very important by male and female participants, it is only women whose level of investment in their education and career is deemed to be impacted by these responsibilities.

**Table 5:** Possible Considerations when Applying for Promotion.

No.	Consideration	Gender	No Importance %	Little Importance %	Important %	Very Important %
1	The compatibility of the responsibilities of the new position with existing home/family commitments	Male (n=66)		7.6%	53.0%	39.4%
		Female (n=64)	4.7%	10.9%	34.4%	50.0%
2	The working hours associated with the new position and the flexibility in how those hours are structure (e.g. starting/finishing times, ability to work from home)	Male (n=66)	3.0%	7.6%	45.5%	43.9%
		Female (n=64)	1.6%	6.3%	42.2%	50.0%

**Perceptions and Attitudes towards the Use of Flexible Work Practices**

If external home/family commitments are viewed by the participants as reducing the investment women can make into their education and career then further assessment is needed to establish the perceptions and the attitudes of the participants towards the use of flexible work practices to counteract this. The survey asked participants to rank their level of agreement on two statements; first that it is important to have a balance between work and life and second that in general it can be difficult to manage the responsibilities of work with family/personal responsibilities. To the first statement 95.4 per cent (n=63) of men and 100 per cent (n=64) of women either strongly agreed or agreed. To the second statement 94 per cent (n=62) of men and 85.9 per cent (n=55) of women again strongly agreed

or agreed. Thus, the vast majority of participants agreed that it is important to have a balance between work and life and that it can be difficult to manage this. When asked if they would feel comfortable approaching their employer about availing of flexible working practices 66.7 per cent (n=44) of men and 70.3 (n=45) per cent of women strongly agreed or agreed that they would feel comfortable doing so. However, when asked if they believed using flexible working practices in their SME would not jeopardise their chance of promotion 56.4 per cent (n=37) of men and 64.7 per cent (n=32) of women strongly disagree or disagreed. Thus, highlighting that the participants are aware that using such work practices may negatively impact their career (Chung, 2018). Additionally, 59.6 per cent (n=37) of responding men (n=62) and 90.6 per cent (n=58) of women strongly agreed or agreed that those in their SME organisation who availed of flexible work practices were viewed as not carry the same workload despite reductions in pay. The implication from this seems to be that while the majority of participants would feel comfortable approaching their employer in their SME about using flexible work practices, they are aware that it would have negative implications for their chances of job progression and how their commitment to their work would be viewed by colleagues. Women in particular, at 90.6 per cent were very aware of the negative consequences attached to availing of these flexible work practices. Furthermore, when asked if they believed that having employees on their team using flexible work practices would increase their own workload 53.9 per cent (n=34) of responding men (n=62) and 54.7 per cent (n=35) of women strongly agreed or agreed. This response from both male and female participants again demonstrates the negative stereotypes attached to availing of flexible work practices and further highlights the difficulties in challenging and changing any stereotypes. Flexible work practices are offered as a solution to the stereotypes surrounding the commitment of women to their education, career and family responsibilities. Thus, they are a means through which vertical gender segregation could be lessened. Yet, this solution actually comes with stereotypes of its own which in turn reinforce the original beliefs about the commitment levels of women in SMEs and beyond (Chung, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

Although there has been significant academic attention granted to the study of vertical gender segregation and the experiences of women as they attempt to advance into those main decision-making corporate positions prior research has focused on larger organisations ignoring SMEs. This study is an exploratory study of the gender imbalance of the main decision-making positions in the Irish SME sector who in Ireland generate over 70 per cent of job creation (European Commission, 2017). No attempt is being made to generalise that the findings of this study are representative of the Irish SME sector as a whole or of the experiences of all those who are employed within it. However, this study does offer some significant observations on the Irish SME sector and vertical gender segregation. Results show that gender imbalance is just as prevalent in Irish SMEs as larger organisations. Furthermore, the importance, and difficulties, of combining work and home life was acknowledged to be a significant consideration by both men and women, yet it was only the commitment of women to their education and career which was questioned. The stigma attached to availing of flexible work practices was also observed in SMEs highlighting the paradoxical situation faced by women in SMEs. The 'stereotype threat' surrounding family and home responsibilities experienced by women, may be lessened by the use of flexible work practices allowing for more balance between work and family responsibilities. However, perceptions illustrate that availing of flexible work practices can have a negative impact on future career progression opportunities.

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