

Women Navigating the Perennial Labyrinth to Managerial Positions: Their Reality, Their Challenges and the In-Between

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Abstract. This study examined women's challenges in assuming managerial positions within the Maltese public Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions. Through the semi-structured interviews using a feminist approach, this research acquired data from managerial women within the local, public VET institutions, i.e., MCAST and ITS. The data acquired revealed that the challenges women face in navigating managerial positions are perceived through the themes of 'Sociocultural factors', 'Gender roles', 'Perceived discrimination', 'Insufficient positive representation', and 'Lack of flexibility'. From this research, it transpired that flexibility encourages women to take managerial roles, and the solution towards gender parity in top positions lies within a change of perspective on a macro and micro level, as opposed to a few measures. The measures implied in this article refer to flexibility in hours and location of work, alongside a clear organisational structure allowing them to benefit from such resources. Furthermore, this research suggests a reform exercise on a national level, targeting parental, maternity, and paternal leave. Consequently, it is recommended that parental leave in Malta is increased drastically and made available to split evenly amongst both parents. Additionally, aiming to change societal expectations and stereotypes based on gender, this article points towards an educational campaign targeting different age brackets within the local population, starting from children up to the elderly.

Keywords: women in managerial positions, Vocational, Education and Training institutions, challenges, gender parity

Introduction

Despite the available literature on women in managerial positions, there is very little research targeting the challenges managerial women face within education, specifically in VET, both globally and less so, Malta. Nonetheless, the discrepancy between the overrepresentation of women in teaching staff (Callister, Newell & Perry et al., 2006), and underrepresentation of women in managerial roles within education, including VET institutions (UNESCO, 2020), is problematic. The incongruency is that women seem to have access to tertiary education and the teaching profession, yet there are challenges to assume managerial positions in education (UNESCO, 2021), including VET institutions (UNESCO, 2020). The significance of this article is the acknowledgement and consideration of women's voices to explain the challenges they face in undertaking managerial positions in local, public VET institutions and potential mitigating measures to target such challenges.

Literature Review

The Local Context

Malta is highly populated, and alongside its comparatively small size, it is considered a close-knit society with extended families living relatively nearby (NCPE, 2012). Compared to Europe, family traditions in Malta are quite strong. While historically, women were expected to stop working upon getting married, recently, more women are interested in continuing working, and progressing in their careers while "balancing" the household and childcare (NCPE, 2012, p. 133).

In Malta, 41% of the labour force are women (NSO, 2020), and while women dominate the teaching profession, men still lead in all managerial positions (Cunneen & Harford, 2016, cited in Vella, 2020; NSO, 2020), with women scoring the lowest among EU member states (Camilleri, 2021; EIGE, 2021). Concurrently, according to Vella, a "key barrier" for women to assume managerial positions is child-caring (2020, p. 8), which was partially tackled with the free childcare scheme in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Vet Institutions in Malta

Malta's VET institutions are comparatively recent, circa 70 years (NCFHE, 2015). VET was commenced when the Malta Labour Party (MLP) decided that one-third of the secondary years were potentially vocational through "trade-schools", responding to various requirements* (Sultana, 1994, p. 75). Despite dissatisfaction with trade schools, the industry relied "on the vocational training provided by schools" (Sultana, 1994, p. 78). In 1968 the "first" Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) was commenced (Refalo & Calleja, 2021, p. 7), adding another tertiary institution and putting "vocational, technical and technological education on a higher level" (Cassar, 2019, p. 26). MCAST aimed to provide training for trades and technology while being exposed to the academic aspects, offering "a complete educational experience, combining the technological with the academic" (Cassar, 2019, p. 24).

Despite changes within Maltese education, while modern apprenticeships and industry-based training are male-dominated (NSO, 2021, p. 3), curriculum and teaching staff are "feminised" (Callister, Newell & Perry et al., 2006, p.10), and gender imbalance (in favour of men) in top positions still echoes in VET (UNESCO, 2020). Nevertheless, the current local female population within tertiary education, especially within VET institutions, is significant and increasing.

In the 1990s, due to the industrialists' demands for an "upgrade", the vocational courses were offered through the Fellenberg Institute, Technical Institute, Secretarial School and Art and Design Centre (Fearne, 2021, p. 28)[†]. However, most secondary school leavers were excluded due to the specific entry qualifications needed leading to the remodelling of MCAST in 2001, which brought together several institutes (NCFHE, 2015). Concurrently, the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) was established in 1987 as Malta's main Tourism and Hospitality educational institution equipped with training restaurants, kitchens and hospitality laboratories pertaining to the courses offered (2021). While both ITS and MCAST provide various courses in Malta and Gozo, ITS currently offers courses up to EQF/MQF level 7 (Master's degree), whereas MCAST offers courses up to EQF/MQF level 8 (Doctoral degree).

Educational Attainment and the World of Work

While the assumption that women may study for higher degrees and hold managerial positions in colleges and universities is valid, research suggests that institutions have left much to be desired regarding female academic recruitment and retention (UNESCO, 2021). Referring to the "care-technical" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 19), women were more prevalent in health, education, arts, humanities, and social sciences courses, while men are more inclined towards the STEM areas of studies (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Contrarily, gender parity in STEM disciplines is only achieved at master's level, with an average of 42% of women across the OECD nations (OECD, 2019, p. 199).

In the 20th century, in advocating the idea to "allow women to choose work rather than the household" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 28), the welfare states became motivated to cooperate with employers to adopt family-friendly measures and encouraged women to

* Including: the demands of students who preferred trade vocations over academic careers, mitigating negative perceptions of technical education, aiding unemployment concerns, and fostering a self-sustaining economy

[†] Mr. Fredrick Fearne was the first principal at MCAST what it was commenced in 2001.

combine family and work responsibilities through the development of family policies and extension of public services (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006). While this "enhance[d] women's opportunities to become economically active" (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006, p. 1913), gender gap in employment is still a reality (WEF, 2021) with the "opportunity gap widening as women progress through their careers" (PayScale, 2021a).

Women in Managerial Roles

Despite attempts in tackling gender parity in managerial positions, there is still a lack of women assuming leadership roles[‡], both globally (Hoare & Gell, 2009) and within the EU Member states (EC, 2019), and only 27% of women occupy leadership roles worldwide (WEF, 2021). The lack of women in managerial positions implies that the "potential of highly skilled and needed human resources remains untapped", suggesting that women are still facing various challenges in assuming and maintaining managerial roles (EC, 2019, p. 25).

Over the years, several attempts were made to improve the female quota in top positions. However, European boardrooms are still highly male-dominated, with an average ratio of 1:4 (EC, 2019) and a general score of 53.3%[§] (EC, 2021b, p. 35). In Europe, women occupy just 14% and 33% of boards and managerial positions, respectively (Naudi, 2019), while women CEOs and board chairs have remained a scarcity of 7% each (EIGE, 2021b). In Malta, the situation is even worse (Xuereb, 2015), as boardroom women account for only 1:8 (EC, 2019), 3% on Maltese boards and 20% in management positions (Naudi, 2019). Despite evidence, PayScale (2021a) found that more employers are becoming uncertain of the reality and source of gender gap in employment, arguing that all gaps can be reasoned out by compensable factors^{**} (PayScale, 2021b). Nonetheless, gender gap in employment is more than mere "indirect discrimination" (NCPE, 2020, p. 17), thus, targeting direct and indirect gender discrimination in the workplace will promote gender equality and positively contribute to "change stereotypical views regarding women's aspirations, preferences, capabilities and suitability for certain jobs" (Oelz, Olney & Tomei, 2013, p. 4).

Challenges

The lack of women navigating managerial positions is sometimes explained as an "opt-out revolution", where women voluntarily choose not to pursue such roles (Belkin, 2013, para. 5). Conversely, other theoretical standpoints attempt to explain this phenomenon from nature/nurture perspectives inclusive of work-life balance issues (Cross and Linehan, 2008); organisational, social, personal, and cultural factors (Hoobler, Lemmon & Wayne, 2011); stereotyping (Krause, 2017); awareness and expectations of women in managerial positions (Hejase, Haddad & Hamdar et al., 2013), and lack of accessibility (Shepherd, 2017). Others point fingers at women themselves, describing it as "women's missing agency" (Shepherd, 2017, p. 84), hence, affirming the stereotypical attitudes which impede women's contribution to decision-making processes (Commission on the Status of Women, 2006).

The Glass-Ceiling

There are various metaphors for the challenges women face in occupying top positions, however, "glass-ceiling" seems to be the most popular, referring to the idea that women perceive managerial roles as available yet unreachable (Loden, 1978, cited in Kagan, 2021, para. 1). To Loden, cultural barriers is what hinders women from assuming managerial positions (cited in BBC World News, 2017). Wulfhorst (2018) takes it a step further explaining that Loden's cultural obstacles are often unconscious assumptions and biases that the

[‡] There is a significant discrepancy between the number of female graduates and their number in managerial positions.

[§] Gender Parity is achieved when the average is score is 100%.

^{**} Compensable factors include skill, responsibility, effort etc.

institutions, men, and women constantly hold, keeping women out of positions of power. Although Loden was confident that the glass-ceiling would be history after more than four decades (cited in Wulforth, 2018), the second glass-ceiling has emerged (UNESCO 2021). UNESCO (2021, p.31) identify the second glass-ceiling within the vertical segregation of the academic sphere in employment, where despite the over-representation of women in teaching staff (especially in lower levels), there is a "dearth" in school administration positions, education policymaking and decision-making. Moreover, UNESCO (2021) claims that women in tertiary education hit the glass-ceiling due to social factors such as wage gap, sexual harassment, and violence. Demographic differences such as sexual identity and race, individually or in any combination, also impact women's aspirations and expectations.

Think Manager – Think Male

During the 1970s, Schein found that "think manager – think male" was a conviction amongst managers, rooted in the idea that managerial positions' characteristics are more associated with the male identity (2001, p. 676). To Schein (2001), decision-makers are more likely to favour male applicants over females during the management selection process, training choices, and opportunity chances owing to gender, creating a psychological barrier for women who were consistently negatively biased. Arguably, the "think manager – think male" (Schein, 2001, p. 676) is still an existing covert reality (Salter, 2018). Concurrently Braun, Stegmann & Hernandez Bark et al. (2017) suggest that women are being obstructed through the Implicit leadership theories (ILT) bias, in combination with the Implicit followership theories (IFT). Simultaneously, recent studies "leave little doubt" (Salter, 2018, para. 2), that while males are consistently associated with managerial positions, females are encouraged to fit in the "ideal follower" identity, a leading contributor to encourage men towards managerial positions, and women as followers (Braun, Stegmann & Hernandez Bark et al., 2017, p. 383).

Perceptions of Women in Managerial Positions

Albeit that studies reveal that both genders can be effective managers, assuming a management job that is "congruent with one's gender, appears to make one more effective" (APA, 2006, para. 4). According to Rosener (2021, para. 35), for long, men were expected to be "in control", and women to be "cooperative" roles. Therefore, suggesting that women assuming managerial positions are more appreciated if fitting in the transformative role^{††}. Congruently, Gibson (1995) stated that while men emphasise goal setting, women focus more on the "interaction" between workers; thus, the effectiveness is not only relational to gender but also the setting (Rosener, 1990, para. 7).

Globally, while women fight for equality in decision-making positions, risking remaining as a "women's issue" (Kantar, 2021, p. 9), there is a steady "gap between the views of women and men" (Kantar, 2021, p. 52). Indicating that women are still seen as less adequate for managerial positions, especially by men (Kantar, 2021), could be a contributing factor to "impostor syndrome"^{‡‡} (STEM Women, 2021, para. 1), which is mostly associated with high-achieving women (KPMG, 2021, p. 4). Additionally, KPMG (2020) found that half of the women in top posts self-doubt their success because they never expected to reach top positions or because of fear of not living up to society's expectations.

Focusing then on parental expectations (in line with society's expectations), Gonchar (2014, para. 4) found that parents were "more focused on the braininess of their sons and the

^{††} Cited in Rosener (1990), the transformational and transactional roles were first conceptualized by Burns (1978) and later by Bass (1985).

^{‡‡} Impostor syndrome was Coined by Imes and Clance in the 1970's, it refers to the difficulty to internalize one's abilities and accomplishments by attributing them to other factors such as luck or connections.

waistlines of their daughters." Thus, parents perceive boys as more "gifted" than girls, expecting them to do better in education and employment. Furthermore, the idea that boys are dominant and girls should be "pretty" (Swift & Gould, 2021, para. 5) is further reinforced through the media (UN Women, 2020b; Wood, 2013), where "femininity" is portrayed as "sexual", "stupid", and "submissive to men" (Tota et al., 2013, p. 10), characterised by domesticity, romance, and motherhood (Swift & Gould, 2021; Wood, 2013). Consequently, while media failed to show and promote women's emancipation in private and public spheres, parents' expectations remained skewed (Tota et al., 2013; Swift & Gould, 2021), leading women to lack career ambition. In fruition, most women do not plan for a managerial position in higher education but rather describe it as "falling into" (Krause, 2017, p. 73) by "happenstance" (Vella, 2020, p.81).

Social Identity and Self-Esteem on Managerial Aspirations

Social and psychological barriers can take many forms, most known are the "queen bee syndrome" (Staines, Jayaratne, & Tavis, 1973, cited in Mavin, 2008, p.79) and leadership "labyrinth" (Carli & Eagly, 2015, p. 514; 2019, p. 1). The term "queen bee syndrome"^{§§} is sexist because there is no "alternative term... to negatively label senior men," nor are men blamed for such behaviour, which re-affirms the "gendered status quo for women in management" (Mavin, 2008, p. 79). While such labels imply a "blame or fix the women" approach, they deflect attention from the real challenges (Mavin, 2006, p. 2716), enabling the leadership "labyrinth" (Carli & Eagly, 2015, p. 514; 2019, p. 1). The leadership "labyrinth"^{***} refers to the "myriad [of] obstacles that women face throughout their careers" (Carli & Eagly, 2015, p. 514), which is "full of twists and turns"; specifically, the perennial paradox of what makes a woman a good leader (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 10). Identifying prejudice, resistance, management style issues, and family demands as the main obstacles, Eagly & Carli (2019) claim that men are promoted faster than women and are less likely to be negatively perceived. According to the "social role theory"^{†††}, Eagly & Wood (2012, p. 123) argue that this non-biological concept shows that women and men were always perceived as nurturers and breadwinners respectively. In parallel, most literature attributes agentic terms to managerial roles and men (Krause, 2017), while women are usually described as "communal" (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 574; Madera, Hebl & Martin, 2009, p. 1593). The incongruity on the female part leading women to be perceived as less qualified for managerial positions and more likely to be negatively judged when in position, is referred to as the "role-congruity theory" (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 573). This implies that women in managerial posts tend to adapt to fit in the male managerial stereotype through attire and speech. For instance, historically, trousers were a "gender-specific garment for men" (Cunningham, 2003, p. 33) used by women to "mimic masculine codes... to level the professional playing field" (Zarella, 2019). Concurrently, to Hebdige (2002), attire is a self-expression reflecting identity, which is possibly a symbolic form of resistance. Thus, the expectation of women to conform to the male-stereotype of "collar" and "suit" (Hebdige, 2002, p. 52) is arguably a form of oppression of the female identity to fit in the male identity within managerial positions.

Regarding speech, Kim Campbell^{†††} claimed that assertiveness, albeit being the "right way for a leader to speak, but it wasn't the right way for a woman to speak. It goes against type" (cited in Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 3). This highlights the difficulties posed by the double-bind, where men are expected to speak with authority, and women are frowned upon if they do.

^{§§} The "queen bee syndrome" refers to when a woman in a managerial position treats lower-ranking females more hypercritical than males (Staines, Jayaratne, and Tavis, 1973, cited in Mavin, 2008, p. 79).

^{***} A term coined by Eagly and Carli (2007a) and one of the most used in the recent years.

^{†††} Social role theory refers to the widely accepted gender stereotypes which develop from a society's gender distribution of work.

^{†††} Kim Campbell is the first and only women that served as a prime minister in Canada in 1993.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Catalyst (2003) found that 47% of women consider developing a style with which male managers are comfortable with as the best-advancing strategy for their careers, implying women's desideratum for validation by men. Simultaneously, Eagly and Carli (2007, p. 4) explain that "there is a real penalty for a woman who behaves like man, because men don't like her, and the women don't either." Moreover, referring to work-life balance, women are paying the shadow price (Boll et al., 2016), where they are still expected to interrupt their careers to fulfil family responsibilities, which leads to less time (and energy) for networking, thus, further encompassed in the leadership "labyrinth" (Eagly & Carli, 2019, p. 4).

Work-Life Balance

Arguing that Young and Willmott's (1975, cited in Gordon, 1975) idea of symmetrical family is flawed, female employees face "dual burden" (Oakley, cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2004, p. 512) or "triple shift", which includes the emotional work added to paid and domestic work (Duncombe & Marsden, 1995, p. 150). Nonetheless, Boll, Leppin, & Rossen et al. (2016) discovered that women spend fewer hours in paid work and more hours in domestic labour than men, which has a detrimental impact on women in employment, particularly regarding promotion prospects. Concurrently, the issue of work-life balance is "a significant factor", especially for cohabiting/married women that have (or aspire to have) children (Cross and Linehan, 2008, p. 36). Coined the "motherhood penalty", Correll, Benard and Paik (2007, p. 1297) claim that because of gender expectations, women suffer negative assumptions regarding their abilities, efficiency, and commitment to their careers, which causes pay and opportunity gap (Torres, 2019) especially in case of absence due to maternity-leave (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006). Conversely, after having children, "family men" are perceived as the breadwinners and benefit from better pay and opportunity (BBC World News, 2017, para. 6). Furthermore, Barrett (1986, p. 269) asserts that due to the "patriarchal ideology", women are forced towards jobs that are compatible with family commitments, such as educational institutions (UNESCO, 2020), which have arguably the most family-friendly in terms of working conditions (UNESCO, 2020). This explains the overrepresentation of women in education (EC, 2021a) hence, possibly the leading workplace for women's career progression into management (Madden, 2011). In conclusion, Cross and Linehan (2008, p. 37) stated that the glass-ceiling is "an individual choice based on their need for harmony and balance between career success and life outside work."

Networking

Garavan et al. (2003, cited in Cross & Linehan, 2008, p. 34) posit that "individuals who excel at networking generally excel within the organisations"; thus, excluding women from "informal networking" impacts their career progression. Proceeding from the "old boys' club" (also known as the "old boys' network", Cullen and Perez-Truglia (2021, p. 1) view this as a "self-perpetuating cycle" where men network in "ways that are less accessible to women", helping them to progress quicker than women. Furthermore, while lower-ranking employees may engage in self-promotion (Coffman, Flikkema & Shurchkov, 2021), managers are more likely to work with colleagues they have been socially involved with (Ranganathan & Shivaram, 2021). Nonetheless, those women who cannot "do it all" are made to feel further inferior by the media (KPMG, 2020, p. 2), thus, encouraging the "minority-status bias in self-promotion decisions"^{§§§} (Coffman, Flikkema & Shurchkov, 2021, p. 3), reinforcing the "self-perpetuating cycle" (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2021).

^{§§§} When the individual is in gender majority, they think of themselves more positively, while those in minority think of themselves more negatively, leading to less likely to be promoted.

Methodology

This study aimed to explore and understand women's challenges when occupying managerial positions within the local, public Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions and what could mitigate such challenges. An emphasis was made on the women's challenges and how they interpret their lived experiences within managerial positions. This research acquired its main data source from semi-structured interviews and their respective transcripts. The research onion (Figure 1), based on the version developed by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016, p. 1), outlines the methodology adopted in this study.

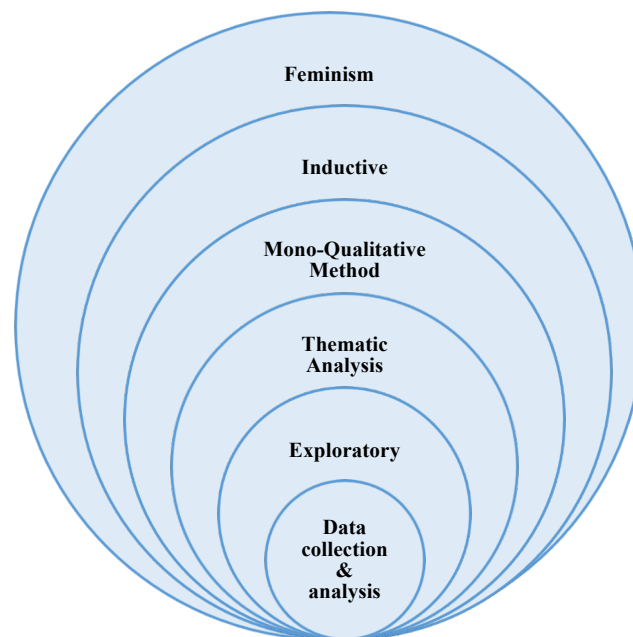


Figure 1: The research onion: adapted from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019)

This research investigates an issue which is not yet clearly defined; thus, the exploratory approach allowed the researcher to explore the issue with the participants. This research used a mono-qualitative method by conducting semi-structured interviews using a feminist approach. Furthermore, this research is emergent, thus, not "tightly prescribed" (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 258), while the inductive technique was apt to allow the study more freedom, while collecting insights and understanding the meanings as provided by the participants. Ultimately, the researcher adopted a reflexive thematic analysis using the liberal feminist perspective to provide a theoretical contribution.

Data Collection

This study uses a qualitative methodology where semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Furthermore, the data was collected from women currently assuming managerial positions within the Maltese public VET institutions, hence Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) and Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS). The respondents were selected through criterion and purposeful sampling from MCAST, and criterion and snowball sampling from ITS.

To obtain as much information and as accurately as possible, the researcher used three central questions, as stated by Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 192), to avoid "limiting the views of [the] participants". During data collection, the researcher utilised investigative questions and listened attentively to the participants responses to uncover subtleties indicating challenges faced by women in navigating managerial roles, as suggested by Simon (2011).

Acknowledging that this research used a feminist approach, the researcher based the interviews on "empathy, mutuality, and respect for the expert knowledge of the participant" (Finley, 2008, p. 97).

Data Analysis

The researcher followed Bengtsson's Qualitative Content Analysis identifying the valuable data from the "dross" to understand further and interpret the data collected through the manifest data analysis displayed within the acquired transcript (Burnard, 1991, 1995 cited in Bengtsson, 2016, p.12). Furthermore, as Figure 2 depicts, the researcher has incorporated the techniques used for multiple case studies into the reflexive thematic analysis designed by Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield et al. (2019)^{****}.

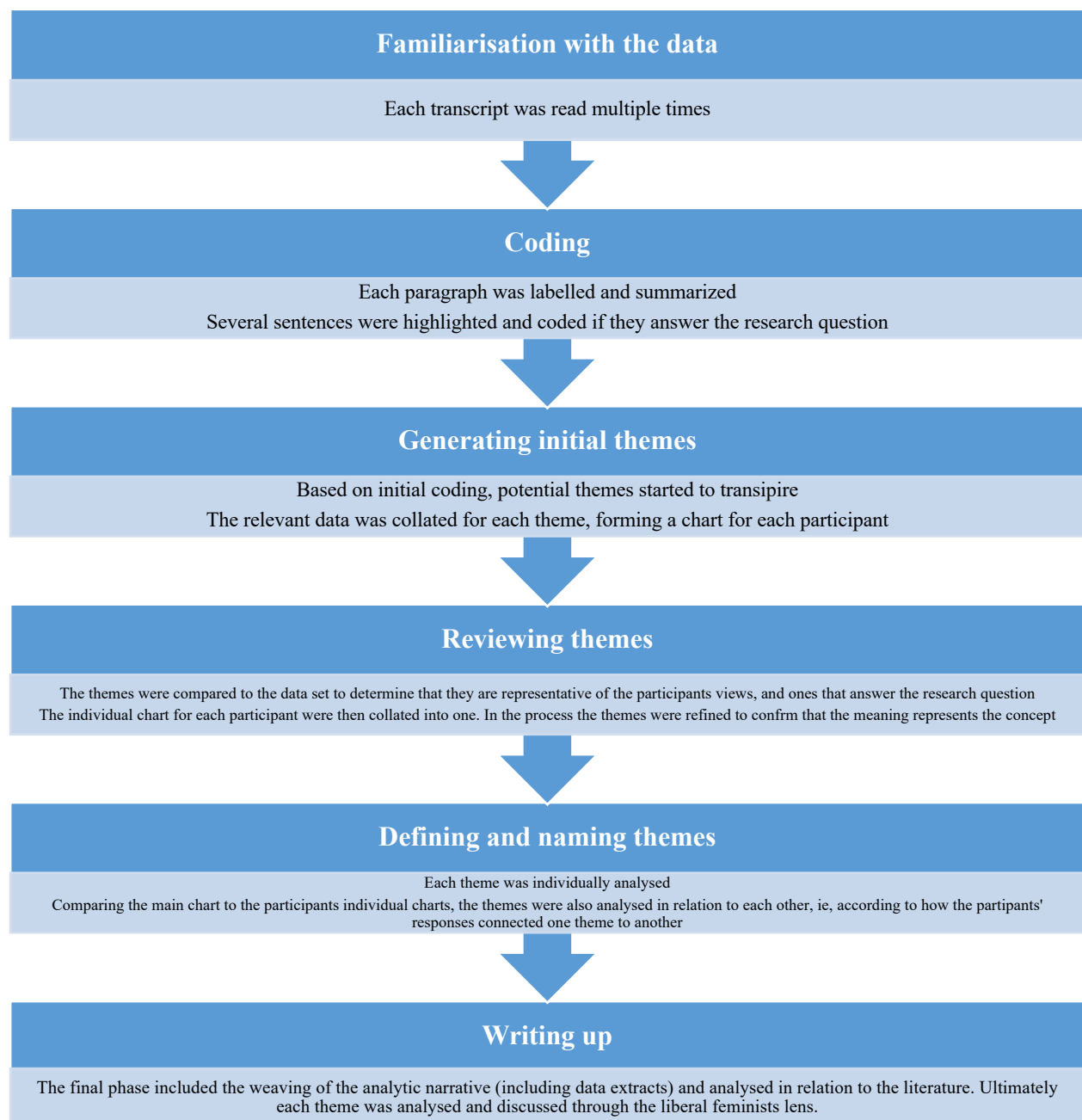


Figure 2: Analysis process in-line with the reflexive thematic analysis process

^{****} The reflexive thematic analysis process can be accessed through appendices section 7.2

Findings & Discussion

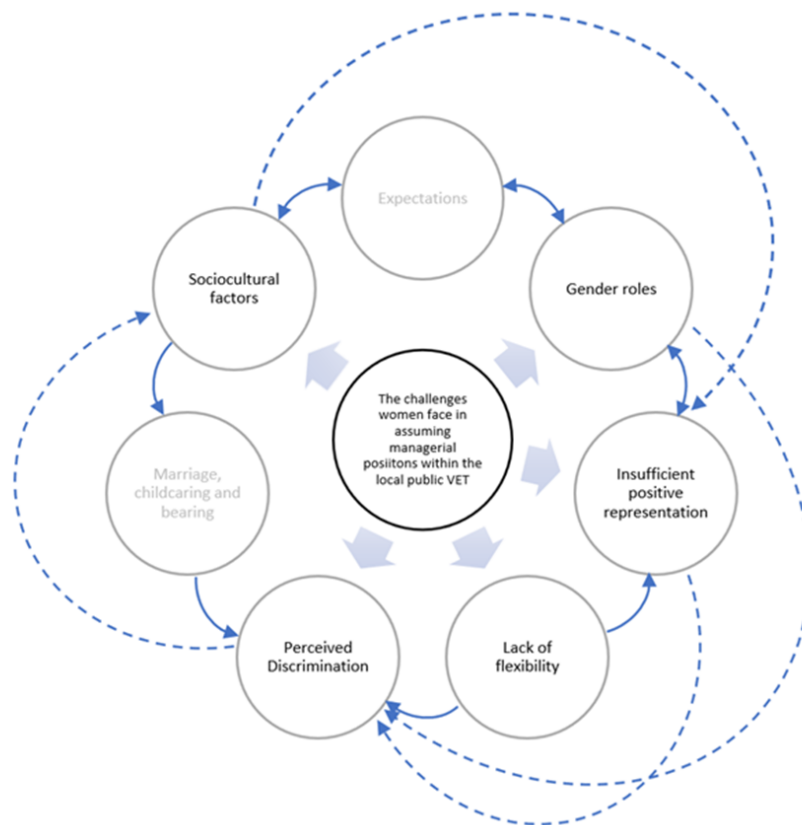


Figure 3: Primary data source analysis

According to the participants, the main challenges encountered in assuming a managerial position are 'Sociocultural factors', 'Gender roles', 'Insufficient positive representation', 'Lack of flexibility', and 'Perceived discrimination'. As the diverging radial chart: Figure 3 depicts, the themes identified are not isolated but interconnected. According to the participants, 'Sociocultural factors' and 'Gender roles' drive each other, whereas 'Sociocultural factors' reinforce the 'Gender roles' through 'Expectations' and vice-versa. Consequently, this causes what can be perceived as discrimination, whereby women are seen as solely primary carers rather than managers, thus, making it more difficult for them to acquire top positions.

'Sociocultural factors' also lead to 'Insufficient positive representation' of women in managerial positions. This is demonstrated in how women are not generally seen as managers because they are perceived to lack ambition due to limited "options" (R1)^{††††} available to them and hold a belief that they must prove themselves due to 'Insufficient positive representation'. 'Sociocultural factors' lead to 'Insufficient positive representation', where according to the participants, the 'Insufficient positive representation' manifested in gender imbalance in decision-making positions, stems from 'Lack of flexibility' caused by 'Lack of resources' and 'Unclear organisational structure'. Ultimately the 'Lack of flexibility' leads to further 'Perceived discrimination' where women are "singled out" (R3) to use the available initiatives, which is again fuelled by the 'Expectations' as invoked by the 'Sociocultural factors'.

Analysis of the collected data revealed that the participants in this study felt that being a woman in a managerial position is harder to attain and maintain than being a male. This owes

^{††††} Participants are referred to as R1 for respondent 1, R2 for respondent 2, etc.

to the 'Expectations' encompassed by the 'Sociocultural factors' and 'Gender roles', where women are expected to be administering 'Family and household responsibilities', making it easier for men to dedicate more time to career progression. Nonetheless, although the participants were aware of the unrealistic expectations, most of them accepted the expectations as part of their duties, to the extent of self-imposing them and feeling "guilty" (R3) if they did not. While two participants mentioned the importance of asking for help from their partner, only one participant specifically said that negotiations with the partner should be ongoing to reflect their circumstances and needs. Despite the challenges, the participants do not feel inferior to males in managerial positions and still feel that they are at times discriminated against for trying to "juggle" (R6) both work and family and household responsibilities.

Furthermore, it transpired that while the participants are all women in managerial positions, they still, to an extent, did not expect gender balance in managerial positions, even though their employment within education is female-dominated, especially at teaching level. This implies a sense of acceptance of the gendered status-quo in managerial positions, which is portrayed in how the participants did not actively engage for a change in society's perception of women; but rather owing it to their upbringing, specifically their parents. Nonetheless, they do wish that society sees them as equal to men. Additionally, the participants argued that despite the increased awareness and younger generations' inquiry of gender roles, the courses chosen by the applicants still reflect the traditional stereotypes regarding gender dominance in particular courses. This could indicate that the participants might have taken the example of students' gender dominance in particular courses (despite awareness) as a justification towards their own acceptance and possibly expectance of the lack of women in managerial positions.

Furthermore, it was observed that the concept of choice was ignored on the women's part, and the idea of rebellion against assumptions and expectations founded by the media and society, including women themselves, was rarely mentioned. Rather, it resulted that being rebellious leads to further negative assumptions about women. Moreover, while the participants argued in favour of flexibility, they were resistant to full remote working, arguing that physical interaction was still more adequate, even though the students they work with are at least 16 years of age. Nevertheless, they have stated that greater flexibility in terms of hours and location of work and a clear organisational structure and resources to support it would benefit both genders, particularly women (due to current sociocultural factors), in meeting professional and personal obligations. Furthermore, it was argued that if greater flexibility is granted, more women would be empowered towards decision-making positions, leading to better societal representation and enhanced understanding and improved policies.

From this article, it transpired that there was no difference in perspective between academic managerial roles and administrative managerial roles. This might be because both roles work within a similar structure mirroring the different managerial roles within the industry. Furthermore, while evidence shows a gender pay gap in other types of employment at all levels, including managerial levels (EC, 2021b), none of the participants mentioned this as an issue within their role. This is because both organisations (MCAST and ITS) operate inside a public framework where the central government standardises managerial roles, including remuneration.

Conclusion

Acknowledging gender imbalance in managerial positions within education, this study aimed to explore and understand the challenges women face when occupying managerial positions within the public Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions in Malta, and what could mitigate such challenges. To answer the questions targeted in this study, the researcher solicited responses from women occupying managerial positions within the Maltese public VET, i.e., MCAST and ITS. It is worth observing that although all the participants

occupied managerial roles, there was no difference in perspective or mitigation suggestions between the participants occupying academic managerial roles and administrative managerial roles. This could be attributed to the structure similarity within and between both institutions. Nonetheless, the acquired data from a set of semi-structured interviews shows that women indeed face several challenges to attain and maintain managerial positions.

It is necessary to keep the Maltese context within perspective as women are still perceived to have a primary role in household duties and responsibilities (Vella, 2020). Accordingly, the participants of this study asserted that despite improvement in the last decades, the 'Gender roles' fuelled by the 'Expectations' as influenced by the 'Sociocultural factors' are still very persistent. This is illustrated in how women are led to lack in career ambitions, by being primarily expected to satisfy family and household needs. In fact, in the past, women were authoritatively expected to resign once they married or had children (NCPE, 2012). Nowadays, while women are not authoritatively expected to resign and have equal educational opportunities, the results show that these expectations from women did not lessen because of their role in employment. Despite that research in this field is in its early stages owing to the relatively little knowledge on this area of study and population, the results fulfilled the scope of this research by acknowledging and disclosing the challenges encountered by women in managerial positions within the local, public VET institutions. Concludingly, the main challenges point towards the sociocultural expectations and perceptions as perceived and interpreted by women. Through their stories, the respondents revealed the impact of these challenges on their lives. Finally, the findings do not suggest the concept of men versus women, i.e., that men are the only ones keeping women away, but rather points towards society in general, including women themselves. Thus, the challenges faced by men is also an area worth of future studies, which may yield findings that helps in the establishment of mitigation measures to aid both genders.

Recommendations for Further Improvements

The results of this research conclude that despite the diversity in participants (in terms of age, marital status, situation, sectors, etc.), there weren't no differences in their views or suggestions for further improvement. Furthermore, although children were frequently mentioned, alongside other family members, the participants have all agreed that several initiatives can be taken to enable women's participation in managerial positions, not only in VET but also in other workplaces.

This article concluded that women seeking to assume managerial positions are not particularly after changing the sociocultural mindset but rather in obtaining the necessary tools to enable their personal and professional fulfilment. The socio-cultural mindset is not limited to managerial women in VET but may apply to any woman; hence, the tools needed to fulfil personal and professional responsibilities should be made available to all working women, independent of workplace, job position, or personal circumstances. This will enable all women, including those without gainful employment, to aim further in terms of career aspirations. The necessary tools implied in this article refer to flexibility in terms of hours and location of work, alongside a clear organisational structure allowing them to benefit from such resources without being "singled out" (R3). In recognition of the unlevelled "playing field" (R6), notably due to the several expectations from women, including childbearing and caring, this article suggests that women are particularly perceived negatively when they are of a childbearing/caring age. By looking at Iceland and Finland as the leading countries, respectively, in terms of gender parity in managerial positions (WEF, 2021), this research suggests a reform exercise on a national level, targeting parental, maternity, and paternal leave.

Consequently, this research suggests that the parental leave in Malta is increased to nine months like Iceland (Jafnréttisstofa, 2017; Werft, 2017), or 328 working days like in Finland

(BBC News, 2020; Ward, 2020), split evenly amongst both parents^{****}. This increase would grant flexibility and empower women to aspire for career advancement while being less negatively biased in terms of promotion aspects due to maternity leave speculations. Additionally, men would benefit from the opportunity to spend more time with their children while reducing the pressure on them to be the automatic breadwinners. Additionally, aiming to change societal expectations and stereotypes based on gender, this research points towards an educational campaign targeting different age brackets within the local population, starting from children up to the elderly. For instance, Iceland being the first country close to terminating gender inequality in top positions, took on the initiative of introducing gender equality lessons as part of the curriculum. Locally, such initiatives could take place in the form of additional seminars or sessions specifically targeting gender equality. This can be included in subjects such as Personal and Social Development, however even better if initiated from pre-school. This requires continuous education; thus, such seminars can also be included as part of Continuous Professional Development programmes within different workplaces and offered through the local council for different age groups. As the participants explained, while such initiatives and reforms are possibly expensive and lengthy, however, they would be socially beneficial by contributing to the cultural change (including expectations, perception, and ambitions) which historically kept women from progressing (Werft, 2017). Furthermore, by referring to Nolan, Moran and Kotschwar (2016) global survey results, this article suggests that if women are enabled to advance in their careers, different employment sectors (including VET institutions) will benefit from a more diversified management team, which is correlated to better performance.

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^{****} In case of single parents, one would have 328 days of parental leave.

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