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**Why don't women fit to top positions? Tales of executive search consultants in Central Eastern
Europe**

Extended abstract

Numerous academic studies have tried to reveal what maintains the persistent inequality between men and women in top positions, and several explanations contributed to our present knowledge. However, this information in itself is still not enough to change the trend. Corporate programs, e.g., training and mentoring, seem only partially successful (Dashper, 2020). Legal forces, such as quota laws, have uneven consequences (Mensi-Klarbach and Seierstad, 2020). Equal opportunities legal frameworks are necessary, but not enough to promote talented women who have the ambition to become leaders, as there are numerous less explicit processes (Glass and Fodor, 2011). In a recent Dutch investigation, Blommaert and van der Brink (2020) drew our attention to the fact that women's selection for executive positions might fail, despite several key figures' best intentions in the process.

Executive searches play a crucial role in the inclusion and exclusion of talented candidates. While numerous scientific investigations aimed to discover the odds and bias of executive searches (Tienari et al., 2013; Merilainen et al., 2013; Holgersson, 2012; Holgersson et al., 2016), there are still undiscovered

aspects of the selection process. Amis et al. (2020) provide evidence on highly institutionalized myths, such as meritocracy and efficiency myth, and Kelan (2008) had already introduced the gender fatigue concept. We still have uncertainties about why women are held back from top positions. This paper aims to uncover the hidden mechanisms which prioritize men over women in these processes. Our main research question is what maintains the tendency of selecting fewer women for executive positions during executive searches? In this empirical research, we focus on four post-socialist countries: we conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 executive search consultants and 24 company decision makers in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, and we also aimed to discover if there are any peculiarities in given social contexts and if these had an impact on executive searches. The interviews were analysed with the help of NVivo 12 software, following the protocol of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results show that these decision makers are led by good intentions to serve the best interest of their organizations, based on rationality and follow the envisioned rules of meritocracy. The results reveal that the executive search consultants' business model, including the guarantee, leads to risk aversion (Risberg and Romani, 2022), and consequently, they tend to provide slightly more conservative solutions. Besides, they often 'over-adjust' to the societal expectations, which, in the region, are rather traditional in terms of gender role attitudes due to the socialist legacy. Above all, several research participants expressed their reluctance to explicitly support women, as they considered this was as discrimination against men. Our research contributes to the present knowledge on executive searches and goes beyond it by showing executive search consultants' role in decelerating societal change, even though it is unintended.

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