

What holds women back? Gender barriers at work

Olga Epitropaki, PhD

*Associate Professor, The “Stavros Costopoulos” Chair in
Human Resource Management & Development,
Academic Director of the MSc in Strategic Human Resource
Management
ALBA Graduate Business School, Greece*



Why do we still have difficulty unlocking the full potential of women at work?

What holds women back?

- Is it an issue of competence? Qualifications? KSAs?
 - Rather unlikely: Higher percentage of women vs men hold a university degree and women consistently outperform men in terms of academic achievement (e.g. WEF gender gap study, 2007)
- Intelligence?
 - Equal in women and men
- Brain differences?
 - Some indeed exist, but unlikely to be the reason...

What holds women back?

Brain differences	Men	Women
General	Systemizers: better at analyzing	Empathizers: better at reading emotions
Size	+	
Cell numbers	+4%	
Brain tissue	+100g	
Cellular connections between brain cells		+
Corpus callosum size		+
Language	Dominant hemisphere (+left)	Both sides
Limbic size		Larger deep

What holds women back?

- Personality differences?
 - Again unlikely: Extraversion, conscientiousness and openness to experience (which consistently predict leadership emergence) same between women and men. Women show higher levels of agreeableness and neuroticism, but weak connections of these two dimensions with leadership (Costa, Terracciano & McCrae, 2001)
- Emotional intelligence and empathy?
 - Higher in women (e.g., Brackett et al., 2006; Hall, 2006; VanRooy et al., 2005)

What holds women back?

- Family responsibilities?
 - More likely: Women’s domestic responsibilities exceed men’s – 2:1 (Bianci et al., 2000).
 - **Childcare.** Interesting research finding -> employed mothers in 2000 spent as much time interacting with their children as mothers without a job in 1975! But they still think they spend too little time (Bianci et al., 2000).
 - **Taking breaks from employment.** 37% of professional women voluntarily dropped out of employment at some point in their lives vs 24% of men (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). Women take time out for “family time”, men take time out to change careers => serious implications: lost income, impeded career growth, depreciation of skills, difficulty in reestablishing one’s career.

What holds women back?

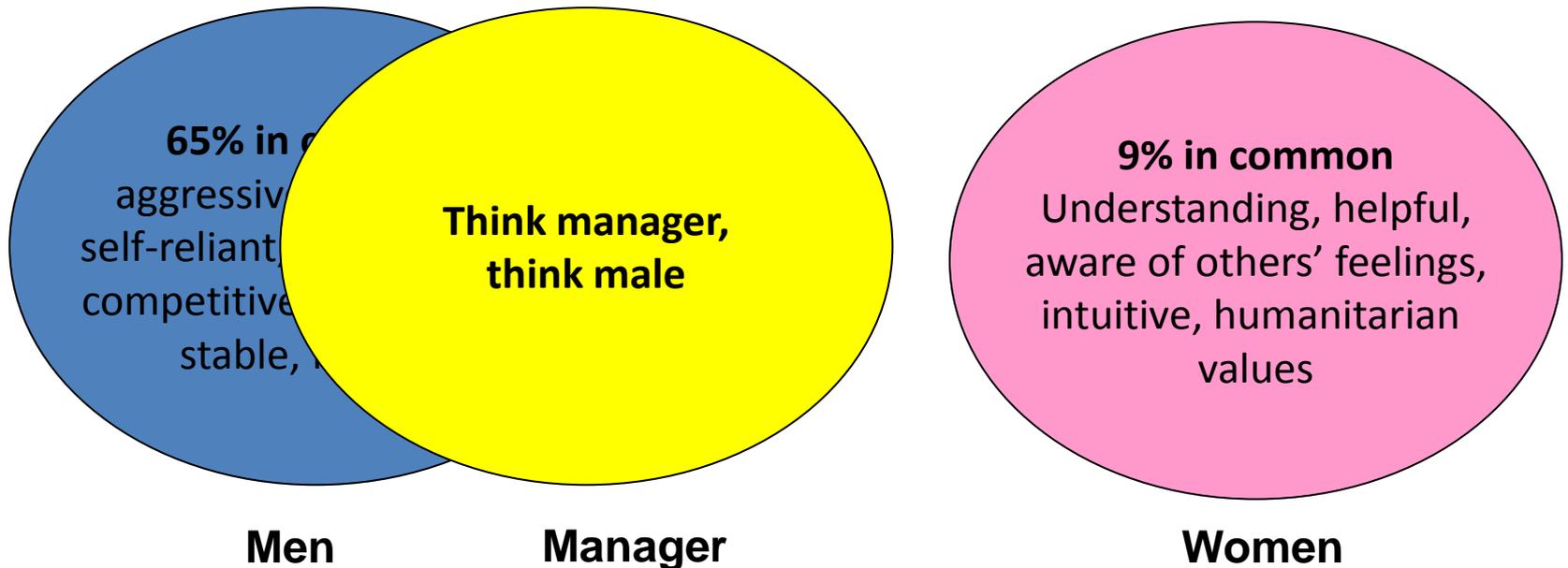
- Family responsibilities?
 - Taking leaves of absence and sick days.
 - Seeking flexible jobs and part-time jobs.
- Discrimination?
 - **Promotion bias** 2:1 in favor of men at all levels (Smith, 2002)
 - Even in female-dominated fields women don't have the advantage!
Token women generally suffer slow promotion in male-dominated careers but token men advance quickly in female dominated careers
=> **glass escalator effect** (Williams, 1992).
 - **Gender pay gap**: 21% in the US, 17% in the EU

What holds women back?

- Discrimination?
 - Biases in relation to **motherhood**. Experimental studies show biases against mothers in competence expectations and screening recommendations (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008).
 - **Interesting catch 22:** Working mothers are seen as more self-oriented and as less dedicated to their children than stay-at home mums – especially when they are believed to work because of a personal choice rather than financial necessity (Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990). Working mothers are also seen as less dedicated to work. They also earn less. Can't win!

What holds women back?

- Discrimination?
 - Stereotypes and prejudice.
 - Implicit Leadership Theories: Schein (1973) traits shared by managers and (a) men and (b) women



What holds women back?

- Discrimination?
 - Implicit Leadership Theories: Epitropaki (2000), Epitropaki & Martin (2004; 2005)
 - Women have a perception of their ideal leader as more sensitive, understanding, sincere and helpful and less domineering, pushy and selfish than men.
 - Women who adopt masculine styles of leadership (directive and assertive behaviors) tend to be disliked and their ability to wield influence can be undermined. Women also risk not getting a job or a promotion when they are too direct (Tepper et al., 1993; Bowles et al., 2007).

What holds women back?

- Gender differences in **negotiation** performance => asymmetric distribution of rewards
 - Male managers and professionals negotiate higher starting pay than their female peers => men's payoff from negotiation was 60% higher than the women's (Gerhart & Rynes, 1991).
 - Women routinely negotiate less desirable employment terms than men.
- **Interesting backlash effect:** Women who adopt agentic negotiation strategies have negative outcomes. Women, when adopting agentic strategies, still need engage in behaviors signaling warmth and likeability (i.e., gender-consistent behaviors) in order to achieve positive outcomes.

A glass ceiling?



"A ceiling? All this time I thought it was a floor."

The glass ceiling

- A prejudiced opinion that typically prevails towards a certain group of people (based on gender, religion, race etc.), typically posing as a barrier for them to further develop their careers.
- Two aspects:
 - **Top limit** that one cannot cross
 - **Fear** to cross a limit imposed by oneself or others (self-fulfilling prophecy)

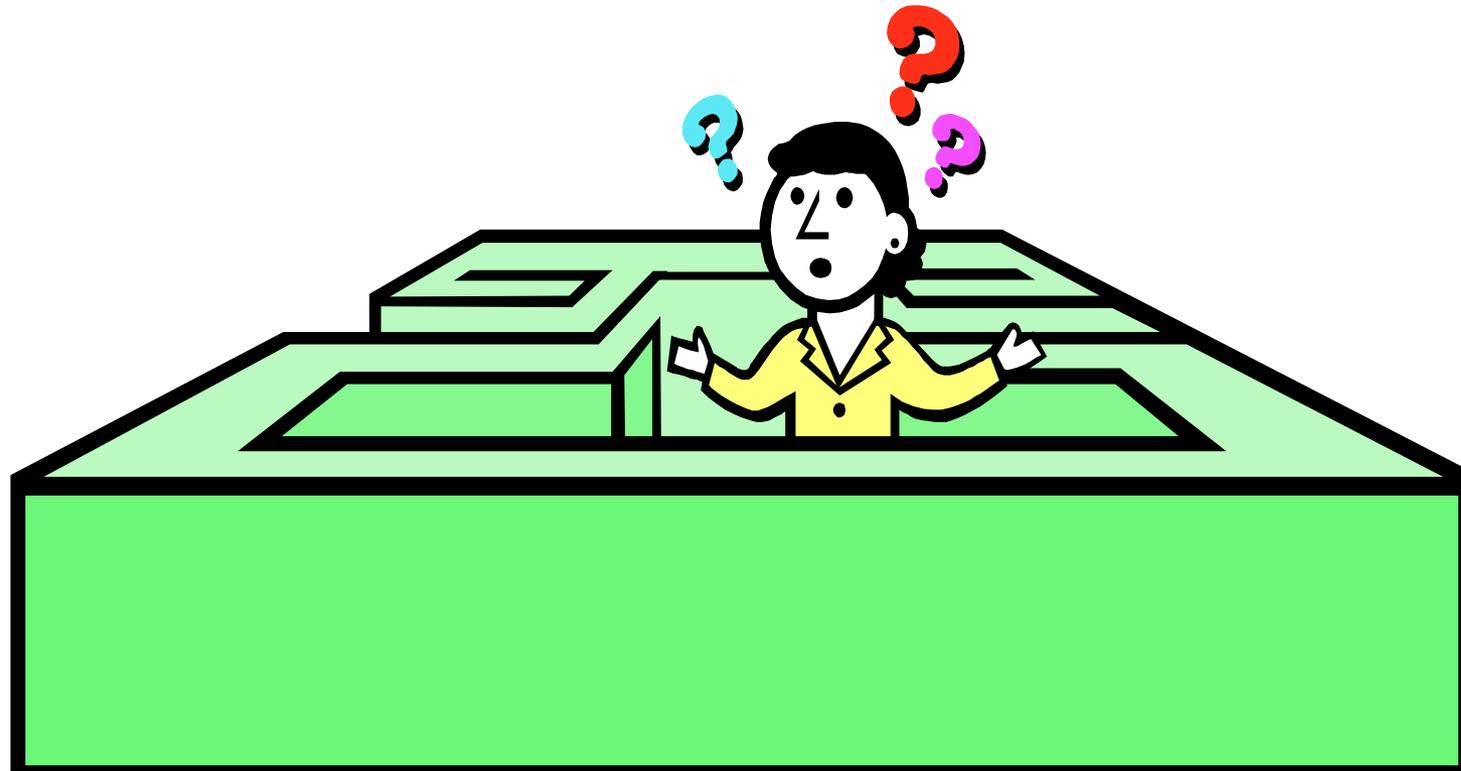
The “sticky floors”

- Failure to balance work and life
- Lack of political savvy
- Perfectionism vs. Excellence
- High need for acceptance – reluctance in tough decisions
- Failure to capitalize on strategic relationships: Networking!



Shambaugh, R. (2008). It's not a glass ceiling. It's a sticky floor. Mc-Graw Hill.

It might actually be a labyrinth...



Eagly & Carli (2007) Through the labyrinth. HBS Press.

The labyrinth

The glass ceiling metaphor might be misleading (Eagly & Carli, 2007):

- ▶ It erroneously implies that women have equal access to entry-level positions
- ▶ It erroneously assumes the presence of an absolute barrier at a specific high level in organizations
- ▶ It erroneously suggests that all barriers to women are difficult to detect and therefore unforeseen
- ▶ It erroneously assumes that here exists a single, homogeneous barrier and **ignores the complexity and variety of obstacles that women leaders can face**
- ▶ It fails to recognize the diverse strategies that women devise to become leaders
- ▶ It precludes the possibility that women can overcome barriers to become leaders

The glass cliff



By Elizabeth Judge
 SO MUCH has been said about the glass ceiling and some have suggested ways to shatter it. But the performance of Britain's top 100 companies, the Glass Cliff March of women into the boardrooms of the country's largest firms, has not helped. Research from Cranfield School of Management shows

Women on board: help or hindrance?

that it is not the diversity of FTSE 100 companies' top executives that is the key to success. The number of female executives has risen to 11.5% in 2003. However, corporate returns

have underperformed the FTSE 100 this year. Marks & Spencer, with five women on the board, underperformed by 30 per cent this year, with those returns underperformed by 14 per cent. Companies at the bottom of the Cranfield Index, with a scanty lack of female representation on their boards, have generally outperformed the index since the start of the year.

“So much for smashing the glass ceiling and using their unique skills to enhance the performance of Britain’s biggest companies. The triumphant march of women into the country’s boardrooms has instead wreaked havoc on companies’ performance”

Judge, 2003, The Times, p.21

The glass cliff

- Ryan & Haslam (2005a)
- There is a relationship between performance and number of women.
- But is the analysis correct?
- Could the causal sequence be reversed?

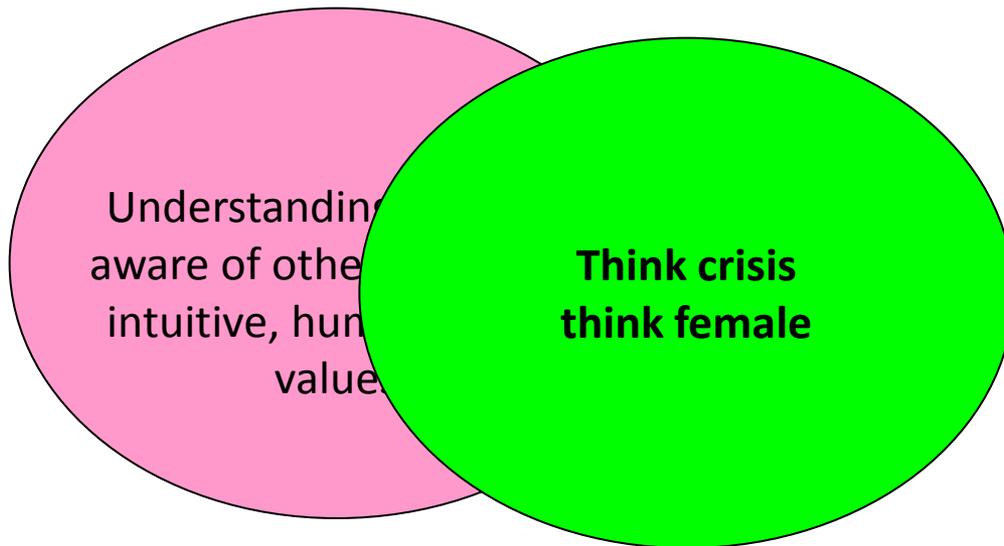
Perhaps women only get given senior positions when companies are doing poorly.



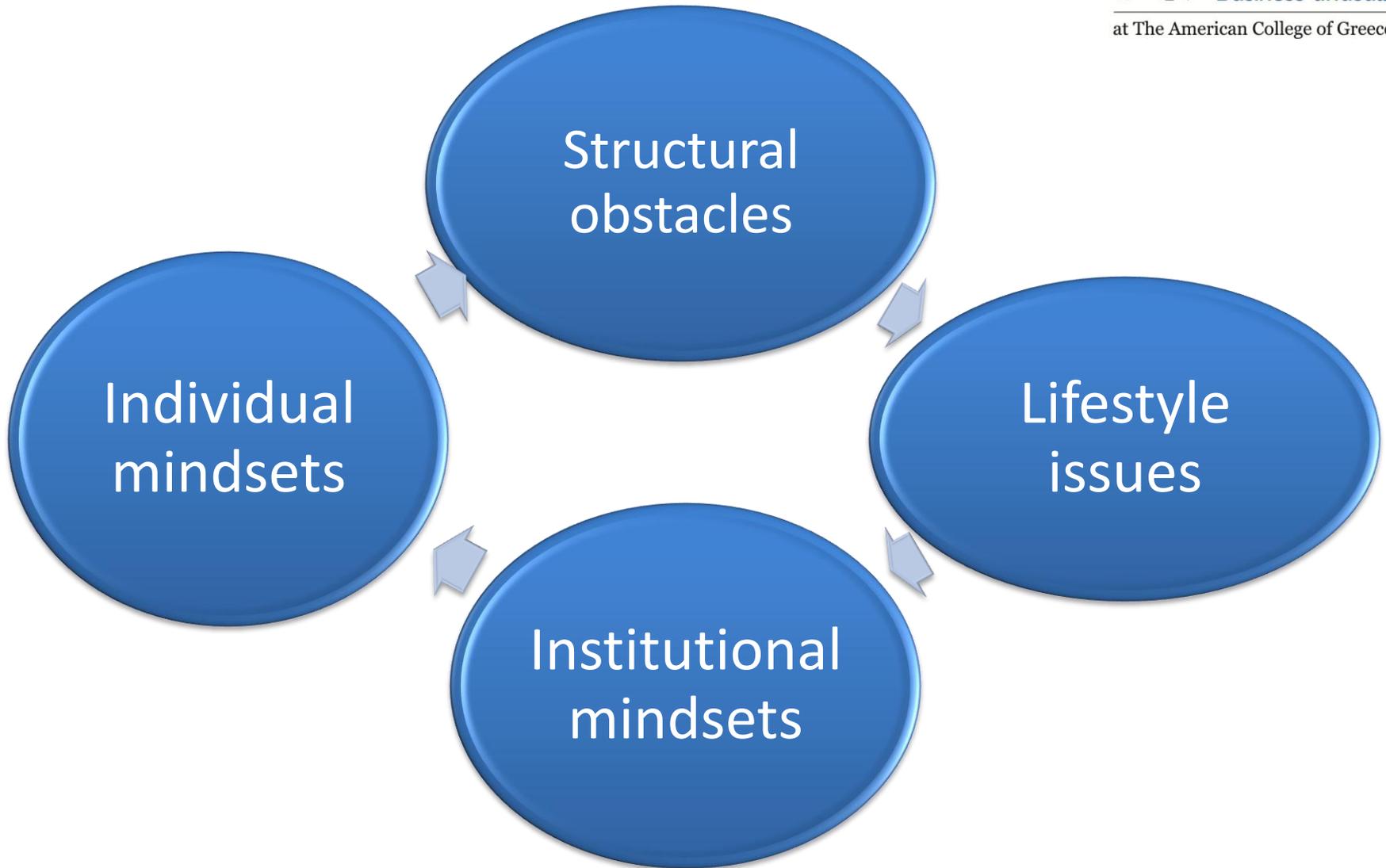
The glass cliff

- Series of experimental studies (Ryan and Haslam, 2005) showed that a female candidate is more likely to be appointed to a leadership position when the position is risky and there is an increased risk of failure.
- Are women set up to fail or are they considered to function better under crisis?

The glass cliff



What holds women back?



We can do it!



Thank you!