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Women managers and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Spain: Perceptions and drivers



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SYNOPSIS

Companies' perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) have been partially analysed based on top managers and mostly offer comparisons between men and women. According to our best knowledge, no study has focused on women managers and identified how their personal characteristics and values influence their perceptions of CSR. This paper analyses the differences in attitudes towards the different dimensions of CSR focusing on the viewpoint of women managers. Moreover, it measures how personal and professional backgrounds influence the perception of CSR.

A total of 206 women in management positions were surveyed. The findings suggest that women in top management positions in Spain value the stakeholder orientation dimension more than they value other CSR dimensions. Furthermore, the results show that personal and professional backgrounds have a limited impact on women's perceptions of CSR. Finally, our results suggest that entrepreneurial women tend to have a better perception of CSR. Thus, several implications can be drawn for business management, and interesting directions for future research are provided.

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Introduction

Currently, it is widely accepted that companies should be measured by the so-called triple bottom line to determine whether they are sustainable in the long term (Davidson, 2009). Likewise, some authors have stated that developing a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy leads to an improvement in companies' financial performance (see Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Malik, 2014) and firm reputation (e.g., Brammer & Pavelin, 2006; Kiernan, 2001; Sharma, 2000; Tullberg, 2005). Thus, companies should pursue a course of action beyond mere profit maximisation or compliance with laws and regulations and should include the voice of the stakeholder in their decision-making process. The role of a company, therefore, should be more than that of a citizen within a society, with the associated economic, social and ethical responsibilities (Davidson, 2009).

Although CSR research has been widely developed over the past two decades, Aguinis and Glavas (2012) revisited previous research and asserted that “*there is a clear imbalance*

in terms of levels of analysis; the vast majority of articles address the institutional and organisational levels of analysis, and there is very little research adopting an individual approach” (pp. 934). One of the micro-foundations of CSR, as defined by the above authors, is the perception of managers regarding organisations.

Previous research has found that gender is one of the most powerful factors explaining differences in CSR perception (see Alonso-Almeida, Casani, & Rodríguez-Pomeda, 2015, for a recompilation). In this regard, two lines of research have developed that focus on gender and CSR. The first line of research focuses on gender inequity in companies and how to close the equality gap by means of CSR development (Braun, 2010; Jamali, Safieddine, & Daouk, 2007). The second line of research addresses the role of women on boards. This line of research finds that when more women are on a board, the company tends to develop a broader set of CSR initiatives (e.g., Marquis & Lee, 2011; Soares, Marquis, & Lee, 2011; Williams, 2003; Zhang, Zhu, & Ding, 2013).

Nevertheless, little analysis has been performed addressing CSR perceptions among managers, especially among women in top management positions. A woman in a top management position is defined as a woman who has reached a senior position in the organisation (see McKinsey Global Institute, 2013).

Moreover, to our best knowledge, no study identifies how female managers' personal characteristics and values influence their CSR perceptions (Bageac, Furrer, & Reynaud, 2011; Stawiski, Deal, & Gentry, 2010). Most research on CSR has been conducted using the perceptions of master's students, primarily those with professional experience, and to a lesser extent those of bachelor's students (see the review in Alonso-Almeida et al., 2015). For this reason, some researchers advise that more research is needed among managers to achieve real change in organisations beyond merely developing actions to create sustainable behaviours (e.g. Bageac et al., 2011). Thus, a more holistic approach to CSR through the lens of gender is required (Pearson, 2007).

This paper's aim is two-fold. Although some previous studies have explored managers' personal characteristics to explain differences in attitude towards CSR (see, for example, Cacioppe, Forster, & Fox, 2008), they have not factored in the gender viewpoint, which is one of the aims of this work. Thus, this study was conducted among women in management positions in Spain, which provides a context of global economic default. Some authors suggest that in these circumstances, CSR could lose importance given other company responsibilities (e.g. Giannarakis & Theotokas, 2011). For this reason, the second aim addresses another factor that has been studied in reference to CSR, professional background (Dawson, 1997; Elias, 2004; Eweje & Brunton, 2010; Luthar & Karri, 2005), and attempts to view this factor through the lens of gender. Given the importance of these issues for research as well as their practical aspects, each of these dimensions will be analysed while considering the context of the recession in Spain. This recession, which began in 2008, could highly influence the behaviours and decisions made by managers. Thus, this paper, which is exploratory in nature, attempts to identify the main drivers of CSR perception among women.

The remainder of this paper will proceed as follows. The second section provides a review of the literature as it relates to variables of interest and outlines our conceptual model and rationale for each of the propositions. The third section describes the adopted research strategy. The fourth section explains the results of the analyses and discusses their findings. Our conclusions, the implications for future policies, the limitations of the study and our suggestions for further research are proposed in the fifth section.

Literature review

CSR perceptions and women's characteristics

With rare exceptions (see Kolodinsky, Madden, Zisk, & Henkel, 2010, who did not find any differences), women as a whole are found to value CSR more than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, when every CSR dimension is analysed separately, the results are mixed.

Malik (2014) explained that there are two main lines of research on CSR. One line of research considers CSR to be a

function of a firm's behaviour towards its different stakeholders, who should all be individually taken into account. The second line of research describes CSR as discretionary, multi-functional firm activities that include economic, social, environmental and legal actions. This paper includes a mix of both perspectives. Thus, in this paper, CSR is defined as organisations engaged in responsible behaviour towards each of their shareholders, taking into account the economic, social, environmental and ethical dimensions of sustainability (see Aspen Institute, 2002; Carroll, 1999; Devinney, 2009).

Regarding the need to maintain a balanced stakeholder orientation that includes shareholders, customers, employees, communities and others, women typically derive less value from economic responsibilities than from non-economic ones (Burton & Hegarty, 1999). Nevertheless, in the last decade, a stakeholder orientation has grown in importance for both men and women, and it is now considered to be the most relevant CSR dimension (see Alonso-Almeida et al., 2015; Aspen Institute, 2002, 2008; Lämsä, Vehkapera, Puttonen, & Pesonen, 2008).

Regarding the social dimension, the Aspen Institute (2008) found that women placed more importance than men on maintaining a healthy community and society. Other research has mirrored these results (Prasad, Marlow, & Hattwick, 1998). Thus, it appears that women seek broader socially responsible actions to benefit the greater good (Pearson, 2007). In addition, Hudson and Miller (2005) found that women are more sensitive to CSR issues, particularly in relation to environmental issues. These findings were similar to those in Freedman and Bartholomew (1990) and Lämsä et al. (2008). Thus, social and environmental issues are more important to women than a stakeholder orientation. However, this finding derives from studies based on students, and it is therefore worth exploring whether women managers feel the same way.

Finally, according to Carroll (1991), CSR contains a legal dimension to encourage a company towards ethical behaviours, perhaps created by the development of environmental legislation in developed countries. Nevertheless, this dimension has a low value in general to both men and women (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2015, Aspen Institute, 2008; Lämsä et al., 2008). For the aforementioned reasons, the following propositions are offered:

Proposition 1. Women managers perceive the values of each dimension of CSR differently.

Proposition 2. For women managers, the most relevant dimension of CSR is the stakeholder orientation.

In addition to gender, most studies took into account personal characteristics and work experience from the samples of managers. Therefore, these variables will be analysed in the following section.

CSR perception and women's personal characteristics

Age is a key variable for explaining differences in perception in business management because people close in age can share a set of values and attitudes based on similar events and experiences. This age effect explains the changing views, attitudes and behaviours of individuals as they mature (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Lyons, Duxbury, and Higgins (2007) noted that

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