Help or hindrance? Work–life practices and women in management

Kateryna Kalysh, Carol T. Kulik *, Sanjeewa Perera

School of Management, University of South Australia Business School, City West Campus, GPO Box 2471, Adelaide 5001, Australia.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Work–life practices are frequently suggested as a strategy for improving women's representation in management. We predicted that work–life practices would increase the proportion of women in management, but their impact would be most evident when the workforce gender composition makes gender stereotypes less salient. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to analyze the relationship between work–life practices in 2002–2006 and the proportion of women in management in 2010, 2012, and 2014. Overall, work–life practices had a positive effect on the proportion of women in management, but only after an eight-year lag. However, this positive effect was not observed in organizations that were highly male-dominated. Leave arrangements and direct provision of services (e.g., childcare or eldercare) had the strongest associations with women in management. Our findings demonstrate the value of work–life practices in improving women's representation in management, but the effect is not immediate and does not operate across all organizational contexts.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Despite their increasing numbers in management roles, women are underrepresented in higher-level management positions (Kulik & Metz, 2015; Wirth, 2001). Whether the statistics come from the U.S.A. (Catalyst, 2013a, 2013b), the U.K. (European Commission, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2013), Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS, 2012; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, WGEA, 2014), or a host of other countries (Catalyst, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2013), the numbers converge on one clear fact: women's careers rarely take them to the top of the organization (Fairchild, 2014; Still, 2006).

Some research explicitly makes a "business case" for improving gender diversity in leadership roles, arguing that female leaders "have unique characteristics that create additional value" to organizations (Carter, D'Souza, Simkins, & Simpson, 2010, p. 397). Evidence supporting the business case is ambivalent and the effect of gender diversity in leadership may depend on contextual variables (e.g., the national context in which a firm is embedded; Post & Byron, 2015). But even if gender diversity in leadership does not deliver economic benefits to an organization, there may be important reputational benefits. A gender diverse leadership can signal to community members and job applicants that the organization is effective in managing diversity (Francoeur, Labelle, & Sinclair-Desgagne, 2008; Olsen, Parsons, Martins, & Ivanaj, 2015).

Organizations are under mounting pressure to increase the numbers of women in leadership roles. This pressure is manifested in stronger legislative requirements and higher internal and external stakeholder expectations. Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Act imposed stricter gender reporting obligations for large organizations in 2012 (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, WGEA, 2012). Investors are now encouraged to consider gender diversity initiatives as part of their organizational assessments

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 8 8302 7378; fax: +61 8 8302 0512.
E-mail addresses: kateryna_kalysh@yahoo.com (K. Kalysh), carol.kulik@unisa.edu.au (C.T. Kulik), sanjee.perera@unisa.edu.au (S. Perera).

(Calvert Investments, 2015; Vigeo, 2014). In Australia, the Male Champions of Change have cascaded their own commitment to gender diversity through their supply chains via a "no women, no work" initiative (Smith, 2013).

In the ongoing debates around gender diversity, work–life practices are frequently mentioned as a strategy for speeding the advancement of women into leadership roles. "Work–life" is an umbrella term encompassing a wide array of practices intended to help employees balance their work and non-work responsibilities (Callan, 2007; Glass & Finley, 2002). Some of these practices (e.g., provision of childcare/eldercare services) relieve women of some family responsibilities; others enable women to better manage family commitments by giving them greater control over their work arrangements (e.g., flexible work schedules, virtual office facilities) (Heywood & Jirjahn, 2009). Organizations most often develop work–life initiatives in response to female employees' concerns about meeting their family responsibilities. Although both men and women can suffer from work–family conflict (Grönlund, 2007; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; van Veldhoven & Beijer, 2012), and employers usually make their work–life practices available to both men and women, women tend to be the most frequent users of work–life programs (Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013; Wise & Bond, 2003).

If work–life practices help female employees to reduce work–family conflict, they may also help women to advance into management roles. A series of reports by Ernst & Young explicitly recommend work–life practices as a solution to the lack of women in senior roles (Ernst & Young, 2011a, 2011b). In particular, practices that offer flexibility to employees about when (which hours and days) and where (in the office or at home) they work are described as "key" to women's advancement by both female managers (e.g., Crisp, 2013) and male champions for gender equity (e.g., McCann, 2014). Major Australian organizations including Coca Cola Amatil, Telstra, and Qantas have introduced flexible work practices designed to increase women's retention and keep them moving up the organizational hierarchy (Bita, 2013).

Will work–life practices increase women's representation in management ranks? Organizations with work–life practices report increased productivity and innovation (Taneja, Pryor, & Oyler, 2012), decreased absenteeism and turnover (Rogier & Padgett, 2004), and reduced overtime costs (Lewison, 2006). From an employee perspective, work–life practices increase organizational attachment and loyalty (Butts, Casper, & Yang, 2013; Wang, Lawler, & Shi, 2011) and reduce employees' experience of work–family conflict (Breaugh & Frye, 2008). Unfortunately, the evidence linking work–life practices to women's representation in management roles is scant and contradictory. Dreher (2003) found that the number of work–life practices was positively associated with the percentage of women in senior management positions 5 years later. In contrast, Straub (2007) examined five work–life practices and found that only one (maternity leave payments beyond the statutory minimum) was positively associated with women's representation in senior management.

Our goal in this research is to examine the relationship between work–life practices and the proportion of women in management positions. We draw on theoretical perspectives explaining how gender stereotypes influence decision-makers' perceptions about women's fit to managerial roles (Heilman, 2012; Lyness & Heilman, 2006) and how these stereotypes are made more or less salient by gender proportions within organizational contexts (Perry, Davis-Blake, & Kulik, 1994). These theoretical perspectives identify the critical role of the context in the relationship between work–life practices and women's advancement. They suggest that work–life practices may increase women in management, particularly in contexts where there are higher proportions of women. However, they also imply that these positive effects will be constrained in contexts where women are a minority. Therefore, we expect to see variations in the effects of work–life practices as a function of women's representation in the organization and in the industry.

We analyzed archival data from 675 organizations in Australia; the data are derived from government reports collected from 2002 to 2014. We make a contribution to the management literature by documenting the effect of work–life programs on women's representation in management across diverse organizations and industries. This information will help managers to develop realistic expectations about the impact of work–life programs, and to understand whether – and in which contexts – work–life programs are likely to improve the representation of women in management roles. As a result, managers can make more informed choices about the practices they adopt and the strategies they use to increase women's representation in management.

Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Although the proportion of female employees in management ranks is increasing, women are still underrepresented at higher levels of management. A wide range of factors slow women's rise to the top (see Metz & Kulik, 2014 for a review) but researchers frequently cite decision-makers' gender stereotypes as a significant barrier to women's career progress. Gender stereotypes create problems for women when decision-makers perceive a "lack of fit" between women's attributes and the attributes those decision-makers believe are required for success in traditionally male occupations and organizational positions (Heilman, 2012). Gender stereotypes are especially problematic when decision-makers evaluate women for management roles, where "the criteria for effective performance tend to be particularly subjective and vague" (Heilman, 2001, p. 663). Organizational decision-makers perceive a lack of fit because female stereotypic characteristics, including the positive qualities of warmth and niceness, are inconsistent with male characteristics of "toughness, forcefulness and achievement-orientation" (Lyness & Heilman, 2006, p. 777) viewed as requirements for success in management positions (Heilman & Eagly, 2008).

Women are less likely to experience gender bias in performance evaluations when "the quality of their work is incontrovertible" (Heilman, 2001, p. 662). For example, Heilman and Haynes (2005) found that gender bias in evaluation of women in leadership roles was diminished in the face of women's excellent contribution to the team's success. Similarly, Post, DiTomaso, Lowe, Farris, and Cordero (2009) found that women who were perceived by managers as innovative received high ratings for promotions — even