The Advancement of Women to Top Management Positions in the Human Resource Management Domain: A time for Change?

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Abstract

Purpose-*This paper explores the rise of women in the HRM domain since its inception as welfare function which was a low status function, where women remain clustered in low ueqqual status positions to their present day much improved status where they are currently occupying top management HR director positions in several european countries such as Australia, Canada, France, U.K, Germany, Switzerland and Estonia.*

The Research Methodology-*The methodological approach is a review of research studies and theoretical arguments in management journals, company reports and hr magazine over the last 26 years*

Main Findings- *This paper traces the evolution of women's passage in the HRM domain where since its inception as a low status welfare function in the early nineteeth century women had unequal status and they rarely reached top positions, to their present day improved status where they are now being assigned to top management positions and are holding HR director positions in a number of countries. This paper highlights the propelling factors that have contributed to the rise of women in this domain. It explains that the Equal OpportunitiesLegislation has had a limited impact in advancing women in this domain but recent management of diversity approaches, the necessity to adhere to sexual strereotypes by organisations, coupled with enabling social practices such as paid maternity leave and childcare, gender egalitarianism and enhanced human capital factors are responsible for the rise of women in this domain. The case of women in the HRM domain can be used to raise awareness about gender discrimination and how it can be combattted and can be useful to academics and policy makers.*

Research Limitations- *This study is based on a review of secondary research studies and theoretical argumentsby major researchers and academics.*

Practical Implications-*This study describes the rise of women in the HRM domain and highlights reasons that have contributed to their current improved and enhanced status of women, where they are reaching top management positions in this domain and can prove useful to academics and policy makers.*

Originality/value*- This paper adds value to the existing literature available on women in HRM .*

Key Words-Rise of women; sexual stereotypes;equal opportunities; management of diversity; gendere galitarianism; HRM.

Introduction-Women in Human Resource Management

This paper explores the rise of women in the HRM since its inception as a welfare function in the early 19thcentury, where women mostly occupied welfare and administrative roles to its current modern managerial status, where women are occupying top management HR Director positions. This evolution of the role and status of women in HRM in recent times is the main focus of this study.It is of significance to note that despite HRM being a feminized profession and having a compelling feminized image,till late women did not have the same status, position, authority, or pay as their male counterparts and were relegated to carrying out stereotypical and non strategic functions in this domain(Brandl et al., 2007a; Brandl et al., 2008b; Brandl et al., 2008c). Legge(1987) argues that women in HR confront a paradox,when the function is marginal to strategic management, "women can reach the top" yet when the function is seen as a compelling contributor to the strategic decision-making then women, if not elbowed out are politely pushed aside" (pp.34). Empirical research shows that female HR managers are underrepresented in higher level positions(Canniffe,1985;Legge 1987; Gooch 1994; Long 1984; Mackay 1986; Monks,1993; Roos and Manley 1996) and has indentified several barriers towards the upward progression of women that are as follows:

The existence of vertical and horizontal segregation, sexual stereotyping of jobs, functional division of labour between male and female HR professionals with female HR professionals strongly represented in soft HR fields while hard hr fields such as compensation and industrial relations being male domains,attitudinal barriers and the double burden of family responsibilities. These have all lead women to remain clustered in lower level positions in this domain and they were thus unable to occupy top management strategic positions(Legge 1897; Pichler et al, 2008; Simpson and Lenoir 2003). Notwithstanding, such assertions recent times have evidenced dramatic changes signifying the rise of women in HRM and an ameloriation in the status of women coupled with the rapid feminization of the HRM profession for e.g.studies carried out by Simpson and Lenoir(2003) found there to be no disparity in between the rewards of female and male HR professionals in the USA when their professional experience was taken into consideration.. The proportion of women in managerial positions has strongly increased in HRM after the 1970's(Blau, Simpson and Anderson, 1998) and women today hold a considerable number of HR Director positions in several European countries and represent the majority of HR Directors in countries such as Australia,Canada, France, U.K. and Estonia(Brandl et al 2007a).

This review explores the rise of women in the HRM domain in recent times, it highlights the propelling factors that have contributed to the rise of women thus making it a special case worthy of an indepth study.It also affirms what several writers believe that that Equal Opportunities legislation has had a limited impact in advancing women in work generally and little has changed and employers have embraced the legislation and not the spirit of the law(pl. see Ross and Schneider,1992; Kandola and Fullerton,1994) and women in HRM have been no exception to this norm. Astrid et al (2010) in their latest study on the rise of women in HRM,emphasise that there is a need for universal standards of E.O and organisations will need to endorse to these principles to legitimate themselves to the public. The study also suggests that the inherent limitations of the E.O. legislation have evidenced the rise of diversity management as the new model for equal opportunities according to which the advancement of women into top management is not only necessary for realizing equal opportunity principles but also to enhance organizational performance (Kelly& Dobbin,1998), this has thus led organisations to re-interpret the presence of women to top management no longer as an act of compliance to legislation but also as an activity that enhances competitive advantage and is beneficial to organisations.

This study proposes with empirical findings that contemperory management of diversity approaches,accompanied by the literatures on sexual stereotypes, enabling social practices such as guaranteed maternity leave and public child-care faciltites,'gender egalitarianism' i.e. better equality between males and females in national contexts, and increasing human capital are factors responsible for the rise of women in this domain in recent times(Brandl et al., 2007a; Brandl et al., 2008b; Brandl et al., 2008c; and Reichel et al.,2010). (Wajchman,1998)Sexual stereotyping is extremely prevalent in organizations still and sexual stereotypes are extremely tenacious with women managers often being considered as travelers in a male world. It is also worth noting that for the longest part of its existence, HRM has been regarded as an occupation that fits female stereotypes. "It has frequently been noted that personnel management is a traditional stronghold of female employment" (Marshall,1984 pp,115). At the very beginning when HRM was viewed as a 'typical' female function, with the stereotypes used in that system, it tended to be concerned with taking care ofothers (Canniffe 1985; Gooch&Ledwith,1996) and bridging capital and labour (Gooch,1994) and has been defined as as ideal job for women.

The past feminization of the HR profession and status were closely and negatively related in the sense that the increased entry of women was accompanied by a lowering of the status of the HRM profession. Scholars justify these developments as the representation of women within HRM depends on the appeal of the occupation to men (e.g., Legge 1987; Roos/Manley 1996). As long as HRM is not important at the overall level of organization and society, men are not interested and leave the positions to women. When the importance of the occupation increases, men become interested in entering the field and displace women. A core argument for why women get ousted is that employers tend to favor men for HRM when the occupation's status is high (Reskin&Roos,1990). For example, when the upcoming of scientific testing instruments modified the image of HRM from a welfare to a professional function, the share of male HR specialists increased (Trudinger, 2004). It is important to note that a close relationship between status decrease and rise of women's representation or vice versa could be observed in the early stages of HRM until the end of the 1980's(Roos/Manley 1996).Legge (1987, pp.50) argues that "women's position in personnel management will inversely reflect the power of the function". The proxy for power refers to the degree to which the function is associated with strategy setting.

As the HRM function became more strategic in nature the jobs became increasingly male sex-typed; men outnumbered women and filled senior management positions. The 1990's have witnessed a dramatic & complete reversal of this trend with fresh empirical findings from several European countries which indicates that the increased entry of women is not accompanied by status deprivation of the HRM profession and that the increased feminization in this domain is accompanied by high status of the profession and this essentially forms the essence of this study (Reichel et al., 2010). In light of these empirical findings this review thus analyses the propelling factors that have contributed to the rise of women in this domain in recent times and also comes up with a conceptual diagram that depicts the factors responsible for the rise of women in present times in the HRM domain.

The investigation parameters

The methodology used to describe the rise of women in HRM is based on latest empirical findings on an international basis within a wide ranging and comprehensive review of journal articles on the topic. The aim of this review was to conduct an exploratory and descriptive but not an exhaustive review of research to discern trends, patterns and discourses that have lead to the rise of women in HRM. In light of the fact that HRM is a feminized professions one should have expected a number of research studies on women in the HRM domain but with only a limited number of research journals articles available on the subject.Thus an attempt has been made to scrutinize a spectrum of journals, magazines and company reports that have researched the area.

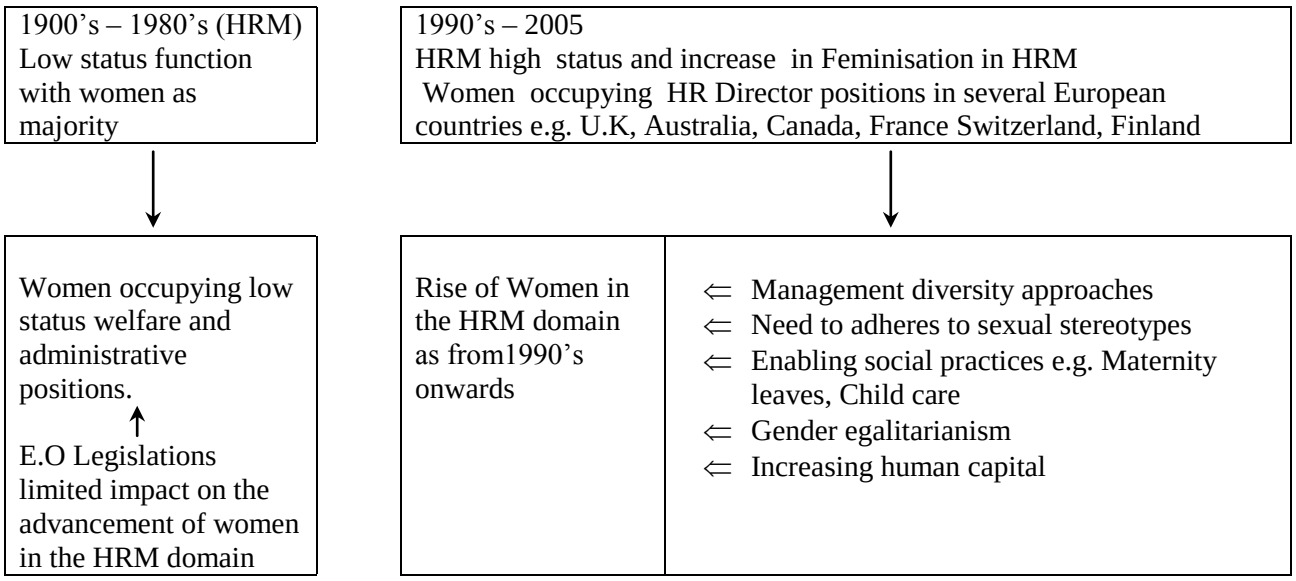
Women's passage in the HRM domain from 1900- 2010

Way back in 1987, Legge argued that 'women's careers in personnel management provide an ''ideal type" model of the taken-for-granted subordination of women in employment and in society' (Legge,1987, pp.33).There is substantial empirical research which indicates a dramatic increase in the number of women entering this domain where they are now also establishing themselves in senior level positions in the recent decades(Reichel et al., 2010; Brandl et al., 2008) The research indicates that there has been an ebb and flow of women in this domain with fluctuations in the representation of women since its inception as a welfare function, where women were employed as welfare officers in factories in the early 1900's, where the function was a low status function (Roos and Manley1996; Legge 1987). Women re-entered the HR profession in large numbers in the 1960's when the emphasis was placed on administrative work associated with legal compliance in work, and men were seen as a misfit for this type of work, reinforcing sexual stereotypes leading to a dominance of women in the profession at this stage (Gooch, 1994).It may not be unreasonable to assume that the feminization trend within personnel work had been to the advantage of women.

As the rise of the labour relations function of personnel management ensued and as the welfare model lost credibility,thus since the 1970's women's representation in the field declined mainly because "women are rarely seen as professional fighters" in such institutionalized conflict (Miller and Coghill,1965 pp. 39-40). This has contributed towards reducing women's influence in the personnel function. This change in emphasis in the personnel function from administration to industrial relations altered men's and women's relative representation in the field and men became the numerical majority (Simpson and Lenoir, 2003) and Gooch and Ledwith(1996) imply that this lead women to being channeled into lower level supporting functions of recruitment, selection, welfare and administration with men remaining in senior positions encompassing industrial relations and the newer strategic HRM. Subsequently there has been a dramatic resurgence in the increase of women in the post 1970's period as to date.Based on US census data Blau et al. (1998) report that the percentage of women working as "personnel & labor relations managers" rose from 21.2 in 1970 to 36.0 and 48.7 percentin 1980 and 1990 respectively. The numbers for "personnel, training, & labor relations specialists" were even higher increasing from 33.4 in 1970 to 47.0 in 1980 and 57.7 in 1990.

The share of female HR professionals in the US increased from 27.3 per cent in 1970 to 53.3 per cent in 1990(Blau et al. 1998). Similar trends can be observed in U.K.(Legge, 1987) and Australia (Trudinger, 2004). Today, in numerous industrialized countries, women represent the majority of HR professionals (Brandl et al., 2008a; Reichel et al., 2010). The figure below depicts the propelling factors that have lead to the rise of women in the HRM domain in recent times.

Figure 1– The propelling factors responsible for the rise of women in the HRM domain



Feminisation and increase in the status of HRM since the 1990's

It is of significance to note that in the past scholars, such as (Legge 1987;Reichel et al., 2010)have observed an association in the changes in female representation and status of HRM.Previously, the predominant trend seen was that the increased entry of women in the HRM domain was accompanied by the demise of the HRM profession or hindered its ability to gain full status (Simpson&Simpson 1969). Reversely,a decrease in numbers of women has accompanied an improvement in the occupation's status. However, in recent times this trend has been dramatically reversed with fresh empirical findings(1995-2004)from 11 Western European countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Switzerland, and UK on women working in HRM at staff and director levels which highlights that the current trends differ considerably from the past inverse relationship between female representation and the status of HRM and presents a picture that differs considerably from the past.Between 1995 and 2004,the percentage of women in HRM increased significantly and at the same time the status of the HRM profession rose.

This research data indicates the co-evolution of inclusion of women and the rise of status in HRM. The developments with regard to women in the HRM domain have also been largely limited to the UK and US so far. These current empirical findings from 11 European countries show a different picture from the past, that despite strong feminization of the occupation the expected status decrease of the HRM profession was not found between 1995 and 2004 (Reichel et al., 2010) This study by (Reichel et al., 2010) reporting on women's representation at staff and director level and the corresponding status of HRM indicates the continuing rise of women in the HRM domain showing that the trend of occupationa feminization of HRM starting in the 1970's continued between 1995 and 2000. The findings of this study show that female employees are holding the majority of positions in HR departments in all these countries over all these years. An average Western European HR department consists of almost three quarter women and a little more than one quarter male employees.

It is also generally believed that high proportions of women at the staff level affect the likelihood of a female being director(Eagly;Karau 2002). It has also been observed that in contrast to the staff level, the director level positions have not traditionally been female-dominated. In 1995 the highest percentage of female HR directors i.e. 31.5 percent was in the UK and relatively the average percentage across all eleven countries was 23 percent. However, a massive rise in the number of women-led HR departments has been taking place with a significant increase in the percentage of female HR directors in eight of the eleven countries between 1995 and 2004. The percentage in Switzerland has more than doubled. In Germany, the proportion of female HR directors has more than tripled. Also countries such as the UK and Denmark who were already showing relatively high numbers of women HR Directors in 1995 experienced a significant increase over the years. On average there has been a highly significant rise from 23 to over 40 percent (almost 80 percent increase).

Thus it can be observed that there is thus a significant rise of the percentage of women working in HRM both on the staff and the HR director level and this trend can be observed rather uniformly across Western Europe.
In order to capture status for the period between 1995 and 2004 the study has used the concept of strategic integration of HRM (Brandl et al., 2008b) which is a composite measure that depicts HR directors' membership in the board of directors and the degree to which they are integrated in strategy formulation. It ranges from zero to two i.e. (not on board; no integration into strategy formulationboard membership; integration intostrategy formulation from the outset). Overall there has been an increase in the percentage of highly integrated HR Directors and in countries like France,The Netherlands and Sweden the proportion of highly integrated HR directors has significantly increased.In comparison to women still the percentage numbers of highly integrated male HR Directors is considerably higher than that of women with the level of strategic integration dependent on age, education and experience.Overall the strategic integration has increased, thus providing evidence that despite the strong occupational feminization of the HRM profession the status of the profession has increased.

Combining the descriptive results on HR department feminization and status it is clearly evident that there is a strong feminization of the occupation between 1995 and 2004 at the staff as well as at the director level and a concurrent increase of strategic integration.This study thus provides first evidence that feminization of HRM does not involve status deprivation through increasing strategicintegration. Although more and more women work in HR and HR directors' positions, the status of the profession does not decline. Subsquently the study indicates that though women are included into top management they were more axed towards stereotypical functions. The data also finds other patterns of segregation which shows that in all countries in the same period female HR directors show lower strategic integration than men. Itis less likely for them to be on the board and to be integrated in strategy formulation than for male HR directors.

Thus, at the level of HR directors there is horizontal segregation, male HR directors are more involved into strategic work than female ones and with an observable typical pattern of vertical segregation. While at the staff level the great majority of HR specialists in all countries are female. The study also indicates that the proportion of women on the director level converges to the proportion at the staff level. In line with this, Trudinger (2004) shows in an analysis of the history of the HR profession in Australia how female HR managers obtained higher levels of authority in organizations and organizational subunits where female workers predominated.Although these developments may help to change the traditional subordination of women within HR, they also perpetuate stereotypes and encourage the concentration of women in this area. The latter has been seen as a major reason for the subordination of the HR field to other managerial functions (Legge, 1987).

Countries with the highest strategic integration of female HR directors have the highest degree of enabling social practices

Brandl et al.,(2008c) study on the influence of social policy practices on the strategic integration of female HR directors shows that countries with the highest strategic integration of female HR directors such as Finland, Israel, Spain, Belgium have the highest degree of enabling social policy practices like public childcare and paid maternity leave programmes. This study also shows that enabling social policy practices supplement company-level efforts intended at removing hurdles for women, thus enhancing positively efforts for developing women's education and strengthening their working experience. Education and experience show a highly significant influence on strategic integration of female HR directors and they increase the availability of qualified women for strategic management. Thus enabling social policy practices allow women to pursue their careers despite motherhood thereby increasing the likely extent of women's professional careers by making investments in their human capital more likely.

In turn, the qualification and working experience divergence compared to male competitors for strategic managerial positions decreases and employers are more likely to consider women for these jobs. Work-family conflicts concerning the integration of job and family remain a major disquiet of female HR managers who have already reached top managerial positions.Social policy practices that facilitate the compatibility of work and motherhood improve the possibility of women obtaining top managerial positions. They reduce the tension between work and childcare and thereby enhance the flexibility of women in their jobs. They also allow employers to anticipate the extent that women will be able to continue in their jobs when they have children. However, the absence of enabling social policy practices impedes the combination of work and motherhood.Examples of important social policy practices for enabling the compatibility of work and motherhood are guaranteed maternity leave programmes and the availability of publicly funded childcare (Chang, 2000).

Propelling factors that have contributed to the rise of women in HRM

Reichel et al(2011) argue that the inclusion of women in HRM top positions since the 1990s is a result of two related mechanisms: firstly the inherent limitations of the Equal Opportunities legislation and the mounting rhetoric about the link between diversity and performance accompanied with the increasing societal pressures to include women at all organizational levels These reasons have made organizations include women into top management positions and since the beginning of the 1990's institutional expectations about the inclusion of women have changed their emphasis from their mere inclusion in the workforce to enabling them to reach top management. Today, economic benefits from gender diversity in the workforce are being stressed in addition to equal opportunity norms or mere compliance with the Equal Opportunities legislation which employers often feel coerced to comply with.Equal Opportunity norms demanding gender diversity in highly visible organizational positions come from a number of different stakeholders, including the media, investors and employees themselves. For example, the popular press frequently calls for including women into top management positions (e.g., Blackman, 2004; Browder, 1995). Previous work has shown that institutional investors increasingly scrutinize corporate boardrooms for diversity (Browder 1995; Singh 2005).

In addition, the reputation and credibility of a firm in both internal and external labour markets seems to improve by including women on the board (Daily&Schwenk, 1996; Hambrick&D'Aveni1992). The persistence of sexual stereotypes have led organizations to allocate women within top management to a function that is strongly associated with female stereotypes such as the HRM function. In this respect, assigning women to HRM offered a solution for organizations to deal with growing demands for enhancing diversity within top management without giving up the traditional classification of female and male work. When these two mechanisms: interest of organizations to include women in highly visible positions and sexual stereotyping prevail correspondingly, this leads to the rise in female representation and a parallel rise in status of the occupation which can be seen from this recent study on women in HRM in 11 western European countries(Reichel et al., 2010).

It is also important to note that studies also show that in countries with the prevalence of gender egalitarianism i.e. better equality between men and women leads women to having more acess to higher level positions in this domain(Brandl et al 2008.,b). The findings of this study show that in societal contexts countries displaying higher gender egalitarian values showed less sex-role differences between male and female directors.The iincidence of such gender egalitarian values opens up elite male-dominated domains to women in the HR field. In the HRM profession such elite jobs include HR Director positions, which are highly integrated in strategic planning and include functional HR responsibilities which were usually considered as a male stereotyped domain. In gender egalitarian contexts people reject traditionally ascribed gender roles(Reskin and McBrier, 2000) and apply normative standards of "equal opportunity in their behaviour"(Charles and Bradley, 2002,pp.576 in Brandl et al., 2008). This also works towards reducing gender discrimination in work.This results in female HR professionals being less likely to face constraints, leading them to get more involved in the strategic functions and shoulder responsibility for previously male dominated HR functions. In turn, sex-role differences in the HR profession are reduced, which can enable women to be on par with their male counterparts in the HRM domain.

Women showing increased human capital in this domain

It is also important that recent years have evidenced increasing human capital in this domain by women with statistics from the U.S which indicate that women have increasingly chosen graduate degrees in labor and industrial relations (IR) and personnel management and human resource development in recent times(Roos and Manley, 1996). Ackah and Heaton (2002) in their studies found that women clearly aspire to a career in human resource management and prepare for such a career by acquiring professional CIPD qualifications in HRM, the entry point to career progression in the U.K. Studies show that women outnumber men by more than four to one in attaining graduate membership of the CIPD(Chartered Institute ofPersonnel and Development, formerly the Institute of Personnel Management, U.K.).This is viewed as the benchmark for qualified practitioners entering the HRM profession in the UK. Thus women are gaining the prerequisite qualifications to reach senior management position as seen from the diversity perspective this human capital needs to be nurtured as it can give competitive advantage to an organization and is beneficial to organizations.

Conclusion

Over the last decades, HRM scholars have often associated the inclusion of women into the HRM profession with the profession's loss of status and have lamented about the inherent limitations of the E.O legislation.

Recent empirical findings about women in HRM indicate that this past trend has been completely reversed where women are reaching HR director positions in several European countries and the accompanying status deprivation of the profession does not occur. The study attributes the rise of women in this domain to the rising management of diversity approaches accompanied by the literature on sexual stereotypes. It also suggests that countries with the highest amount of strategically integrated HR directors are the ones with highest degree of enabling social practices. It reiterates further that in countries with high gender egalitarian contexts women are able to occupy elite male dominated HR directors positions. Recent times have also evidenced increased human capital in this domain and thus as more and more women obtain qualifications in HRM, organizations need to ensure that they reach position in organizations consumerate with their education and qualifications and that this human capital needs to be nutured. Thus it can be summarized that these are the propelling factors that have contributed to the rise of women in the HRM domain in the recent decade.

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