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Women and Men as Managers in a Female Dominated Sector and Company

ABSTRACT

Seen from a gender perspective, in organizational studies, management is often regarded as having a male label. This label is explained by the overrepresentation of men in management positions and by the work tasks and working conditions for managers, as well as the male image of management. In this article an organization is presented where women make up the majority in first-line managerial positions. The organizational strategy aiming to increase the number of men both on the lowest level and among the first-line managers. The newcomers are allowed to break the organizational rules and are given privileges.

The women's way of working is adequate and successful, and they are considered to be good at their work. As managers, however, women in general are regarded less positively than men. Organizational practice has not changed the male label of management in the organization, and, consequently, organizational practice has not influenced the male label which management has in society.

Keywords: *Gender in organizations, first-line managers, service sector, men as minority, women as managers*

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INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

This article deals with management from a gender perspective. Seen from this perspective, management is often regarded as having a male label in organizational studies (see, for example, Collinson and Collinson 1989; Collinson and Hearn 1996; Lipman-Blumen 1992). The reasons for this label have been discussed and divided into different categories: (1) the conditions in working life that demand a great commitment to work, especially for those in management positions; (2) managerial tasks associated with male characteristics in our culture; and (3) the domination of men in management positions in working life (Alvesson 1997; Schein 1975; Lipman-Blumen 1992). The male label of management is one dimension of the dominating gender system. Yvonne Hirdman (1988, 1990) introduced the concept "gender system" in its Swedish context in the late 1980s. The gender system is a system of power characterized by two principles concerned with hierarchy and dichotomy. The latter can be illustrated by the sex segregation on the labor market and the former by the fact that men, as a rule, are over-represented on high organizational levels (Women and Men in Sweden 1998). The gender system is an extensive system working in and through organizations. Organizations, and the way they operate, are constructed by the gender system, as well as being constructors of the gender system.

The empirical findings that illustrate this article are from an established Swedish company, retailer of mainly tobacco, papers and sweets. Women make up the majority of the working force not just among the blue collar workers but also as first-line managers working as shop/store managers. The organization is in a period of reformulating its strategy, part of which is decreasing gender segregation and encouraging more equality, a policy formulated by the top management as "more men in our shops."

The situation for minorities in organizations is different from that of the majority from many perspectives. They are visible and often seen as representatives for a group rather than as individuals (for example, see Kanter 1977; Pettersson 1996). The literature on women as managers and as a minority is growing (For examples, see Alvesson and Billing 1997). Less is known about men as managers in a minority position, even if the importance of management in the construction of male identity can currently be found on the agenda of some researchers (see, for example, Collinson and Hearn 1996).

As the company presented is dominated by women as first-line managers, the third point mentioned in the introduction above is not relevant, but provides an important background to the following questions: What are the working tasks of the first-line managers, women as well as men? Are the first-line managers, women and men, committed to their work and their employer? How do the first-line managers view their roles and positions in the organization for

their own and the opposite sex? The answers can give some information to the often-posed questions, "Do women and men manage in the same way? Is there a special female management style?" The difficulties in answering these questions on scientific grounds have been, and are, great (see, for example, Alvesson and Billing 1997; Alvesson 1997; Billing 1997; Sundin 1997). These difficulties may be at least partly derived from the gender segregation on the labor market. It is hard to draw meaningful conclusions from studies of women and men as managers, as they work in different sectors and organizations. In this current case they work in the same company in the same positions.

The questions above will be answered by means of descriptions and analyses of how women and men employed as first-line managers work and talk about their own and each others management in a company and a sector dominated by women at that level. The answers are used to discuss and comment on whether and how the global management male culture as stated above influences the local management culture numerically dominated by women – and the other way around. The aim of the article is therefore both empirical and theoretical.

CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Managers and leaders

Some concepts that have already been used need clarification. The article concerns first-line managers. There has been much discussion on the differences between managers and leaders in international literature (Hughes, et al. 1996). Yet, the transfer of theories and findings from one national and/or cultural context to another is not without problems as illustrated by Korvajärvi (1998). It has been argued that there is a special Swedish management style that is rather democratic and open (Edström and Jönsson 1998). This has to be kept in mind when the managers are presented. The words "manager" and "managing" will be used when referring to these persons and their work, although they refer to themselves as "leaders." As will be seen below this can be explained by semantics rather than by an awareness of the differences discussed in academic journals. The persons in the study have positions as managers, although, as will be seen below, they have few persons to manage and limited authority both for decision-making and action. This is not unique. Most managers have positions on low hierarchical levels with few persons to lead and restricted working conditions. This fact is often neglected in the literature, debate and statistics (see, e.g., Milsta 1994; Rainey and Watson 1996; Westley 1990). The neglect of first-line management is difficult to understand, not just in light of their numbers, but also because these managers determine if and how decisions and intentions are implemented in the organizations – and the reverse. Through them top management receives information concerning what is going on within the organization. The importance of

these lower managers is so great that influential researchers argue that, "the middle is the organization, the holder of its traditions, the keeper of its faith" (Kanter and Stein 1979, p. 90). In the literature the situation of middle managers and the first-line managers is portrayed throughout as being difficult. They are said to be subject to pressure from above and from below. They have limited autonomy and may not participate in the strategic decisions. They are supposed to execute orders without questioning even if they from their position can see other alternatives and other local needs. Despite that they have to motivate their subordinates to work in accordance with the intentions of higher managers. The workers naturally associate decisions and decrees with first line managers executing the orders. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1979), on her own and together with others, has summed up the middle manager's and first line managers work as discharged under the following conditions: tasks: according to the rules, routine, with little connection to problems important for the organization; personal opportunities: slight contact with the highest managers, little influence over strategic decisions; development opportunities: few rewards to be given and taken; other conditions: hard direction of the utilization of the work force, difficulty in getting non-routine decisions through, distance to the top-leaders.

Nevertheless to be a manager on a low level can have many positive features. It can give a feeling of having the opportunity for a career inside or outside the organization. How realistic such hopes are depends both upon the organization and upon the individual. Organizations can be built up so as to facilitate and offer advancement. It may also be true that certain positions lead nowhere and that some organizations offer very few opportunities (inferior "opportunity structures" as Rosabeth Moss Kanter [1977] expresses it). The existing opportunities are commonly not equally distributed; certain individuals or groups have better advancement possibilities than others.

Career opportunities are not the only reason for accepting a position as manager, even on a low level. To be actively part of the operations, "close to reality," can be very stimulating. Certain possibilities may exist to be able to act as an entre/intrapreneur, even if this is in conflict with the rules for how the operations should be conducted (Geisler 1993). However, judging from earlier studies, subordinates seem to appreciate an entre/intrapreneurial manager (Pearce et al. 1997). The current trend in organizational rhetorics stresses flexibility, group orientation, decentralization and flat organizations sometimes associated with "new technology," mostly information technology (cf. Abrahamsson 2000; Collinson and Hearn 1996; McLaughlin 1998). Decentralization, which has a very positive image in Sweden, may completely wipe out the lowest placed managers or at least diminish their already limited authority (Geisler 1993). Information technology can have the same effect; it makes possible steering and control over very long distances. Organizational design is an area which is very popular in the

general and the scientific debate concerning the transformation of working life, business life, and the public sector. It is often difficult to distinguish between rhetoric and practice. (This theme has been dealt with by, e.g., Barbara Czarniawska 1995.) Among the currently popular concepts is the term transformative leadership. Transformative leadership is said to build upon charisma, concern for the individual, and intellectual stimulation to the benefit of everyone – both managers and other employees (Rainey and Watson 1996).

The leadership style which is described above – participatory-based, relatively conflict-free and content – provides associations to management styles preferred and practiced by women according to some popular books and articles on women as managers, a theme that will be dealt with in the next section.

Sex, gender and first-line managers

The gender system was mentioned in the introduction. Today gender is an integrated part of the terminology both in the social sciences and the public debate. "Gender" was introduced to distinguish social sex from biological sex. The theoretical debate continues, and what seemed to be a pedagogical and theoretical tool is now questioned (see Hagemann and Åmark 1999; Hirdman 2000). This debate will not be referred to further in this article, but it should be noted that the concepts "women-men," "female-male" and "femininity-masculinity" are frequently used in the debate. Mixing these concepts up is not unusual, even in research. (For a presentation of the concepts and part of the discussion, see Alvesson and Billing 1997.) The terms "women and men" are used here to denote biological sex, for example in reference to men or women in interviews, whereas the terms "female and male" refer to behaviors, actions, attributes, etc. considered to be typical for women and men, according to interviewed persons and authors. The labels female and male can be assigned to individuals, tasks or organizations. The meanings and attributes of female and male and the terms femininity and masculinity vary over time and space. The on-going processes are sometimes emphasized by the use of verb-forms such as "labeling" and "gendering" (Acker 1990, 1992; Thurén 1996; Baude 1992).

Sex and gender has been, and is, a popular theme in organizational studies in general and in studies on leaders and managers in particular. Parts of this discussion will be summarized as a background to the empirical findings and the analyses. A warning must be issued, however! Some of the literature presented is of a very popular type aimed at demonstrating the competence of women as leaders and managers. The women presented as examples in some of the books and articles are very far from the shop managers that constitute the empirical basis for this study – not the same country, not the same positions, not the same sector, etc. In spite of these differences, the generalizations presented here are of relevance as they, and the conclusions reached, are well-known and a part of the public knowledge concerning women

(men) and management, something which is demonstrated in the empirical study presented below. The conventional wisdom should not be neglected as it gives assumptions for men – and also for women (Hearn 1993).

Transformative leadership, mentioned above, has certain features, which are often said to be associated with women's style of leadership. This means that earlier evidence of differences (or similarities) between women's and men's styles of leadership are obsolete – all leadership is becoming more feminine, write researchers who are convinced that transformative leadership is something new (Antal and Izraeli 1993; Bass et al. 1996). Female leadership, equated with women as leaders, quite often implies characteristics and behavior as expressed in popular narratives. Two frequently cited books concerning women's leadership and management, Sally Helgesen's *The female advantage* (1990, in Swedish *Ledarskap på kvinnors vis*) and Susan Vinnicombe's and Nina Colwill's *The Essence of Women in Management* (1995) will be used as examples. Sally Helgesen (1990) builds up her account mainly as a comparison with Mintzberg's study (1973) of male managers' work style. Helgesen claims that, as managers, women function in a more circular fashion than men, that they prefer networks to hierarchy both within and outside of the company, that they are more accessible (than men) to their fellow workers, and that they communicate differently (from men). Women's manner of defining and seeing their careers also deviates from the prevalent male notions by always giving time and place for their children and other family members. Susan Vinnicombe (1995) depicts how the society's and the business world's transformation brings forth women's "natural work style" (preface, p. xiv) as being highly appropriate. This natural work style is defined as task-steered rather than prestructured, as assuming flexibility, entrepreneurship, multi-dimensionality, group steering, concern for fellow workers, and verbal communication rather than demarcated tasks and status thinking. Vinnicombe's co-editor, Nina Colwill, confirms in a later chapter that differences between women and men in management have been observed with regard to managerial style: democratic/participatory versus authoritative/directional and person orientation versus task orientation.

The authors cited can be seen as advocates for the standpoint that women and men are different and, maybe because of that, work as leaders and managers in different ways. Swedish studies also show that women and men employ different methods as managers, but in a more moderate way and without reference to women and men being different in other respects (Wahl 1997). Others, and this is more common, see women and men leading and managing in the same way (see Alvesson 1997).

Women managers are often in a minority position, but there are organizations, such as the one in the case study, and situations where men make up the minority. Minorities in organizations often use strategies to "survive" and succeed (Kanter 1977). Men, when in the

minority, also use such strategies, but, belonging to the "first" sex, they can act from stronger positions (Williams 1993; Harris 1995). As management is said to have a male label, men might be expected to be able to come into a sector dominated by women comparatively easily, as long as they do it in management positions (cf. Collinson and Hearn 1996). Men are often welcomed by both employees and management to typically female operations and are not judged negatively, even when they are given preferential treatment, a problem which women in corresponding situations often encounter (De Matteo et al. 1996). Let us recall however, before we continue on this theme, that many feminist researchers argue that organizations can be seen as masculine constructions (see e.g. Acker 1992; Cockburn 1991; Hearn 1994) which implies, to use Anna Wahl's words, that "men assume that they possess the organizations" (1994, p. 27). In the company in the case study, this should not be the case, since the men are newcomers to the organization also as first line managers. On the other hand Tienari (1999b) concludes from his studies that many women in management positions may not be a proof of gender equality but "may in fact be evidence of the opposite" (p.24) . Consequently the expectations on the case company do not point in one direction.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT – COUNTRY AND SECTOR

In Sweden, the country where the organization studied is located, women participate in the labor market to almost the same extent as men. However, they often work part-time. The labor market is segregated both horizontally and vertically. Women dominate the retail sector, within which the study is made. Retailing is the part of the private sector in Sweden that has the largest share of women. It is also the sector that, according to the official statistics, reveals the greatest discrepancy between the share of employed women and the share of women among managers. The men dominate strongly among the highest-ranking managers, although women comprise the majority up to the middle-management levels (Woman and Men in Sweden).

There are some studies of first-line and middle managers in retailing. A study by Brockbank and Traves (1995) claims that there are great similarities between women and men as managers within commerce with regard to career ambitions, but different outcomes with regard to their success. This is attributed to the authoritarian culture which, the authors argue, characterizes the sector, and to the existence of an invisible "glass ceiling". The explanations given often make women responsible, for example in the form of lack of self-confidence. Brockbank and Traves interpret this as an euphemism for the glass ceiling and argue that units of commerce which build on customer service are especially well-suited for feminine and androgynous management. The view of management which prevails within the sector is obsolete. That is, it is not adequate in today's society and today's companies (see also Brockbank

and Airey 1994). The sector and its companies are therefore undergoing a change with cultural and gender dimensions, although the change could be classified as comparatively slow (Gable et al. 1994; Tomlinson et al. 1997). Just as in other studies on leadership and management, the studies which are referred to concerning commerce are primarily British or American, which can lessen their "comparative value" for the Swedish situation (cf. the first report from the Servemloj project 1999).

THE CASE STUDY

The company

The company studied is about one hundred years old and has had different owners over the years. The study presented here was conducted during a period when the company was owned by a big Swedish industrial group. The original business concept was to distribute newspapers and magazines. The company's activities have through the years reflected the society's transformation, the Swedes' social and cultural development. The company has followed along from the railway era to the air and car era – newspaper sales have moved from the railway stations to other traffic points, to shopping centers and housing areas, to department stores and after-hour shops, and to kiosks with new architecture. (Frick et al. 1974, p. 37).

Today the company consists of small stores, "Sweden's smallest department store," selling sweets, sandwiches, and flowers, dealing with betting slips as well as bus tickets. The early history, the central locations, and the close association to the big newspaper companies have given the company a dreary label. "People hardly know what it is; they believe that it is a public company." (manager, woman, in a medium-sized city.) The company had some financially difficult years in the beginning of the 1990s. The decade opened with losses explained foremost by declining tobacco and newspaper sales. The results improved some years later due to a broader assortment and the fact that some shops were converted to a franchise concept.¹ The company is in a process of cultural change. In the company's present business concept it is emphasized that the customers are "people on the move." Selling should be "quick, convenient, friendly" and should be in good "close-at-hand" locations, that is, in places where many people pass (the quotas are taken from the company's own brochure). The company is nevertheless not prepared to discard all that is "old and dreary" but invests in quality, not the cheapest serve-yourself candy, for example. All employees do not interpret this as being completely positive. "So, we shouldn't sell cheap? Now it's supposed to be expensive to buy in our stores." [laughter] (manager, woman, in a small town).

¹ At the time of the investigation there were about 400 shops owned by the company. Slightly less than 50% of them were left to franchisees. These units are not a part of the presentation in the article but included in Sundin (1998).

The owners have initiated an active equal-opportunity policy within the company as a part of the cultural change. This policy follows an established plan (which is required by law), the aim of which is said to be to contribute to "competence and flexibility" for the company's best. The dominance of women in the company means that "more men in our shops" is one of the goals which have been set up for the short term. It is presumed that more men will lead to a higher status for the company and the branch. The employees emphasize that this is important. In different ways they can verify the low status which retailing has and perhaps especially this part of the sector. One of the men working as shop manager relates the following: "If you stand in a shop, especially one of ours, you will hear a lot of rubbish. People believe I am stupid because I work here. People are very condescending... . I have perhaps been to dinners with buddies who are engineers. 'What do you work with?' 'I am a manager of a small shop'. Silence follows!"

Employees

A typical shop has two to five employees, even if there are stores that have close to thirty employees, all or some of them working part-time. In the table below the sex/gender structure among the shop managers and saleswomen/men on January 1, 1997 can be seen. During recent years the number of employees has decreased considerably.

TABLE 1. Employees in September 1997.

EMPLOYEES	WOMEN	MEN
TOP MANAGERS	0	4
MIDDLE MANAGERS	8	13
SHOP MANAGERS	184	28
SALESMEN/WOMEN	1068	178
OTHERS	78	25
TOTAL NUMBER	1338	278

(Source: The company's head-office)

At the time the study was made the company had more than 1500 employees working in the around 200 shops distributed all over the country. The head-office is located in Stockholm. Those in charge of a shop/store are designated as "managers" or "shop/store managers". The persons who function as intermediate links between the central office in Stockholm and the shops throughout the country are called "sales managers." They are actually middle managers, as are those placed in the head office. It is with the sales managers that the shop manag-

ers have most contact. The sales managers regularly visit "their" shops. Other usual contact persons for the shop managers are employees in the central office in Stockholm who are responsible for products and contracts with suppliers.

As is apparent from the table the absolute majority, more than 80 percent, of the employees are women. The percentage of women shop managers is the same as the share of women among the sales personnel. Men dominate strongly at the highest levels. Part-time work is very common within the company, as it is in retail trade in general. Even the managers work part-time. While only 20 percent of the female managers work more than 40 hours per week, more than 60 percent of the men do. The work performance varies both with the unit's size and with the region where it is located. In these respects there is a considerable covariance of unit size and population, that is, the largest units are in the largest localities.

Shop managers have often worked in one of the company's shops before they became managers, but the difference between women and men is substantial. Over 60 percent of the women were "common" employees in one of the company-stores, before they got positions as first-line managers, while less than 40 percent of the men had corresponding experience. The typical shop manager has been employed in the company for ten years, the women longer than the men, on average twelve and eight years, respectively. The process of gaining a managerial position has thus been more rapid for men than for women. Even among the sales staff the men have shorter periods of employment, that is, they generally stay in the company a shorter time. The men are also younger than the women. The young women have higher education than the young men, but, in general, the younger employees are better educated than the older. The advancement in education is partly "a sign of the times," but it is also an indication that the demands on the shop managers have risen. The delegation of responsibilities requires a relatively well-educated labor force.

Method for the empirical study

The empirical study was done during 1996/97. An inquiry was sent out to all the local shop/store managers. The first section of the questionnaire dealt with data on the respondents' personal background, such as age, education, and earlier work experience. Questions concerning motivation for becoming a manager formed the transition to those concerning the work content and performance. Questions on management in general and management in the shops in particular were asked. A number of questions which were answered by indicating a position on a graduated scale, from one (do not agree at all) to seven (agree absolutely), were used to obtain information on issues of the type accounted for above, as well as to discern opinions of women's and men's relations to superiors, to employees in general, as well as of certain special relations and of certain special work tasks. Questions concerning women's and men's

management were included in several formulations. The inquiry also dealt with the respondents' plans for their future working life, what dreams and plans they had and the compatibility of their plans with their dreams. A reminder was sent out to those who had not answered after approximately one month. Those who still had not answered were phoned to obtain information with regard to some of the issues that were judged to be especially important.

TABLE 2. Information sources. (The number in this table slightly differs compared with Table 1 due to vacancies in some shops.)

	WOMEN	MEN
QUESTIONNAIRES TO SHOP MANAGERS		
SENT	175	30
ANSWERED IN WRITING	104	19
ANSWERED BY PHONE	14	5
TOTAL	118 (67%)	24 (80%)
INTERVIEWS		
WITH SHOP MANAGERS	9	4
WITH SALES MANAGERS	–	2
WITH EMPLOYEES AT THE HEAD OFFICE	2	3*

* one of them was the managing director.

Those who answered the inquiry were asked to indicate if they agree to be interviewed. A sufficient number accepted this invitation and 13 of them were interviewed, two of the women twice. The interviews generally concerned a special aspect, such as management. The telephone interviews made to complete the questionnaire sometimes developed into rather long conversations. Even sales managers and people in the head office have been interviewed.

The presentation of the information given by the questionnaire and the interviews follows the aims presented in the beginning. When information comes from the interviews it is clearly indicated, and information is provided on the sex of the informant and the size of the place where the shop is located. Approximately a big town means a big shop.

Responsibilities, work tasks and commitment in practice and rhetorics

The shop managers have many responsibilities and work tasks. The units are too small to enable anyone to be devoted to managing on a full-time basis. The managers, especially the women managers, serve as cashiers during most of their working hours. The number of employees is determined by the allocation of staff hours determined by the company's head office. The lo-

cal shop manager decides the distribution of the available work hours among employees, sometimes after discussions with them. Decisions covering the purchase of inventory may be made by the shop manager for amounts up to about one thousand Swedish crowns (8 crowns = 1 ECU). The managers may not introduce new products and have to use the suppliers that have contracts with the head office. The managers' possibilities for independent actions are restricted. Some of the shop managers are able to act more freely, and their ways of describing their situation and their responsibilities vary considerably, which will be illustrated and discussed more further on.

The shop managers' income consist of hourly wages with a managerial bonus. Some managers, men more often than women, do have monthly salaries, which is considered an advantage. There are also other types of supplements, although they are limited. The men earn more than the women do. Sex/gender is significant as an explanation of the wage differences (Sundin 1998 – appendix).

In response to the question, "Do you consider yourself to be manager of the shop?", all the men and 92 percent of the women answered, "Yes". These positive answers were, however, often accompanied by reservations, although some have succeeded in creating a free space within the given framework. "One has to become involved, one has the right to decide, one must do things that one perhaps otherwise would not do... ." (woman, manager in a medium-sized city). One male shop manager in a bigger city clearly stated that, "One must decide just about everything oneself ." At the other extreme, one of the respondents stated that she sees herself as a common employee. "I order and see that everything functions. That is all." (woman, manager in a small city). The shop manager's perspective concerning managing seems to point in a democratic direction, which has strong support from the company's top-management. Only 4 percent of the women and 12 percent of the men consider that a democratic manager is not tantamount to a good manager. The significance of the testimonies is illustrated by their own ways of working. Women and men seem to employ somewhat different strategies in their daily work. Almost 60 percent of the women said that the work tasks are simply divided equally among the employees and some more states that there was no difference between them and the remaining employees, an opinion which was shared by slightly more than 40 percent of the men. The employees were often given an area of responsibility. Some of the managers said that this was natural and not problematic: "My staff may of course make independent decisions...they can fix it themselves" (Woman manager, medium-large city). Others find it more difficult to see it this way. "I get a bit irritated when it is not finished... . I try to let them do it the day I am away or the like, but at the same time it is important that what we order is correct so that the supply will last for a week... . I have to check that it tallies." (woman, manager in a large city). The ambivalence is explained foremost by difficulties in appar-

tioning hours, which is seen by all as a major problem. "I have so terribly little time, so I can't meet them (the employees), not even once a week. It is extremely difficult to exert any management." (woman, manager in a large city).

The women are especially keen on gaining support for all decisions which concern the employees before implementing the decision. This is reflected in the fact that a majority of the women, a considerably higher share than for the men, have their own employees as discussion partners in matters which concern their shop. Since all of the staff work so closely together, "it would be unnatural if they could not say what they thought. But it can be frustrating to be a fellow worker and manager at the same time. Even if one tries, the relationship is a bit different from that which the others have with each other." Problems easily arise, primarily with regards to the number and distribution of opening hours and how they should be staffed. An upper limit is, as mentioned above, determined by the head office. The employees' strongest wish is most often increased working time – they want to earn more and they do not want to work alone. They think that there is a need for double staffing. The shop managers often share this opinion, but they do not have the authority to do anything about it. "I would like them to get better wages and it feels extra good to be two so that one can be calm and secure and have time for that little extra in some way. At the same time my orders are to reduce the hours." (woman, manager in a large city).

The company's sales managers are the discussion partners most often referred to by all shop managers – both women and men. The respondents turn to the head office less often. In this respect the men are more active than the women. "I usually ask the office for help," says one of the men. The men seem to "direct their eyes" and strategy upward, while the women see themselves as one of the group and are satisfied with talking to the sales manager when he comes by.

One of the article's objectives is to discuss differences between women and men working as managers on the basis of common practice and from the way they talk about their work and that of their colleagues. The questions that were asked in the inquiry concerning women and men as managers posed no difficulties; they were all answered. The responding men consistently expressed stronger opinions. The standpoints of women can be interpreted as a stand for the sex/gender-neutral alternatives, and that they did not want to support the underlying stereotypes. The following differences of opinions between women and men were found:

- female managers are seen as being better in staff welfare;
- both sexes see their own ways of working as more positive than does the opposite sex;
- women especially believe that men do not want to work as subordinates to women;

- men especially believe that women do not want to work as subordinates to women;
- both men and women believe that women's decisions are questioned by the employees more than those of men;
- women strongly believe that men have authority but are also less doubtful about female authority than are the men;
- both women and men, but especially women, believe that men have closer contacts with and are more supported by their superiors;
- the men especially believe that female managers have problems combining family obligations with work and that they have lower ambitions and lack self-confidence.

The differences in opinion indicate that shop managers, both women and men, believe that there is a difference between the way women and men work in a management position. The sales managers who regularly meet managers in action are of the same opinion " ... but it is difficult to put a finger on it." One difference is that men clearly express their wish to take responsibility for larger shops. They are also more demanding – they "make demands" for their shops and themselves, while the women "offer suggestions." It is especially the older women managers that disguise their wishes as suggestions. "The chaps ask in another way. That's just the way it is. They are more direct". That the company's units are too small for young men with "go" is assumed by some, while others argue that it is not the age but the attitude that is decisive. Let us now, after this description of the replies, more systematically relate the results we have found both to what we know from earlier studies and to existing theories within the area.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Diversified worktasks handled by satisfied first-line managers

The company investigated has a majority of women as managers in their shops, which are distributed all over the country. This fact led initially to the posing of some questions that have been answered. The working tasks seem varied and in many respects typical for first-line managers. Most of the work tasks are the same as those of the rest of the employees, while the work tasks exclusively done by the manager are extras – administration, contacts with other management levels and the responsibility for the distribution of hours. The last mentioned task is the trickiest one – and also sometimes done in cooperation with fellow employees. As the main part of the managers work tasks are ordinary selling and ordinary selling is dominated by women, the image of the work can hardly be classified as male. This is also the judgment made by the managers themselves.

The commitment is great but the working hours not overwhelming. Part-time work is also usual among the managers, especially among women. Despite that, they see themselves as managers and talk about the shop as "theirs". They run them purposefully and creatively. Some of the features which are usually associated with female management are distinctly reflected: accessibility in relation to the employees is a pronounced wish even if the practical possibilities are felt at times to be altogether too small, communication is uncomplicated, flexibility is considerable, group steering and the involvement in and caring for the employees is pronounced. Child and family concerns are manifested in part-time work and the scheduling.

It was found that the shop managers' duties are bound by regulations and routine. The opportunities for the shop managers to influence the organization are limited by the infrequent contact with the highest managers and the modest effect they have on the strategic decisions. Contact with top management is confined to having listened to the managing director during some training day and to seeing his picture in the staff magazine. With the remaining centrally placed managers the contacts are also small, but in this respect there are sex/gender differences as men have more contacts than women.

The company reality is much in line with what the twenty-year-old American study by Kanter et al. (1979) has shown. The opportunities for rewards are few and chances for personal development in their work relatively limited. The shop managers' possibilities to reward their own subordinates are also limited. Despite that it can be said that the managers in our study are fairly satisfied with their situation. They generally have the authority they deem necessary. Inasmuch as they as a rule have worked earlier as saleswomen/men, they are also familiar with the existing conditions. The greatest discontent concerns the hard steering of the allocation of hours and the composition of the assortment. The shop managers thus feel that they have little possibility of influencing the income, but instead have to devote themselves to cost reductions. Although to an outside observer the conditions seem to be rather hard and restricted, the satisfaction expressed by these managers can be compared with the results presented by Rosenthal et al. (1997). They studied the introduction of different quality techniques in supermarkets and found the employees surprisingly satisfied. The peripheral location of many of the shops in this company, which Kanter alleges is a disadvantage, is perceived by some to be an advantage. To be "out of sight" can imply a certain freedom.

Which type of management is practiced in the shops? Can the modern trends be found there? Managers apply a participatory-oriented managerial style (Johansson and Johansson 1997), similar to the transformative management, principally in issues that directly concern the fellow workers. The shop managers throughout both show concern for the individual employee and encourage intellectual stimulation. This can, and sometimes does, create a legiti-

macy problem in relation to the employees, since the managers' work tasks are primarily the same and because they quite often have become managers over their former fellow employees. The employees sometimes question the managers, but no severe conflicts arise with regard to their function per se. The frustration the shop managers feel can be localized and verbalized – the inadequate allocation of hours. This is also, most often, possible to explain to the other employees.

There is no legitimization problem upward in the organization, something relatively often described elsewhere (Lindestad and Jeffmar 1992). The shop managers are really seen as managers by both the head office and the sales managers. The role conflicts are thus relatively minor (Mintzberg 1973). It should be added that the shop managers' way of talking of managing is very concordant (Karlsson 1997). They look upon themselves as managers, although they use different strategies in their daily work.

Has the leadership, which is described above – participatory-based and relatively conflict-free – anything to do with the fact that most of the managers are women? Some of the persons interviewed definitely said that this is the case. Let us therefore now discuss the investigation's results from a gender perspective.

Women as managers: competent, confident but undervalued

In the organization studied women have long held leading positions and gained awareness of their own competence (cf. Fyrst and Wahl in SOU 1997:135). The women regard their own activities and practice more positively than the men, and they consider themselves capable of dealing adequately with both work life and family life. From the perspective of gender theory this can be interpreted positively, seen from the women's standpoint: they have neither completely accepted the fact that men hold them in lower esteem, nor have they fully accepted the surrounding society's higher esteem for men and the male.

Women who are managers are often assumed to find it more difficult than men to fill that position. Wahl (1998) and others argue that there is a contradiction in the constellation "women and manager" per se. In spite of the company being dominated so strongly by women, even among the shop managers, this assumption also exists within this organization. In this respect the shop managers seem, however, to differentiate between the conditions in their own company and in general. There is massive agreement that both women and men, but especially women, are well suited as shop managers. The respondents also consider the shop managers to be both managers and leaders. A partly doubtful attitude toward women as managers does nevertheless exist. Of the women in the company more than 40 percent believe that men do not want to work as subordinates to a woman. Nearly as large a share of women and men believe that women find it more difficult than men to manage men. The observation should be

made that few of the women who are managers within the company have any experience of men as subordinates. Most of the women manage other women.

Men as managers – demanding and appreciated

The answers from our shop managers showed some differences between women and men. Women are assumed by both women and men to be better when it comes to staff welfare. This is a familiar and a commonly occurring attitude concerning women (c.f. Tienari 1999). It seems as women more consequently practice participatory-based leadership, but this may be a result of the size of the units. None of the very smallest shops have a man as manager. This leads naturally to the next question: why do none of the smallest shops have a man as manager? The question is commented on by the sales managers. The men working as shop managers are assumed to be heard more readily and to have easier access upward to the very highest management within the organization. The women especially say that this is so. Given the company's policy of encouraging men to accept employment as well as to be shop managers, it can be assumed that the men in fact are subjected to affirmative action. In addition men get relatively large units and more quickly become shop managers. Men's career opportunities in the organization are different, and better, than the women's. The male shop managers often take direct contact with the head office, thereby breaking the formal chain of command. This action is supported by top management in practice. The women follow the formal hierarchy, contacting their sales manager first. The alternative of contacting the head office neither occurs to nor attracts them.

The men in the top of the company have been and are invisible both for the shop employees, the customers and other actors within the organization's day-to-day operations. The level which is in focus here was and is heavily dominated by women. The organisation is sometimes referred to as an organization characterized by "old maids." Earlier research has shown that employers have sometimes tried to introduce women in organizations in order to break the existing work routines and culture (Cockburn 1985; Wikander 1988). In the company studied we see an example of the opposite. The employer hopes that men will change the organization's culture and image both externally and internally, although in many respects the women currently working as first-line managers already do what is wanted. When men are now being recruited with support from the topmanagement and the official equal-opportunity policy, they do not fully take over the women's established way of working but instead put their own strategies into practice. It seems appropriate here to refer to research on men in occupations and contexts dominated by women. Men in a minority position seem to construct their masculinity differently than when they make up the majority (Harris 1995; Hearn 1994). A usual pattern is to accentuate in some way the "difference" in relation to female fellow employees.

In the company studied here we have seen examples of variations on this theme. The women have developed a common attitude in dialogue with the company's managers on middle and higher levels. Certain differences in behavior can be observed between women and men. The differences are those which are to be expected in accordance with prevalent stereotypes. It is the men who are the newcomers as shop managers, and it is consequently they who challenge the management-style shaped by the women. When the men break with the organization's formal routines, instead of being punished, they are rewarded. The women (and the men) realize, or believe, that men are more apt to have the ear of top management. This does not give rise to anger or opposition but is regarded as being natural. Nor do the women question that it can be positive to have more men in the shops. They share the notion that this is good, even in the cases where the men advance considerably faster than they themselves have done.

In their work, both women and men think that women are questioned more than men are by the employees. This too is related to what has been stated above, but can also be a consequence of the partly different management styles that are practiced. The participatory-based style supports discussion. The men have a more skeptical attitude toward the authority of women than do the women themselves. Again the organizational accentuation of the preference for men as managers can play a role, but the women's own positive experiences of exercising their authority also have an influence.

The gender system's organizational practice

The masculinization of management which can be traced in the company is supported by society's dominant notion, of the official equal-opportunity policy as well as of the company's aspiration to modernize and render the organization more effective (cf. Johansson 1997; Westerberg 1997). The older, established, way of managing practiced by the women is considered to be obsolete and the new, introduced by the men, as the current management fad. This result is unexpected in an organization whose top management sincerely aspires to increase equality and in a time which is said to be characterized by a need for management characterized by female notions and with many of the characteristics already practiced by many of the existing store managers.

In the first part of the article different reasons behind the male label on leadership and management were presented. The third one, the majority of men in these positions, is not relevant in this case for the lower management levels. There women make up the majority. This could be the reason behind the irrelevance also of the first point mentioned, unsuitable working conditions for people with obligations outside work. In this company the managers have been working part-time and with working hours arranged with respect for the family situation.

The second reason, the content of the work tasks and the gender label of the positions, are less obvious. Women working as managers look upon themselves as managers, and they think they can do their job without problems. Others, both men in similar positions and the sales managers, consider the women to be managers but they look upon them as exceptions. The women working as shop-managers are seen as exceptions from the rule that men, not women, are managers and they are exceptions, as they have no difficulties with their subordinates or with their families. The talk of the ambivalent and insecure women manager is replicated, although they do not see themselves like that. Here we might then presume that an awareness of the prevailing gender order in the society validates the responses both from sales managers and shop managers. That this awareness is strong is evident in the other related differences, and the acceptance of it is manifest also within the company. Several of the interviewees mean that when women meet, they just "drivel and talk rubbish". Even in this respect it was not so much their own experience they had in mind – the own workplace functioned well – but these were general notions. While those who declared this most verbosely in the interviews were women, proportionately more men have this notion, according to the results of the inquiry. The situation gives strong support to the conclusion drawn by Tienari (1999b) that many women in management positions neither are a proof of gender equality nor "co-emerge with a profound change in gender segregation in the organization as a whole". To that I would add that many women does not automatically mean a high value of womens' way of working.

The men working in the company are, naturally, bearers of the general gender order and well aware of the privileged position they have within the organization. The men are looked upon as managers with access to the head office, ambitions and good relations to their employees. These opinions are often self-fulfilling: the head office treat men and women differently, and sales managers do ask men to take big shops, not small ones. These actions are taken from the position that men are "born managers," an assumption which also seems to be the "gendered subtext" in this company (Benschop and Doorewaard 1998). Although the company in this case study has many competent women in managerial positions they will not, probably, change the vision of management and leadership as male either inside or outside the company. Therefore, men are welcomed as they represent the proper image, and, if the process goes on, a practice in accordance with that. If the organization's equal opportunity policy is rapidly extended to also embrace an increased number of women on higher levels (the aim stated in print), women's manner of performing and leading can be maintained and perhaps strengthened. The conclusions drawn here are, however, far from unambiguous.

In the company in the case study women are by tradition first-line managers. The women's way of working is adequate and successful, and they are considered to be good at their work. Despite this, the male label of management seems to be an integrated part of the organ-

izational reality. Men are wanted as managers, although perceived feminine traits are desired. The organizational practice has not changed the male label of management in the organization and consequently the organizational practice has not influenced the male label of management in society.

Apart from the insights about managing on low levels and the sex/gender dimensions, the study presented here elucidates how necessary it is to describe and analyze on the organizational level in order to understand changes in society, fluctuations on the labor market and how the gender system works. ■

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