**Stream: Organizations as Mesolevel Influencers of Social Change**

**Meso-level Influences in the Promotion of Women to the Top of Investment Banks**

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**1.Purpose**

Global investment banks have promoted a variety of initiatives aiming to improve prospects for women’s careers within their organizations. But most have failed to make substantive impact and the percentages of female Managing Directors (MDs), banks’ highest grade, remain at 10-15% in most divisions. Initiatives to help women make the right career choices and develop appropriate skillsets, fail to account for the meso-level influences of organizational culture that shape definitions of ‘gender’, ‘leader’ and ‘success’.

Historically taken-for-granted beliefs, values and norms become ‘rationalised myths’, including what it takes to be a leader in that organization. “The persistence of structures and beliefs that result in gender inequities…can partly be attributed to institutional processes that uphold the legitimacy and assumed neutrality of these arrangements” (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007, p.306). Perceived as natural, neutral and legitimate, this stability limits people’s ability to imagine alternatives and therefore is resistant to change (DiMaggio, 1997).

Transitioning to leadership roles and “constructing a leadership identity is fundamentally a relational endeavour” (Ely, Ibarra, Kolb, 2011, p.478). To be considered promotable to MD level, the individual needs to be perceived as already behaving like an MD. But definitions of “suitability” (Noon, 2012) for leadership are constructed at a group and organizational level and women make judgements about “fit” (Peters & Ryan, 2010) at an individual level. Both are affected by the lack of exemplar female role models (Sealy & Singh, 2010).

Women in these industries struggle to form a leadership identity that is acceptable to both themselves and their predominantly male peers, subject to the “double bind” of agentic/communal stereotypes and social roles, suggesting woman/leader incompatibility (Eagly & Karau,2002). They suffer from the subtle biases of second generation discrimination (Sturm, 2001) and have to make choices between identities of competency and likeability (see Heilman & Parks-Stamm for review, 2007).

Yet institutions believe that individuals succeed or fail on their own merit – but what is defined as merit is constructed by those already in power (Mcnamee & Miller, 2004). Ely et al found despite the strong discourse of meritocracy, it was those individuals with support networks of relationships who succeeded and those without failed. Within individualistic organizational cultures, this perpetuates the myth of meritocracy.

**2. Design/methodology/approach;**

This paper will reflect on data from two projects considering the importance of relationships in successful women’s careers. The first study includes 33 interviews with women at Director and MD grade across six global investment banks, in the UK. The second considers 17 interviews of male and female Ds and MDs who recently experienced the promotion process to MD (successfully or otherwise) in one global investment bank.

**3. Findings**

Initial findings reveal that participants regard the promotion process from D to MD as gender neutral, based on current and potential contribution. However, the analysis highlights significant requisite informal processes, revealing vague promotion criteria and heavy dependency on sponsorship relationships.

**4. Originality/value of the paper.**

The paper will contribute to the limited qualitative research exploring the career experiences of those at the most senior level of global financial services firms. It will consider the particular challenges that women face when transitioning to senior leadership positions and how the gendered dynamics of the organizational level impact their individual level identity work and the efficacious use of relationship resources.

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**Ruth Sealy, Senior Research Fellow, Deputy Director of the International Centre for Women Leaders, MRES Course Leader, Cranfield School of Management**

Ruth’s research interests cover many aspects of women in leadership, including board composition and corporate governance. Her doctoral research considered the importance of role models for female directors in investment banks, and how the lack of them may affect their work identity formation and career aspirations. Building on contemporary literature on the cognitive construction of role models, organizational demography and work identity formation, her research explains the importance of relational identification for women in a male-dominated workforce.

Ruth has advised government and business on the issue of women on boards and has been the lead researcher of the UK’s annual Female FTSE Report since 2007, regularly presenting the report’s findings to both academic and practitioner audiences, globally. The annual report has a considerable reputation and research impact, with the findings cited in over 100 broadsheet newspapers, radio and television channels, and practitioner journals across the world each year. Ruth has spoken at many academic and practitioner conferences, lectures on MBA and MSc courses, and has written a number of book chapters and journal articles. In 2009 Ruth won a Best Paper award at the British Academy of Management Conference and in 2011 won a Best Paper with her PhD student Doyin Atewologun at the Academy of Management. She is a member of the editorial review board for Gender in Management – an International Journal and is a Chartered Member of the Institute of Personnel and Development.

**Patricia Pryce, Doctoral Researcher, International Centre for Women Leaders, Cranfield School of Management**

Patricia has recently started on her research career and is interested in how women develop their careers to the most senior levels within organisations. She is particularly interested in exploring how individuals develop and use social capital (resources gained through network activity) for career progression and whether there are gender differences in this process.

The early part of Patricia's career was spent in Human Resources working within the retail and distribution sector followed by five years within the health and fitness industry, during its period of rapid growth. Patricia has also worked as an Executive Search Consultant recruiting into mid to senior level management positions.

After completing her Masters in Occupational Psychology in 1996, Patricia became more interested in business psychology and set up her own consultancy providing learning and development programmes at personal, management and leadership level. Much of the work she has done with individuals has encouraged them to explore the significance and value of their business based relationships identifying the benefits these can have on career progression, for themselves and others. She has worked across many industries both in the UK and overseas (America, Singapore, Czech Republic, Germany, Spain and France). Patricia is also a qualified Executive Coach.