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Motherhood: an impediment to workplace progression? The case of Cyprus

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify potential explanations on why motherhood affects the non-progression of women, in Cyprus, to the top of the organisational ladder.

Design/methodology/approach – For the purposes of the study a qualitative approach was taken and semi-structured interviews were used. The interviews were conducted with specific, preselected employment groups. These were chartered accountants from the Big Four (PWC, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, KPMG) companies in Cyprus and academics working at the University of Cyprus.

Findings – It has been identified through the interviews that women in Cyprus are faced with impediments on their way to the upper levels of the organisational ladder. The reasons for this vary and one of the most important is the motherhood effect. In particular, the research suggests that cultural norms and perceptions that women should be the primary caregiver are a barrier to advancement for women and there is a lack of family friendly policies and childcare facilities at least in the organisations included in this study.

Originality/value – This paper sheds light into a previously under-researched area; gender equality in Cyprus. The author also denotes the problems a mother is faced with on her way to the top of the organisational ladder and that culture is of utmost importance with regards to the role of women in the society and the workplace in Cyprus and elsewhere.

Keywords Gender, Cyprus, Glass ceilings, Motherhood, Progression

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper focusses on the effects of national culture on organisational culture in Cyprus with a particular focus on the treatment of mothers in the workplace. There is limited research on gender and organisations in the Cypriot context (Cockburn, 2004). Gender roles in Cyprus are, however, known to be particularly traditional (Cockburn, 2004; Loizos, 1981). In this context there is value in exploring if and how the culture affects the workplace experiences of women, and especially those who have the particularly idealised role of mother to dependent children. To this end, the study focusses on experiences in two sectors in Cyprus; academia and the accountancy profession. These were chosen because they have reasonably equal entry rates for men and women. This is indicated by the increasing number of women in the said professions as measured by the Statistical Service of Cyprus (2015).

The paper starts with a review of the literature on women and employment and summarises some of the work on barriers to advancement and on national culture and its potential influence in organisations. This review concludes with the presentation of

three research questions, and following a description of the methodology employed to address them, the results of a qualitative study are presented. The paper moves on to an analysis of the findings on the experiences of the participants in the research with particular focus on the effects of Cypriot culture and Cypriot organisational policies on advancement for women and for mothers. Links are made to existing research in the Discussion Section. The Conclusion Section focusses on implications and areas for further research.

Employment and gender

During the last three decades there has been an increase in the number of women in the workplace (Davidson and Burke, 2004). Despite this, the distribution of women's employment varies from men across sectors and within hierarchical structures (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Peppard, 2007). Research shows that women all over the world are still under-represented in the so-called male occupations (jobs that the majority of employees are comprised of men such as engineers; Ely *et al.*, 2008) as well as the upper levels of organisations (Heilman, 2012).

According to statistical information gathered by the Equal Opportunities Commission nine out of ten employees in the construction industry are men (EOC, 2001). Moreover, according to Wilson (2003) women are often expected to be employed in professions such as teaching or nursing and routine office work whilst men are more associated with professions such as medicine, law and skilled manual work. The suggested reasons for this variation in the employment trends amongst women and men are several and contentious. What is clear is that both structural and cultural influences can be involved, at least to some degree. In the words of Heilman (2012, p. 115), "people can be disadvantaged (or advantaged) in how they are viewed not because of what they are like or what they have done, but because of the gender group to which they belong". That is to say that women's employment may be affected by the expectations adhered to them deriving from the very fact that they are female. Beyond this, Biernat and Kobrynowicz (1997) also suggested that the perceived unfitness of women, especially in male dominated jobs, further acts as hindrance to their progression in these workplaces.

In terms of advancement in employment, women account for 30 per cent of all managerial jobs across European countries (Kirton and Greene, 2005). The failure to advance women in senior positions at the same rate as men, both in public and private sectors in all developed countries, has been identified in several studies and statistical evidence (Adler and Izraeli, 1988; Davidson and Cooper, 1993). In Wirth's (2001, p. 26) words, "women's interest in professional and managerial work and the predicted shortages of highly qualified managers have not […] resulted in women obtaining senior executive positions in significant numbers". In 1995, women comprised less than 5 per cent of senior management in the UK and the USA while in many other countries, including Australia, it was close to only 2 per cent (Sinclair, 1995). 15 years later women still only led in 2 per cent of Fortune 500 companies and only in five companies which are listed on the Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 stock index (*The Economist*, 2010). Women are similarly under-represented amongst governments and decision-making bodies in the largest organisations within the member states of the European Union (Eagly and Sczesny, 2009).

Further to the above and according to the Grant International Business survey report 40 per cent of business all over the globe did not have any women in senior management (Grant Thornton International, 2007). Booysen and Nkomo (2010)

noted that while the representation of women in senior management has increased during the past years they still have a long way to go towards numerical equality with their male counterparts.

Barriers to female employment advancement

The reason for the discrepancies between rates of men and women in senior positions in organisations is another highly contested area. Some refer to a "glass ceiling", a concept popularised in the 1980s which, according to Morrison and Von Glinow (1990), is used to describe a wall that although transparent it is so substantial that it prevents women (Morrison *et al.*, 1992), and minorities (Powell, 2000) from advancing to higher managerial positions based on their gender and/ or race. The term glass ceiling was first introduced in a *Wall Street Journal* article in 1986 (Hymowitz and Schellhardt, 1986) and is used to describe the development barriers for disadvantaged racial minorities, as well as women, and its focus has been expanded to include all promotional opportunities and not solely those pertaining to senior management positions. Powell (1999) suggested that even when women are educated and have the necessary experience they can still encounter a glass ceiling.

Other explanations for lower rates of advancement for women in organisations specifically implicate culture. National culture deeply affects the models that individuals have for their organisations and the meanings which are attributed through them (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Organisations constitute a subjective entity for employees because employers will give meaning to their organisational environment based on their own perception of culture (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998). By this, it is shown that organisational cultures are affected by the cultures of the country; they are based in and by the cultural characteristics of their human resource, although defined differently than cultures in general.

Individuals occupy several roles over the course of their lives. Roles such as "worker", "parent" and "partner" all contribute to a self-identity in individuals (Adams *et al.*, 1996; Posig and Kickul, 2004). If an individual believes that a particular role is demanding too much time and effort, at the expense of other roles, that individual is said to be experiencing inter-role conflict (Noor, 2004). A particular type of this is the conflict experienced when the demands of work impact negatively on home life, and conversely, when the demands of home life are perceived to impact negatively on work; work-life conflict (Rotondo and Kincaid, 2008). Motherhood is a particular role associated with this. The tension between working life and motherhood is especially pertinent because individuals who occupy both roles often have them both prioritised (Shelton, 2006; Perrons *et al.*, 2007).

Further, there is much reportage that many types of employment create a particular work-life conflict as the flexibility desirous for managing dually prioritised roles may be unavailable (Tausig and Fenwick, 2001; Felstead *et al.*, 2002). As suggested by Gatrell (2004) the burden of family responsibilities lies on women therefore, their experience of work-life balance differs of that of men. In effect, women might seek for part-time jobs, or jobs with fewer responsibilities, so that they can cope with this dual role (Lewis and Lewis, 1996; Marshall, 1991). Certainly, in their study of work-life balance in small firms, Kapasi and Galloway (2015) found a common motivation for switching from employment to self-employment was for role flexibility.

Meanwhile, as a consequence of the links between social and organisational culture, people within the organisation might engage with the perception that women who aspire to a career are somehow violating cultural norms (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). This may be particularly pertinent for women who are mothers, as it has been shown

that women who hold characteristics solely attributed to their gender, such as motherhood, are evaluated less positively than their male counterparts or even females who are not mothers of dependent children (Heilman and Okimoto, 2007). Notwithstanding, organisations that have cultures of long hours are particularly challenging in terms of managing work and motherhood as some attempt to juggle the balance between competing demands of work, family and personal responsibilities (Lewis, 2001; Hayman, 2005). Women might also experience gender harassment within their workplace as they would be seen as deviating from their female traditional roles (Leskinen *et al.*, 2015). Leskinen and Cortina (2014) identified five possible ways of gender harassment; sexist comments, gender policing, crude behaviour, infantilization, and policing of work-life boundaries. This latter category mostly affects mothers.

The Cyprus context
The situation in Cyprus reflects the global trend outlined. In fact, the Cypriot situation is particularly divisive. A recent study conducted by PWC (2011) indicated that in 2010 half of all Cypriot-based organisations (private and public) did not have a single woman on their board of directors and 32.7 per cent had just one woman. Further, Cypriot culture has been shown to be particularly patriarchal (Cockburn, 2004; Loizos, 1981), with cultural norms for women, and especially mothers, prioritising and idealising caregiving in the home. Correspondingly, breadwinning is a role ascribed in the family context as almost exclusively male (Cockburn, 2004; Loizos, 1981). In this effect Cypriot culture can be identified as high masculinity according to Hofstede's dimensions in a sense that males dominate within the society and females are being controlled by their domination (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005).

Up until the early twentieth century Cypriots were mainly occupied in rural activities and common to non-urbanisation, and according to Cockburn (2004, p. 49) "traditional family values placed many constraints on women". Gender-specific roles were deeply rooted in the Cypriot culture (Socratous, 2016); the natural place to find a man was the coffee shop while women were settled at home (Loizos, 1981). Cockburn (2004) stated that in Cyprus it was, and in most cases still is, considered an insult for a man to do house chores. Apart from a small percentage, Cypriot people were poor at that time and an even smaller percentage of women had "a wage or a salary at their own disposal" (Cockburn, 2004, p. 49) and were mostly depended on the man of the household (the father or the husband) for income (Cockburn, 2004; Anthias, 1992). This indicates a degree of high power distance culture (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) that denotes inequalities of power and wealth between the power holders (in this case men) and those belonging in lower lanes (in this case women).

Women in Cyprus entered the workforce after the Turkish invasion of 1974 due to the necessity of a dual income (Socratous, 2016) but their establishment was not easy especially taking into account the patriarchy prevailing in the Cypriot society (Loizos, 1981) and the family obligations that were considered female responsibility (Cockburn, 2004; Loizos, 1981). Cockburn (2004) noted that Cypriot women were mostly occupied in low-paid, low-esteemed jobs and these jobs are now perceived as female jobs such as nurses and secretaries. Cyprus's accession in the EU has helped towards gender equality in Cyprus (Socratous, 2016) however, "the EU has given women a language in which to assert their rights, but implementation is another matter. As in the rest of Europe, women in Cyprus are still far from equal with men" (Cockburn, 2004, p. 112).

Where children are cared for while parents work, what usually happens in Cyprus is that grandparents take on this role. In this respect Cypriot culture can be

characterised as a high collective culture according to Hofstede's dimensions due to the fact that family members, in this case the grandparents, take care of other members of the group (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). In the case that the grandparents are not able to help and the couple cannot afford to hire a nanny then the mother would be the one to leave her career by switching jobs or becoming a housewife to take care of the children as indicated by the participants in this study. This is in accordance with Wilson (2003) who notes that in the absence of a support system (parents, childcare facilities, etc.) the amount of time a woman can devote to her workplace is limited.

The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which culture in Cyprus disadvantages women in employment and if there are issues particularly pertinent to mothers. To this end, the following three research questions are generated:

RQ1. Do the participants in the study perceive gender inequalities in their organisations that affect women's progression?

RQ2. Is motherhood perceived to be a particular barrier to advancement in the organisations in this study?

RQ3. Are policies to support the development of mothers in organisations effective?

Methodology

Since there is little existing research on gender issues in Cypriot organisations the use of an inductive approach was considered appropriate. For the purposes of the study a qualitative methodology was designed, and semi-structured interviews used to allow the opportunity to express their thoughts and experiences with minimal constraints and also to cover all the issues that might have any implications on the non-progression of women in the workplace. Correspondingly, the qualitative approach would allow for the emergence of nuanced and personal data, particularly pertinent since the study sought to explore the experiences of Cypriot workers as they lived them. As Stake (1995) noted, it is only through examining the experiences of those we seek to understand that we can discover what the pertinent issues are. Following Salkind (2009), semi-structured interviews with a conversational tone were considered a good means by which participants in the study might express their own stories.

The interviews were conducted with specific, preselected employment groups. These were chartered accountants from the Big Four (PWC, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, KPMG) companies in Cyprus and academics working at the University of Cyprus (Department of Business and Public Administration, Department of Education). The reasons these groups of people were chosen were the following: the entry requirements for both men and women are the same, starting salary for both men and women is the same, these occupations attract equal numbers of both male and female candidates, and there is a representation of both public (University of Cyprus) and private (Big Four) sectors.

The sample included both women and men in order to have an unbiased view of the results. Both men and women are affected by culture. Personal contacts were used to gain access to participants in these firms. Lists of people who would be willing to help with the research were provided and participants were contacted directly and interviews arranged. Thereafter, snowballing (Mason, 1996) was applied, meaning that participants that had been interviewed suggested other people to participate.

In total, 29 individuals were interviewed, 13 men and 16 women, (see Table I for demographics of each participant). Numbers, according to the order the participants

Participant's number	Gender	Profession	Age	Marital status
1	Male	Accountant/partner	Late 40s	Married with dependent children
2	Male	Accountant/partner	Late 40s	Married with dependent children
3	Female	Accountant/supervising senior	Late 20s	Single
4	Female	Accountant/assistant manager	Late 20s	Single
5	Female	Accountant/assistant manager	Late 20s	Single
6	Female	Academic/associate professor	Late 40s	Married with dependent children
7	Female	Accountant/assistant manager	Late 20s	In a relationship
8	Female	Accountant/assistant manager	Late 20s	Single
9	Male	Accountant/assistant manager	Late 20s	In a relationship
10	Male	Accountant/assistant manager	Late 20s	Married with child on the way
11	Male	Academic/professor	Late 40s	In a relationship
12	Male	Accountant/assistant manager	Early 30s	Single
13	Male	Accountant/assistant manager	Late 20s	Single
14	Male	Academic/associate professor	Late 30s	Married with dependent children
15	Female	Academic/visiting lecturer	Mid 30s	Married with child on the way
16	Male	Accountant/manager	Mid 30s	Single
17	Female	Accountant/assistant manager	Mid 30s	Married with dependent children
18	Female	Accountant/assistant manager	Late 20s	Single
19	Male	Accountant/supervising senior	Late 20s	In a relationship
20	Male	Accountant/manager	Early 30s	In a relationship
21	Male	Accountant/assistant manager	Late 20s	Single
22	Female	Accountant/manager	Mid 30s	Married with dependent children
23	Female	Accountant/senior associate	Late 20s	Engaged with child on the way
24	Male	Accountant/associate	Late 20s	Engaged
25	Female	Accountant/senior manager	Mid 30s	Married with dependent children
26	Female	Accountant/ senior manager	Mid 40s	Married with dependent children
27	Female	Academic/assistant professor	Mid 40s	Married with dependent children
28	Male	Academic/associate professor	Mid 50s	Married with dependent children
29	Female	Academic/assistant professor	Early 40s	Married with dependent children

Table I.
Demographics of
participants

were interviewed, were used to substitute the participants' real names, in order to afford anonymity, for example, "Female 6, Academic, late 40s". Participants were assured by the researcher about maintaining their anonymity and were assured that they could stop the interview and withdraw from the research at any time. Further to that a signed letter was given to them by the researcher guaranteeing their anonymity.

All interviews were in Greek and recorded and transcribed verbatim into Greek and then translated to English. Analysis was conducted by exploring the narratives generated in interviews. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), analysis was guided by themes pre-identified in the extant literature, and by themes that emerged during the fieldwork. Themes were identified by the researcher conducting analysis independently and achieving consensus by consultation thereafter. The themes were identified by the participants' replies in the broader study and were acknowledged as the main issues that concern Cypriot people both in the society and the workplace. The themes identified in the broader research are education, motherhood, family and networking (Socratous, 2016) and this paper deals with presentation of the results for motherhood.

Results

Do the participants in the study perceive gender inequalities in their organisations that affect women's progression?

The results of the research indicate that gender variation is observable in the organisations included in this study. According to the participants the percentage of

women partners at the accountancy firms barely reaches 10 per cent. When it comes to academia there was not a single woman as a professor, the highest level in academia, in the two departments of the University of Cyprus that were represented in this study. The reasons for the existence of this discrepancy vary between the two sectors although motherhood seems to be of pivotal importance.

When it comes to the accountants, both men and women participants asserted that it was by choice that women did not progress to the upper levels of the organisation or even chose to leave the company at some point due to their devotion to their families. As some participants noted it is difficult for a woman to follow the demanding pace and long working hours of the accountancy profession. The reasons for lack of advancement for women in academia are somewhat different, although along the same lines. There is the perception by the male participants that women would have children and would want to stay at home or leave work earlier than usual therefore, indirectly affecting their collaborations and promotion opportunities. Such perception was not evident among female academics participating in the research.

All participants, regardless of their occupation or level at their organisation, admitted to working longer hours than those for which they are contracted, and there was general acknowledgement that this would be difficult for women who want to have a family. This finding is also in accordance with Lewis (2001) who noted that organisations that have cultures of long hours are particularly challenging in terms of managing work and motherhood.

Also evident was the belief that evaluation procedures are subjective but not necessarily in favour of men. Some participants, men and women accountants agreed that despite the subjectivity of the managers with regards to promotions and evaluations women do not progress by choice. The below quote is indicative:

> When it comes to promotions I don't feel that gender has anything to do with it. […]. I know a woman who was many years in the position of assistant manager because she chose not to get promoted (Female 8, Accountant, late 20s).

It is evident by the research, and supported by the above quote, that both men and women accountants participating in the study agree that women do not progress to the top of their organisations by choice. However, the participants seemed to ignore the impact of culture on their lives hence, on their choices. This perception suggests a denial of the existence of the glass ceiling which according to Wringley (2002) prolongs the problem.

A male academic suggests that women are stricter towards other women than men are in terms of promotion decisions. He says:

> I don't know why women do not make it at the end. Most of the times the committee decides to recruit men […]. I have to add that when there is a woman in the committee she is stricter against other women! I don't know why this happens, I cannot explain it (Male 11, Academic, late 40s).

Another male academic identifies the problem is subject-specific; implying that academic subjects are somehow gendered. However, he suggests that things are changing. Specifically he indicates that:

> In general most academics in this field (marketing) are men so the pool of women you can choose from is smaller. This happens at an international level and not just in Cyprus […]. Nowadays there are quite a few women academics of younger ages. Perhaps in the past due to social circumstances the role of women was different and this might be the reason why that not many women reached the point of having an academic career in marketing. Perhaps women prefer other directions. I cannot be sure (Male 14, Academic, late 30s).

*Is motherhood perceived to be a particular barrier to advancement in the
organisations in this study?*
The reasons for the existence of the discrepancy between the advancement of men and
women in the two sectors are similar. When it comes to the accountants, both male and
female participants seem to believe that women choose not to get promoted or leave the
company because they want to devote themselves to their families. A female
accountant indicates that:

> I believe that women are capable of being promoted. I also believe that some women do not
> progress by choice. Because our job is very demanding and requires long hours and overtime
> so I believe that a woman who is ready to get married and have children maybe she won't be
> interested in seeking a career (Female 3, Accountant, mid 20s).

However, it was noted by several participants that this "choice" of women not to
progress in the workplace may be cultural:

> I believe that Cypriot culture drives women to choose family over their careers. If a woman
> chooses to follow a career people might judge her for this […]. Some things have changed but
> at the back of our minds there is still the perception that women are responsible for raising the
> children (Female 3, Accountant, mid 20s).

> Due to the fact that our line of work is very competitive and demanding most of the women
> choose to change careers and not progress at the partner level. This happens due to family
> obligations. Fortunately or unfortunately in Cyprus the burden of raising the family falls on
> the shoulders of the mother (Male 1, Accountant/Partner, late 40s).

Another female accountant admitted that motherhood had infringed her career
development but she found this normal as she was not able at the time to adhere to the
male standards:

> Definitely motherhood has affected me. But I believe that opportunities are given to everyone
> equally. If you can work the same hours as everyone else then you will progress […]. They
> don't really care if you are a working mother. The manager treats both men and women
> equally (Female 17, Accountant, mid 30s).

Not all respondents subscribed to the idea than women choose not to advance. For
example, a female academic claims it is about an imposition of perceptions of roles that
really affects advancement:

> […] promotions are dependent on perceptions. And definitely, I can sign for it, that there is the
> perception that a woman cannot get promoted at the same pace as a man when she has a
> family […]. When it comes to men having a family is not considered an impediment to their
> careers because there is the belief that the wife will be responsible for children. This
> perception is very strong (Female 6, Academic, late 40s).

It appears that both men and women in this study agree on the fact that motherhood
can hinder women's progression in the workplace. Some participants perceive this to be
a choice of women (devoting more time on family than career) but others acknowledge
that this role (gendered specific) has been ascribed to women by cultural norms.

Are policies to support the development of mothers in organisations effective?
The participants were asked to identify family friendly policies that are in place within
their organisation. Most of them could not identify immediately what a family friendly
policy is and after the researcher gave examples such as flexible working hours or

working from home they indicated the situation within their organisation. Due to the very different nature of the jobs academics and accountants do, responses varied of course.

The nature of an academic's job is flexible by default. Academics fix their teaching and research programme according to their own agendas. A male academic indicated:

"I think that the University has family friendly policies in place. I am not a family man so I don't have personal knowledge. The working hours are very flexible and despite the fact that each academic has many duties, you can schedule your time in such a way that will be convenient for you. This flexibility is very important" (Male 11, Academic, late 40s)

Despite this flexibility, however, women still feel the pressure to prove themselves. A female academic noted that:

Generally, the working time for academics is very flexible. However, there is the misperception that if you are not physically at the office you are not producing work. So this face time is important. You might be at the office and play games at the computer or do online shopping -there is this perception for women that they do online shopping at work- but if they see you it means that you are working! (Female 6, Academic, late 40s).

On the other hand, when it comes to accountants they have far less flexibility. As indicated by the participants, the nature of the job most often does not allow for working from home nor flexible hours. A male accountant noted that:

No working from home is allowed. You need to be physically present at the office and with the clients. Projects are handled by a team so you need to work with our colleagues on a daily basis. This is something that women might not like so this maybe one reason that they choose to leave (Male 1, Accountant, late 40s).

There was evidence also that organisational culture can work in opposition to official organisational policy. A striking example is described by a female academic who despite being entitled by policy to four months maternity leave felt pressed to work:

I didn't take on all my maternity leave. On paper I took it but I didn't use it, not even for working from home. I was at the office. I was here until the last minute I gave birth and shortly after I gave birth I returned. I was breast feeding and I brought the pump at work to remove the milk! There is pressure on women to work more and prove themselves. Not all men have this mentality. But it doesn't take more than a small group of people to poison the atmosphere. There is also a group of people who remain silent. They just go along. There is pressure towards women (Female 6, Academic, late 40s).

A male accountant also identified maternity leave as a problem:

However, a pregnancy can stall a woman's career for about a year so she will miss out on her chance for promotion. Next year around she will have to compete with the next intakes as well (Male 12, Accountant, early 30s).

In addition to maternity policies, the accountancy firms also had a "mother's scheme". This allows mothers, for as long as their children are under 18, to work fewer hours and be remunerated accordingly. Despite presumably pro-equality intentions, an obvious drawback is the perception that mothers have less time-commitment to work than others. Gatrell (2001) found that organisational programmes to offer part-time hours to mothers made motherhood highly visible. They found in their empirical UK study that mothers who work part time were more likely to experience organisational disadvantage and barriers than mothers who work full-time. They proposed that the

reasons for this are that the latter have made their dual role less visible, and as a consequence they suggested that organisational policies targeted at workplace and career development of mothers may be counter-productive. A mother's scheme might provide a marker to other employees and managers that a woman's children are prioritised equally or above her job, while the same is not true for men (as this scheme is not available for fathers) or for women who do not use it. This perception was expressed in the interviews:

> If a woman takes on the mother scheme she will not be able to compete with everyone else. She will always be a step behind. It is the nature of the job that requires physical presence. If you are not there you cannot compete and you cannot be reliable if you always leave on time. There are very strict deadlines in our line of work and also there are emergencies (Female 5, Accountant, late 20s).

> We have mother scheme which enables women to get off work earlier at around 3. However, if a woman takes on the mother scheme she will not have the same opportunities for promotion as everyone else. When we have a deadline due we sometimes need to stay late at night to work. This cannot be easy for women with children unless they have help from their husbands or their mothers (Male 12, Accountant, early 30s).

It has been identified by both men and women in the study that showing face-time is very important in organisations in Cyprus in terms of promotion and progression. Therefore, despite the fact that family friendly policies are in place they actually hinder a woman's career instead of helping. Further to the family friendly policies mentioned there is also the issue of childcare facilities within organisations. This is something that can be found abroad although it is rare in Cyprus. The University of Cyprus does have some facilities but they have only been established very recently. Most of the participants noted that it would be helpful to have childcare facilities in the area of the organisation but the most important thing is to have childcare facilities (no matter the location) with extended working hours.

Discussion

The research reported in this paper suggests that while there is the perception that men and women share the same opportunities within the workplace and women do not progress by choice, there appear to be various structural and cultural influences at play. There is also the perception that once a woman becomes a mother she needs to devote more time to her family/children and that this will be to the detriment of her career. These perceptions are shared by both men and women. This is in accordance with the literature which indicates that women are not able to equally to compete with men in the workplace due to their choice for motherhood or because of the perceptions of employers who think that a mother would not be devoted to her work (Barnard, 2000). Crosby *et al.* (2004) also noted that mothers are faced with discriminatory behaviour when it comes to career progression and they encounter a maternal wall on their way up.

Fredman (1992) noted that equal treatment of individuals who are not equal in a social basis might cause further inequalities. This is suggested in this study: the limited, formal notion of equality can be of use only to the minority of women who are able to conform to organisational norms but cannot reach or correct underlying structural impediments. It could be argued that in this case mothers as distinct from women in general, are particularly disadvantaged. This is also in accordance with Heilman (2012) who indicated that people can be treated differently not because of what they are like or what they have done but because of the characteristics of their gender group.

Cultural norms in organisations are gendered in that normatively they work for men but not for women (or men) with dual and competing work/life priorities. Thus, there is no evidence in the current study of direct gender discrimination. Instead, there is a clear insinuation that national culture and particularly the role of women and mothers is transferred in the workplace. This research suggests that Cypriot culture being a highly patriarchal one transfers these notions to organisations. Therefore, perceptions that women should be the primary caregivers for children are not restricted within the society, but are embedded and affect development within organisational structures and cultures also. This is also in accordance with Cox and Blake (1991) who suggested that cultural stereotypes are integrated into the organisations as well.

The main reason that motherhood prevents women from progressing to the top of the organisational ladder, according to the findings of this research, is the cultural norms that women are the primary caregivers and hence they choose, or are forced, to spend less time on their careers or even abandon their profession. The identification of this specific role of women in Cyprus is also supported by the literature (see Cockburn, 2004; Loizos, 1981). According to the findings there are two types of women that adhere to this cultural norm: the ones that feel it is their obligation to take care of their children and so choose not to progress further in order to devote themselves to their families which is in accordance with Hakim's (2000) Preference theory that suggests that when there is no economic need a large percentage of women would choose not to work and the ones who might not feel so strongly about it but still follow the cultural norms of the Cypriot society which proclaims the male-breadwinner and the female-caregiver stereotypes incorporating the factor of culture. The lack of appropriate structures (childcare facilities and family friendly policies) might affect both of the above mentioned categories. This finding is in accordance with several studies which indicate that the high turnover of women in the so-called male professions such as accounting is due, among other reasons, to the lack of childcare provision (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2016; Bell, 2009).

According to the participants in the research the majority of women who "disappear" from the organisational ladder do not progress due to the fact that they have become mothers. In these cases either they search for a less demanding job with fewer working hours or spend less time in their current job or, leave the workplace and stay at home to raise their children. This is in accordance with Barnard (2000) who suggested that some women prefer to have a part-time job so they can also fulfil their duties as mothers. It has been suggested by several participants that the need of women to devote themselves to their families, especially when they have children, derives from the norms of the Cypriot culture which position women as the primary, or even the sole, caregivers for children and men as the breadwinners.

Apart from the cultural aspects there are also, as mentioned earlier, certain structural obstacles that mothers are faced with. As indicated by the findings of this research, and supported by Barnard (2000), the maternity leave period is considered a lost one for women as they stay at home, and away from the workplace, for about four months. During leave they would not have developed work-related practice. Thus it is inappropriate to expect women to return after prolonged leave and be able to just pick up where they left off. So rather than women having to adhere to male standards (Acker, 1991) consideration of the circumstances of returning mothers is required. It is shown, through this study, that in order to progress within the workplace one needs to put on extra hours and work really hard. This goes for both men and women.

However, it is acknowledged by all the participants that this is almost impossible for women with children. The industries and organisational structures do not support women (and especially women with families) to be excellent and this leads to a potential limitation for both women and organisations. Although, this situation might derive from cultural and societal norms organisations need to find a way to address it. As Kanter (1977) suggested it is the structure of the organisation that does not allow men and women to equally compete. As Lewis and Humbert (2010) noted the ideal employee, for today's organisations, should be a man who is available and willing to work 24/7 and that any family responsibilities should not affect the workplace.

It has been identified, by the majority of the participants in the research, that women not only miss out on important things while they are away on maternity leave but they are also having difficulties in adjusting when they return. Although family friendly policies, like flexible working hours or the mothers' scheme, are in place they seem to have the reverse outcome and mothers are perceived by some employees as less willing and able to invest in their job. This is also supported by Hearn and Parkin (1983). This is clearly a challenge for the organisations to adjust and/or reform policies in such a way so that they could be helpful to all employees, both male and female, and create more commitment on their (the employees) behalf which will have positive results for the companies as well. As Oswald *et al.* (2014) indicated keeping the employees happy makes them more productive. Hence, a change in organisational structures is of great importance in such a way to help both men and women to balance work and family and not just giving women the opportunity of staying home with their children without any mechanism to help them upon their return.

It is shown by the replies of the interviewees that the academic women who have participated in this research have somehow adapted to the male working model. All of them admitted that while they took their maternity leave on paper they did not actually use it; instead they were working from home and returning early to the workplace. They said they could not afford being away for four months. These women have devoted many years and much effort to their careers and seemed loathe to jeopardise that investment. This is in accordance with the work of Fredman (1992) who noted that only women who can conform to the male stereotype can take advantage of the possibilities given to them at the workplace.

Adding to the above, women, as indicated by the participants in the research, are also faced with the problem of childcare. Further to that, the absence of childcare facilities within the workplace has been identified by the accountants. The participants in the research indicated that it would be helpful for women to be able to leave their children close to their workplace and especially during working hours in the evening. The university has recently built a kindergarten within its premises and the employees, as indicated by the participants in this research, find it very helpful. This is in accordance with Davidson and Burke (2004) who suggested that organisations should provide family-oriented initiatives and commit to diversity programmes in order to support their employees to have a work-life balance.

Conclusion
In this paper we sought to identify the impact of motherhood on the non-progression of women in the workplace in Cyprus based on a qualitative research among chartered accountants and academics. It has been identified through the interviews that gender inequality is evident within the organisations of the participants and that women are faced with impediments on their way to the top of the organisational ladder. The main

obstacle, according to the results of the research, women are faced with is motherhood which affects, directly or indirectly, their career progression.

The research suggests that women in Cyprus, due to their gendered-specific roles adhered to them by cultural and societal norms are considered the main caregivers for the children. This role in enforced on women so when they become mothers they either choose or are forced to prioritise their family over work. This gives them a direct disadvantage in comparison with their male counterparts or even women with no dependent children. Further to that, the absence of effective family friendly policies and childcare facilities with extended working hours add to the difficulties women are faced with in their attempt for work-life balance.

It was suggested by some participants in the research that a compulsory paternity leave should be given to men who become fathers. This way both fathers and mothers would have responsibility of their new-born and men could appreciate the difficulties women are faced with when return to the workplace after maternity leave. Another suggestion is the introduction of parental leave which is currently applicable in some Nordic countries for example Estonia[1]. This way, both the parents can stay home for the whole, or some of the period, provided by the parental leave. This measure might encourage more men to spend more time with, and feel the responsibility of, their children. Also, it might give the opportunity to women to better combine work with family. Fredman (1992) also indicated that specific gender characteristics must be taken into account when forming equality programmes.

Furthermore and according to the findings of the research, in Cyprus there seems to be an opportunity to develop childcare facilities that adhere to the modern way of life in the twenty-first century where both parents are employees and need to have a safe place for their children. This would allow both parents to follow a career as well, if they want to.

Women, during the past few decades, have made huge steps towards their representation in the workplace. However, there is much evidence that advancement remains an issue and this study has shown this to include the Cypriot context. More investigation is needed in order to be able to address the problem and find solutions enabling both men and women to have the same opportunities in the workplace and to find the balance between their work and their family. In addition, other professions and countries should also be investigated as they might be faced with different problems.

Note

1. www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/Leavenetwork/Country_notes/2014/Estonia.pdf

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Appendix. Interview questions

Demographics

Gender: F….. M…..

Age Group: 21 – 30……

31 – 40…….

41 – 50…….

51 – 60 …….

61 – 70……..

Employed: Full Time….. Part Time…..

Job Title:……………………………

Years in present position: less than a year…..

1 – 5………..

6 – 10………

11 – 15…….

16 – 20…….

More than 20……..

Marital Status: Single……..

Single with children……..

Married/ Spouse…….

Married with children…….

Workplace

1. Talk to me a bit about your work.

   a. What do you do every day?

   b. What are your main responsibilities?

   c. Who do you report to?

   d. How often are you being evaluated?

   e. Do you feel there is potential for development/promotion within your organisation?

2. How many men and women are in your line of work within your organisation?

   a. Do you feel men and women are treated equally within your organisation?

   b. Do you feel men and women have the same opportunities for promotion/ development?

   c. Are you aware of any family-friendly policies within your organisation (flexible hours, working from home)?

   d. Are there any child-care facilities within your organisation?

   e. Do you feel that working mothers within your organisation are in a disadvantaged position than everyone else?

3. Do you feel networking is important for your job?

   a. Do you feel that men are better than women at networking for work?

4. Do you feel mentoring is important?

   a. Do you have a mentor?

   b. Has it helped you?

Family

1. Talk to me a bit about you family.

   a. Do you have children?

   b. Who takes care of them?

   c. Did you take on maternity/paternity leave when they were born?

   d. Has this affected your job?

2. Who is responsible for the household (cooking, cleaning)?

   a. Do you have outside help?

3. Do you feel that family responsibilities have affected your job in any way?

4. Does your spouse support your career choices?

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Childhood

1. When did you decide to become an accountant/academic?

    a. Did you have any other dreams while growing up?

2. Did you have support by your parents?

    a. Did they support your decision or did they have other plans/dreams for you?

3. Tell me a few things about your childhood.

    a. Where did you grow up?

    b. How many members were there in your family? Did your sisters/brother have the same opportunities for education?

4. Was your mother working while you were growing up?

    a. Who was responsible for the household?

    b. Who was responsible for raising the children?

5. If you could do everything over what would you change?

Society

1. Do you feel that there is gender discrimination in the Cypriot society in general?

    a. In what areas?

2. Do you feel that women are in a more disadvantaged position than men when it comes to household responsibilities?

3. Do you feel that motherhood affects women's progression in their workplace?

4. Do you feel that women stay at home to raise their family by choice or are they socially/culturally driven?

5. Do you feel that social/cultural norms should change/evolve in any way?

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