

GENDER BALANCE POWER MAP

National study: Belgium

Co-inspiration between
social and conventional enterprises
to promote equal access
to decision making positions





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Co-inspiration between social and conventional enterprises
to promote equal access to decision making positions in Belgium

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Belgium ranks fifth in the “Gender Equality Index 2015 - Measuring gender equality in the European Union 2005-2012” of the European Institute for Gender Equality. Yet it only ranks 14th when it comes to the evaluation of women’s participation in the Boards of the largest listed companies¹: only 13% are women in Belgium versus 16% in the EU-28. The situation has slightly improved over time². Several measures have been adopted in the last 10 years: the 2013 report from the Institute for Equality between Women and Men showed that the enactment of a law on quotas in 2011 in Belgium had an impact on the share of women in Boards of listed enterprises and the first 100 unlisted enterprises in Belgium, reaching 10% in 2012 versus 6% in 2008³. Although the increase is still rather limited, these results are a major stride forward. The legislation on gender quotas being quite recent, it will need time to bear its fruits.

Unlike the gender quota legislation, Belgium is one of the first European Member States to have developed a legislative framework for social enterprises. Even though a legal status for organisations of the social economy (such as associations, foundations...) has been in existence since 1921, the social economy was only defined in 1990. More recently in 2004, the Federal State and the federated entities endorsed a cooperative agreement on a common definition of the “plural economy”. In this agreement, the social economy is considered as one of the two pillars of the plural economy (next to the corporate social responsibility) and is defined as an ecosystem of social enterprises characterized by a business-oriented momentum (paid employment, economic risk-taking...), a purpose of service to the community or to its members rather than a profit-oriented purpose. It is also characterised by a democratic decision-making process and an autonomous management.

In 2015, we conducted two in-depth qualitative case studies, one in a conventional enterprise and one in a social enterprise in Belgium employing less than 65 persons. The analysis focused on the opportunities and barriers women faced along the process of getting access to decision-making positions. The present research reveals that both enterprises invite women to hold middle and low-level management positions which are as a consequence mainly occupied by women. Top management positions are however dominated, if not exclusively held, by men. The findings clearly show that the national legislative framework has no impact on small enterprises and that the resources scarcity (lack of time, of money, of formal HR services, etc.) is a strong factor hindering the development of sound talent search programs or equality gender policies. Even though both types of enterprises have very different corporate cultures (a gender-neutral one in the conventional enterprise; a gender-sensitive one in the social enterprise), both organisations tend to reproduce unconsciously gender stereotypes. The small size of the organisations however plays in favour of a broader range of arrangements and informal support structures helping women both fulfilling their professional objectives and balancing their private and professional lives.

¹ EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR GENDER EQUALITY, 2015: 55.

² See EIGE’s index trends at <http://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/gender-equality-index/2012/country/BE> (accessed July 24, 2015).

³ IEFH, 2012: 104.





INTRODUCTION

One of the most important activities of the Gender Balance Power Map project consists in carrying out national qualitative studies aimed at taking stock of the levels of participation and access of women to decision-making positions in conventional enterprises and enterprises of the social economy in each partner country. The comparative results of these field investigations are looked at against every cultural, historical and political country's background which has been shaping the development of this gender-equality process in the economic decision-making bodies.

In this national study, we focus on the policy framework likely to influence the gender balance in corporate managerial and executive positions, the education, the evaluation and remuneration processes as well as the representation of women in the selected enterprises. Further to several sound studies published by public institutes, research centres and civil society organisations in Belgium, this research aims at enriching our knowledge of the gender-equality development under the angle of the real access to decision-making positions in Belgium. The partnership of the Gender Balance Power Map project decided that the method to achieve this goal would be to conduct qualitative sociological case studies in two enterprises (one conventional enterprise and one social enterprise).

The basic premise of this work was that the gender factor operates differently in conventional and social enterprises and therefore influences the access of women to management positions in a distinct way in both kinds of enterprises. The goal of this study is subsequently to suggest a potential answer to the following question: 'How does gender influence the access of women to decision-making positions and to what extent this influence differs in both enterprises?'

In order to answer these questions, we selected one conventional and one social enterprise in Belgium. Both of them were small organisations employing less than 65 persons and operating in a female-dominated sector. In each enterprise, 3 managers and 6 female employees were interviewed. In the first contextual part of the study, is analysed the policy framework regulating both types of enterprises. Then is analysed the organisational level and how the selected enterprises actually generate opportunities and barriers to the access of women to senior business decision-making levels. Finally, we discuss the results found in each enterprise in a comparative perspective.





CHAPTER 1: POLICY FRAMEWORK

1. CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF GENDER EQUALITY

The path towards equality between men and women in Belgium has not been a smooth one and the current achievements in this area are the result of a long process. Women have been fighting for gender equality since the 19th century. They first obtained political rights; the recognition of their role in the economy came later with the gradual acquisition of economic rights over the 20th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, Belgian women started to be recognised some economic rights. In 1900⁴, they obtained the right to open their own bank accounts and to sign labour contracts. They were still legally considered as minors and their financial possibilities were limited until the 1970s.

In contrast with other European countries like France, Germany or the UK, World War I did not represent actually a starting point for the emancipation of women in Belgium since they did not replace men in the industries. After the war, the vote of women divided the catholic party, the socialists and the liberals⁵. After many heated parliamentary debates, women became eligible to all elections but their votes remained limited to communal elections: at this time, the female electorate was considered as a new challenge in the political spheres as it was thought that the increase of the number of voters could change the political equilibriums. During the interwar years, feminist groups kept fighting for the extension of voting rights for women, for a greater economic equality and for democracy⁶. They considered the growing influence of extreme-right parties as a threat to women's rights and freedoms. The economic crisis of 1929 also affected women's situation⁷. Since 1934, in order to protect men's employment, quotas of married women in the public administrations have been defined and prescribed.

However World War II brought to halt the fight for women's rights and all the efforts were directed towards the war effort. After the German defeat, political debates started again and women obtained the same political rights as men in 1948, after three years of intense debates between conservatives and socialists. Since then women have been allowed to vote and be elected in all types of elections. Despite the legislative progress, women were not yet adequately represented in the political sphere: until the end of the 1960s, only 3% of women were elected to the Belgian Parliament⁸.

The beginnings of the European integration gave a boost to gender equality in the economic field as the Treaty of Rome signed by Belgium in 1957 stipulated the principle of equal pay in the newly born European Community. Article 119 stipulated that: "*Each Member State shall during the first stage*

⁴ http://www.corpscite.be/servlet/Repository/Ligne_du_Temps_pdf?IDR=5601 (accessed March 23, 2015).

⁵ http://www.avg-carhif.be/cms/dossier_fpol_fr.php#entredeux (accessed March 23, 2015).

⁶ KEYMOLEN D., COENEN M.-T., 1991: 50.

⁷ http://www.avg-carhif.be/cms/dossier_fpol_fr.php (accessed March 19, 2015).

⁸ http://www.avg-carhif.be/cms/dossier_fpol_fr.php#entredeux (accessed March 19, 2015).





*ensure and subsequently maintain the application of the principle that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work*⁹.

Despite further political initiatives since 1957, like laws on gender pay equality¹⁰, gender inequalities have not been removed in Belgium: a difference of 10 percentage points can be noted between employment rates of women (62.1%) and men (72.3%). When focusing on the labour market, we also observe a gender pay gap of 10.2% in favour of men holding similar positions¹¹. The labour market itself is highly segmented: women tend to be dominant in occupations such as professionals, clerks, service and market sales workers and elementary occupations¹². Another distinction between men and women on the labour market is the different types of contracts offered to both, i.e. only 8.9% of female workers are self-employed compared with 16.5% of male workers. When women are hired as employees, they are much more often employed part-time (43.6% of female employees) than their male counterparts (only 9.7%). Women are also employed under fixed-term contracts more often than men but the gap is less significant than the gender difference in part-time and full-time jobs (9.3% women work part-time whereas only 7.1% men do so)¹³.

Yet, another problem subsisted, although women acquired new political and economic rights, they were still underrepresented in the highest positions of companies: they represented only 14% of the Boards' members in the largest listed companies in Belgium in 2013¹⁴. This phenomenon has generated a new concept called "glass ceiling" which helped give visibility to the problem recognised as a social and political one. Even if women are more educated than men, they do not enjoy the same wages and do not hold the same professional positions. Eurostat shows that in 2013 Belgian women tended to be more educated than men, 38.3% of women between 25 and 64 years old had a tertiary degree versus 32.8% of men of the same generation.

Following the publication of several studies, the political debate tended to focus on practical solutions to the effects of the problem, such as childcare solutions, rather than on the roots of women's underrepresentation at the senior executive levels of companies. Furthermore, most enterprises did not develop any long term strategies for ensuring a more equal participation of women in their Boards of Directors. However according to Mercer *"Economists have calculated that eliminating the gap between male and female employment could boost the GDP"*¹⁵, their better integration in decision-making positions is not considered as a priority¹⁶ by enterprises.

As a matter of fact, Belgian women remain much more affected by professional precariousness than their male counterparts. According to an IFEH¹⁷ study, in 2010, 8.6% of women were unemployed in

⁹ Treaty of Rome, Article 119, 1957.

¹⁰ Loi du 16 mars 1971, Article 47 bis, sur la protection de la rémunération des travailleurs.

¹¹ Eurostat, 2011.

¹² Eurostat, 2012.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Eurostat, 2013.

¹⁵ MERCER, 2014: 13.

¹⁶ MERCER, 2014 : 57.

¹⁷ IEFH, 2011: 98.





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Belgium. 44.3% of women in Belgium had a part-time work contract¹⁸ and, as a consequence of the crisis, this rate has been constantly increasing since 2008¹⁹. Finally, almost 10% of women have only temporary labour contracts.

2. GENDER EQUALITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Since 2002, the Belgian Constitution recognises the gender equality. Article 10 stipulates that “*equality between men and women shall be guaranteed*”²⁰. This decision came rather late as the result of a protracted mobilization of women’s associations. International institutions also played a role in the constitutional recognition of equality between men and women. As a matter of fact, the Beijing Women’s Conference (1995) which aimed at improving women’s rights in the world, led to the signature of a protocol by the 189 different countries represented at the Conference. The Belgian government was part of the countries which signed the report and the action plan²¹. Even though the texts were non-binding they had an impact on politics illustrated by the adoption of new measures in Belgium, such as the law of 16 December 2002 creating a Belgian institute for gender equality.

The Institute for Equality between Women and Men (IEWM) is an organisation that depends²² on the government and provides data concerning the situation of women in Belgium. It promotes gender equality in the professional sphere, as well as the fight against violence and discrimination. In order to achieve these goals, IEWM publishes studies, creates guides for the administrations and organises dissemination and awareness-raising events. The Institute also monitors the enforcement of federal and regional policies concerning equality between women and men.

Labour unions also play an important role in the implementation of gender mainstreaming policies in Belgium²³. In 2004, the three largest Belgian labour unions (FGTB, CGSLB and CSC) signed a “gender mainstreaming charter”²⁴. In this document, they committed themselves to establish gender mainstreaming policies in their organisations. FGTB, the socialist labour union, made also available guides for women and continues to support them when they want to reduce wage gaps in their enterprises²⁵.

In Belgium, there are three main levels of governance: the federal level, the federated level and the local level (the cities). The federal level is represented by the Belgian State; since the 1970s, several constitutional reforms have gradually reduced the powers of the Federal State which have been

¹⁸ IEFH, 2011: 123.

¹⁹ Eurobarometer on weekly working time for full-time and part-time work from 2009 to 2013.

²⁰ Belgian Constitution, Titre II, Article 10.

²¹ UNO, 1995.

²² Arrêté royal du 4 avril 2003 portant réorganisation du Conseil de l’égalité des chances entre hommes et femmes, Législation pour l’égalité hommes femmes, article 22.

²³ ARDURA, A., SILVERA, R., 2002: 23.

²⁴ FGTB, CGSLB, CSC, 2004: 5.

²⁵ FGTB, 2015: 15.





transferred to federated entities. The federated level is subdivided into two kinds of actors: the three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region) and the communities (the Flemish one, the French one and the German one). Communities hold the responsibility for education, social and cultural policies while regions have been assigned the economic, employment, territorial development and housing issues²⁶. In 2015, the 6th reform of the State entered into force and a broad array of powers were transferred to the regions which have exercised henceforth more competencies than the Federal State. Nowadays in Belgium, the prerogatives of public power are generally in the hands of the regions and the Federal State is complementary thereto.

At the instigation of EU-gender mainstreaming policies, the different Belgian levels of governance progressively implemented legislations within their own remit. The European Commission adopted a first text about gender mainstreaming in 1996²⁷, just after the Beijing Conference. The integration of gender mainstreaming into the policy process was considered by the European Commission as one of the best ways to fight discrimination against women²⁸. Therefore, the Belgian government was asked to include gender mainstreaming policies and their budget impact in its legislation. It did so by implementing gender mainstreaming policies in Belgium in 2007. A law voted on 12 January 2007²⁹ was aimed at controlling the successful implementation of the Beijing proposals in the regional administrations. In its 2009-2014 Regional Policy Declaration, the Federal government also encouraged regional authorities to roll out gender mainstreaming policies in their own administrations.

At the local level, some public administrations took the proposed initiatives of the Beijing Women's Conference very seriously. Subsequently, the government of the Brussels-Capital Region was the first local government to include gender equality in its public policies by initiating gender mainstreaming in its administration in 2012³⁰. The gender mainstreaming program of the Brussels-Capital Region was launched with five main measures³¹:

- Increasing awareness of public agents about gender issues;
- Improving the coordination of local actors;
- Collecting data about target populations;
- Observing the impact of budgetary allocations on target populations;
- Taking into account gender equality in the public procurement assignment of contracts.

The other Belgian levels of governance gradually initiated their gender mainstreaming policies with the support of IEWM³².

²⁶ CHAMBRE DES REPRÉSENTANTS DE BELGIQUE, 2014.

²⁷ ARDURA, A., SILVERA, R., 2002: 4.

²⁸ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2004: 5.

²⁹ Loi du 12 janvier 2007 visant au contrôle de l'application des résolutions de la conférence mondiale sur les femmes réunie à Pékin en septembre 1995 et intégrant la dimension du genre dans l'ensemble des politiques fédérales.

³⁰ BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION, 2012.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² IEFH, 2007: 10.





3. GENDER EQUALITY LEGISLATION

The first laws dealing with gender equality in Belgium concerned the labour market and the fight against wage gaps between women and men. It started in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome, which introduced the guarantee of equal pay for men and women³³. In Belgium, the law of 16 March 1971³⁴ introduced the right for female employees to sue their company in case they would not apply equal pay to men and women employees. The latter law has never been implemented. A new one was voted in 2012³⁵ in order to fight against unequal pay between women and men. On 22 April 2012, a law was voted with a view to shrinking the pay gap between men and women. Social partners had been involved in the drafting of the law which was reinforced by a royal decree in 2013³⁶. The government appointed a conciliator in 2014 whose role was to manage pay gap litigations and issued an evaluation grid to analyse the wage structure³⁷. Despite all legislative endeavours, the wage gap between women and men in Belgium remains some 20%³⁸.

Following the first equal pay bill in 1971, Belgium has developed gradually its legislative arsenal concerning gender equality at work. The law of 4 August 1978³⁹ prohibited all forms of discrimination against women on the labour market. On 10 May 2007, the transposition of a European Directive⁴⁰ paved the way to a new law introducing a whole set of measures for the protection of women on the labour market. For instance, it offered ways and means to strengthen the struggle against discriminations on the labour market and sexual harassment⁴¹ started being punished.

If the Belgian legislator did take into account direct gender discrimination only, indirect discrimination was also dealt with in legal provisions which enhanced the reconciliation between family and professional lives. As a matter of fact, it was demonstrated that legislations improving childcare solutions and offering more flexibility were one way to improve equality between women and men⁴². The law of 12 December 2001 introduced the “time credit” concept allowing an employee to dedicate more time to his/her children’s education, to personal training or to medical care and support⁴³. Women were then entitled to take up to 36 months of time credit until their children are 8⁴⁴, provided that their enterprises had signed a collective agreement. Time credit is calculated according to a number of parameters such as its form, the age of the worker and it can be added to family

³³ Treaty of Rome, Article 119, 1957.

³⁴ Loi du 16 mars 1971, Article 47 bis, sur la protection de la rémunération des travailleurs.

³⁵ Loi du 22 avril 2012 visant à lutter contre l'écart salarial entre hommes et femmes.

³⁶ Arrêté royal du 17 août 2013 portant exécution du chapitre 4, section 2, de la loi du 22 avril 2012.

³⁷ Arrêté royal du 25 avril 2014 relatif au rapport d'analyse sur la structure de la rémunération des travailleurs.

³⁸ STATBEL, 2014.

³⁹ Loi du 4 août 1978 portant sur la réorientation économique : « Art. 116. (Voir note sous-titre V.) En application de l'article 6 de la Constitution, le principe de l'égalité de traitement entre hommes et femmes s'applique à l'accès à l'emploi, à la promotion professionnelle, à l'orientation, à la formation, au perfectionnement et au recyclage professionnels, à l'accès à une profession indépendante ainsi qu'aux conditions de travail ».

⁴⁰ Directive 2000/78/EC, 27 November 2000.

⁴¹ Loi du 10 mai 2007 tendant à lutter contre certaines formes de discrimination, Articles 4 and 6.

⁴² MARON, L., MEULDERS, D., O'DORCHAI, S., 2008: 348.

⁴³ Arrêté royal du 12 décembre 2001 pris en exécution du chapitre IV de la loi du 10 août 2001 relative à la conciliation entre l'emploi et la qualité de vie concernant le système du crédit-temps, la diminution de carrière et la réduction des prestations de travail à mi-temps..

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*





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allowances⁴⁵. The law of 1 July 2002⁴⁶ completed this first measure by granting men an equal entitlement to the parental leave: since then, mothers and fathers are equally entitled to take a parental paid leave in order to raise their child or children. In Belgium, the parental leave lasts 12 weeks⁴⁷ and can be shared between the two parents.

With regards to the political participation of women, the first law about women's representation in the Parliament was introduced in 1982 by Paula d'Hondt⁴⁸. The law did not receive the green light of the Council of State as it would supposedly entail a restricted choice for the voters. However in the 1990s, a large number of political parties recognised that women's underrepresentation in politics⁴⁹ needed to be addressed. The Smet-Tobback law introduced in 1994 by both MPs Miet Smet and Louis Tobback tried to improve the representation of women in the elections. This law proposed to introduce quotas of women on the parties' lists of candidates, i.e. men could no longer account for more than 2/3 of candidates⁵⁰. Even though there was still no parity, equality in politics was making some headway⁵¹. However, two types of elections were not covered by the scope of the law, namely the elections to the European Parliament and to the Belgian Federal Chambers⁵². In 2002, two new laws provided for the obligation of parity in every single election in Belgium⁵³. With these new laws, the first two candidates of a party's list had to be a man and a woman⁵⁴. At regional level, the Walloon region put into force new measures to promote gender equality in the policy-making process. Since the 2003 decree, quotas of women have been complied with in governing bodies of public agencies⁵⁵.

Finally, the gender impact on public budgets was mentioned in the law of 12 January 2007 imposing on public authorities to include a gender dimension in their budgetary plans from 2011 on⁵⁶. A guide was produced by IEWM to help implement this dimension in the regional public budgets. The COCOF, one of the first community administrations which launched gender mainstreaming programmes has a gender-oriented budget. Other regional and community governments have been striving to apply these measures in social policies, for example.

The compliance with the law on gender equality is monitored by IEWM which has been endowed with legal powers to this end⁵⁷. All the gender mainstreaming policies are evaluated in cooperation with IEWM as well as the instruments developed by local governments. The auditing process of IEWM is

⁴⁵ <http://www.jobat.be/fr/articles/ai-je-droit-a-une-indemnite-si-je-prends-un-credit-temps/> (accessed March 27, 2015).

⁴⁶ MARON L., MEULDERS D., O'DORCHAI S., 2008: 355.

⁴⁷ MARON L., MEULDERS D., O'DORCHAI S., 2008: 353.

⁴⁸ KEYMOLEN, D., COENEN, M.-T., 1991: 258.

⁴⁹ IEFH, 2005: 17.

⁵⁰ Loi du 24 mai 1994 visant à promouvoir une répartition équilibrée des hommes et des femmes sur les listes de candidatures aux élections, Article 117 bis.

⁵¹ IEFH, 2005: 15.

⁵² IEFH, 2005: 16.

⁵³ Loi du 18 juillet 2002 assurant une présence égale des hommes et des femmes sur les listes de candidatures aux élections des Chambres législatives fédérales et du Conseil de la Communauté germanophone et loi du 17 juin 2002 assurant une présence égale des hommes et des femmes sur les listes de candidats aux élections du Parlement européen.

⁵⁴ Loi du 18 juillet 2002, Article 22 bis.

⁵⁵ Décret du 15 mai 2003.

⁵⁶ Circulaire relative au budget 2011.

⁵⁷ Arrêté royal du 4 avril 2003 portant réorganisation du Conseil de l'égalité des chances entre hommes et femmes, Législation pour l'égalité hommes femmes, article 22.





transparent and independent. The assessment of gender mainstreaming policies within the COCOF administration is performed every year⁵⁸. Concerning gender wage gaps, the main labour unions, especially FGTB (the socialist labour union)⁵⁹ and CSC⁶⁰ (the Christian confederation of labour unions), monitor the implementation of gender equality laws in enterprises and advise the employees.

4. REGULATION ON WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS

The regulation supporting a better representation of women in economic decision making positions came into existence only recently in Belgium⁶¹ as a result of the mobilization of feminist associations and the production of institutional investigations⁶². In 2006, IEWM observed that 45% of the largest Belgian enterprises (BEL20) did not have any woman in their Boards of Directors. Less than 10% of these enterprises had more than two women⁶³. This wake-up call for the political world led it to consider seriously the issue, under a renewed impulse of both the European institutions and associations.

Quotas represent a relatively new policy tool in Belgium to ensure gender equality in political and economic decision making positions⁶⁴. Quotas requiring a minimum number of women in Belgian enterprises' Boards of Directors have only been in place since 2011. This decision was essentially promoted by the government and feminist organisations. Business spheres were to a great extent against the measure considering that it was improper for a better representation of women in the economic decision-making process⁶⁵.

According to a survey of the labour union for independent workers (SNI)⁶⁶, 81% directors of small and medium-sized enterprises – SMEs – were against the law of 28 July 2011⁶⁷ claiming that they should be allowed to choose the best candidates for their executive governing bodies, irrespective of the gender dimension. The Belgian Council of State, the highest administrative court in Belgium, was skeptical about the relevance of the law. Though it endorsed the need for more gender equality in Belgian companies the Council of State deemed disproportionate the sanctions against Boards of Directors⁶⁸. Despite these oppositions to the implementation of quotas in Belgian companies, the law

⁵⁸ <http://www.genderatwork.be/wp-content/uploads/Portfolio-2014-FR.pdf> (accessed March 23, 2015).

⁵⁹ <http://www.fgtb.be/web/guest/egalite-femmes-hommes> (accessed March 27, 2015).

⁶⁰ <https://www.csc-en-ligne.be/csc-en-ligne/brochures/egalite-hommes-femmes/brochures-egalite-hommes-femmes.html> (accessed March 27, 2015).

⁶¹ STOJANOVIC, N., 2014.

⁶² IEFH, 2008; Loi du 28 juillet 2011.

⁶³ IEFH, 2008: 18.

⁶⁴ IEFH, 2008: 2.

⁶⁵ <http://trends.levif.be/economie/people/femmes-les-pme-belges-ne-veulent-pas-des-quotas/article-normal-200407.html> (accessed March 24, 2015).

⁶⁶ <http://www.cdh-parlementfederal.be/?p=1743> (accessed March 24, 2015).

⁶⁷ <http://www.nsz.be/fr/nouvelles/politique/des-quotas-pour-le-nombre-de-femmes-dans-le-conseil-dadministration-pas-une-bonne-idee/> (accessed March 24, 2015).

⁶⁸ http://www.rtf.be/info/belgique/detail_critiques-du-conseil-d-etat-sur-les-quotas-de-femmes-dans-les-ca?id=6140723 (accessed March 31, 2015).





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was voted, enacted and even reinforced two years later, on 20 November 2013, when the European Parliament voted a proposed directive on improving the gender balance⁶⁹ at first reading.

On 28 July 2011 the law was implemented at the country's federal level. In Belgium, quotas were only mandatory for Board of Directors in public companies and companies listed on the stock market. The implementation process is regularly controlled. Indeed companies are required to provide a public report every year about the representation of women in their Boards. As soon as the law was passed, public companies had to comply with the quota and subsequently include progressively at least one third of women in their Boards of Directors. Companies listed on the stock market employing⁷⁰ more than 250 people have been given six years to implement it⁷¹ while the smallest listed companies (less than 250 people) have been given eight years⁷². Regarding non-listed companies, no specific rule has been set up for the representation of women in their Boards. Only Wallonia passed a decree in 2014 introducing a quota of 1/3 for the boards of non-profit associations benefiting from an authorization of the Walloon region⁷³.

Several sanctions are listed in the law for infringements of the provisions on quotas. A court can rule null and void the decisions taken by a Board which would not comply with the legal requirements⁷⁴. The benefits offered to Board members can also be removed⁷⁵. Even so, these legal requirements are often ignored in the absence of real incentives – of a financial nature, for instance – to foster women's participation in the governing bodies of companies. Such a shortcoming is all the more unfortunate as companies do not seem to set up long term strategies for a better representation of women in their Boards of Directors⁷⁶. With regard to this trend, IEWM has made available several tools to promote women's participation and presence in business decision-making positions: IEWM provides, among other things, a database of good practices in the area of gender equality in businesses and publishes regularly progress reports⁷⁷ (see Chapter 1.2). No genuine coercive instruments have been implemented as a follow-up to the enactment of the Belgian law on quotas. It is therefore hardly surprising that its effects remain limited⁷⁸. If some women do hold senior executive positions in businesses, gender parity in Boards does not seem to be looming any larger in Belgium.

⁶⁹ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2013.

⁷⁰ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2013 (2).

⁷¹ Loi du 28 juillet 2011, Chapitre 2, Paragraphe 2.

⁷² Loi du 28 juillet 2011, Chapitre 6, Paragraphe 2.

⁷³ <http://socialsante.wallonie.be/?q=action-sociale/egalite-des-chances/legislation/egalite-hommes-femmes> (accessed November 16, 2015).

⁷⁴ Loi du 28 juillet 2011, Chapitre 2, Article 2.

⁷⁵ Loi du 28 juillet 2011, Chapitre 4, Article 5.

⁷⁶ MERCER, 2008: 27.

⁷⁷ http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/fr/domaines_action/emploi/ (accessed March 24, 2015).

⁷⁸ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2013 (1).





5. SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISES⁷⁹

A. DEFINITIONS

The concept of social economy was first formalized 25 years ago, in 1990, by the Walloon Region Economic and Social Council (CESW)⁸⁰. Further to this first formalization of the sector, a couple of other slightly different definitions were introduced in the following years. Hence a second definition came up in 1997 when the Flemish Platform for Social Economy (VOSEC, now called In-C) gathered for the first time about thirty organisations from the Flemish third sector. The last one appeared in 2004 when the Belgian Federal State and its federated entities endorsed in a cooperative agreement a common definition of the “plural economy”. In this agreement, the social economy was described as one of the two pillars of the plural economy, the other one being the corporate social responsibility.

Although three definitions coexist, similar criteria enable to identify organisations belonging to the social economy sector. First of all, social enterprises are “enterprises”; this means that they are business-oriented (paid employment, economic risk-taking...) and involved in the production of goods and services to meet their consumers’ needs. The social character of their activities is determined by three additional criteria:

- (1) purpose of service to the community or to its members rather than profit-making – that is to say that social enterprises integrate in their set of values the primacy of people over the capital;
- (2) democratic decision-making process;
- (3) autonomous management.

Marginal differences can be detected in the three definitions of the social economy. For instance, the Flemish approach includes principles as transparency, quality and sustainability. However, all these definitions refer to a legal framework granting a proper status to social enterprises in Belgium.

B. LEGISLATION

There is not one single legal framework in Belgium. As in many other countries of the European Union, social enterprises can take on different legal forms: there are five of them. Historically the companies willing to be recognised as social enterprises in Belgium were registered as corporate bodies characterised by the priority given to social objectives such as non-profit associations or foundations (since the law of 1921), cooperatives (since the creation of the National Council of Cooperation in 1955) or mutual societies (since the law of 1990).

⁷⁹ The definitions and legal data presented here come from MERTENS, S., MARÉE, M. 2008. *Social Economy in Belgium : Definition*, E-note n°4.
⁸⁰ CESW, 1990.





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In 1995, a fifth legal status, called “company with a social purpose” (“entreprise à finalité sociale”, in French)⁸¹ was created in order to allow commercial organisations such as public limited companies or private limited companies to have a social purpose. In such companies, profit is not an end per se but rather a means to achieve the business social purpose. Until 1995, no legal form existed to recognise this category of organisations carrying out for-profit commercial activities for social purposes⁸². Until now, the legal status of a “company with a social purpose” has been used to a very limited extent. In 2010, the number of companies with a social purpose covered by this legal status was estimated at 453 representing 6,563 employees in Wallonia⁸³.

It should be noted that, partly with the cooperation agreement of 2004 between the Federal State and the federated entities and entirely since the enforcement of the sixth State reform at the beginning of 2014, the responsibility for the “social economy” was altogether transferred from the Federal State to the regions⁸⁴. Following this regionalization of the social economy policy, two Belgian regions – Wallonia and Brussels-Capital Region – passed laws defining the social economy as a whole, respectively in 2008 and 2012⁸⁵. The criteria that define the social economy in these two laws are the same as those laid down in the definition of the Walloon Region Economic and Social Council. In these texts, were introduced additional technical elements regarding low-skilled persons’ integration, job seekers or recipients of minimum social benefits.

C. KEY FIGURES⁸⁶

More than 16,700 social enterprises were registered in Belgium whereas there are 204,774 companies in the private sector (the latter figure does not include social enterprises). This represents more than 367,664 full-time equivalent jobs: hence, social enterprises represent 11.8% of full-time equivalent jobs in Belgium. Unsurprisingly, the great majority of jobs in social enterprises have been created in non-for-profit associations (90%). Mutual societies account for 3.6% of them; foundations 2.6%; businesses with a social purpose 2.5% and cooperatives 1.4%. Additionally, almost half of all jobs in social enterprises are jobs in the health and social work sectors.

A qualitative analysis of these jobs reveals that, in social enterprises, women represent the major part (69.8%) of the employees while they only represent 35.5% of the workers in the rest of the private sector (figures from 2012). It appears clearly that women are more often employed part-time (66% of

⁸¹ “The Belgian ‘company with a social purpose’ and the Italian law on social enterprise define a label that crosses the boundaries of all legal forms and can be adopted by various types of organization (not only cooperatives and non-profit organizations, but also investor-owned organizations, for instance), provided they define an explicit social aim and that they are not dedicated to the enrichment of their members.” In DEFOURNY, J. and NYSENS, M., 2010: 7.

⁸² CRAMA, M., 2014.

⁸³ MESMER, 2014: 11.

⁸⁴ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2014: 3.

⁸⁵ WALLOON REGION, Décret relatif à l'économie sociale, 31 December 2008; BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION, Ordonnance relative à l'économie sociale et à l'agrément des entreprises d'insertion et des initiatives locales de développement de l'emploi en vue de l'octroi de subventions, 26 April 2012.

⁸⁶ The data presented in this part come from the second Barometer of the Social enterprises in Belgium, a study conducted in 2015 by the Social entrepreneurs Academy. The study is available here: <http://www.academie-es.ulq.ac.be/Barometre2015.pdf> (accessed September 08, 2015).





GENDER BALANCE POWER MAP

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women employees) than men (27.3% of men), but the same difference can be observed in the rest of the economy (54.9% of women are employed part-time compared with 15.7% of men).

Finally, a regional comparison allows us to highlight regional specificities. Indeed, whereas the number of social enterprises is more or less the same in Flanders and in Wallonia, full-time equivalent jobs are quite significantly more numerous in Wallonia (19.5% of the private-sector employment) as compared to Flanders (14.8%) and the Brussels-Capital Region (14.4%).





CHAPTER 2: OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS FOR WOMEN IN ECONOMIC DECISION-MAKING, QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN ENTERPRISES⁸⁷

1. CONVENTIONAL ENTERPRISE

A. THE ENTERPRISE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

The conventional enterprise offers consulting services to businesses willing to outsource the management of their human resources (HR). Their core fields of expertise are recruiting, screening and assessing the workers; training and developing the employees; managing the payrolls and bonuses; supporting HR projects and strategies; and managing the outplacement of employees and their careers. The organisation is regulated by the legislation on “public limited companies”. The company is based in Brussels and employs 41 persons (37.6 full-time equivalents), 28 of them being full time, 13 of them being part-time (figures of 2013). The 11 men are employed full time; out of the 30 women employees, only 17 are working full-time. In 2013, the turnover was €6,446,065.

Regarding the structure of the organisation, the conventional enterprise belongs to the national subsidiary of an even bigger international group. The subsidiary is composed of several legal entities (inter alia social enterprises as well) that offer a wide range of services to businesses of all sizes (SMEs, large companies, international groups) and all kinds of entrepreneurs (starters, self-employed workers, etc.). The conventional enterprise chosen as a sample reports to the international consulting business unit. This unit is part of a group of five that are all accountable to a Board of Directors.

The gender composition of the management positions in the subsidiary is not a gender-equality exemplary model though it very much depends on the hierarchic level: the higher we climbed the managerial ladder of the group, the fewer women we found. Men dominate senior management positions in the group, with only one woman being head of a business unit. They all gather in a management committee which reports to the Board of Directors whose members are only men. Having a closer look at the public limited company of our sample enabled us to discover that the organisation of the company is rather complex as several services regulated by the same legal status of the conventional enterprise do not all belong to the same business unit in the group.

Regarding the conventional enterprise of our sample, it is composed of two main departments: HR solutions (including activities such as outsourcing, international employment services and legal advice)

⁸⁷ The following study compares the women's access to decision making positions in “conventional” and “social enterprises”. The expression “conventional enterprise” is based on the established terminology used in the academic literature when referring to business companies not having the characteristics of social entrepreneurship (see BORZAGA and DEFOURNYOR, 2001 or more recent FATHI, PEROTIN and GAGO, 2012). Whereas “conventional entrepreneurs” measure performance in profit and return, “social entrepreneurs” additionally evaluate their social impact (BORZAGA and DEFOURNYOR, 2001).





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and HR consulting (including talent and development, recruitment and selection, outsourcing, outplacement, HR projects and surveys). These two divisions are managed by women. The legal representative of the public limited company is left to one of the men Board members (also CEO of the group) but the latter does not really take part in the management of the conventional enterprise as the heads of departments actually report to the head of the business unit they belong to (see the chart below): one of them is managed by a man (“International Markets” business unit), the other one is managed by a woman (the “Social Services” business unit).

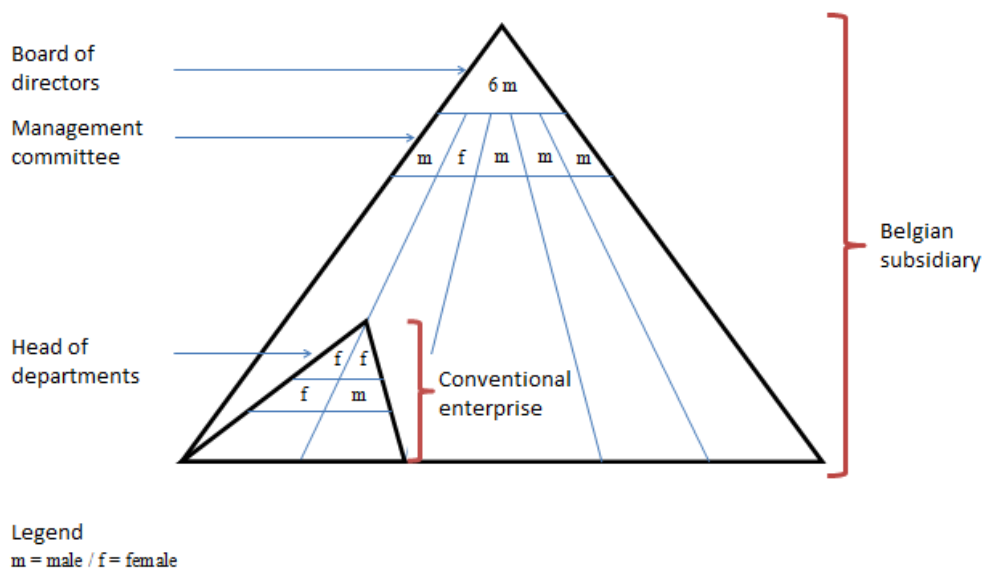


Chart 1 – Organisational chart of the conventional enterprise

The complex relations between the conventional enterprise and the international group will not be further explored in our analysis as we will focus on the conventional enterprise per se. However, it should still be noted that one of the female top-managers we interviewed expressed some difficulties with regard to the gap that existed between the conventional enterprise as an autonomous organisation and the imperative to report to the Board of Directors. Her department operates fairly independently within the subsidiary. Consequently, she finds herself between the two levels: (1) upper management of the whole subsidiary which she describes as rather controlling and very much performance-oriented and (2) the team working for her department where the management style is very participative and autonomy is central. She says that sometimes she has difficulties in achieving certain results because of the highly participative management style. When she fails to fulfil some targets, she is the only one blamed by the upper management of the corporation. However the upper





management does not want to interfere at the team level and only exerts pressure on the manager and sanctions her.

The conventional enterprise being a rather independent legal unit in the group, we will now only focus on its internal organisation in terms of education, evaluation, remuneration and promotion even though these dimensions may be decided at a upper level in the group.

B. WOMEN IN EDUCATION, EVALUATION AND REMUNERATION PROCESSES

The organisation being an expert in human resources management, the processes dealing with education, evaluation and remuneration are rather well defined. The feminised work environment is not a synonym of a greater awareness of gender equality in employment. The organisation tends to adopt a rather gender neutral approach, developing processes and arrangements for all its employees with no specific objective to support women's career development.

Gender equality in the education process

A lot of training courses are provided to both employees and managers. The first ones are invited to undergo training courses on the basis of the evaluation carried by the line manager. The serious efforts and resources invested by the enterprise in training provided to its employees are visible in the wide range of options made available: if professional trainings offer to increase technical or commercial skills linked to the consulting missions of the employees, well-being training is also made available such as time management training, mindfulness or well-being at work programs, etc. All training courses and workshops are available for all employees irrespective of their position in the organisation. Training activities can also be organised at the request of the employees themselves. As for managers, trainings are mainly offered in order to help them carry evaluations, deal with remote-management, etc. One of the managers interviewed responded that leadership was the most important competence that a manager should really feel comfortable with. The wide range of training opportunities available to employees was considered by this manager a very useful tool for managers themselves to better support their team:

"It is part of the management journey, we learn. We can follow a lot of training courses, on the way to lead an interview, on team remote-management... If we want, we can have a lot of tools. But leadership is compulsory (...). This is how our job can be facilitated. When I see someone in trouble with his/her job organisation, I advise him/her to follow a training on time management" (Ana, manager, F).

Gender equality in the remuneration process

In accordance with the gender neutral approach promoted by the organisation, the managers describe a remuneration system based on the rules, pays and advantages being decided against the





background of the position held by the employees in the business. Wage increases depend on the grade of the workers in the pay scale and their status:

“[The regulation regarding remuneration] is strict. We have scales and advantages linked to certain functions. Pay increases depend on the level reached in the scale and the status. It does not depend on whether your face fits” (Ana, manager, F).

Although some procedures exist for the remuneration and the promotion, the criteria do not seem clear to employees who are not able to describe them. Some wage gaps were even pinpointed in some departments between men and women who had exactly the same position and the same seniority, hence past experience. One of the interviewed women said that when talking with a male colleague, she realised that he earned €800 (gross) monthly more for the exact same position in the firm and while they both had the same work experience. The discovery of such a gap led to discussions at the staff committee. After an internal investigation by the management, it was concluded that the gap was not generalised to all services. As for the services concerned by a pay gap, the management decided to fill in those gaps and to increase the salaries of the concerned women. When hired, this employee had been told she would have a different job from her male colleague. However, she ended up doing actually the same work. Due to the formal classification of her job position, the management had justified that her salary, calculated with a compa-ratio system, was lower. The compa-ratio aiming at assessing the competitiveness of an employee's pay level as compared to the current market rate, wages calculated with this system depend on the position occupied by the employee without taking into consideration the gender criterion.

“They function with a compa-ratio system how they call it. They compare the salary of each person with those prevailing on the market and they tell you that you are at 98% of your compa-ratio, for example. This means that they are 98% on the market to earn as much as you do. This means as well that you should not complain because you make good money! Now if you are at 65-70%, you know you can claim more... It is a functions classification based on a comparison with the market” (Delphine, employee, F).

The remuneration being connected with the position, the wage evolution depends on the job evolution of the employee in the firm. The function in which the employer decides to hire a staff member therefore is the main factor influencing his/her salary. In the case of the discriminated female employee, her official job title was different from her male colleague even though they were doing the same job with the same work experience; the compa-ratio method had then led to a lower salary for her. Yearly evaluations are therefore of great importance when an employee expects to change position and increase his/her salary.

Corporate culture regarding gender equality

Although some measures for the wellbeing of employees have been set up in the firm (in the manner of the flexible working time or the mindful program – a training program aimed at tackling the causes





of stress), none of them directly takes into consideration the gender equality. The main focus of the corporate culture is the client satisfaction. Hence the five values of the enterprise are the following: strongly together, client orientation, responsibility, trust and quality. Those values are mainly promoted outside the organisation; internally though, several interviews pointed out this client-oriented culture. As a matter of fact, a newly arrived team manager was recruited not for her technical skills, since she did not know all the corporate tools, but for her sound customer experience.

Except for this client dimension that seems to have been historically prioritised (or at least very consensual), the corporate culture has progressively changed. As described by the new low-manager, the organisation reoriented its culture towards a more competence-focused one than it used to be. The former habits seem to give a much greater importance to loyalty and seniority. The promotions were given to employees having spent years in the same position and considered as “deserving” a new higher-level job. This analysis of the former corporate culture can partly explain that the current Board of Directors of the national subsidiary is exclusively dominated by old men:

“I would say that it is a company where people stay for their whole life. It explains that in the Board of Directors, you have men who have grown up in the enterprise and who have done their entire career here. But what I see is that we hire, they start to look outside of the company to find new profiles and there are a lot of women... well we are in human resources...” (Ana, manager, F).

This gap between the former and the emerging corporate culture can also be seen at the line management level. One of the managers interviewed pointed out that, even though the leadership program to be followed by future managers highlights the importance of granting some freedom to the employees at the work place, managers are at same time asked to be at work in the morning to welcome the employees and follow-up at the end of the day what was achieved. The interviewee found regrettable that in the end, some employees tended to conform to this latter management style: she reported to have received emails in the morning from employees or got calls from people who had not seen her during the day as to let her know they were at work. Even though the organisation showed attempts to offer more flexibility and autonomy to its employees, a former culture of presenteeism seems to remain well embedded in the habits of some employees, preventing a deep renewal of the work organisation in order to foster a better conciliation of the professional and private lives.

Gender equality actions and family-friendly arrangements

The company has adopted some measures to support employees in their endeavours to balance their private and professional lives: the organisation hence offers 2 days of home working per week, the possibility to participate in meetings from home, flexible working hours, credit holiday (take more holidays before your children are 12 and less after), days off when needed without the approval of the superior, change to a part time contract. Most of employees and managers use flexible working hours and home working. These arrangements are supported by many technical arrangements to help





employees be fully efficient where and whenever they work. They all have laptops, their professional landline redirected from work via the Internet, and all their work files accessible through an internal platform accessible online. Hence, many interviewees reported to work very early in the morning (sometimes before their children's breakfast or straight after their partner picked up their child/children at the nursery). Some others said leaving early in the afternoon – between 3 and 4 pm – to go and pick up their children before the peak-hour traffic. Most of the time these employees work again later in the evening when children are asleep.

Many employees mentioned those arrangements as one of the reasons for staying in this organisation and do not leave to the company next door: first because there are handy tools to better balance work and private life but also because it is symptomatic of the trust the organisation has in its staff members. Indeed, the assessments of employees deal with the quality of their work without imposing on them a working method allowing them to organise themselves as they want to achieve the objectives that are assigned to them. If this great flexibility helps find a work-life balance, many interviews also revealed a difficulty to set limits to the work they do. The difficulty is all the more significant as the workload is often described as quite heavy.

Family-friendly arrangements and gender equality actions have a limit as employees move up the managerial ladder. As a matter of fact, several managers interviewed expressed their difficulties to balance their private and professional lives. Because of the numerous responsibilities managers are asked to take upon themselves, one of the female managers interviewed mentioned with humour that she could certainly not win the “best mummy” award. To her, her life is all about compromises between her private and professional lives in order to make it as liveable as possible for both her and her daughter. Another manager expressed the difficulties she had with the obligations linked to her position: when asked about career paths for men and women, she said there were no differences; they both have the same opportunities to progress. Even though opportunities are not based on gender, she admitted that men had more time than women to invest in their careers. She noticed that in her current position, she needed to attend networking events which are mainly organised in the evening (Ingrid, 2 children in school age). These obligations somehow are a limitation to women's careers as it implies to endorse late working hours.

C. WOMEN IN THE PROMOTION PROCESS

The HR sector being seen as a rather feminine work environment, women occupy a large place both among employees and managers. The next section will however analyse how women, although they represent the great majority of workers, do not have really access to the highest managerial positions. In order to do so, we will first describe the role of women in the screening committees before picturing the role of women as candidates for promotions. After this brief introduction, two subsections will dwell again on the opportunities and barriers for women to have access to management positions in the organisation.





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Role of women in screening committees

Křížková et al. suggest that since women accessed the labour market later than their male fellows, they had to comply with the model of worker that used to match with the life roles of men⁸⁸. This capacity to fit with the prerequisites of the model worker being easier to men than to women, it largely maintains and reproduces especially vertical inequalities in the positions held by men and women in the organisation. In the conventional enterprise of our sample, the team is almost exclusively composed of women. At the management level, women represent 60% of the work force; they mainly occupy middle management positions (100% of the middle management positions) while the only highest position in the organisation is left to a man (see chart below). In the case of our organisation, can we talk then about a reproduction of vertical inequalities between men and women? What is the role of women in screening committees and who are these women holding management positions in the firm?

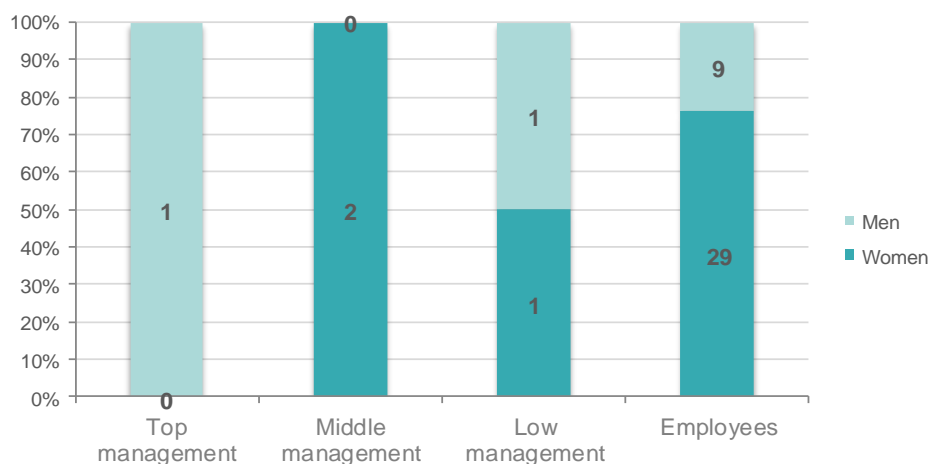


Chart 2 – Share of men and women in the conventional enterprise's hierarchy

Recruitment and promotion being decided by the top management (along with the Board of Directors and the management committee), middle and low managers have actually a rather limited latitude to negotiate or support the promotion of one specific employee. This influence of lower-managers is even more constrained by budget restrictions decided upon by the top management. The budget is indeed allocated according to the objectives of the departments and requires from a head of department (middle manager) to justify the creation of a new management position for instance. As a matter of fact, it is because the top management considered the results of one of the department as not good

⁸⁸ KRÍŽKOVÁ, A., MAŘÍKOVÁ, H., R. DUDOVÁ, R., SLOBODA, Z., 2009: 523.





enough that they decided to rearrange its structure from January 2015 on and merge the three former teams into one. As the highest decision bodies are mainly composed of men, it also makes it difficult for women to push for their fellows and/or for a better consideration of their own issues.

Role of women as candidates for promotion

The team is however mainly composed of female workers. They represent 76% of the team. When asked what are their expectations for their future professional lives the interviewees tend to adopt one of the two following attitudes. In the first case, women attach a great importance to work which they consider as an intellectual stimulation, a social integration institution and/or a synonym of freedom. In those cases, whatever their age or their family status, they express a will to obtain a management position. In the second case, women give little importance to work, more particularly as compared to their family lives (see table 1 in the appendices). Acknowledging the situation of women in the promotion process, we will now try to identify the factors that contribute to their promotion (from their positioning as candidate to their effective access to a managerial position) and the elements that actually stand as barriers to their access to such positions.

a. Opportunities

All managers and employees stated that they do grant a great importance to assessment as a central criterion for evaluating external as well as internal candidates. Although no gender equality program exists in order to support the participation and the success of women in such procedures, some internal and informal incentives exist. They mainly depend on the personality of the team leader and his/her relationship with the employees: some examples show that when a manager gets along well with one of the employees, is satisfied of his/her work and has been informed of his/her professional project, he/she encourages and supports him/her to be promoted to a higher-position in the organisation. These informal forms of support are welcomed by the senior executives of the organisation that values seniority and is very much willing to win the loyalty of the best workers. Besides this very contextual factor, women benefit from some more structural factors.

First of all, the labour productivity is not evaluated on the time spent at work. The several family-friendly arrangements offered by the organisation enable employees to decide how to organise themselves in order to reach their objectives. Therefore female employees leaving work at 3.30 to go and pick up their children at school is not a disadvantage for women willing to be promoted. This flexibility in the work organisation is also rather accessible but to some extent, the flexibility decreases with the level of responsibilities of the managerial staff. Hence some current female managers enjoy flexible working hours, teleworking and a permissive leave system.

The priority given to internal mobility also plays in favour of the female employees: all the vacant positions are displayed on the intranet of the enterprise during two weeks before being published on job sites. Each and every employee is then allowed to apply; it was estimated that about 50% of the





vacant positions were given to former employees of the firm. The numerous training activities offered by the organisation also add to this empowerment of women: the leadership program that lasts for one year and a half is described by one of the employees currently following it as a very complete one, open to men and women. The program is based on the 5 main values of the organisation and is completed by a discussion with the employee to be promoted in order for him/her to present his/her management projects, his/her first thoughts on how he/she could fulfil them, etc.

Last but not least, the representation that women have of the concepts of career and ambition is of some importance. Indeed, when mentioned in interviews, the idea of having women in higher positions was never interpreted as something negative. On the contrary, several female interviewees were rather happy to describe themselves as ambitious. This positive representation of the concepts of career and ambition is for several employees part and parcel of the development of professional projects aimed at fostering their managerial advancement. It was not made clear if this positive feeling towards a career vertical development was conditioned by the sector of which it is the core business or if it was something more general in conventional companies as compared to social enterprises.

b. Barriers

Most of the interviews led us to acknowledge that the organisation promoted a gender neutral approach. With promotion processes based on competences and detailed assessments, the organisation hopes to avoid discrimination. However, a deeper analysis of the career paths in the organisation rather shows similar results as those highlighted by Křížková et al. who state that gender regimes tend to be reproduced in contemporary organisations despite the existence of gender equality actions⁸⁹. Indeed, the tradition of the organisation is to promote employees from the firm who have been accumulating the best experience, qualifications and competences, and to propose them managerial vacancies. Such a competence-based selection method is actually quite discriminatory for women as it requires them to adjust themselves to a model of worker initially shaped for men. Indeed, the management positions in the firm are described as less flexible and very demanding in terms of availability even late at night for instance. Additionally, a selection based on competences and work experience implies to have developed professional skills through several work experiences. Women having children would then tend to be disadvantaged not on the basis of their maternity itself but indirectly since their maternity interrupted their careers and their on-the-job training. This screening process is all the more difficult to overcome successfully as employees do not have a clear picture of how the decisions are taken after their assessment. As described by the interviewees, it seems quite difficult to know what are the minimum requirements or the criteria used during the evaluation to get a promotion. Some employees were also proposed to take up a position without going through the whole formal screening process. As a matter of fact, an interviewee mentioned the example of one of the new line managers who got the position after being invited by her own manager to take the job.

⁸⁹ KRÍŽKOVÁ, A., MAŘÍKOVÁ, H., R. DUDOVÁ, R., SLOBODA, Z., 2009.





The company attitudes towards parenthood also seemed quite unfavourable to women. Thus, to this manager, taking up a management position was obviously a synonym of making sacrifices as the person taking the job should be prepared to do more than simply “perform well in the job”. To him, family life could not be used as an excuse:

“When you apply for a higher position you need to be ready to work more. If you apply it means that you know that this will impact your life. If you have to leave at 5 to pick up your children from school it is not worth applying” (Jan, manager, M).

In line with this statement, an employee experienced difficulties to get a new position and an increase of her salary while she was about to give birth to her second child. She went on her maternity leave when she could have been promoted. She was requested as part of the process to go through a probationary period of 6 months of effective delivery before being promoted. The effective delivery implies that the employee works on a full-time basis for 6 months excluding holidays, sick leaves, etc. Since she left for her maternity leave, her promotion was postponed to the following year. She described this period as very frustrating. Even though she never felt that maternity was a problem, she had to patiently wait for a longer period of time before being promoted because she was about giving birth. Consequently, women having children tend to be promoted later than men. The latter have often been promoted in the meantime and are thereafter less available to look after their children, and women have to enjoy spill-over effects. Indeed, while they could not be promoted because they were pregnant, their partners could be, limiting thereby the career evolution of their wives. One of the interviewees explained how she refused a promotion opportunity. As her husband was already an HR manager, they decided jointly that it would be too complicated for their family life if both of them were managers:

“I have been selected for an HR management position for Benelux. My husband is a HR director. We needed to make a decision. Finally you thought it over and came to the conclusion: “We have kids. I have an offer. Is it what I want?” Finally I refused the offer with tears in the eyes but I do not regret it. My husband already had a management position; we thought it would have been too complicated, that we would have been too absorbed by our jobs” (Océane, employee, F).

A last barrier deals with representations. The interviews highlighted several characteristics of what is supposed to be a good manager: hence, management positions are pictured as very demanding ones, requiring high competences, huge leadership capabilities and sound decision-making skills. However, those attributes being tied to the ideal of the male manager, women tend to be disadvantaged when as employees they need to demonstrate such capabilities to their hierarchy in order to be promoted (first their team manager, but afterwards the HR department and the top manager). Additionally, the requirements for taking up a management position do not take into account the obstacles a woman could meet in case she would not be able to rely on an adequate support in the household. As argued





by Guillaume and Pochic, “*women are clearly handicapped by the social representations attached to sexual roles and household division of labour*”⁹⁰. All the current managers as well as women willing to access management positions are people who either do not have children or enjoy some sort of support from their partner or a family member (like parents) at home (cf. tables 1 and 2 in the appendices).

Finally, the very complex relation of the conventional enterprise being embedded into a wider national subsidiary was also described as a reason for increasing the pressure on middle managers. The latter are therefore requested to be able to take distance from the team management in order to adopt a result-oriented approach. This “distance from the local social context” was also mentioned by Guillaume and Pochic as one of the criteria identified as a formal specification for career promotion in gender-neutral organisations⁹¹. This situation, mentioned by one of the managers interviewed, was suggested as something more difficult to handle for women than for men as “*women feel guilty or more often responsible. If they fail, they easily believe that it is their own fault. They think that they have to do more, whilst a man will easily say – it is not my responsibility. A man can be more easily indifferent whereas a woman is more emotionally involved in the relations with her colleagues, in her private life*” (Ingrid, manager, F).

D. CONCLUSION

As underlined by many interviewees themselves, the conventional enterprise of our sample adopts a gender neutral approach in the sense that any processes, programs or decisions of the firm are not directly promoting men or women. No specific support is given to women as the corporate culture would lead to consider it as an unfair treatment against men. This gender neutral approach is supported by a corporate culture based on the promotion of individual competences, more particularly leadership.

The main objective of a conventional enterprise being to make profit, all levels of the hierarchy are assessed on the basis of their quantitative results. Individuals are allowed to organise their work the way they want, the corporate culture leaving an ample room of manoeuvre to self-management of workers. The enterprise thus offers several family-friendly arrangements that actually benefit both the conciliation of work and private life of workers, and their capacity to be fully efficient anywhere and at any time. The intensification of result-oriented assessments increases in line with the level of managerial and executive positions.

If all management positions are described as available to anyone, the framing of the highest executive positions makes them less accessible to women, especially to those who do not enjoy a substantial support at home. The highest management positions are indeed very much time-demanding, focused

⁹⁰ GUILLAUME, C., POCHIC, S., 2009: 23.

⁹¹ GUILLAUME, C., POCHIC, S., 2009: 20.





on leadership and quantitative results, and are eventually accessible through a competence-based assessment process. If the organisation is still in a process of getting rid of old habits – such as the culture of seniority-based promotions – new managers tend to support the new corporate customer-care culture, devoting a major attention to the satisfaction of the client (customer orientation), to the organisation (need for quantitative results) and to the employee (self-achievement for individuals through trainings, work-life balance and career development).

2. SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

A. THE ENTERPRISE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

The social enterprise is a service provider to businesses of the non-profit and the social economy sectors in two Belgian towns, namely Brussels and one in Wallonia. Their core fields of expertise are the support to business creation, legal and financial advice, human resources consulting, administrative management of the staff and provision of training activities. The organisation falls under the legislation regarding “companies with a social purpose” as its legal status is the one of a not-for-profit association. Its turnover in 2013 was €835,596.

The social economy sector in Belgium, especially in fields of activities such as human resources, social inclusion and care – to name but a few – tends to be viewed as a feminine work environment. At the opposite of the model worker described as a man free from the concerns of family life⁹², the feminisation of the Belgian social economy can be explained by the numerous similarities that can be found between the work tasks in the sector and the household duties. If it does not mean that the jobs are always performed by women, female workers are predominant in the sector. The social enterprise of our sample is no exception to this general observation: the social enterprise belonging to the service sector, women tend to be dominant in the organisation (68% of women).

Regarding the structure of the organisation, the enterprise is divided into four departments: social management; consulting; training; supports. Each department is led by a manager representing the department in a coordination committee. Only the social management department has two different managers: one for the social management team in Wallonia, who is actually the so-called “Administrateur délégué” or Executive Officer, and he is a man; another one for the social management team in Brussels, who is a woman. The consulting and training departments are managed by one man who is about leaving. The support department is directly managed by the “Administrateur délégué” / Executive Officer. The coordination committee is then composed of the Executive Officer himself and the three line managers.

⁹² KRÍŽKOVÁ, A., MAŘÍKOVÁ, H., R. DUDOVÁ, R., SLOBODA, Z., 2009: 523.





The enterprise is composed of 25 people including 17 employees, 3 line managers under the responsibility of a Board composed of 3 men and 2 women. The daily administration of the enterprise is left to an “Administrateur délégué” / Executive Officer, a position that has always been occupied by a man. However, line management positions are mainly occupied by women since the only male line manager will be replaced by a former female consultant of the organisation, and thereafter i.e. in April all line management positions will be held by women. From a statistical point of view, top management positions are mainly held by men (60% of the Board members are actually men). Only low management positions are dominated by women (66% until the end of March, 100% from April on). Yet the employees are mainly women: they represent 87.5% of the case managers, 75% of the counsellors and 60% of the support functions (out of 5 support positions, the 2 administrative assistants and the accountant of the firm are women).

The employees hold general assemblies of workers on a quarterly basis. Those meetings are attended by the two branches in Brussels and in Wallonia and their objective is to give the opportunity to their workers to address organisational issues and submit collective requests to the managers. They mainly discuss issues related to working conditions and the working atmosphere. In times of crisis, workers can also call for a special general assembly meeting in order to deal with more specific or one-off problems. Every year, workers’ representatives are elected in each site during a general assembly meeting. They are in charge of sending the minutes of the general assembly meetings to the workers for approval before delivering them to the managers.

B. WOMEN IN EDUCATION, EVALUATION AND REMUNERATION PROCESSES

In line with the values of the sector, the organisation has developed an inclusive approach as illustrated by the recruitments of low-skilled employees. Hence the organisation was described as very open-minded regarding the diversity of its staff. For a Moroccan employee, wearing the Islamic veil had never been questioned as other female employees were already doing so when she arrived in the enterprise. This cultural tolerance was described as a proof of the friendly atmosphere and the good relationships within the organisation.

Gender equality in the education process

The diversity value was also highlighted with regards to the profile of people hired by the enterprise. As a matter of fact, the company had hired people with neither qualification nor relevant professional experience. However low-skilled employees are mainly women; the few men working in the social management, consulting and training departments all have a tertiary education degree. Without any distinction on the basis of the qualification discrepancies, all employees are equally invited to attend training activities. A couple of training courses are organised in the company by the managers and/or employees themselves on several issues such as operational or legal aspects. The learning process of a software is entrusted to an external expert. Most of the time, the employees take the initiative to





approach managers with a training request. The request is subsequently analysed by the management to see whether it fits with the employees' jobs. For some employees, training activities are aimed at improving their knowledge and skills on the job. As the organisation is also a training provider, the employees who are trainers for instance undergo a 3-day training to improve their teaching skills.

Gender equality in the remuneration process

As for the salaries, the management made the decision to apply the same pay scale to all employees. The remuneration in Belgium in general, and especially in the non-profit sector is based on grids established by joint committees ("*commissions paritaires*") for different occupations. They take into account the competencies, the level of responsibility and the work experience; the gender criterion does not influence the level of pay. The workers' wages are then defined according to the position of the employees in the firm and their seniority with no regard for their level of education or ability to negotiate. The remuneration process was actually described as a tool likely to promote gender equality since, as noted by one of the female line managers, female workers were very reluctant to negotiate their wages in contrast with male workers who – with no exception – tried to bargain when they were interviewed for the job:

"Complying with the wage scale salary scale ensures a higher degree of consistency. In general, discrimination occurs when employees are recruited. There is no comparison: men always negotiate their salary, unlike women who always accept the scale." (Sandra, manager, F).

The same observation came out from an interview of a female employee. The latter was indeed so happy to get the job that she did not negotiate her salary. She described her own attitude as representative of the high-capacity of acceptance of women to perform unpaid or low-paid work. As a matter of fact, this employee had been invited to become a Board member and even though she appreciated the fact that her competences and experience were being acknowledged, she highlighted that this acknowledgment did not translate into a financial increase. As a consequence, she concluded that men and women definitely had a different relationship to work and remuneration since men were more aware of what they were worth and more demanding:

"I accept a job if I like the job, regardless of its pay, it does not even matter if I am not well paid, it is something which unimportant for me. First I try to see if I am well where I am. A large number of men are more aware of what they are worth money wise. I am not really capable of selling myself... When I arrived here I did not even negotiate my salary, they asked me what I wanted to be paid and I accepted, I was happy I had a job" (Marianne, employee, F).

The remuneration evolution depends on the same pay scale, increasing with the level of responsibilities and the seniority in the organisation. Consequently, the performances of the employees are in no way a criterion influencing their remuneration.





Gender equality in the evaluation process

If some assessments have been implemented recently in the organisation, the objective was not to introduce financial differences by rewarding employees according to their achievements. Several opportunities to discuss on the employees' career path are foreseen. Since last year, the employees are asked to participate in "evolution sessions" – scheduled every 6 months – with their line managers, one meeting out of two is also attended by the Executive Officer. The final decision of potential changes in the employees' positions are always made by the Board of Directors.

Although the process does not run yet very smoothly (the evaluations are not very regular), it was set up in order to foster more frequent bilateral discussions between employees and their line managers with a view to providing every employee with the appropriate training and career path according to his/her objectives, his/her capabilities and the needs of the organisation. The evaluations – internally called "evolution sessions" – are considered by the managers as a tool offering the possibility to employees to express their well-being or lack of well-being at work and their future expectations. They contribute to the objective of a qualitative evolution of the employees' jobs, for instance, through the diversification of their duties and the development of new skills thanks to training opportunities.

Corporate culture regarding gender equality

If the organisation has set up rules guaranteeing a greater equality between all employees, these rules do not respond to any formal gender equality program. The corporate culture promotes values such as equality, tolerance, diversity and horizontal governance. The entry of two women in the Board of Directors as well as the access of women to low management positions was described as a step enhancing gender equality in the firm. It tended to increase the awareness of the managers that private and family lives of employees had an influence on their work. The home-working measure was adopted when two women joined the Board. Their arrival opened a window of opportunity to women whose claims have been henceforth discussed in the Board and advocated by two of their fellows:

"Since last year 2 women joined the Board of our organisation, before there were 3 men, and the impression was that our demands have been more favourably taken into account. We have asked for the possibility to work from home (work online). Before we were confronted with three men who perhaps were stubborn/not open to change on this matter and the fact that 2 women joined the Board, who may have children or may spend more time with their families, has helped us to obtain a positive answer to our request" (Nora, employee, F).

While the access of women to the Board played a role in the development of family-friendly arrangements, the presence of women at the low management level benefited women in accessing the labour market. Indeed, the effects of homosociability seemed to have had a special impact on the social enterprise of our sample considering the greater importance given to personal relationships among workers. As a matter of fact, one of the female line managers was quite convinced that her application had been supported by her former female manager:





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“I think that I have been supported by the office former manager in Namur. When I reach the last stage of the screening process, I was competing for the job with a man and she has clearly expressed her will to work with me.” (Sandra, manager, F).

Besides a progressive integration of gender issues within the agenda of the organisation thanks to the arrival of women in the Board, it remains a challenge to integrate women in the highest-level positions of the organisation, especially in the managerial positions. As one of the Board members expressed it, the support to women tends to become difficult when it comes to human resources management. The difficulty is indeed to deal with what is internally called *“the potential absenteeism”*. From his point of view, when the team is essentially composed of women, all the more so when they are within the childbearing age range or they are mothers of young children, the management has to plan for the consequences of women's maternity on their availability for work considering that they may wish to be more involved in their household activities. It implies to put in place back-up systems and a proactive management of human resources, as confirmed by this manager:

“One needs to learn to anticipate the fact that once women have children they are more often absent; (...) you need to be prepared to support them. Women, potentially, could be more frequently absent from work than men because of health issues, children, maternity issues. With women, at least once they have children, I trigger my support-oriented approach. Women need a greater support than men” (Jacques, manager, M).

Throughout the promotion process, the management therefore evaluates the skills of the applicants in the light of the managerial job prerequisites but in the case of women, it assesses in addition their capacity to manage both their job and their household. When a woman is appointed to a managerial position, she is asked whether she feels capable to cope with several responsibilities of a professional and family nature:

“However when a woman is appointed to a managerial position, I want to be convinced that she is able to manage properly both aspects of her life, namely job and family. The question is for women holding executive positions whether they will be able to manage their jobs and their family lives. It is a question that I do not ask myself for men” (Jacques, manager, M).

The question is not raised when men are being promoted even though they might be fathers as well. Yet this discriminatory attitude towards women seems to be gradually fading away since women have had access to managerial jobs, at least as line managers, as a result of advocacy initiatives of female managers for the promotion of female employees. This “advocacy” and the access of more women to line management positions had actually a spill-over effect, namely reinforcing the support from the organisation to female employees through the implementation of family friendly arrangements.





Gender equality actions and family-friendly arrangements

The more or less 7.5 hours of work per day are usually spent in the organisation premises where all the employees have a desk with a desktop computer and a landline number. In addition, a few gender equality measures are made available in the enterprise to help employees combine private lives and paid jobs. Those measures are both formal provisions (time-credit, flexible working hours, homeworking twice a month) and informal arrangements (possibility to bring children to work or work at home when they are sick, no work meetings in the evenings). A sound understanding and support to the parents in general – especially when children are sick – is very much appreciated by the employees. The work-life balance is even more facilitated by an atmosphere of far-reaching mutual trust, i.e. employees are not closely and strictly monitored, they can organise their work in a fairly autonomous way. Among the informal arrangements, a tacit agreement also implies that no work meeting or any work-related activity takes place out of the normal working hours. Gathering for a professional purposes (even team building when it is at the initiative of the organisation itself) is avoided in the evenings or during the weekends. In the same spirit, it is not surprising to see employees' children at the office when the schools or the nurseries are closed, due to strikes for instance. This is typically the type of flexibility which is provided for in bilateral arrangements with the management. Hence managers in this social enterprise somehow tend to act as 'gatekeepers' "*with regard to the implementation of individual, formally offered measures or in terms of the development and compliance with the employees' demands*"⁹³.

More formal family-friendly arrangements are also offered by the organisation such as flexible working hours: both the employees and managers are allowed to arrive between 8.30 and 9.30 am in the morning and leave, depending on their arrival time, between 5.00 and 6.00 pm in the evening. Although the employees enjoy this flexibility and the friendly atmosphere in the organisation, the important workload is often conflicting with the objective of work-life conciliation as the great number of cases to be dealt with by employees (about 50 clients per employee) forces them often to work overtime. Consequently, it is not unusual for employees to work several extra hours at the end of the month when they have to produce the payrolls of their clients or at Christmas when bonuses are to be paid.

In view of a better work-life balance, the organisation offers also the possibility of working part-time (also called "time credit"). Usually, an employee holding a part-time contract works four-fifths of a full-time equivalent, i.e. comes at work four days a week. However, if many female employees took the opportunity to reduce their working time to better balance their job with their family life, they have to struggle to perform all their assignments as the decrease of their working time is not always proportionate to the decrease of their workload. A large number of women having experienced a part-time contract described it as a cause of additional pressure and stress:

⁹³ KRÍŽKOVÁ, A., MAŘÍKOVÁ, H., R. DUDOVÁ, R., SLOBODA, Z., 2009: 544.





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“I remained quite a long time working four-fifths here because I have a little child with health problems. But the problem with a very absorbing job... currently, I am working four-fifths because my dad is sick. It is a four-fifth full time equivalent but the workload has remained unchanged... The problem is that it gives you the impression to have more time for yourself, but it is exactly the contrary. I have never been as exhausted as I am though my working schedule has been reduced by one fifth. So at the moment, I am really thinking to put an end to my time credit. We plan things that are not realistically feasible. It has nothing to see with the hierarchy, this is the danger of a job that one likes... Time flies!” (Valérie, manager, F).

The organisation also allows every worker to do two days of homeworking per month. In principle, both employees and managers are authorized to work from their own places. The interviews although revealed that the unavailability of proper material supports such as laptops for all the employees limited the implementation of such an arrangement. For those who only have a desktop computer, working from home is considerably less accessible. If some employees described this homeworking opportunity as a very beneficial arrangement helping them avoid long home-to-work journeys for instance, others regretted that the same opportunity is not offered equally to all employees. To this female employee, this difference of treatment was unjustified and seemed to be a special advantage granted to senior employees:

“Does your company offer any family-friendly arrangements and benefits?”

- *Well, I think it is possible for some people in the company and not for others. Maybe this is linked to seniority in the organisation. I would have difficulties if I wanted to extend my working time or to work differently, for instance from home. I do not have a professional laptop” (Louise, employee, F).*

Although the good employee-manager relationships and the support given to female employees since the arrival of women in managerial positions paved the way to the implementation of several formal and informal family-friendly arrangements, practically speaking they are not necessarily working well and can lead to an increased work pressure on the employees. It is assumed that the rather small size of the company was an obstacle to a proper implementation of the family-friendly arrangements through workload reforms or a greater investment in the material available for instance.

C. WOMEN IN THE PROMOTION PROCESS

One of the main results of the interviews' analysis is the demonstration of a rather clear horizontal and vertical job division. The management roles in the company have definitely been progressively feminised in recent years. Indeed, the Board of Directors, composed of a minority of women (between 20 and 25%) from 2006 to 2010, became an entirely masculine Board in 2011 and 2012 following the departure of the only woman. In 2013, the Board decided to extend the number of its members with a view to including women in the executive leadership: two women then became Board members in





April 2013 (see table 3 in the appendices). While the Board of Directors meets on a quarterly basis to discuss on the strategic orientation of the organisation, the day-to-day senior management of the enterprise is left to a so-called “Administrateur délégué” / Executive Officer who has always been a man. The current one has been in the office since 2009; his predecessor occupied the post for 17 years.

Even though a majority of the workers are women, they have difficulties to move up to the highest senior executive positions. The directors reckon that this is strongly related to men’s availability at work, men having more time to dedicate to work because they take on fewer responsibilities at home. Especially when women have their children, men are the ones bearing the workload and responsibilities. Such different professional roles, in return, produce discursive effects on the task divisions in the household. When children are sick, women are more likely to take care of them since men have more responsibilities at work: as a matter of fact, 6 women in the team have asked to reduce their working hours in order to take better care of their children. The experience of this employee is a good illustration of how men and women balance their work and family lives. Indeed, she has better balanced her private and professional lives since she was separated from her former husband as it clarified the work division among them; the father has the children 2 days per week, and one weekend out of two, which allows her to have some time for herself. Still, the situation remains difficult when children are sick or on holidays as the father still expects her to take a leave and care for the children:

“It is something irresistible for me, because they are my children. Often people are advising me to be tougher with him and hold him accountable for his responsibilities – when children are staying with him and they are sick he needs to take care of them, but I cannot do this because they are my children. However, it deepens even further the prevailing inequalities”
(Marianne, employee, F).

Due to the small size of the organisation again the few decision-making positions held by women are fairly stable and it might be the reason why the access to higher-level positions was hard to describe for both employees and managers. It was admitted that no formal procedure existed for obtaining a promotion in the organisation. One manager described the evolution of the career paths in the organisation as the converging interest of both the employee’s professional projects and the needs of the organisation. Since there is no human resources department, the duty of matching employees’ professional expectations and the enterprise strategy is partly performed by every line manager on behalf of the Board of Directors. Over the years, in a gradual manner, they have had the tendency to stimulate on-the-job motivations and prevent people from getting bored by engaging in the discussion on the development of their career paths when employees’ evaluations are being conducted.

As a collateral effect, this career management indirectly seems to generate three different attitudes. The first one is typically adopted by high-skilled employees with capabilities to bargain their additional benefits from this type of management. This group mainly employs men who, considering their





qualifications, could enjoy higher pays and responsibilities in other companies. When no management position is vacant, the Board usually finds interim solutions by offering to this type of employees a more diversified job. In doing so, the employees reach a different category in the pay scale and thereby increase their salary. This informal arrangement with the pay scale was described by the managers as a way to limit the turnover of the organisation's brains.

On the contrary, low-skilled women in the firm tend to be more loyal to the organisation and stay longer (table 4 in the appendices). Usually feeling grateful for having been hired, these employees do not expect explicitly to climb the managerial ladder. Some of them do not even dare asking for any kind of change in their labour situation, such as opting for a part-time contract for instance. The description of the professional expectations of this type of female employees characterises all in all this second type of attitude. As stated by one of them who feels lucky and appreciative towards her employer who gave her a chance and does not expect any vertical evolution in her career:

"I have no degree, no work experience. I remained unemployed and my applications were all receiving negative responses and it was because I did not deserve it. So I am glad to have that. I have been given the opportunity to learn by doing, to take initiatives (...). Since I consider it as a gift, I do not ask for anything else." (Véronique, employee, F).

A third attitude stands in between the two previous ones: some women do expect to access higher-professional positions in their career but are not given the opportunity to fulfil such a professional project in the current organisation. For their self-achievement they adopt or plan to adopt an exit strategy consisting in leaving the social enterprise for a higher-level position or another opportunity of elevating their professional status somewhere else. For one of the line managers, this exit strategy is actually operating successfully as the last promotions that took place in the organisation became effective after a work break or after adding another professional experience:

"People move around and they get a better position each time they come back. I often say to myself that I would very undoubtedly have had my current job if I would not have left. I think there is a huge amount of work to do regarding assessment interviews, job descriptions, meetings..." (Valérie, manager, F).

This exit strategy echoes the difficulties many women in the organisation mentioned to see one day a female Executive Officer ("Administratrice déléguée") in the organisation. As a matter of fact, several female interviewees seemed to say the least skeptical about the opportunity for women to access the highest position of the organisation. In the opinion of one of them, the promotion of a woman at this position would not easily fit with the mindset of the Board in which male members are 50 or 60 years old and thus belong to a generation with a different approach of women in senior executive positions:

"Now there are women in our Board but before it was somehow male-chauvinist in the sense that only men were members. Even now, I think that in the current Board, the mentality has not





yet radically changed..., two men in the Board (apart from Jacques) are elderly and have a very rigid attitude towards women's promotion to the highest level. I think that for young people, it not surprising to see women holding senior managerial or executive positions but for elderly men it is not self-evident" (Nora, employee, F).

In addition to that, it is interesting to note that women who are either managers or willing to access a higher-level position in their careers are women holding a tertiary education degree. They are also the ones who have received a significant family support during their studies. On the contrary, the low-skilled female workers have experienced educational difficulties. Most of the time, the family support was missing; families could even be an obstacle when within the household women were only represented and perceived as wives and mothers who needed to stick to these social roles. The fact of transgressing these roles was in some cases severely blamed as evidenced by the experience of this female employee forced to marry and stay in her home country instead of being supported in the medical studies which she had started in Belgium:

"I stopped my medical studies because I was forced into marriage in 1987. I lived 8 months with him and then I escaped. To take him back with me, I had to work. I was 20 and I had to stop my studies" (Anita, employee, F).

a. Opportunities

Although no criteria were mentioned as prerequisites to access managerial positions in the social enterprise, the analysis of the interviews enabled to identify two factors propitious to the promotion of women. The first one was the importance of having occupied lower positions in the organisation. It was reminded on several occasions that the current top manager had been working previously as a simple case manager himself, in the same way as all team managers. It seemed like some of the legitimacy of the managers was coming from this social rise. Indeed, no external recruitment process (either the advertisement of the job offer or a call for external candidates) was ever mentioned in the description of the screening process of a manager. Given the great proportion of female workers in the organisation, it seemed quite natural that managerial positions be held by women.

A second criterion was equally favourable to women: the importance given to interpersonal relationships in the enterprise was more likely to promote a good understanding between managers and employees. Since representatives and employees of the enterprise claimed to share a set of values like non-discrimination and equal opportunities, women managers were granted possibilities to negotiate and support the promotion of women. The integration of a gender-oriented dimension in the decision-making process in favour of such a promotion was then encouraged by advocacy activities of female managers. Somehow, these managers acted as "claimants" on behalf of all other women in the organisation even though none of them had specific demands. As a matter of fact, some interviewees





reported stormy discussions between members of the management committee on increased difficulties caused by maternity leaves to properly manage the human resources management. When it occurred, it was reported that having two women in the management committee proved very helpful to defend the recruitment of women instead of men whatever the job. It also helped the organisation strengthen its family-friendly corporate culture and develop work-life balance tools and informal arrangements.

The professional path of this female case manager, described by one of the interviewees, is also a good illustration of this dynamic approach that could be called women's solidarity. She was a storekeeper when she applied for the position of case manager and was competing with a more-experienced male candidate. The female manager supported very much her application which was described by the interviewee as *"a kind of informal discrimination from women to promote other women"* (Sandra, manager, F). Finally, the replacement of the only male line manager by a female employee is probably the best illustration of the shift of the corporate culture towards a greater gender equality. Former employee in the department, the concerned woman was promoted while she was pregnant and could not therefore take over immediately the position, three months prior to her maternity leave. While it would have been unthinkable in a large majority of organisations, a female employee described this decision as one of the best practices in place in her enterprise:

"I am so much better here, where I am now. I am repeating this very often against the background of the job I had before in fairly powerful institutions (...) however I found here an understanding environment, genuine humanity, genuine diversity, genuine management of the diversity – here we have hired a pregnant woman, I have never seen this anywhere; hire a woman in her 5th month of pregnancy is unrealistic, nobody wants to hire pregnant women" (Marianne, employee, F).

b. Barriers

Even in this quite feminised organisation, access of women to senior executive positions remains difficult: as a matter of fact, only 40% of the Board members are women and the position of Executive Officer (delegated administrator) has always been occupied by a man. If the low management positions are accessible and occupied by women, the highest ones remain rather unattainable. The issue of work-life balance is the main reason for the difficulties that women have to move up the managerial ladder. The burn-out phenomenon described by several employees is a very tangible proof of the risks inherent in women's access to higher senior positions, a proper balance between work and private lives remaining a touchy issue. When talking about the implementation of quotas for women, several employees underlined the importance to carefully think about the consequences and the impact of such a measure:





“I am afraid of one thing – burn out for women. The [quota] measure in itself is good but it has to be accompanied by other measures and means. We cannot ask women to do more than what they already do, I think this is unrealistic, and even worse I would say that it is simply dangerous. Therefore as long as we are not recognising the load of unpaid work done by women, which is still work, we will never achieve equality between men and women” (Marianne, employee, F).

Beyond that general observation in the social economy sector, the qualitative data gathered during the interviews led to the identification of three categories of barriers.

As a first category, barriers depending on individual factors have been highlighted. Indeed, many women expressed the difficulty they had to promote themselves as potential managers. The first reason which was mentioned was the inadequacy of their skills. For an employee, her young age and her recent arrival in the organisation as compared to other employees gave her the impression that it would be illegitimate to apply for a management position that was going to be vacant:

“With my personality I could never assert that I would very well consider myself as being a line/service manager and anyway in the current context, knowing that I have less working experience in the organisation than my other colleague, less working experience in the organisation, less working experience in general” (Marianne, employee, F).

Other employees had difficulties to figure out that they could hold a managerial position in this specific organisation as they have been developing so rich relationships with other employees that they would not feel prepared or willing to establish another hierarchical relationship with them. One of the employees hence described how difficult she found it to be managed by a former employee. It seems to have very much influenced her own perception of her professional evolution. She actually thought that managing a team within which she had been working was a personal, internal barrier:

“I get along so well with my colleagues, we are doing things together upon completion of our day of work, it would be very difficult afterwards to build up barriers between us and re-create a dividing wall” (Julie, employee, F).

The second category of barriers corresponds to organisational hindrances: indeed, the way the enterprise functions generates difficulties especially for women. The coexistence of both formal evolution sessions and informal bargaining practices tends to be perceived as a barrier to the promotion of women. A first reason was openly expressed from one of the managers who thought that women had greater difficulties to bargain their positions and working conditions than men. A second reason depends on the informal relationships men can have among them marginalising women, even unconsciously. As described by the interviewee, informal meetings only gather male managers who are more likely to make women feel less important to listen to than men:





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“Now I am attending the management committee and so does Sandra. Before it was only composed of men. But what is clear is that when there are on-the-side meetings, only men attend them. Women are integrated to ease men’s conscience. They don’t have the same right to speak as men. It is clear that men still feel superior, in the non-profit sector” (Valérie, manager, F).

The second organisational barrier is strongly linked with the social role of women and how women picture themselves both at work and in their private life. It seems to stem from the lack of substitutability that is observed in the enterprise. As described by Křížková et al., the presence of substitutability in the firm is important as it enables employees and managers to be able to rely on a backup during an absence⁹⁴. Given the very small size of the company, each and every case manager is in charge of his/her own cases. It can lead to a reluctance from women to take upon more responsibilities as they would have to prioritize either the family or their professional duties and would probably find themselves confronted with a dilemma if they had to choose between caring for a sick child and a task of the utmost importance at work for instance. As a proof of this barrier, one of the low female managers expressed the guilt feeling she had with regard to the image of the “good mother” she wanted to uphold while being invested in her job:

“This is clear that I have the feeling to be the one carrying the father’s briefcase in the comics. And when you come home, children are there: oh mummy, you’re back! Usually it is the mum who is cooking and the dad that comes home late. And I feel bad because I have the impression that I don’t fit with the regular clichés on the role of the mummy and the daddy. It is true that my children are very happy when I pick them up at school. For the oldest, it is mainly taking the time to speak together, to have a chat. It is fortunate that my partner is here. It is very difficult to have a private life, the life of a mother, and a full-time job. It is not easy and this is why women have so many difficulties to take up higher positions. Many careers are on hold for this reason” (Valérie, manager, F).

Finally, the third category of barriers is rather embedded in the other obstacles, i.e. the representations. Women are not promoted because they translate their gender social roles into prerequisites for certain positions. Regarding the positions of managers for instance, many researchers have already spotlighted male-oriented characteristics that are expected from the candidates. Guillaume and Pochic worked on the relation between the concept of sacrifice in a context of work-life balance and the access to senior executive positions⁹⁵. They identified several characteristics of managerial careers among which the one of “a calling”, “selflessness”, “total devotion”, “work full time”. These characteristics of managerial careers reinforce the masculine image of managers by which men and women must abide whatever their time constraints when they are out of work. The management of the time constraint is all the more challenging for women willing to access managerial positions as they observe difficulties to combine family-friendly arrangements and

⁹⁴ KŘÍŽKOVÁ, A., MAŘÍKOVÁ, H., R. DUDOVÁ, R., SLOBODA, Z., 2009: 529.

⁹⁵ GUILLAUME, C., POCHIC, S., 2009: 21.





their career development. The following testimony from a young employee willing to access a managerial position confirms the conclusion of Guillaume and Pochic according to which the temporal norms associated with management positions are prejudicial for women⁹⁶ as the intense job involvement required by these positions ignores the constraint of individual life cycles such as maternity:

“It is difficult to figure out how I could fulfil my professional projects [i.e. become a manager] while having children. The day I will have children, I would like to be more present for them and not having to work more than 38 hours a week which is currently the case. I can imagine striking a balance: keep working but with reduced working hours or a somehow lighter workload” (Marianne, employee, F).

D. CONCLUSION

The social enterprise of our sample really fits with the values usually attached to the non-profit sector. The importance given to the social dimension of work, the attention of managers to the development of employees' careers and their rewards, the rather flat hierarchy and the participative system of governance are translated into strong principles in the rules of the organisation such as a perfect wage equality, the development of several family-friendly arrangements, and so on. Such a corporate culture might lead to think that the social enterprise is the right place for women's access to managerial positions.

To a certain extent, it is true. The low-management positions are mainly occupied by women. Since the beginning of April, the only man still holding a low-management position will be replaced by a woman. This means that all low-management positions will be held by women. The positive attitudes of the management towards equal opportunity as well as the advocacy activities from female managers on behalf of their fellows enabled pregnant and low-skilled women to access management positions.

Top management positions remain dominated by men though. The Board had to be enlarged to 5 members in 2013 in order to open the door to 2 women, after the departure of the only woman late in 2010. Means and procedures are lacking but some arrangements fostered a more gender-sensitive corporate culture, even though informal incentives and family-friendly arrangements do not necessarily favour the access of women to managerial positions.

Time and human resources constraints inherent to small organisations limit the number of promotion opportunities and substitutability options are often deemed inadequate. The great flexibility and understanding of the management regarding work-life balance is sometimes inconsistent with the

⁹⁶ GUILLAUME, C., POCHIC, S., 2009: 22.





significant daily workload. Finally, even if the corporate culture is openly tolerant, gender sensitive and family-friendly, it does not appear to be sufficient in order to break away from the representations of the social roles that some women still bear in their minds. However, the rather good mix of professional expectations and family-friendly attitudes both among female employees and managers provides a leeway for an in-depth reflection on gender issues.

3. COMPARISON OF THE SITUATION IN A CONVENTIONAL AND A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

This section outlines the similarities and differences between the social and the conventional enterprise of our sample with regard to the situation of women in the two types of organisations. This comparative analysis will also attempt to identify good and bad practices enhancing women's participation in the decision-making process.

A. THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE TWO TYPES OF ORGANISATIONS

In the two types of enterprises, women hold management positions. If they tend to dominate in middle and low management positions, they remain outnumbered in the highest positions. The flatter hierarchy in the social enterprise, which is also due to the small size of the organisation, does not seem to influence significantly the access of women to decision making positions.

One of the major differences lays in the corporate culture and its influence on the representation of women in the two organisations. Indeed, the corporate culture in the conventional enterprise is much more client-oriented than in the social enterprise. This client orientation implies a greater focus on the external image of the firm and its performance rather than on its internal situation. Unlike in the conventional enterprise, the client satisfaction was never mentioned neither by the employees nor by the management in the social enterprise. The corporate culture in the social enterprise was much more focused on the enterprise itself and the staff members' well-being. The importance given to a casual working environment, a cheerful atmosphere and friendly relationships among workers was referred to several times when talking about what work represented in the interviewees' lives.

These two different corporate cultures strongly influence the representation of women in the organisations. In the conventional enterprise for instance, the competence-focused management avoid the development of gender-based policies by promoting a gender neutral approach: the staff members are assessed on the basis of their capabilities and skills with no regard for the social roles that might come along with their gender. In the social enterprise however, the workers' gender is taken into account. It does not mean that the gender dimension is always considered to the benefit of women. The gender dimension was accepted in the professional environment and enabled women





managers to promote other women employees to low-management positions and develop family-friendly arrangements. It generated the emergence of management practices specific to women. For instance, women are asked if they can combine their professional and family responsibilities before being promoted to a management position.

B. THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN EDUCATION, EVALUATION AND REMUNERATION PROCESSES

The situation of women in education, evaluation and remuneration processes is mainly influenced by the size of the organisation. The conventional enterprise belonging to a bigger international group, the training offer is consequently much broader. The great value given to individual skills is also an incentive to take up education opportunities in order to climb the hierarchical ladder. In this regard, newly promoted managers are invited to follow a leadership training of one and a half year. The situation is contrasted in the social enterprise in which a lack of resources of a different nature (time, money, human resources) limits the training opportunities. Informal skills transfers often occur in the framework of a one-to-one solidarity, mostly among women. Such informal skills-upgrade would not be possible in the conventional enterprise where employees mainly work either in smaller offices (in pairs) or directly in the client's premises. They have therefore far fewer contacts with their hierarchy and colleagues. Although the two enterprises are different to a great extent in size and internal organisation, they both provide training activities to all their employees and managers regardless of their gender.

As for the remuneration, both enterprises describe remuneration processes based on the employee's position and his/her seniority. None of them either correlates remuneration with the workers' performance. The process is much clearer in the social enterprise where salaries fluctuate with a pay scale bargained and decided upon by a joint committee of social partners for the whole non-profit sector in Belgium. The process is described as a favourable tool for gender equality since it decouples the level of pay and bargaining capabilities of the employees. In the conventional enterprise, the compa-ratio method used to calculate the employees' wages is far less intelligible for employees: the pay level for each specific position is indeed indexed to the current market rate. Staff members' salaries can be translated into a percentage unveiling the ranking of the employee on the market. An employee with a compa-ratio of 100% is then paid exactly what is the industry's average pay for the position held by the employee. The absence of a strict pay policy in the conventional enterprise leaves more room to the bargaining of wages.

The two pay policies being based on the position, the best option for employees to improve their salaries is to change their jobs after an evaluation with their hierarchy. In terms of evaluation, the two companies have very different policies. Due to different corporate cultures, assessments are much more frequent and regular in the conventional enterprise than in the social enterprise. Annual assessments are being conducted with the involvement of the HR department which keeps track of them over time. These evaluations are an opportunity to assess the employees' performance and to define new objectives for them. In the social enterprise, the assessment process is not so systemically





organised and does not have the same objective: evolution sessions as they are called aim at discussing the employees' career paths and the training needed to achieve the objectives, to upgrade the employees' skills and to develop their added value to the enterprise.

C. OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS FOR THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN

Women hold management position in the two organisations. If structural similarities such as the size of the organisation trigger a similar approach in favour or against the promotion of women to managerial positions, the different corporate cultures affect women's professional paths in very different ways.

In terms of opportunities, even though they do it for different reasons, both organisations prioritise the internal mobility: in the conventional enterprise, this promotion process seems to be the legacy of a former great importance given to loyalty; in the social enterprise, it seems to stem from the legitimacy gained through social climbing. As the enterprises count a high number of female employees, such a preference given to internal promotion plays, statistically speaking, in favour of women.

The two organisations also have in common the decoupling of time spent at work and the evaluation of their workers' productivity. The several tools set up in the conventional enterprise for employees and managers to work away from the office and the family-friendly corporate culture in the social enterprise offer a great flexibility to women who might also have to fulfil household and caring duties.

However some opportunities are specific to each organisation. The representations women have of the concepts of career and ambition are very different from an enterprise to the other. In the conventional enterprise, for instance, women are quite willing to describe themselves as ambitious. In the social enterprise, on the contrary, several female employees expressed difficulties to imagine themselves as managers and/or did not expect to move up vertically in their jobs.

A great discrepancy also exists with regard to the place given to what we might call "female solidarity". In the social enterprise, the small size of the organisation and the significant place given to interpersonal relationships enable managers and employees to develop homosociability practices. The informal character of those practices is absent in the conventional enterprise where promotion processes are governed by strict promotion and assessment procedures.

In terms of barriers, the rather small size of the two organisations does not offer sufficient back-up solutions for employees and managers to be able to rely on someone else in their absence. The limited human resources in both organisations generates a dilemma for workers, in particular for women, have to choose between their family and occupational duties. The lack of back-up being even more manifest for higher positions, the access to management positions imply a potential "sacrifice" of the family life as the new responsibilities linked to the job will damage the capacity of the newly-promoted manager to respond to the image of a "good mother".

Strongly linked to this idea of "sacrifice", the great availability requested from managers in both organisations and the lack of sound gender policies in both enterprises tend to act as a barrier. Indeed, when they are promoted, women are expected to "*know that this will impact [their] life*" (Jan,





manager, M) and to “*feel capable to manage both [their] job and [their] household*” (Jacques, manager, M). The barrier is even harder to overcome when women lack support at home.

In addition to these common barriers, the two enterprises also unveil specific obstacles to the access of women to management positions in their own organisation. The competence-based selection method used to promote employees in the conventional enterprise for instance generates discriminations for women incommensurate with what is experienced in the social enterprise. Indeed, women are asked to abide by criteria based on a model of workers initially shaped for men. Furthermore, the career breaks due to maternity leaves penalise women in their career path and interrupt their on-the-job training thus engendering a spill over effect: men are promoted younger as they are not concerned by such leaves; therefore, when women are considered for a promotion, their husbands have accessed jobs with so many responsibilities that they can no longer accept management positions as they would increase the complexity of their household management.

The representation of what a good manager should be is also different in the two organisations. In the social enterprise, low-managers are required to be, above all, team leaders. Their role is mainly to support the members of their team by paying attention to their workload, the difficulties they might encounter in their case studies, etc. The small size of the teams also enables to develop positive interpersonal relationships. In the conventional enterprise, a great attention is paid to the leadership capabilities of managers, even at the lowest levels. All managers are asked to take distance with the local context in which they intervene and avoid any form of day-to-day management; they are advised to opt for a performance-oriented and unemotional approach. People holding such positions are therefore expected to have high leadership capabilities and sound decision-making skills conveying thereby a masculine image of managers.

A couple of barriers specific to the social enterprise have already been mentioned. A final one is linked to the aforementioned informality existing in the decision-making spheres of the social enterprise. As a matter of fact, if the great importance granted to interpersonal relationships and informal arrangements in the enterprise entails a significantly tighter solidarity between women, it also opens the door to the revival of old domination habits. The informal relationships that are also prevailing between male managers tend to marginalise women from the decision-making process when decisions are more of an operational nature and, consequently, female managers have the impression that they are not necessarily taken seriously into consideration.

D. GOOD PRACTICES AND BAD PRACTICES IN CONVENTIONAL AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

A cross-reading of the interviews of the two organisations regardless of the positions involved enables to detect several bad and good practices. If the bad practices are mainly common to the two organisations, the best practices are all organisation-specific.

First of all, in the two organisations, the total absence of a formal gender policy hinders the advent of a sound promotion of an equal access to management positions. This lack of general gender policy





prevents managers, employees and HR services (when they exist) to adopt a global perspective on what are the issues faced by women and what obstacles might obstruct their access to management positions. This lack of gender policy hence leaves the door open to discriminatory practices that, for most of them, are developed unconsciously in both organisations.

As a matter of fact, managers tend to be discriminatory when women are close to a promotion and are eventually asked whether they feel capable of combining simultaneously both their new decision-making position and their household duties. In the conventional enterprise, new female managers are expected to be able to make certain sacrifices when confronted with a dilemma. In the social enterprise, it was mainly noticed prior to the promotion when managers assess the “potential absenteeism” of the female candidates.

The issue of work overload, especially when women are working part-time in the two organisations is also increasing the level of stress felt by several women. A Belgian study from 2010 showed that the workload along with the conciliation of professional and family lives were the main causes of female burnouts⁹⁷. Additionally, when difficulties to handle the workload are experienced in one position, we reckon the employee or manager can be quite reluctant to take up a position with even higher responsibilities.

Further to these difficulties women might encounter in the two organisations, each enterprise develops good practices in order to enhance women’ access to management positions.

In the conventional enterprise, the great flexibility given to employees and managers thanks to family-friendly arrangements help many female staff members of the organisation to better balance their professional and family lives. Flexible working hours, home- and tele-working as well as assistance programs to alleviate the burden of sick children or to learn how to deal with stress are the main tools referred to by women in the organisation. These arrangements and the building up of a relationship of trust between the different hierarchical levels avoid an assessment of the employees on the basis of the time they spend at work. All staff members are able to arrange their work and their household duties, social activities, etc. as they wish as long as they remain available for most of their working time during the common working hours in the event they would have to communicate with their clients or colleagues.

From a management perspective, the team managers described a model close to the flexible availability developed by Guillaume and Pochic and “*a management based more on results than on excessive attendance*”⁹⁸. Yet the female managers from our sample differ quite significantly from the management style qualified by the authors as “*not very diplomatic, rough, direct and very remote from the stereotypes of the éternel féminin (participating in dialogue, consensus, delegation of tasks and so on)*”. On the contrary, women holding management positions not only promote an efficient organisation of their working time and accommodate it to the family schedule but they also do it in a quite participative manner.

The numerous training activities developed by the conventional enterprise is also an interesting point to underline as it contributes to the empowerment of women in their access to decision-making

⁹⁷ SPF Emploi, Travail et Concertation sociale, 2010: 10.

⁹⁸ GUILLAUME, C., POCHIC, S., 2009: 33.





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positions. The 1.5-year leadership training provided to employees and mandatory before becoming managers is, in that sense, very positive. The training programs are accessible to both men and women. It can either help employees organise their working time more efficiently for instance or help managers improve their leading skills.

As for the social enterprise, the entry of two women in the Board of Directors seems to have created the “*critical mass*”⁹⁹ women of the enterprise were waiting for in order to have their claims heard. Indeed, the arrival of these women at a senior executive level allowed to find solutions to gender issues: it was mentioned as a factor contributing to the promotion of pregnant women to management positions.

In terms of management style, the corporate culture being much more orientated towards the well-being of individuals, team leaders tend to focus more on people management than on quantitative targets. This culture has given rise to an increasingly better understanding of the family issues and the development of informal family-friendly arrangements. For instance, women in the firm are allowed to bring their child or children at work if the nursery is on strike.

Finally, gender pay gaps are avoided through a strict implementation of pay scales to determine the salary paid for each position in the enterprise. Individual wage bargaining initiatives are not possible.

⁹⁹ GONZÁLEZ MENÉNDEZ, M. C., FAGAN, C., GÓMEZ ANSÓN, S., eds. 2012: 5.





CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSIONS

In Belgium the fight for gender equality started a long time ago in the late 19th century. Over the last two centuries, the activism of several women groups and associations has helped raise awareness in the public sphere with regard to the importance to implement policies aimed at promoting gender equality. While the level of education of women has been on the rise during the 19th century – they gained their access to the university in 1880 – feminist mobilisations increased. In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, a broad array of achievements contributed to close the gender gap. Certain professions which had been exercised by men only, opened to women who started becoming doctors in 1884 or public agents in the same year. In 1900, women started to acquire economic rights with the authorization of holding a savings account for married women, the right to sign labour contracts and to be wage-earners.

While the Second World War put a halt to the fight for women's rights, the beginning of the European integration gave a boost to gender equality in Belgium in particular after the introduction of the “equal pay for equal work” principle in the Treaty of Rome in 1957. The development at the international scale of gender equality issues with the organisation of regular United Nations conferences on women went hand in hand with the evolution of the issue at the Belgian scale. The opening of a first Belgian academic centre for women's studies in 1986 and the publication of several studies on the topic again helped raise awareness among the political sphere that consequently developed practical answers such as childcare solutions.

Even though gender equality is rather well embedded within the Belgian set of values and integrated by representatives into their political agenda, it was translated into public policies at the federal and regional levels only recently. Discriminations against women on the labour market only became forbidden after the enactment of the law of 4 August 1978. Indirect discriminations were also contemplated by the law-maker through the adoption of laws dealing with a better conciliation of family and professional lives at the beginning of the 2000s. As for quotas, Belgium introduced this policy tool within the national legislation in 2011 with the obligation for public companies to introduce at least one third of one of both genders in their Boards. The largest enterprises (employing more than 250 employees and generating a profit higher than €50,000,000) are also covered by the same legal provision requiring that one third of the Board members be of a different sex than the rest of the board.

However Belgium has, as compared to most of the European Member States, a long tradition of social entrepreneurship. If the first Belgian cooperatives came into existence in the 19th century, it is mainly in the 1960-1970s that social economy projects started to reach a critical mass. In 1990, the Walloon Region Economic and Social Council defined the social economy as an ecosystem of social enterprises characterized by a business dynamics (paid employment, economic risk-taking...), a purpose of service to the community or to its members rather than profit, a democratic decision-making process and an autonomous management. Historically the companies willing to be recognized





as social enterprises in Belgium were registered under a different legal status giving priority to social objectives such as non-profit-making associations or foundations, cooperatives or mutual societies. In 1995, a fifth legal status, called “company with a social purpose” was created in order to enable commercial organisations such as public limited companies or private limited companies to have a social purpose. However it never expanded. It is only in 2008 and 2012, that Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region respectively passed laws defining social economy as a whole.

Given this particular characteristics of social enterprises, the aim of this study was to answer the question of an easier access for women to decision-making positions in conventional or in social enterprises in Belgium. From our own in-depth qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews carried out in two small Belgian enterprises (a social one and a conventional one), we can conclude that few differences can be observed in the access of women to management positions. First, none of them has set up corporate policies or programs aimed at supporting women or gender equality in the form of quotas, for instance. The total absence of formal gender policies hinders the advent of an effective equal access to management positions. This lack of general gender policies prevents managers, employees and HR services (when they exist) to adopt a global perspective on what are the issues faced by women and what obstacles might obstruct their access to management positions. This lack of gender policy hence leaves the door open to discriminatory practices that, for most of them, are performed unconsciously in both organisations. In the conventional enterprise, such policies would be seen as an unfair treatment against men since individuals are valued on the basis of their competences which are, in this corporate culture, understood as gender neutral. In the social enterprise, the resources constraints inherent to the small size of the organisation work against the implementation of formal gender policies that would help fight gender stereotypes that still arise in spite of a gender sensitive corporate culture.

In both companies though, neither employees nor managers see specific organisational barriers preventing women to access management positions. Whether women expect to hold a decision-making position or not, they believe they are eligible to leadership jobs. As a matter of fact, in the two enterprises, women hold management positions. One of the reasons given by interviewees in both enterprises was that women accounted for the largest number of the companies' employees; it was then considered as natural to have female managers. Yet they are mainly found at middle and low-management levels.

In the conventional enterprise, the procedure to access management positions is totally gender-blind as candidates are evaluated according to their individual capabilities without any consideration for gender. This focus of the corporate culture on competences seemed to be pretty well integrated as many female managers interviewed expressed the importance of being recognised for their professional skills and being appointed for these rather than for the fact of being a woman. Such a selection process tend however to be quite discriminatory against women as it is highlighted by the vertical segregation in place in the enterprise. Women are found at low and middle management levels that are described as much more participative and relational. But when it comes to top





management positions, the individual attributes required to hold the positions are much more masculine: top-managers are asked to provide sound leadership, to be focused on quantitative results, to be very much available and flexible with regard to their working hours.

In the social enterprise, all managers are promoted internally. It is therefore not surprising to see former female employees accessing management positions. The latter are rather chosen for their loyalty to the firm and their management competencies. Time and human resources constraints inherent to the small size of the organisation do not offer adequate promotion opportunities and substitutability options for all women hoping to become managers. Additionally, the lack of formal procedures both in the evaluation and promotion processes tends to let develop unconscious gender stereotypes especially when it comes to the striking of a proper balance between women's private and professional lives: when the latter are about to be promoted managers, they are asked, unlike their male counterparts, how they will manage their new professional responsibilities along with their household.

At the individual level, in-depth interviews also shed light on common barriers linked to the attitudes of women towards their own career. In both enterprises, some female employees expressed that decision-making positions were of no interest to them. For most of them, it had to do with both a rather negative image of careerist women and a will to lend themselves to the social role of the good mother. In many cases, these professional expectations based on the perception of the roles of women within society were even reinforced by an unequal share of household duties among the family members. Different reasons could be at the roots of this greater involvement of women at home. Maternity often slows down their career development; indeed while their partners have more opportunities to be promoted when they are caring for their families, women have a tendency to limit their professional responsibilities to ensure that one of the parents be able to fulfil the caring duties in the household. Respectively, women holding management positions tend to enjoy an important support in the management of household duties, either from their partner or from family relatives.

The main differences to be noted in the attitudes of women towards their access to management positions in the two firms were probably the discourses on ambition and maternity. In the conventional enterprise, women's ambition was much more admitted than in the social enterprise even from the part of women unwilling to hold management positions themselves. In the social enterprise though, maternity was less considered as something total and exclusive from all other social activities. While work and maternity seemed more complicated to combine successfully in the conventional enterprise, women in the social enterprise often expressed the need to keep having either a professional or a voluntary activity besides their caring duties.

In neither enterprise, women seemed to consider maternity as a possible barrier to women's promotion. When being asked how they managed both their professional and private lives, women in both companies explained the several family-friendly arrangements developed by their enterprise. The conventional enterprise for instance offers a great flexibility to its employees and managers in the form





of flexible working hours and teleworking. A wide range of different programs are also at the disposal of employees such as childcare assistance program, mindfulness program, etc. The management promotions at least at the middle and low-management levels in the conventional enterprise are close to the “flexible availability” model conceptualized by Guillaume and Pochic. Such a management model prefers to base its evaluation on results rather than on attendance. In the social enterprise, the corporate culture based on the well-being of individuals and horizontal governance helped develop formal and informal solutions to family and gender issues: in addition to the offer of part-time contracts, employees and managers were entitled to use to a certain extent flexible working hours. Interviewees also repeatedly mentioned that it was not surprising to see employee's children at work in case of a strike of nurseries for instance.

The comparison of the processes for women to get promoted in social and conventional enterprises in Belgium brought us to the conclusion that few differences existed between the two kinds of companies. In both organisations, unconscious gender stereotypes are persistent among employees and managers when they interpret the social roles and competences of women. Even though the social enterprise has a tendency to pay greater attention to gender issues, results in terms of access and expectations to access management positions in the two enterprises remain similar. Women tend to limit themselves in their career progression in order to successfully balance their professional and private lives. Even though they progressively climb the managerial ladder, it remains hard for them to reach the highest senior executive jobs. This observation can probably also be explained by the different types of management required at the different levels of responsibilities: the low and middle management positions being more in contact with the teams of employees, the style of management is often more participative and demands more social skills. The highest decision-making positions in both companies are however still shaped to be held by people demonstrating attributes associated with masculinity. Finally, this vertical segregation is a joint result of structural barriers that are to be found in the social roles assigned to men and women both at work and in the household, and that are reproduced in the professional sphere through the persistence of unconscious stereotypes.





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GENDER BALANCE POWER MAP

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APPENDICES

List of interviews

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES FROM THE CONVENTIONAL ENTERPRISE IN BELGIUM		
Nick name	Position in the firm	Gender
Léa	Employee	F
Océane	Employee	F
Louise	Employee	F
Delphine	Employee	F
Mélanie	Employee	F
Karoline	Employee	F
Ingrid	Manager	F
Ana	Manager	F
Jan	Manager	M

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES FROM THE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IN BELGIUM		
Nick name	Position in the firm	Gender
Julie	Employee	F
Louise	Employee	F
Anita	Employee	F
Marianne	Employee	F
Véronique	Employee	F





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Nora	Employee	F
Sandra	Manager	F
Valérie	Manager	F
Jacques	Manager	M

Expectations of employees regarding their career evolution in the conventional enterprise (table 1)

EXPECTATIONS OF EMPLOYEES REGARDING THEIR CAREER EVOLUTION					
Nick name	Age	Number of children	Family situation and support	Importance given to work	Work expectations
Léa	Up to 30	None	Married to a doctor	She insisted on the fact she wants children and wants to be the one who will raise them. She does not want any nurse. She puts her family life on the top of all her priorities.	No management position: she would rather take a four-fifth or part-time (she is planning to have children soon)
Océane	Middle age	2	Married to a manager	Although there are material advantages to work (salary, car...), it is also an opportunity to learn and to be rewarded. Compared to other spheres like family, she says she needs both of them.	No management position: as she learned she was struck with a serious illness, she would rather diversify her missions than leading a team
Louise	Up to 40	1	Partnered	She describes herself as ambitious and talked a lot about the importance she gives to get her clients satisfied. It may be relevant to note that she took 3 months of maternity leave.	Management position
Delphine	Up to 30	2	Partnered	She refers to work as source of money and benefits in kind. Indeed, directly after she finished school, as she started in one of the big four, she enjoyed a company car. She always negotiates her salary and gives it a great importance when choosing a job.	No clear expectations: she works to make a living. If she could, she would totally stop working to raise her children. As she has to work, she rather sees herself in a management position.





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Mélanie	Up to 40	2	Divorced, she has the children 1 week out of 2	She describes work as a synonym of freedom. By working full-time, she also does not need anyone to support her or her family.	Management position
Karoline	Up to 40	2	Married	She describes work as intellectually stimulating. She is happy to have time for her kids on Wednesdays but she could not stand not working at all.	Management position: she is already taking the leadership training

Source: Interviews carried in the organisation

Family situation of managers and potential support in the conventional enterprise (table 2)

FAMILY SITUATION AND SUPPORT OF MANAGERS				
Nick name	Position	Age	Number of children	Family situation and support
Ingrid	Manager	Middle age	2	Divorced, not in charge of the kids
Ana	Manager	Middle age	1	Single, great support from her parents
Jan	Manager	Middle age	None	Partnered

Source: Interviews carried in the organisation

Participation of women in the Board of Directors of the social enterprise from 2006 to 2014 (table 3)

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS FROM 2006 TO 2014			
Year	Number of women in the board	Total number of members in the board	Percentage of women in the board
2006	1	4	25%
2007	1	4	25%
2008	1	4	25%





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2009	1	5	20%
2010	1	5	20%
2011	0	4	0%
2012	0	3	0%
2013	2	5	40%
2014	2	5	40%

Source: Annual balance sheets of the organisation

Expectations of employees regarding their career evolution in the social enterprise (table 4)

EXPECTATIONS OF FEMALE EMPLOYEES REGARDING THEIR CAREER EVOLUTION			
Nick name	Level of education	Approximate length of the stay in the organisation	Expectations
Julie	Bachelor degree	Up to 3 years	Diversify her activities before thinking of a management
Louise	Master degree	Up to 3 years	Management position
Anita	Secondary school with graduation	Between 10 and 15 years	No higher-level position
Marianne	Master degree	Up to 3 years	Management position
Véronique	Secondary school without graduation	Between 10 and 15 years	No higher-level position
Nora	Bachelor degree	Up to 3 years	Horizontal diversification

Source: Interviews carried in the organisation

