

Mechanisms contributing to the scarcity of women at top management positions in Sweden

- A case study at an executive search firm through a gender lens

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Abstract

Sweden is at the forefront of gender equality work and one of the highest-ranking countries in the world when it comes to gender equality. Yet, Sweden is still far from achieving gender equality in the labor market and a majority of top management positions belong to men. Recruitment plays an important role for gender equality in the labor market and the use of executive search firms has become increasingly institutionalized when it comes to recruitment of top corporate leaders. Executive search firms are essential, yet seldom explored, intermediaries that control elite labor markets by mediating relationships between candidates and clients, and by declaring definitions of talent. The purpose of this thesis is to identify mechanisms contributing to the scarcity of women in the top layers of organizations, which is done through a qualitative case study at an executive search firm explored through a gender lens. This in turn contributes to the rather unknown research territory of gender and executive search. The empirical data is collected through a twofold approach; interviews with executive search consultants and database documentation about recruitment cases. All data is founded on recruitments to the industrial sector. Seven mechanisms contributing to the scarcity of women in top management are identified and our analysis shows that gendering has effects on the outcome of recruitment cases, either consciously or unconsciously, through consultants and clients. These actors are in turn influenced by societal pressure, stereotypes and the mere fact that gender equality is on the agenda in society.

Key words: Sweden, Executive Search, Recruitment, Gender Equality, Doing Gender

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1. Introduction

This chapter first presents a background of the thesis subject, which is rooted in the scarcity of women at top management positions. This is followed by a literature review of previous research concerning gender equality and executive search. This leads to an identification of a research gap, which lays ground for the purpose and research question. Lastly, a thesis roadmap is introduced.

1.1 Background

Women are underrepresented at senior level positions globally (McKinsey & Company, 2015) and constitute just 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs (The Washington Post, 2015). Sweden is one of the highest-ranking countries in the world when it comes to gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2015; UNDP, 2015) and is often portrayed as a country that is at the forefront of gender equality work (Lewis & Rake, 2008). Yet, a study that was carried out on behalf of the Swedish government shows that Sweden is still far from achieving gender equality in the labor market and that men are in majority in top management positions (SOU, 2014:80). According to a gender equality report from 2015, only 10% of the CEOs of the 1050 largest companies in Sweden are women and only 5% of the 266 publicly listed companies in Sweden have female CEOs. The report also states that it will take another 50 years until there are as many female as male CEOs in Sweden (Ledarnas jämställdhetsbarometer, 2015).

Gender segregation and discrimination of women have existed in the Swedish labor market for centuries. The first type of segregation is referred to as the *primary segregation*, where women were denied access to education and the labor market on the same terms as men. The *secondary segregation*, currently existing, concerns differences in women's and men's tasks and positions at work. This type of gender segregation has several dimensions of which the *vertical segregation* is relevant for this thesis. It deals with the fact that women and men do not advance in the same way in their respective careers, thus touching upon the scarcity of women in top management teams of corporations (SOU, 2004:43).

Literature offers many different explanations to this. Vial et al. (2016) write about several scholars (Heilman et al., 2004; Phelan, et al., 2008; Rudman, 1998; Rudman et al., 2012) who over time have shown how gender bias continues to function as an obstacle for the advancement of female candidates to leadership positions. The *glass ceiling* is a well-known metaphor, which is used to define invisible barriers that artificially prevent women from advancing in their careers (Murrell & Hayes, 2001; Cortina, 2008; Burke & Mattis, 2005). Discrimination is also mentioned as a reason to why women's chances of reaching managerial positions decrease, for example an employer choosing a man just

because he is a man or formulating the requirements for a position according to a man (IFAU, 2007:25).

Recruitment has been found to play an important role when it comes to inequality in the labor market (SOU, 2014; Dreher et al., 2011; Faulconbridge et al., 2009; Van den Brink et al., 2010). A concrete example illustrating this is that 33 listed companies in Sweden replaced their CEOs during 2014 and only one company replaced a man with a woman (AllBright Report, 2015). The use of executive search firms (ESFs) has become increasingly institutionalized and gradually developed into a norm when it comes to recruitment of top corporate leaders (Beaverstock, 2007; Coverdill & Finlay, 1998). Executive search consultants are third-party actors that are hired by clients to recruit often difficult-to-find executives to positions that clients aim to fill (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998; Hamori, 2010).

Taking actions to improve gender equality at the top of organizations can be viewed as both morally right and an intelligent thing to do. The business benefits are: a wider and deeper swath of talent to solve problems, increased innovation and a better reflection of a company's own customer base (McKinsey & Company, 2012). Desvaux et al. (2007) have found that European companies are most likely to experience strong stock market growth where there is a higher proportion of women in senior management teams and Hunt et al. (2015) state that companies having more gender diverse workforces perform better financially. Moreover, countries where women and men have more equal economic opportunities are more wealthy countries, which indicates a connection between the level of development and the role of women in society (Mikkola, 2005; World Bank, 2012).

Today, several institutions regard gender equality as a core priority. By 2015, the UN's third millennium goal was to "promote gender equality and empower women", and four of the World Bank's priority areas concern the reduction of inequality between genders (UN, 2016; World Bank, 2012). Attention to women's participation in top management teams has increased in societal debates over the past years, which points towards the importance of this issue (Allbright, 2016; Årets unga ledande kvinna, 2016; Female Economist of the Year, 2016; Cook & Glass, 2014; Terjesen & Singh, 2008; Wirz, 2014). During the last thirty years there has also been an increase of research on gender bias, which according to Vial et al. (2016) reflects the perplexity of scholars faced with proof that the advancement of women into top positions of power and prestige seems to have stagnated.

As can be understood from the background presented above, the dearth of women in management teams of corporations is still a fact in most parts of the world and a highly debated topic both in society and within the research community. About this debate, Wirz (2014) mentions Mavin and Simpson's (2014) argument that business schools and corporations often are found to be led by gender blind principles and that they play a rhetorical role in the debate, rather than acting by example and breaking new ground. Further, ESFs are interesting vantage points for studying the issue of inequality in top management positions considering their role as matchmakers (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998). ESFs are important intermediaries (Collinson et al., 1990; Hawcroft & Dewhurst, 2013; Petersen & Saporta, 2004; Sealy et al., 2009; Tienari et al., 2013; Hamori, 2010) that control elite labor markets by mediating relationships between candidates and clients, and by declaring definitions of talent, hence influencing and deciding what individuals that qualify as talented candidates (Faulconbridge et al., 2009). Thus, ESFs can contribute to a deeper understanding of barriers for women in reaching the top layers of organizations. On this note, we believe that this study is highly relevant, in which we aim to contribute to the debate about the scarcity of women at top management positions by looking at executive search processes through a gender lens.

1.2 Previous literature review and research gap

1.2.1 Previous literature review

Research on women in management became an important field during the 1980s and has been ever since. One of the first questions asked was if women could be managers and why there were fewer women in top management. The second question asked was if female and male managers had different attitudes and behaviors in organizations (Mikkola, 2005). Although research on gender equality and women in management is abundant, there is a gap of knowledge on the roles of ESFs as recruiters and previous research within the field of gender equality in executive search is relatively scarce (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). Firstly, many studies on corporate leadership in general focus on aspects such as demographics and performance implications, rather than on the appointment process itself (Doldor et al., 2012). Secondly, if having the appointment process in focus, a literature mapping by Hamori (2010) shows that much previous research has focused on ESFs' impact on pay, career paths or similar, rather than gender in particular. Research investigating the scarcity of women in appointment processes suggest that ESFs are important intermediaries, yet seldom explored, and that there is little evidence of their real role (Collinson et al., 1990; Hawcroft & Dewhurst, 2013; Petersen & Saporta, 2004; Sealy et al., 2009; Tienari et al., 2013; Hamori, 2010).

Despite the scarcity of research within the field of gender and executive search, some studies exploring this area have been conducted, especially during the last two decades. Much of the research has focused on Anglophone¹ countries (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998, 2000; Khurana, 2002; Dreher et al., 2011; Doldor et al., 2012; Fawcett & Pringle, 2000), but relatively little research builds on empirical data from other countries (Faulconbridge et al., 2009). Further, Tienari et al., (2013) state that research often relies on ex post accounts from interviews and studies. They suggest that studies where researchers observe clients, consultants and candidates during search assignments would be particularly useful, but highlight that it is difficult to conduct due to the confidential nature of the executive search business. Moreover, the common conclusion of previous studies exploring ESFs seems to be that gender biases exist in different ways in their processes (Fawcett & Pringle, 2000; Holgersson, 2003; Doldor et al., 2012; Tienari et al., 2013; Wirz, 2014).

Tienari et al. (2013) suggest that male dominance in top management is reproduced by ESFs and their clients. They found that gender stereotypes are recreated and that women are excluded similarly across cultures. Fawcett and Pringle's (2000) findings are in line with many of Tienari et al.'s (2013) conclusions and both their studies argue that assumptions about men and women are reiterated and that the ideal candidate is defined as male, leading to the tendency to compare female applicants to the picture of a typical man. A report by Doldor et al. (2012) states that ESFs' processes remain opaque and subjective and that they often are driven by predominantly male client representatives who tend to favor those with similar characteristics to themselves. Their report highlights that ESFs not only assess candidates on suitability in terms of skills, but also on subjective judgments on fit, which can be seen as a disadvantage for women due to the male-dominated nature of clients. Fawcett and Pringle (2000) argue in congruity with this and state that a masculine senior executive culture exists and that representatives from the client influencing the hiring decision often are men. Moreover, a study by Holgersson (2003) shows results that are in line with Fawcett and Pringle's (2000) argument that a contributing factor to the scarcity of women in top management positions is consultants' tendency to rely on established, predominantly male networks.

The latest study about this subject that we have come across was conducted by Wirz (2014). She writes about how ESFs are involved in the gender and leadership paradox, but from a more holistic perspective where she states that ESFs are "[...] deeply implicated in the lack of gender parity in leadership positions. Yet, they should neither be perceived as the cause of the problem nor the principal agent contributing to it" (p. 189). In line with this, Holgersson (2003) and Tienari et al. (2013) highlight the role of

¹ (Primarily) English-speaking.

clients as important players in this dilemma. Several studies argue that consultants often point towards their limitations in including more women, one example being that there is a perceived lack of potential female candidates in the market (Tienari et al., 2013; Doldor et al., 2012; Holgersson, 2003). Holgersson (2003) states that strict requirements from clients reduce consultants perceived room in finding female candidates. Women have also been found to be excluded in the end of processes because of clients' shifting criteria or their belief that female candidates are reluctant towards the top management challenge (Tienari et al., 2013). On the other hand, Wirz (2014) points out that ESFs have a responsibility through their role as advisors to their clients.

1.2.2 Research gap

As presented above, gender equality and executive search taken together create a rather unknown research territory. The reason for this can to some extent be explained by the difficulty in gaining access to ESFs due to strict client confidentiality. This thesis addresses several of the unexplored areas of previous literature. Firstly, this study contributes to filling the research gap on ESFs with a focus on gender, argued by Hamori's (2010) mapping. Secondly, the thesis provides more evidence of the real roles of ESFs in recruitment (Collinson et al., 1990; Hawcroft & Dewhurst, 2013; Petersen & Saporta, 2004; Sealy et al., 2009; Tienari et al., 2013; Hamori, 2010). Thirdly, as most of the research within this field has been conducted in Anglophone countries, this study contributes to an understanding of this subject in Sweden in particular. Fourthly, this thesis builds on documentation about actual recruitment cases retrieved from an ESF's database as well as in-depth interviews with consultants². Access to actual cases enables us to take part of comments that have been written during the time of recruitments and ask consultants about concrete events. Thus, by using database information this study can to a certain degree address one of the challenges with a study at an ESF according to Tienari et al. (2013); reliance on ex post accounts.

In our background it has been highlighted how women still are a minority in top management. The potential benefits of having gender balance in management teams have also been described. Gender equality in top management teams is not only a question of fairness, but also about companies hiring the best qualified candidates and reaching their full performance potentials. Despite the fact that top management in corporations is merely a small piece of the world we live in, it has an important symbolic value. On this note, we believe that we have emphasized the importance and relevance of this issue as well as identified a distinct research gap, which together lay the foundation for the research question of this thesis.

² Read more about this in chapter 2, methodology.

1.3. Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study is to fill the research gap and provide explanations to the scarcity of women at top management positions by exploring this issue from a recruitment perspective with a gender lens. This is done through a case study at an ESF named *case study firm* (CSF), which will be further presented in the methodology chapter. Taken together, this has led to the research question presented below:

What mechanisms contributing to the scarcity of women at top management positions can be identified by exploring the executive search practices at CSF through a gender lens?

1.4 Thesis roadmap and definitions

Below is a roadmap that illustrates an overview of the seven chapters in this thesis, as well as a table with definitions and important information.

Figure 1: Thesis roadmap

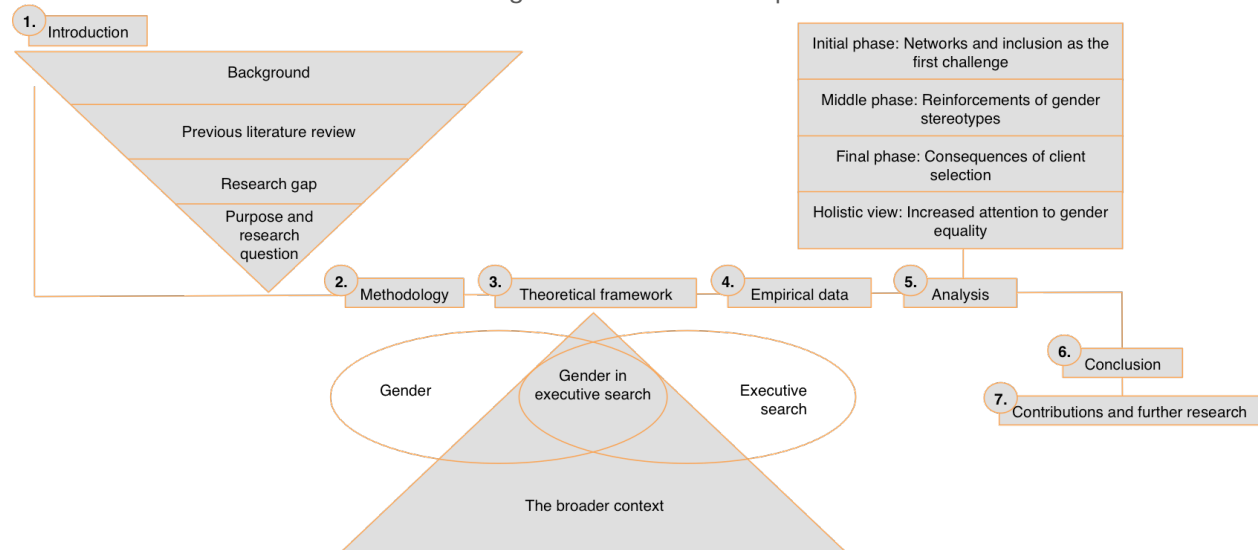


Table 1: Definitions list and important information

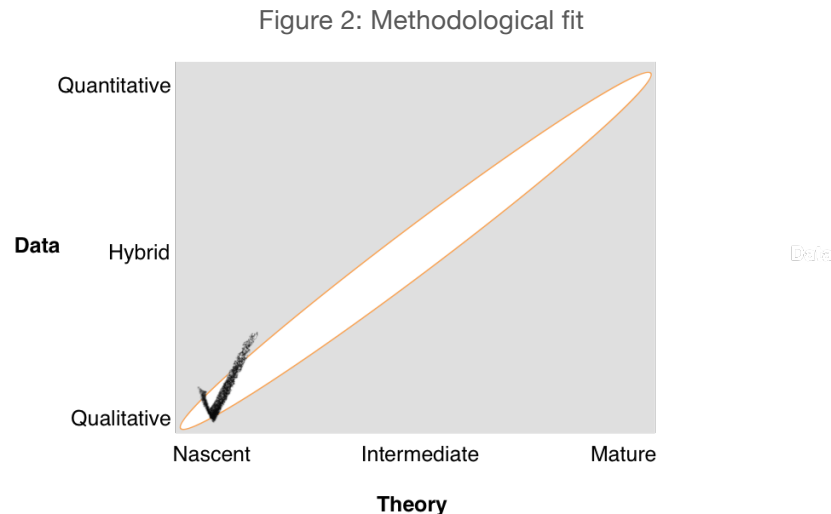
Word/Name	Meaning
ESF	Executive Search Firm
CSF	Case Study Firm: The ESF that is used as case study company in this thesis
PC	Potential candidate: A candidate that is considered for a position
SC	Selected candidate: The candidate who got the position in a recruitment process at CSF
Sources	People in the market that CSF use to get market intelligence on other individuals
Consultants	Referring to recruitment and assessment consultants at an ESF, unless otherwise is stated in the text
Sign-off	When a PC is excluded from a recruitment process by clients or consultants or by withdrawing him/herself
Longlist	A list of PCs created by consultants. This is the first list of candidates presented to the client
Shortlist	A list of PCs that make it further in the process and proceed from the longlist to be interviewed by the client
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
HR	Human Resources
SD	Sales Director
GM	General Manager, for example head of a business unit or country manager
Support functions	Core activities of businesses are supported by support function offices, such as HR, finance etc.
PE	Private Equity
Important information to have in mind while reading this thesis	
As will be explained in the methodology chapter, all empirical collection is based on recruitments to top management positions in the industrial sector. The discussions in this thesis are therefore dependent on this, unless otherwise is stated in the text	
In this thesis, “(women in) management” and “(women in) leadership” have the same meaning	
When we mention “the gender equality issue”, we refer to the imparity between genders	

2. Methodology

This chapter describes the choice of methodology as well as collection and analysis of empirical data. Lastly, trustworthiness of the methodology is discussed.

2.1 Methodological fit and research approach

A descriptive and exploratory research approach is used to address the nascent state of previous literature within gender equality and executive search, since it enables an understanding of events and the reasons behind them (Saunders et al., 2009). The nascent state of literature also puts the methodological fit of this study in the lower left corner of the figure below (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Therefore, we have chosen to use a qualitative research approach for this thesis, which enables an understanding of underlying factors within the debate of the dearth of women in top management by exploring the constructs of it.



Source: Edmondson & McManus (2007). Methodological fit in management field research.

In line with a qualitative research approach, the research question is open-ended and the purpose of the study is to identify patterns within recruitment and gender equality in order to provide a deeper understanding for mechanisms within this field. Further, we have used an interpretative epistemological approach in order to analyze information (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Initially, this thesis was carried out using a deductive method, meaning that we started with theory in order to get an overview of the research area and guide interviews in accordance with existing theoretical themes. However, during the remaining part of the thesis we went back and forth between empirical collection and theoretical framework, using an iterative method (Bryman & Bell, 2013).

2.2 Research design

This thesis builds on empirical data from a case study at an ESF. The empirical data is collected through a twofold approach; semi-structured interviews with consultants and database documentation about multiple top management recruitment cases. A case study approach is appropriate for this thesis since it aims to describe and explain a phenomenon (Yin, 2009). In accordance with Yin's (2007) distinction between different types of cases, this case study can be classified as *information-rich* and *revealing* since it builds on an organization's processes and specific recruitment cases that have not previously been investigated.

We have chosen to use a multi-method qualitative study (Saunders et al., 2009) and include two sources of data since it enables us to ensure a high level of integrity of the analysis (Silverman, 2013). Knights and McCabe (1997) argue that case studies can be used to enable combinations of multiple qualitative methods in order to avoid relying on one single approach. Thus, the comprehensive nature of the empirical data collection gives this thesis a strong ground for a profound analysis. Combining the two sources enables new discoveries and creates a unique standpoint. The interviews enable the study to capture opinions and perceptions of reality, while the database documentation contributes with complementary information regarding real-life cases.

2.3 The case study

2.3.1 Choice of case study firm

The ESF involved in this case study is anonymous because of the confidential nature of the executive search business. The chosen ESF, named CSF, was selected on the basis that we have contacts at the firm. CSF had prior to our interaction highlighted gender inequality in top management and had a positive attitude to the thought of collaboration in order to reach a deeper understanding of this topic. This has led to generous access to both CSF's employees and database.

2.3.2 Choice of recruitment cases

CSF mainly works with senior appointments to management teams and boards. In this study, focus is on what we refer to as top management positions, such as CEOs or the heads of functions³. The cases are from the years 2012-2015 and the span was chosen in order to get a sufficient number of cases. We chose to not go beyond 2012 in order to ensure that consultants remember the cases relatively clearly and that consultants responsible for the cases still work at the firm, since it enables us to use information from the cases during interviews.

³ For example CFOs, SDs, HR Directors or similar.

The process of selecting 20 cases was divided into three steps. First, we gathered all relevant cases⁴ and ended up with a large number⁵ of cases across all available sectors⁶. In the second step, it could be concluded that approximately 50% of all cases had been done within the industrial sector, which made it the largest sector among the cases at CSF. Thus, we decided to only focus on the industrial sector in order to increase comparability across cases. In the third step, an analysis of all industrial sector cases was done together with relevant consultants, which led to 20 cases being chosen. The cases were selected on the basis that there was enough information regarding the case in the database, the responsible consultants still worked at CSF and that there had been women involved in the case. The last requirement has been in focus since some cases within the industrial sector do not involve any women at all. Such cases are irrelevant for this study since they are less revealing about gendered effects in recruitment processes. Implications of the last requirement are further discussed in 4.2.2.1, where the data is presented.

2.3.3 Choice of interview subjects

The interview subjects in this study are seven consultants from CSF, who have been involved in at least one of the 20 selected cases. Some consultants have been interviewed several times due to the high number of selected cases belonging to them⁷, and the total number of interviews is 14. In addition to these 14 interviews, we also conducted a pre-study in order to get a comprehensive view of the research field and to facilitate empirical and theoretical collection. This also enabled us to better understand the terminology and processes of executive search, which helped us to set a direction for our empirical collection interviews (Kvale, 1996). The pre-study consisted of four interviews; two with our main contact persons at CSF and two with prominent researchers active within the field of gender equality.

Below is a table of all interviews conducted, including the pre-study. Consultants from CSF are linked to the cases they have been involved in and all interview dates are stated. Pseudonyms are used for all consultants in order to maintain anonymity.

⁴ All recruitments to top management positions from 2012-2015.

⁵ This cannot be further specified due to confidentiality reasons at CSF.

⁶ Industrial, consumer, technology, finance, healthcare and pharmaceutical.

⁷ When looking at table 2, please note that some consultants were interviewed two times during the same day.

Table 2: Interview list

Type of interview	Pseudonym/ name	Company	Title	Cases	Interview dates
Pre-study	Kim and Love	CSF	Consultants	Not applicable	2015-12-15 2016-01-19
Pre-study	Anna Wahl	KTH ⁽¹⁾	Professor	Not applicable	2016-02-02
Pre-study	Nina Åkestam	SSE ⁽²⁾	Researcher	Not applicable	2015-12-14
Empirical collection	Kim	CSF	Consultant	Case6 • Case7 • Case10 • Case15	2016-02-08 2016-02-23 2016-02-26
Empirical collection	Andy	CSF	Consultant	Case1 • Case20	2016-02-23 2016-02-23
Empirical collection	Robin	CSF	Consultant	Case2 • Case7 • Case9 • Case10 • Case14 • Case16 • Case17 • Case19	2016-02-08 2016-02-23 2016-02-23
Empirical collection	Michelle	CSF	Consultant	Case4 • Case5 • Case13	2016-02-24 2016-02-24
Empirical collection	Love	CSF	Consultant	Case8 • Case19	2016-02-24 2016-02-24
Empirical collection	Sam	CSF	Consultant	Case18	2016-02-24
Empirical collection	Alex	CSF	Consultant	Case3 • Case11 • Case12	2016-03-03

1) KTH Royal Institute of Technology

2) Stockholm School of Economics

2.4 Empirical design

2.4.1 Database

The first empirical gathering was done by collecting data from CSF's database. CSF's database is similar to a corporate bank of resumes, impressions and comments about individuals⁸ that can help guide consultants in future searches. The database information used in the thesis had to be retrieved separately for each case and from each stage of the recruitment process, taking us approximately four full weeks to finish at CSF's office. Within each stage of the recruitment process⁹, information from several individuals in the process was gathered, leading data collection to be split between actors such as sources, consultants, PCs and clients.

⁸ Such as PCs or sources.

⁹ An overview is provided in figure 6.

The data retrieved from CSF's database can be divided into three categories. Firstly, data regarding number of individuals involved¹⁰ in each case was collected and divided in accordance with gender. This was done to provide an overview of gender distribution in CSF's processes in general and the distribution at different stages of the selected cases in particular. Secondly, data on responsible consultants and client company specifics for each case was gathered to further facilitate comparisons and analysis of the cases. Thirdly, more detailed data on individuals from cases was compiled through a careful review of comments logged in the database from CSF's consultants when individuals were excluded from the processes. This data enables us to connect the outcome of cases to interview material.

2.4.2 Interviews

Our study was first introduced to CSF's consultants through an email that was sent out by our contact persons. This was the background the consultants had before the interviews and no questions were sent out on beforehand in order to allow for more spontaneous reactions. All interviews were done in person and took place at CSF's premises, and each interview lasted for about one hour. The interviews were recorded in order to increase the chances of producing reliable data (Saunders et al., 2009). A confidentiality agreement that entailed complete anonymity of CSF¹¹ was signed in order to establish trust between us and the consultants.

A semi-structured design for the interviews was chosen as a result of the descriptive nature of the thesis. The interviews began with an introduction about the thesis, which was followed by the consultant introducing him- or herself and the work at CSF. In accordance with the semi-structured character of the interviews, the remaining part was guided by prepared discussion topics¹² (Bryman & Bell, 2013) and open questions. This made room for unexpected answers and an exploration of the reasoning behind them, leading to other potentially interesting areas not proposed by us or literature to be discussed (Gillham, 2005). The interview design was created based on the information from our pre-study as well as a first theoretical search. Database information proved to be highly beneficial during the interviews since it contributed with information regarding cases that led to interesting discussions that might otherwise not have been explored.

2.5 Data analysis and interpretation

The first step when processing interview findings was to transcribe recorded interviews. When analyzing the empirical data from the first interviews, several themes¹³ were

¹⁰ PCs, sources and client representatives.

¹¹ Including all actors that might be involved in the study, such as consultants, clients and candidates.

¹² See discussion topics in appendix.

¹³ See themes presented in chapter 4, empirical data.

discovered. Thus, a systematic exploration of similar themes guided the remaining interviews, although still allowing for new themes to be explored. This method enabled a gradual categorization of the empirical data, which also facilitated our theoretical search and highlighted several central concepts (Bryman & Bell, 2013). The themes also facilitated focus on the most important patterns and enabled us to exclude less relevant parts (Langley, 1999). This focus helped us discover seven key mechanisms contributing to gender disparity in top management, which are presented in the analysis chapter. Throughout the analysis of empirical data, we continuously discussed and questioned conclusions to ensure accurate interpretations (Yin, 2009). In relation to this, we describe how individuals are influenced by gender stereotypes and assumptions in our analysis and we want to highlight our acknowledgement of the possibility that we ourselves also could be influenced by this. However, we have tried to avoid these unconscious biases by constantly being aware of the possibility while writing this thesis.

2.6 Trustworthiness

Throughout our work in this thesis, several methodological choices have been made in order to drive progress and keep the study within reasonable boundaries, which have led to some implications. We have chosen to let Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for trustworthiness guide the limitation discussions since they according to Sandberg (2014) are appropriate to discuss the accuracy of interpretation and presentation of findings in qualitative research. *Credibility*¹⁴, *transferability*¹⁵ and *confirmability*¹⁶ are presented below, while *dependability*¹⁷ is discussed in section 7.1.2 in order to enable a discussion about the generalizability of the whole thesis.

The interview material was sent out to the interviewed consultants for approval in order to increase *credibility* of our findings. Anyhow, an implication on *credibility* is that all data has been gathered in Swedish, creating a need of translation into English. Even though this has been done with utmost carefulness, writing in a second language can have an effect on results, especially regarding quotations. Because of the interpretative approach in this thesis, we have been careful to present empirical findings and analysis in a way that makes it simple to understand our interpretations. The aim is to illustrate the plausibility in our reasoning and increase *credibility*. Throughout the thesis we have also constantly discussed and questioned our interpretations and choice of wordings, in order to increase *confirmability*. One of us has always taken on the devil's advocate role, aiming to thoroughly go through our arguments and make sure that they hold.

¹⁴ The "truth" of the findings, as viewed through the eyes of those being observed or interviewed and within the context in which the research is carried out (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

¹⁵ The extent to which the research would produce similar or consistent findings if carried out as described (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

¹⁶ Researchers need to provide evidence that corroborates the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

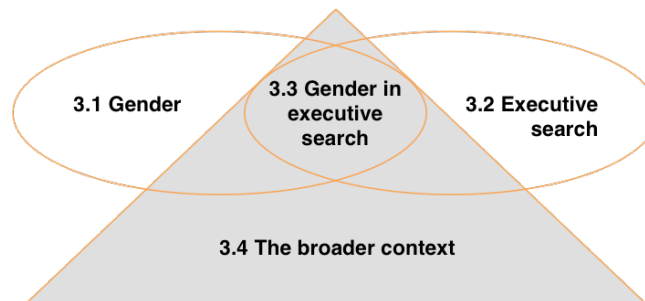
¹⁷ The extent to which findings can be transferred to other settings (similar contexts) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Furthermore, considering the importance of the database information and its role as a foundation for all empirical collection in this thesis, empirical validity is argued through the comprehensive number of cases rather than the number of interviews, as well as the advantage created by combining the two sources. However, the fact that the thesis builds on interviews and specific cases in the industrial sector and on cases chosen on the basis that women were included creates a unique setting that decreases *transferability*. Another factor that could complicate conducting a study with similar results is confidentiality and that the findings are dependent on full access to an ESF in terms of its database and consultants.

3. Theoretical framework

The complexities behind the scarcity of women in top management are investigated through two theoretical cornerstones we believe are essential for this study: gender and executive search. The framework is founded on those sometimes overlapping theoretical areas, which later are discussed in relation to each other. The last section focuses on the broader context where we present a systems-oriented model that describes dependencies between macro-, meso- and micro-levels and how it affects women in management. Research on institutional actors and their role in society is provided to complement this model.

Figure 3: Theoretical roadmap



3.1 Gender

3.1.1 Gender as a concept

At the foundation of the debate regarding the scarcity of women in executive positions in corporations is the concept of gender. A distinction between sex and gender can be dated back to 1968 when three main elements were identified as part of the gender identity development; biological factors, sex assignment at birth and environmental and psychological influences (Stoller, 1968). While sex is ascribed by biology, gender is

considered a status achieved through psychological, cultural and social means (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Wahl et al., 2001; Wahl, 1997). Butler (1999) argues that “being” a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible and De Beauvoir (1973 [1949]) states that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. Gender definitions change according to time and space, and are dependent on the interpreting person (Wahl et al., 2001; Wahl, 1997).

3.1.2 Doing gender and gender as a stratification system

Researchers have tried to categorize theory on gender equality into different areas in order to facilitate navigation within this field (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Risman, 2004). Risman (2004) categorizes gender as a social structure and divides theory into four traditions¹⁸. We have chosen to focus on the third and the fourth tradition. The third tradition includes theory on how *doing gender* creates and reproduces inequality, with focus on social interaction and accountability to others’ expectations. The fourth tradition emphasizes an integrative approach on gender as a *stratification* system. Since these two traditions not only include individual aspects, but also interactional and institutional, they lay a basis for theory on gender as a social construction which we believe is essential for exploring the thesis subject.

West and Zimmerman (1987, 2009), who wrote about *doing gender* already during the 1980s, explain the concept as building on the notion of seeing gender as a social practice. Similar to what is stated in 3.1.1, they describe gender as a *doing* rather than a *being*, in other words an ongoing situated process where sex category is influenced by normative perceptions of attitudes and activities. *Doing gender* can be described as complex processes and accomplishments that are embedded in social interactions in which we categorize others, and are categorized, as men or women (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Gherardi, 1994; Mavin & Grandy, 2012). Lorber (1994) agrees with this and argues that gender differences are socially constructed and universally used to justify *stratification*. She argues that the continuing purpose of gender as a modern social institution is to construct women as a subordinate group, since one can justify the creation of groups that can be hierarchically divided if differences between people are constructed. Wahl (1997) writes that men and women are segregated into different positions in the labor market, which makes it possible for society to attribute certain positions based on gender, often men in management and women in subordinate positions.

Risman (2004) claims that cognitive bias is one reason to why *doing gender* is recreated in everyday life and that in order to deconstruct gender inequality, individuals

¹⁸ Areas of theory.

need to understand how it is constructed and reproduced. She argues that acknowledgement and deconstruction of gender categories are the only ways to end subordination of women. Kelan (2010) writes that literature sometimes refer to *undoing gender* as a way to decrease gender bias, which requires individuals to pay attention to processes and interactions where gendering takes place. However, Kelan (2010) and Mavin and Grandy (2012) agree with other researchers¹⁹ who question that gender can be undone and argue that *undoing gender* in fact is more likely to reproduce gender. Mavin and Grandy (2012) suggest that people should aim towards *doing gender* well, in a manner that acknowledges sex category implications, or *doing gender* differently, for example through enactments of femininity and masculinity that challenges the gender binary.

3.1.3 Gendered perceptions of managers

Some researchers argue that the perception of a non-gender manager is similar to the perception of a male manager, according to both men and women (Deal & Stevenson 1998; Wahl, 1996). Wahl (1996) states that both leadership and masculine attributes are social constructions. The perception of a non-gender manager, which is similar to the perception of a male manager, is therefore also a social construction. This leads to the occurrence of specific problems when it comes to women and management positions, due to the simple fact that they are not men. Wahl (1996) also writes that masculinity has become a part of leadership, since much former research only has researched men as leaders and this has become the base of the definition. This is in line with Powell's (2011, 2012) "think manager-think masculine" paradigm and his and Koenig et al.'s (2011) claim that leadership often is associated with masculine attributes.

Many studies write that the gender of perceivers²⁰ has an impact on gender bias. Kwon and Milgrom (2010) state that male employees are more likely than their female counterparts to quit if they get a female manager because of an aversion towards them. Further, they write that male employees in male-dominated occupations may be particularly resistant to female managers due to traditional stereotypes. Bosak and Sczesny (2011) write that male evaluators select male applicants with a higher certainty than female applicants, which they believe is a result of lower confirmatory standards for male applicants compared to female. Similarly, Vial et al. (2016) state that female power-holders are regarded as less legitimate than male power-holders. Deal and Stevenson (1998) state that both genders value similar characteristics in a manager and agree on the descriptions of male managers, but that the description of a female manager differs depending on the gender of the perceiver. Men attribute negative

¹⁹ For example Messerschmidt (2009) and West and Zimmerman (2009).

²⁰ Individuals who observe or behold.

characteristics²¹ to female managers while women attribute positive characteristics²² to them.

Several scholars have provided explanations to why there seems to be a reluctance towards female leaders. A perceived lack of fit (Heilman, 2001; Ridgeway, 2001) or incongruity between traits and behaviors associated with successful leaders and those seen as typically descriptive of women have been given attention to as important factors (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that a consequence of the incongruence is that it is more difficult for women to become leaders. Another established explanation to the resistance towards female managers is related to behaviors and gender stereotypes, and that people tend to be negative towards gender deviants; men or women who act in discordance with traditional gender stereotypes (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

3.1.4 Reproduction of gender biases

One explanation to the reproduction of gender inequality in management contexts is related to the nature of interpersonal perceptions and preferences. Powell (2011, 2012) states that men are more comfortable with other men. Similarly, Lipman-Blumen (1976) describes *homosociality* as the mutual orientation to members of the same sex. However, the physical co-presence of members of the same sex does not necessarily create a homosocial sphere. A male homosocial sphere can be preserved even if women participate, but this only holds if the women adapt to the male patterns of communication and interaction that are applied. Most leading positions are dominated by men, which leads to men identifying and comparing themselves with other men. Women, on the other hand, do not relate to their own gender in the same sense, since it does not have power to the same extent as men. Therefore, they relate to men as well, since that is where the power is (Lipman-Blumen, 1976).

Byrne (1971) suggests that there is a *similarity-attraction paradigm* in recruitment processes, leading to individuals surrounding themselves with similar others. Rivera (2012) also writes about similarity as a basis for evaluation and argues that hiring is a *cultural matching* between candidates, evaluators and firms. She states that employers tend to seek candidates that are similar to themselves²³. Her study shows that “evaluators implicitly gravitated toward and explicitly fought for candidates with whom they felt an emotional spark of commonality” (Rivera, 2012, p. 1017). The *cultural matching* also has a stereotypically gendered nature and can indirectly disadvantage

²¹ Examples of characteristics mentioned: procrastinate, deceitful, hasty, shy, having a strong need for social acceptance, timid, vulgar, nervous, easily influenced, bitter, uncertain and passive.

²² Examples of characteristics mentioned: firm, well informed, objective, sophisticated, direct, intelligent, ambitious, authoritative and competent.

²³ For example in terms of experiences and self-presentation styles.

applicants who hold more stereotypically feminine leisure interests, regardless of sex.

Another mechanism that can contribute to the reproduction of gender biases is the conviction of objectivity itself. Castilla and Benard (2010) write that individuals in managerial positions favor male employees over equally qualified female employees in organizations that are explicitly communicated as meritocratic. The authors argue that there are two main mechanisms involved in this. Firstly, once individuals feel that they have established their own moral credentials as non-prejudiced, they are more inclined to express prejudiced attitudes. Therefore, they might be more likely to allow stereotypes to influence their decisions. Secondly, individuals believing that they are objective become more confident that their beliefs are valid and thus more likely to act on those. Castilla and Benard (2010) suggest that this can have unintended effects on gender bias.

3.2 Executive search

3.2.1 ESFs' roles

ESFs deliver independent professional advice and their way of working is similar to the practices of management consultancy firms, whose services are immaterial, hard to assess (Furusten & Werr, 2009) and produced together with the client (Sturdy & Wright, 2011). According to several researchers, consultants are used to get expert advice and access to specific knowledge (Richter & Niewiem, 2009; Vogl, 1999). Similarly, academic papers describe ESFs as having an expert role, summarized as hiring capabilities, information advantages and efficiency in recruitment. ESFs are also intermediaries between candidates and organizations, and consultants often focus their efforts in managing the relationship between the two actors to create a favorable impression of their services (Burton-Jones & Spender, 2011).

3.2.2 ESFs' practices

The success of ESFs is dependent on to what extent they can make themselves credible to clients in offering something special. As a result of the intangibility of their consultancy, consultants often concentrate on managing the client relationship (Clark, 1995). As mentioned by Tienari et al. (2013), Coverdill and Finlay (2000) suggest that a paradox of consulting is that the more successful ESFs are in creating strong client relationships, the more dependent they become on these clients. In relation to the client relationship, a study by Khurana and Piskorski (2004) shows that ESFs are expected to legitimize both the search process and the final choice of candidate, even though made by clients.

Khurana (2002) writes that in order to present only defensible candidates²⁴ to clients and maintain good client relationships, ESFs tend to focus on a narrow pool of candidates with experience from certain types of prestige organizations. In line with this, Hamori (2010) suggests that ESFs tend to be risk-averse and sometimes lack creativity in the way they place executives. Charan (2005) argues that ESFs sometimes are driven by a *usual-suspects bias* in CEO searches and that they might not nominate promising lower-level executives to higher positions. One reason for this might be that it is easier for consultants to argue for already sitting CEOs rather than motivate potential of individuals currently in less senior positions (Charan, 2005). Similarly, Khurana (2002) states that the external CEO search process has created a *closed ecosystem* of top executives that have similar personal and demographic attributes. Thus, consultants can be thought of as gatekeepers since they affect what kind of people that are considered for certain assignments (Doldor et al., 2012; Faulconbridge et al., 2009).

3.3 Gender in executive search

The initial part of the executive search process and consultants' reliance on networks is often discussed as playing an important role for gender balance. Consultants find many candidates through networks, which also are used to retrieve information about people that are PCs for assignments (Coverdill & Finlay, 2007). A broad network is highlighted as a factor affecting the likelihood of a candidate being considered by an ESF for a position (Holgersson, 2003; Fawcett & Pringle, 2000; Charan, 2005). Many researchers argue that one reason for gender bias early in recruitment processes is that ESFs tend to rely on networks that are predominantly male and have less information about female managers (Dreher et al., 2011; Tienari et al., 2013; Fawcett & Pringle, 2000). According to Dreher et al. (2011), women are less likely to be contacted by consultants than men²⁵. Faulconbridge et al. (2009) state that consultants tend to rely on networks that consist of preferred layers of candidates who dominate in the labor markets at the expense of others that do not fit the description.

Researchers also mention personal fit and similarity as factors influencing gender balance, similar to the discussion about recruitment in general in 3.1.4. When evaluating candidates, consultants often create a candidate pool²⁶, which is decided by requirements for a position. Consequently, many candidates in such formed pools are homogenous with regards to requirements, which then cease to play an important role in candidate selection. This is where social similarity and fit have been suggested as essential factors (Coverdill & Finlay, 2007). Research has shown that consultants pay

²⁴ Candidates that consultants can defend when discussing them with the client, for example in terms of experience or skills.

²⁵ Primarily white males, i.e. women and minority male counterparts are less likely to be contacted.

²⁶ People in the market that could be considered as PCs for an assignment.

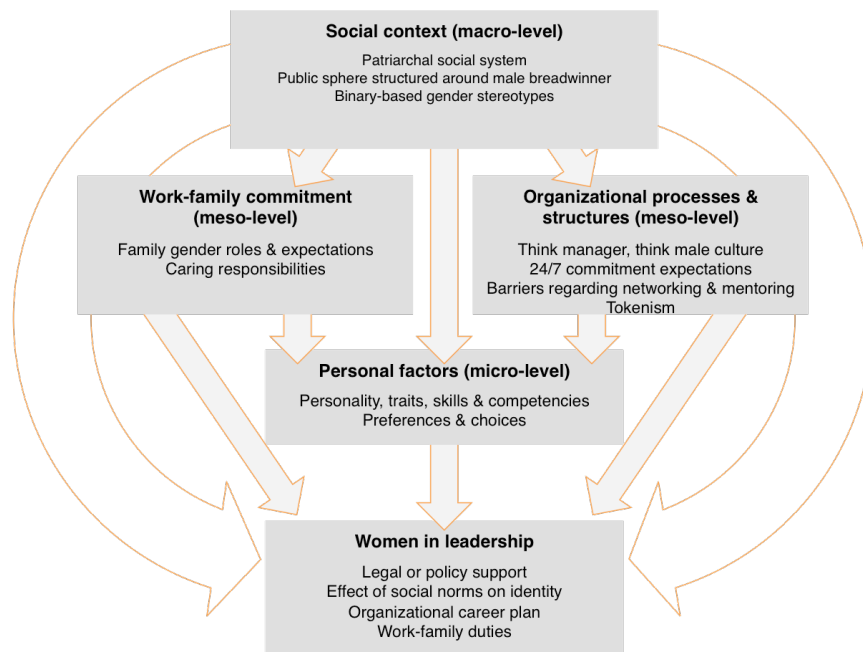
much attention to personal chemistry when evaluating individuals (Coverdill & Finlay, 2007; Khurana, 2002). Coverdill and Finlay (2007) argue that recruiters and clients tend to feel most comfortable with candidates who are similar to themselves, which might contribute to the maintenance of inequality patterns due to gender bias. This is in congruence with Faulconbridge et al.'s (2009) statement that consultants often resemble their clients; white middle-aged males that are part of a homogenous professional elite.

3.4 The broader context

3.4.1 Gender-organization-system framework

In order to put the cornerstones of our theoretical framework provided above in a larger context and thus facilitate a deeper understanding of mechanisms in gender and executive search, this section describes the Gender-Organization-System (GOS) framework presented by Fagenson's (1990, 1993). This is a framework on women in management that contributes to an understanding of how different dimensions influence each other. The framework focuses on the simultaneous interaction between the personal, organizational and societal level when it comes to the underrepresentation of women in management. The theory has been illustrated in a model by Omar and Davidson (2001), which has been further developed by Wirz (2014). The latest update by Wirz is the one used in this thesis due to its simplicity and modern view.

Figure 4: The GOS framework



Source: Wirz, M. (2014). The Practices Within Leadership Selection: A Gender Analysis. Cambridge: University of Cambridge. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Figure II.1: The gender organisation system of women in leadership, p. 19.

The GOS framework builds on the assumption that individuals or organizations can not be properly understood isolated from society. This framework is particularly helpful since it enables understanding gender status through organizational and societal contexts, where the gender differentials first emerge. The framework also highlights the interdependency of the process; when the system in which organizations and individuals are embedded in changes, the other components change as well (Fagenson, 1993).

We believe that all dimensions in the GOS model are important for this thesis since the gender theories presented in the beginning of this chapter permeate all of them. The micro-level, which regards personal factors, is touched upon in several sections since it is further down in the model and influenced by the other dimensions. On a meso-level, organizational processes and structures are discussed, particularly in the sections regarding ESFs. However, no theoretical attention is given to work-family commitment, since we consider it to be more difficult to explore as a result of the empirical material in this thesis. Further, extra emphasis is put on the macro-level in the next subsection in order to provide an understanding for how both organizations and individuals are influenced by the externalities surrounding them.

3.4.2 Macro-level influences

To conclude the theoretical framework, we have chosen to include a perspective on how society affects organizations. This is a helpful addition to the cornerstones of our theoretical framework and enables a deeper analysis of the macro-level in GOS.

Steiner and Steiner (2011) write that businesses shape and change government and society, and are molded by political and social pressures. They argue that social contracts between businesses and society exist, which define the broad duties that businesses must perform to retain society's support. Engwall (2008) argues that the media is one important actor constructing rules for businesses through scrutinization. Further, civil society constructs movements in order to influence corporations and take actions outside the political system (Engwall, 2008).

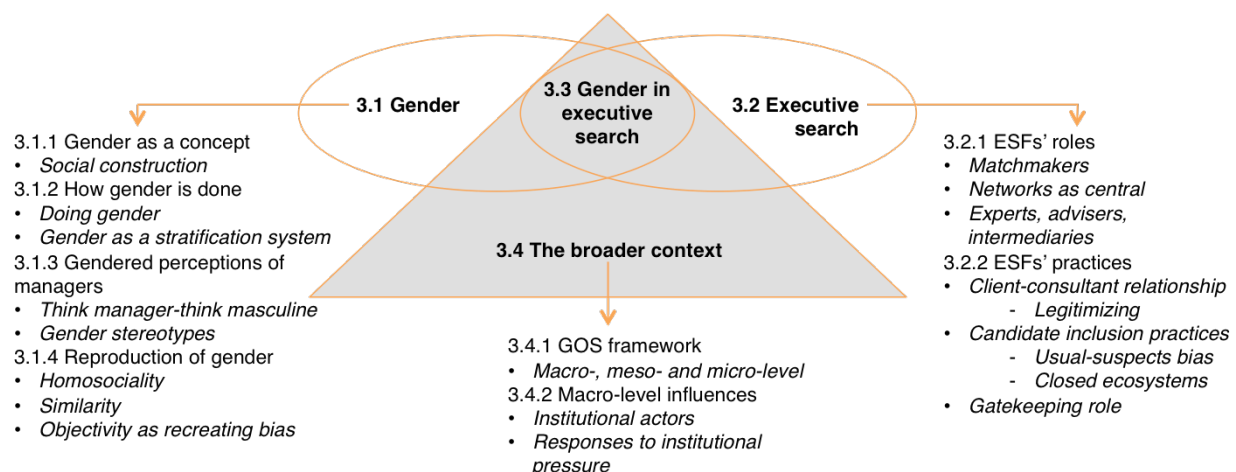
Furusten (2013) writes that organizations are embedded in an institutional environment, which consists of institutional actors influencing and shaping it. The actors create institutional products, such as information or rules, which are used as tools to control or influence organizations. These are packaged into materialized or social products, such as reports or lectures, in order to be delivered to and comprehended by the environment (Furusten, 2013). Continuing on this theme, Oliver (1991) writes about businesses' strategic responses to institutional pressure: compliance, compromise,

avoidance, defiance or manipulation. Compliance is the least active response, meaning that businesses obey rules consciously or unconsciously. Manipulation is the most active response, meaning that businesses try to influence or control institutional processes leading to pressure. This last alternative response is similar to Brunsson's (1993) theory about justification and hypocrisy. With justification, Brunsson states that planned actions are defended in order to convince people that they are the right ones. By hypocrisy, he essentially means that actors communicate one thing in order to be comprehended in a certain way, but in fact do something else that is not in line with what is communicated.

3.6 Theoretical framework summary

The sections in the theoretical framework in this thesis and their key concepts are summarized in the figure below.

Figure 5: Theoretical framework summary



4. Empirical data

This chapter presents CSF, their processes and the empirical data in this thesis. The empirical data is gathered from two sources; CSF's database and qualitative interviews with consultants. The empirical data below is narrated in the same way as it was told from the sources, in a simple and unadorned style. Further, we have identified several themes that will guide the presentation of the data in order to facilitate the reading.

4.1 Company overview and the recruitment process

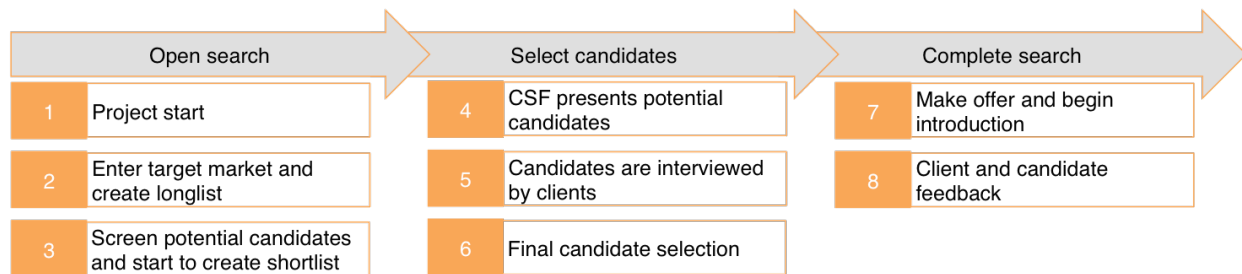
4.1.1 Company overview

CSF is a senior-level ESF. The firm advises client companies within several industries on top management and board position recruitments. Since this case study examines

confidential information at CSF, the company is anonymous and can not be presented any further.

4.1.2 CSF's recruitment process

Figure 6: Recruitment process overview



The figure above is an overview of the recruitment process at CSF and its stages.

In the first stage, CSF creates a job description²⁷ and discusses the candidate profile with the client. CSF also conducts an analysis of the client organization and creates a list of target organizations that are suitable to look into in order to find PCs. When CSF searches for PCs, it performs internal²⁸ and external²⁹ sourcing. A longlist with approximately 10-15 PCs is created and presented to the client in the second stage. The third stage involves the client selecting a number of PCs from the longlist who are interviewed by CSF. After this, normally around four candidates³⁰ are selected to the shortlist. In the fourth stage, the candidates' resumes and comments from interviews with CSF are packaged into a report that is presented to the client. In stage five, client representatives perform interviews with shortlist candidates and in step six a candidate is chosen. Stage seven and eight involve offer letter sign, announcement of SC as well as follow-up actions.

4.2 Overview of cases

In this section, information from CSF's database regarding top management recruitment processes within the industrial sector 2012-2015 is presented in the form of statistics and comments. Firstly, tables of gender distribution at specific points in the processes from all cases is presented in order to provide an overview. Secondly, information regarding the 20 cases chosen for this study is further presented with in-depth statistics and comments. The statistics are presented in percentages only, in order to maintain complete anonymity of CSF.

²⁷ A description of the position that CSF is mandated to appoint on behalf of the client, for example in terms of responsibilities and required experience.

²⁸ Using consultants' own professional networks to get ideas of PCs and sources.

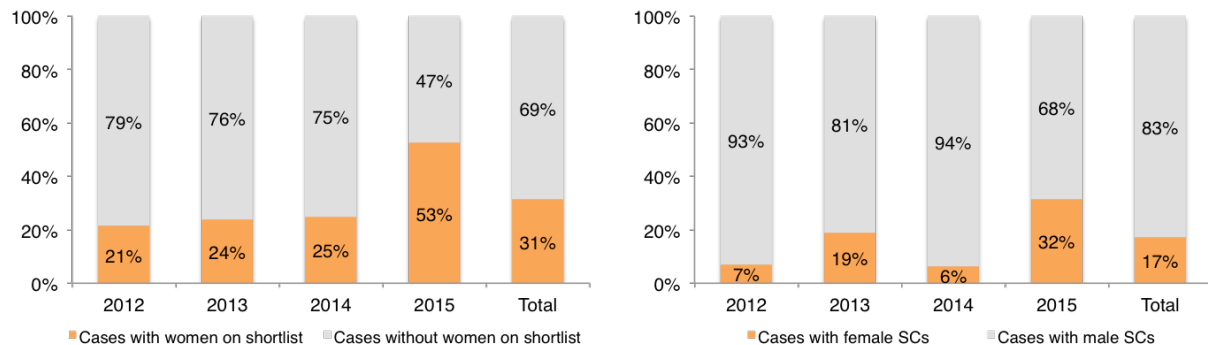
²⁹ Contacting sources in the market in order to get recommendations on PCs.

³⁰ It has been up to 12 candidates on shortlists in the selected cases in this thesis.

4.2.1 All cases

In the figure below, statistics from all top management appointments within the industrial sector 2012-2015 are presented. Number of cases having women on the shortlist have increased over the years, and the SC gender difference is the lowest in 2015.

Figure 7: Cases



The diagrams above show gender distribution among cases within the industrial sector, 2012-2015. The diagram to the left shows cases with at least one woman on shortlist in relation to cases with no women on shortlist. The diagram to the right shows cases with female SCs in relation to cases with male SCs.

4.2.2 Selected cases

4.2.2.1 Case specifics

Statistics on the 20 selected cases are presented in table 3. The table provides an overview of the gender distribution at each stage of the recruitment process. A definition list that explains terms can be found above the table. The column *considered sources* includes all individuals marked as potential sources for the case in CSF's database. Numbers in the columns regarding recommendations from sources are based on individuals mentioned as PCs by sources when they are asked in general about a position³¹.

As stated in section 2.3.2, there are implications on the data due to the selection criteria of cases. The data is influenced by the fact that cases were chosen on the basis that women were included, suggesting a more positive outlook in comparison to industrial cases in general. Further, the unique gender distribution in the HR case compared to the others, affects the total gender distribution. Moreover, in some cases

³¹ In order to give an as accurate picture as possible, the data excludes information from when sources are called to give input on a PC, since the PC is not a suggestion from the source in those situations, but instead brought up by the consultant from CSF.

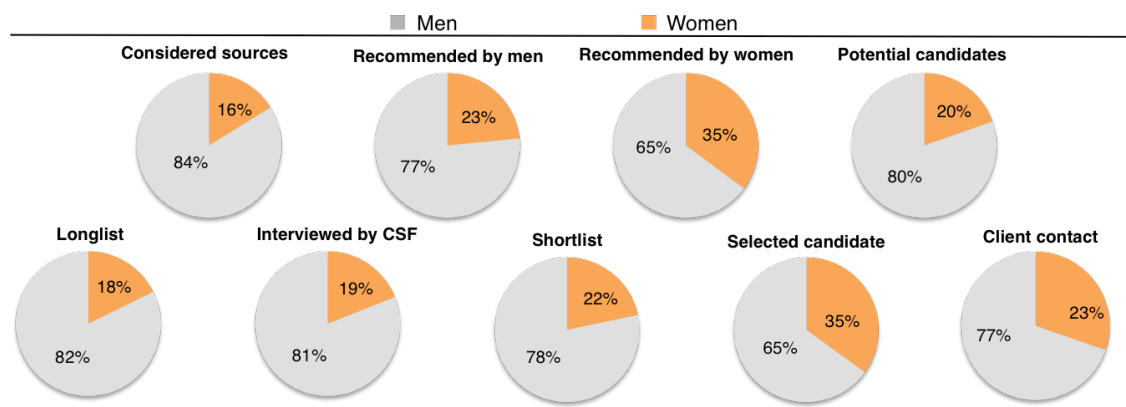
the percentage of women increase during the process, which in most cases is a result of the few women involved proceeding while some men are excluded³².

Table 3: Data on selected cases

Definition lists																							
Columns												Client contact role											
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Role: Position to be appointed at client company• Considered sources: Total number of considered sources• Rec.: Total recommended individuals by sources• Interviewed by CSF: Potential candidates selected by client from long list, to be interviewed by CSF consultants• Client contact role: Positions of representatives from the client company• F: Female• M: Male												<ul style="list-style-type: none">• MT: Individuals from the management team• PE: Representative(s) from PE-firm• BM: Members from client's board of directors• C: Chairman from client's board of directors											
												Client ownership structure											
												<ul style="list-style-type: none">• P: Private• PL: Publicly listed• PE: Private equity											
Case	Client ownership structure	Role	Year	Considered sources		Rec. by men		Rec. by women		Potential candidates		Longlist		Interviewed by CSF		Shortlist		Selected candidate		Client contact		Client contact role	Responsible consultant (from CSF)
				F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M		
Case1	P	GM	2015	29%	71%	16%	84%	25%	75%	14%	86%	15%	85%	14%	86%	14%	86%	X	0	1	MT	Andy	
Case2	PL	GM	2013	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	35%	65%	37%	63%	43%	57%	50%	50%	X	1	0	HR	Robin	
Case3	PL	CFO	2014	25%	75%	0%	100%	0%	0%	21%	79%	22%	78%	25%	75%	20%	80%	X	1	1	CEO, HR	Alex	
Case4	PL	CFO	2015	19%	81%	25%	75%	100%	0%	20%	80%	14%	86%	9%	91%	12%	88%	X	0	2	MT	Michelle	
Case5	PL	CFO	2015	22%	78%	36%	64%	67%	33%	26%	74%	24%	76%	21%	79%	29%	71%	X	0	1	CEO	Michelle	
Case6	PL	CFO	2015	23%	77%	0%	100%	0%	100%	52%	48%	48%	52%	47%	53%	42%	58%	X	0	2	CEO, HR	Kim	
Case7	PL	CEO	2015	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%	9%	91%	12%	88%	0%	100%	0%	100%	X	0	1	C	Robin & Kim	
Case8	PL	CEO	2015	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%	12%	88%	14%	86%	0%	100%	0%	100%	X	1	0	C	Love	
Case9	PE	CEO	2015	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%	94%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	X	0	1	PE	Robin	
Case10	P	CEO	2014	0%	100%	33%	67%	0%	0%	7%	93%	8%	92%	0%	100%	0%	100%	X	0	2	C, BM	Robin & Kim	
Case11	PL	CFO	2014	4%	96%	0%	100%	0%	0%	13%	88%	18%	82%	0%	100%	0%	100%	X	1	1	MT	Alex	
Case12	PE	CFO	2014	4%	96%	43%	57%	0%	100%	15%	85%	7%	93%	17%	83%	0%	100%	X	0	2	PE	Alex	
Case13	PL	HR	2015	38%	63%	48%	52%	44%	56%	61%	39%	67%	33%	80%	20%	80%	20%	X	0	2	MT	Michelle	
Case14	PE	CEO	2013	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%	94%	5%	95%	0%	100%	0%	100%	X	0	1	PE	Robin	
Case15	PL	SD	2012	8%	92%	0%	100%	0%	0%	6%	94%	8%	92%	14%	86%	20%	80%	X	1	0	HR	Kim	
Case16	PL, PE*	CEO	2012	25%	75%	0%	100%	0%	100%	12%	88%	12%	88%	17%	83%	17%	83%	X	0	1	C	Robin	
Case17	PL	CEO	2012	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%	3%	97%	5%	95%	0%	100%	0%	100%	X	0	2	C, CEO	Robin	
Case18	PE	CEO	2015	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	18%	82%	16%	84%	50%	50%	20%	80%	X	1	0	PE	Sam	
Case19	PL	CFO	2015	12%	88%	0%	0%	0%	0%	18%	82%	25%	75%	22%	78%	43%	57%	X	0	2	CEO, HR	Robin & Love	
Case20	P	CFO	2014	9%	91%	0%	100%	0%	0%	28%	72%	18%	82%	44%	56%	50%	50%	X	1	1	MT	Andy	
Total				16%	84%	23%	77%	35%	65%	20%	80%	18%	82%	19%	81%	22%	78%	35%	65%	23%	77%		

*Publicly listed, but having PE company as a large shareholder

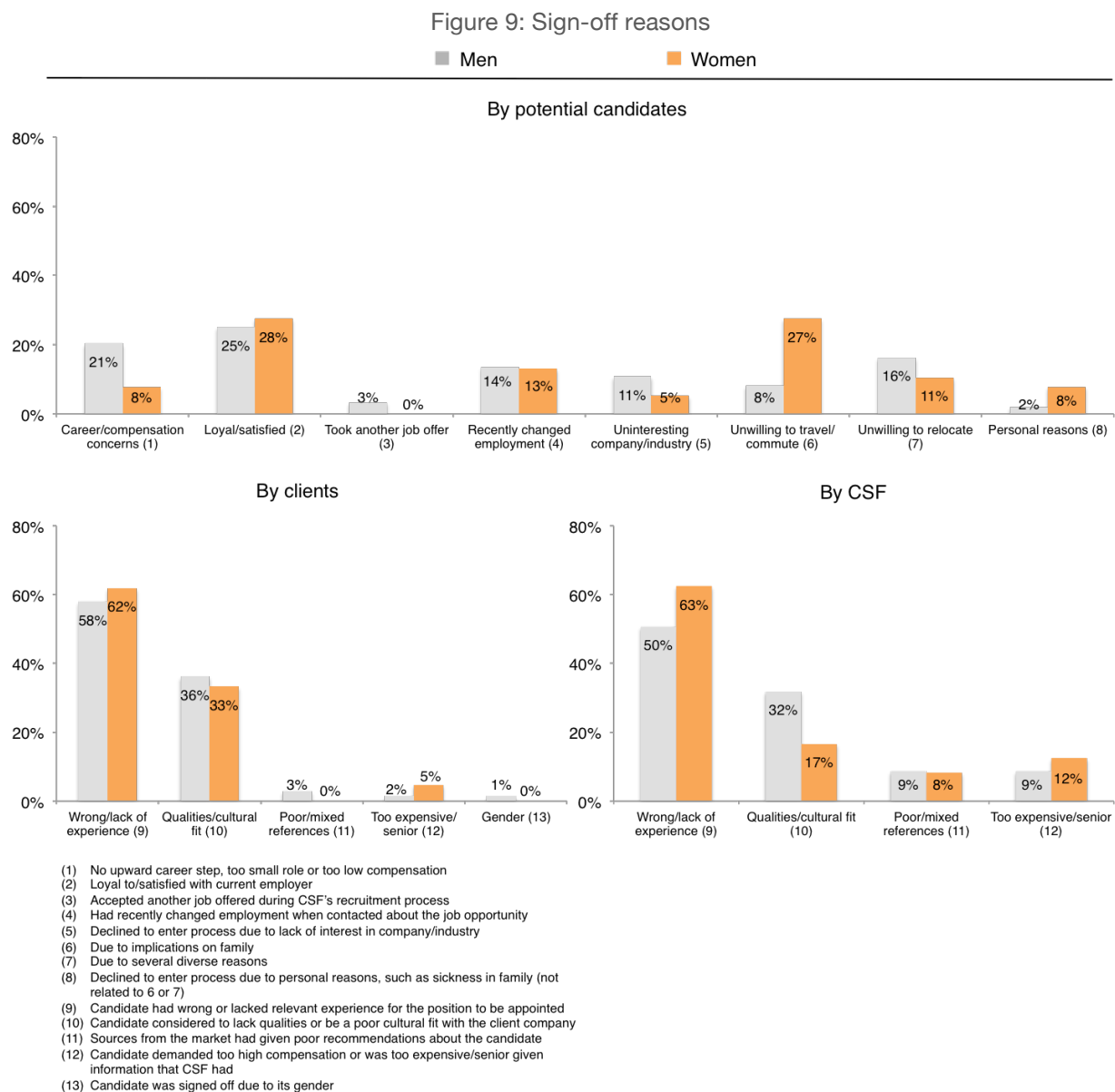
Figure 8: Summary of total



³² As an example, in one case there was one woman and several men on the longlist. The one woman and some men were taken further in the processes to be interviewed by CSF. This increases the percentage of women in the processes since it is in relation to men, creating a somewhat delusive picture.

4.2.2.2 Sign-off reasons in cases

Figure 9 presents aggregated data of reasons to why candidates are excluded from the recruitment processes in the 20 selected cases. The data is divided into diagrams based on which actor in the process that has signed off the candidate; PCs themselves, CSF or client representatives. It should be noted that one candidate can be signed off due to several reasons, thus the data below is based on the total number of reasons given. The diagrams are created by first categorizing the data by gender. Then, the number of reasons in each group is divided with the total number of reasons given in that gender category. This is done to highlight all possible sign-off reasons for each gender in order to detect potential differences.



4.3 In-depth data

In this section, in-depth data from interviews with CSF consultants and information from the 20 selected cases are presented. The whole recruitment process lays as a foundation for the interviews in order to provide a comprehensive view. The data is presented in accordance with the overall timeline for a recruitment process at CSF and with consideration to where main actors are most prominent. Initially, focus is on the first part of the recruitment process where networks are central. Thereafter, the consultants' practices as well as the client perspective are presented.

4.3.1 Network practices and the candidate pool

4.3.1.1 *The importance of networks*

A recurring theme when discussing the search process with CSF's consultants is the initial phase and the reliance on their professional networks, which are described as key when searching for PCs. According to all consultants, CSF's networks consist of individuals that can function as PCs or sources by providing new names or input on already known individuals. Kim says that when consultants look for PCs they brainstorm with each other and review previous assignments in order to get ideas³³. She adds that the most important leads come from previous clients and candidates. Love points out that CSF does not market their services, which almost makes it a must for individuals to be known to CSF from before or be recommended by sources in order to be considered as PCs. Andy and Michelle mention that it is rare that CSF engage in desktop research and work with cold candidates³⁴.

Networks are also important when verifying candidates through informal referencing. In fact, Love, Michelle and Kim believe that their networks are the most crucial parts in their search processes since a recommendation or a negative comment in the end can determine if an individual is considered as a PC or not. The networks are built up during a long period of time and shared among both existing and new consultants. Sam has worked within the same industry and has known many executives for more than 20 years. Similarly, Andy states that he expects to have life-long relationships with many of the SCs from his assignments since these individuals could be clients or valuable sources in the future.

4.3.1.2 *Gender distribution in networks*

Love, Kim, Alex, Sam, Michelle and Andy believe that their networks consist of more men than women. The consultants discuss three main factors that they believe cause the gender distribution in their networks.

³³ Names of PCs, sources or organizations to look into.

³⁴ Individuals that are unknown to CSF.

The first factor is that the gender distribution in CSF's networks can be explained by the attention given to gender equality over time. Sam states that the top executive world historically has been dominated by men and that gender diversity has gained attention mainly during the last couple of years because of pressure from media. The second factor is mentioned by Kim who believes that the current male dominance in their networks recreates the gender distribution since men often recommend men. Further, Kim also explains that when CSF is working on assignments, they are more prone to include individuals that they know from before, which is a disadvantage for women. The third factor is given by two consultants who think that the roles to be appointed influence the gender distribution in their networks. Michelle believes that there are more women in the networks for HR and communication positions and more men in the networks for CFO and CEO positions. Andy believes that his male dominated network is a result of him working with management roles within the industrial sector. However, he does not think about gender when it comes to his network, but is rather concerned with targeting specific companies³⁵ and knowing relevant individuals³⁶.

Kim and Michelle believe that CSF could be more proactive and systematically build and expand their female networks. Love and Sam highlight that CSF work actively with this and that some consultants are extra committed as they try to identify new female profiles and organize networking events for women. Further, most of the consultants at CSF state that they specifically ask sources for female recommendations if not given at first.

4.3.1.3 Recommendations from networks

Almost all consultants believe that both men and women in their networks in general recommend more men. The consultants give several explanations to this. Andy suggests that one reason for men recommending more men could be that they are used to working with other men in professional settings and that it therefore is hard for them to "think outside the box". Within the industrial sector there are more men than women on executive positions and because of this skewed exposure it is logical that men recommend men. In an effort to understand why women recommend more men, Kim believes that the roles described to sources often fit men since they are described with male attributes. Michelle and Andy recall that female candidates more seldom are recommended when talking to sources about CEO and CFO positions, or other positions within the industrial sector. However, they state that there are more women

³⁵ Companies where it is likely to find PCs for search assignments.

³⁶ In terms of their background and experience.

available and recommended for HR positions or positions within the consumer sector. Andy thinks that this is due to the more creative nature of such positions and says that they are about “colors, shapes and relations”.

4.3.1.4 The pool of women

Many of the consultants repeatedly get back to the *pool of women*³⁷ when talking about recommendations from sources and their possibilities in finding female candidates. To elaborate around why the perceived *pool of women* for industrial assignments is small, the consultants give two reasons.

Firstly, they think it is a result of the role they are appointing and the industry of the client company. All consultants state that there are fewer women than men in the pool of candidates for top positions within the industrial sector. Sam thinks that this is especially true for CEO positions and that this is a result of history, that more men have worked with sales, which often is the recruitment base for CEO positions. Andy agrees and believes that there are more men than women if looking at high-performance CEOs. Michelle adds to this by comparing Case13 with Case4 and Case5 and says that they had more women than men in the process for the HR role while she believes that the distribution was 20/80 women/men for the CFO roles. Here, she adds that CSF was careful to carry out their responsibility and at least reflect the female candidate pool in the market. Secondly, Andy, Kim and Michelle say that there is a clear link between education and gender balance within business. Andy and Michelle say that the pattern is natural since many people working within the industrial sector have backgrounds in engineering and there are more men studying this subject. To illustrate what he means, Andy adds: “Boys and large machines”.

Consultants also mention some consequences of the fact that there are fewer women available for top management positions in the industrial sector. They suggest that it leads to a high demand for women holding such positions. Kim mentions a comment from a CEO of a large industrial company who said that “he does not groom women since as soon as he has spent significant time and resources on promoting them, someone else will steal them away from him immediately thereafter”. Similarly, Alex talks about how he struggled to find female candidates in Case11 since women at such senior positions are aware of their own value. He argues that women of such caliber get recruitment calls daily and would certainly not consider a new position if it is not a clear step up in the career ladder.

³⁷ Number of available female candidates in the market.

4.3.2 Consultants' views on evaluation and positions

4.3.2.1 Masculine benchmark and behavioral differences

The job description that is created together with the client in the beginning of an assignment, as well as the consultants' own benchmarks and views on competence, are critical parts affecting gender distribution in the recruitment processes.

Love, Michelle, Kim and Robin suggest that candidates are evaluated against a male norm and a benchmark that is characterized by masculine attributes. Michelle explains: "There are more men at top positions, which influence the picture of how an executive should be". Kim says that because of stereotype biases, one pictures a man when hearing the words "driven" or "results-oriented". Consultants often find it difficult to identify women that match position requirements, which is mentioned by Robin who had a challenging time presenting women in Case9.

Love points out that all candidates are evaluated against the same benchmark, but that women are less selling in their descriptions of themselves than men. Love and Andy remark that men are good at emphasizing their own achievements. In contrast, Love and Kim suggest that women are more careful with what they take credit for; they want to be sure that they can stand by their word, they are more team-oriented and have a more realistic view of their own capacity. Perceived gender differences regarding this selling attitude are also seen in candidate interviews. Robin thinks that men have a tendency to exaggerate and take credit more often than women, but he states that consultants are aware of this and take it into account. Andy has a slightly different view and thinks that women are easier to interview since they are more genuine and honest. He adds that men are more careful in order to "say the right things" and sometimes not tell the whole truth. Kim says that women's less selling attitude not necessarily is negative for them, but it can be deceptive for consultants who might be tempted to present a male candidate to the client because of the fact that he proves himself more than his female counterparts.

4.3.2.2 Different roles and qualities

Many consultants believe that men and women are drawn to different positions. Love, Kim and Robin believe that women find roles that entail less travelling or international presence more appealing, such as support functions³⁸. Robin says that sales roles involve a lot of travelling and that women are less likely than men to travel four to five days per week. Kim uses this reasoning to explain why a majority of the PCs to the SD role³⁹ in Case15 were men.

³⁸ For example finance, marketing and HR.

³⁹ Described by the consultant as a large sales role with significant leadership responsibilities.

Andy believes that positions are related to candidates' qualities. He gives the example that different qualities are required in order to become a successful marketer compared to a successful plant manager. The female marketers that he has encountered are communicative and innovative, which are female qualities that fit that kind of position rather than a plant manager position. The competencies required for a plant manager position might be more appealing to men since it is about "firm structure, machines and filth". Andy clarifies that male marketers and female CEOs of course also exist and he does not believe that the qualities⁴⁰ CSF looks for in candidates are ascribed to any gender. However, he has only encountered one "heavy woman"⁴¹ with an operative business-to-business role and he states that it is the most masculine thing one can do: "To build tunnels under ground". He mentions another strong female candidate from Case1 that he liked, "a female factory manager who had stood with her feet in the oil, with previous experience from industries with low margins, and tough, masculine environments". Michelle discusses how the gender equality issue partly is a generation question, and adds that some younger men she encountered in a recent case had feminine qualities: "They were not at all these secure men that advertise themselves [...] I had to ask for some authority".

4.3.3 Consultants' views on candidates

4.3.3.1 Family implications

Family implications are often brought up by consultants as a factor affecting gender equality in top management by influencing women's tendency to take a new job. Love believes that women more often than men turn down job opportunities because of family reasons. Andy says that the appointments that CSF work with are demanding, well-paid, time-consuming jobs that require significant sacrifices and his observation is that candidates in their assignments are in "unequal relationships" with their significant others. Women are usually the ones that have to take a step back and take care of the home to enable their husbands' careers.

Further, consultants state that women are more reluctant than men to relocate or commute because of family implications. Kim says that men usually have wives with less qualified employment, which makes it easier for them to follow their husbands to where their job opportunities are. Women with a career often also have husbands with a similarly advanced career, which makes it more difficult for them to relocate. Two examples that illustrate the complexities regarding commuting are mentioned by the consultants. Andy mentions an appointment made by another company. A female

⁴⁰ For example strategic and leadership capabilities.

⁴¹ In the context referring to a "tough" person.

finalist declined after discussions with her husband with the explanation that she could not commute as much as the position required because of their children. Six months later, when the position was open for applicants again, her husband applied. Another example is mentioned by Kim who says that the location for the position in Case6 was a challenge and that two strong female candidates withdrew due to implications from commuting on their families. The finalist was a man who ended up commuting hundreds of kilometers every week, with two small children at home. However, Michelle, Kim and Love experience that family responsibilities are shared more equally between genders today.

4.3.3.2 Different attitudes

In addition to family implications, Love and Alex mention a difference in general attitudes to job opportunities based on gender. Alex believes that women think more long-term and that they are more concerned with whether or not a new job is a step in the right career direction. Love also talks about this, but states that it is important to men that a new job is a step up in the career ladder, while women can take horizontal career steps if it leads to interesting industries or companies. He says that women want to be passionate about their jobs, while men aim to be career smart: “One woman said ‘I do not feel that my heart beats for this position’. [...] And one man said that he wanted a CEO position regardless of where“. Sam believes that women and men are becoming more alike when it comes to attitudes to job opportunities, but that women are more analytical and concerned with work-life-balance. Love and Michelle state that women are more hesitant when approached with a job opportunity. Kim believes that men are less risk-averse, and Michelle suggests that women might be more insecure or realistic. Further, Kim and Alex believe that women more often than men decline a job opportunity because of loyalty to their current employer.

4.3.4 Clients’ influence on processes

4.3.4.1 Demands for gender diversity

Kim and Robin believe that client companies set the standards when it comes to gender diversity in recruitment. Michelle and Kim point out that there is a “greater cause” associated with promoting women and in the end the responsibility is held by clients. Kim states that if not requested, consultants might not go the extra mile⁴² trying to include more women in the processes only to fulfill a “greater cause”. It is more time consuming to find female candidates in an industrial market where those talents are scarce. In contrast, Andy argues that ESFs have a greater responsibility; if CSF does

⁴² As an example, Kim mentions that if women are not demanded by clients, the consultants might not ask sources for female candidates in a systematic way.

not include women in their processes, they will never be presented to clients who in turn are less likely to end up with female SCs.

Consultants have different views on clients' requirements regarding gender diversity in recruitment processes. Sam argues that gender diversity is important to clients and that it can be illustrated by business advantages from having female networks and consultants at CSF. He mentions a recent assignment they won because of the very fact that he had a female colleague with him in the pitch meeting. Andy, Michelle and Alex agree and state that clients often demand female candidates in processes. Andy gives an example from Case20, when the client representative CEO said: "In our world there are not many women, so my expectations are not high, but we would like to see some female candidates". The rest of the consultants believe that gender sometimes or seldom is discussed with clients. Kim states that when gender is not a discussion there are often positive reactions if a woman appear on the longlist. Similarly, Sam mentions Case18, when the client's comment on a qualified female candidate on the longlist was: "And in addition, she is a woman". Being a woman in Case18 became an advantage, since the client decided that they wanted that female candidate. Robin adds to this when talking about Case17 where gender diversity was not important to the client. His point is that in order to have more women included in the processes, it is needed that clients ask for female candidates.

4.3.4.1.1 Internal influencing factors

Sam, Michelle, Love, Robin and Kim believe that clients' demands are dependent on contextual factors such as the role to be appointed or client representative specifics.

Michelle, Love and Robin state that sometimes only women are requested by clients to fill support functions, in order to appoint a woman to the management team. Michelle exemplifies with Case13 in which CSF was to appoint an HR director and the client distinctly wanted to recruit a woman. Michelle understands the client's reasoning in this situation, since HR is a position where it is easy to find female candidates. Robin mentions how companies try to create a quick fix when it comes to gender diversity by appointing women to HR positions. They try to "paint the facade in bright colors" in order to seem like gender equal companies. Further, Sam believes that gender is irrelevant when it comes to CEO positions. Kim says that if there has been a man on the position previously, clients usually picture a male follower.

Genders of client representatives are also discussed by consultants as influencing gender balance in recruitment. Robin exemplifies with Case7 where the male client representative was unconcerned with gender balance in the process and explains that "in their world, the SC is a man". He also mentions Case16, where a male chairman

represented the client and had authority to decide on SC with second opinion from the board, which had three female members. At first, women were not requested by the male chairman, but when a longlist with only men was presented, the female representatives had objections. Kim presents a reverse example when describing Case15 where the client management team⁴³ consisted of seven men and two women. In the end, the client was to choose between three finalists, two men and one woman. The woman was a strong candidate, but excluded from the process by the female representatives from the client company. Kim explains: “They said that they could not proceed with her as a finalist, since they did not want people to believe that they were trying to build a female troika at the company”.

4.3.4.1.2 External influencing factors

Robin, Kim and Sam point out that clients’ demands on gender diversity in recruitment processes to a great extent are influenced by societal pressure. Kim mentions Case6 as an example where the client management group consisted of only men and they were determined to find a female SC and demanded a 50/50 gender distribution on the longlist. She believes this request was related to the fact that their male dominated management team had been highlighted by an institutional actor in the Swedish business society⁴⁴.

The amount of pressure put on management groups to engage in gender equality work differs depending on ownership structure. Sam says that publicly listed companies get better publicity when they appoint a woman. Alex’s view is that some companies in the medial spotlight talk about gender equality for PR reasons since it creates shareholder value. Sam and Robin mention that PE-owned companies on the other hand fly under the medial radar and do not care about gender equality, and Alex adds that they mainly are results-focused⁴⁵. Robin compares Case14 and Case16 with each other in relation to this. Case14 has a male SC and is a PE-owned company with no specific attention from media, while Case16 has a female SC and is a publicly listed company with much attention from media where client representatives aimed at hiring a woman.

4.3.4.2 Candidate selection

4.3.4.2.1 Personal chemistry

Many consultants mention personality as a critical factor when discussing clients’ preferences. Robin states that clients are concerned with how PCs will fit into their organizational environments and mention that clients can have higher requirements on women to fit into masculine organizations. “Is this woman tough enough” is a

⁴³ One of their business units, which was in focus for the assignment.

⁴⁴ AllBright.

⁴⁵ And who delivers the results are not important.

commonly asked question. He elaborates by adding that some men feel threatened by strong women: “One can experience people as more or less comfortable working with women, and that it involves a change or a challenge [...] but it is expressed as a question of personality, not as a question of gender”. Love and Andy state that in the end, the determinant factor for candidate selection is personal chemistry in many cases. Love believes that this in combination with the fact that many client representatives are men has gender implications on recruitment processes. He argues that clients have more experience of working with men and that they often evaluate and compare a candidate’s personality towards the “typical man”.

Alex describes the process in Case3, where the client chose between a male and a female finalist. The female finalist had more relevant industrial experience and was a more credible candidate on paper. However, the man was chosen because he had a strong personal brand and a humble personality that the client favored⁴⁶. Andy adds to this by exemplifying with two cases where women have been among the finalists and a man has been chosen due to personal chemistry. In Case1, Andy emphasizes that it had nothing to do with gender but only personality: “It was not like the client did not chose her, but they chose him”. One comment from the client when the woman was signed off in Case1 was that they were unsure if she would be able to manage the complexity of their business, but Andy did not agree with this reasoning.

4.3.4.2.2 Differences in requirements

In addition to the perception among the consultants that women sometimes are evaluated against a masculine benchmark⁴⁷, consultants also express that there sometimes are higher requirements on women. Kim has a feeling that clients have an inherent fear that women sometimes are included in processes as *alibi candidates*⁴⁸, in order for consultants to be able to present at least some women. Thus, the question if women are included because they are women or competent candidates arises. Love agrees and his perception is that women have to be better than their male counterparts in order to get the same job. Kim says that women in processes sometimes are referred to as *superstars*, while it is enough for their male counterparts to meet requirements. Love states that this also is done by sources, who distinguish female PCs they recommend as “even better than the other candidates”, as if to prove that they deserve to be included in the processes. Kim believes that consultants sometimes put higher demands on women in order to “dare to take the risk involved with presenting the candidate”.

⁴⁶ The female candidate ended up as SC after the male candidate had declined an offer from the client (Alex).

⁴⁷ See 4.3.2.1.

⁴⁸ Candidates that not qualify for a position are included in the recruitment processes due to gender diversity reasons.

One example of a situation where the client closer scrutinized a woman is Case7. A number of candidates were considered for the shortlist, among them one female candidate with a strong profile. Five men were chosen for the shortlist and according to CSF's database, the woman was signed off by the client due to lack of a certain function experience. When discussing this case with Kim it became clear that some of the male finalists lacked the same experience. Kim wanted to take the woman further in the process and could not explain why the client signed her off. Kim adds that the same thing happened in a recent longlist meeting where the client wanted to sign off a woman for similar reasons. Later in the meeting it became clear that male candidates still involved in the process lacked the same experience.

4.3.4.3 Risk-taking

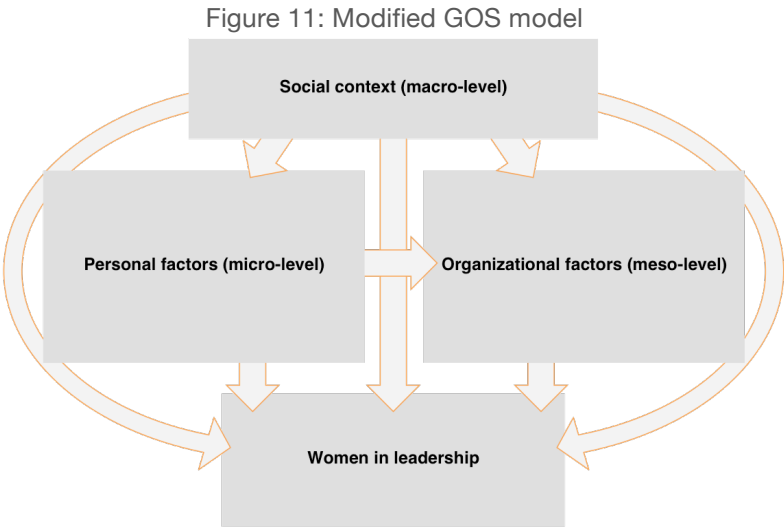
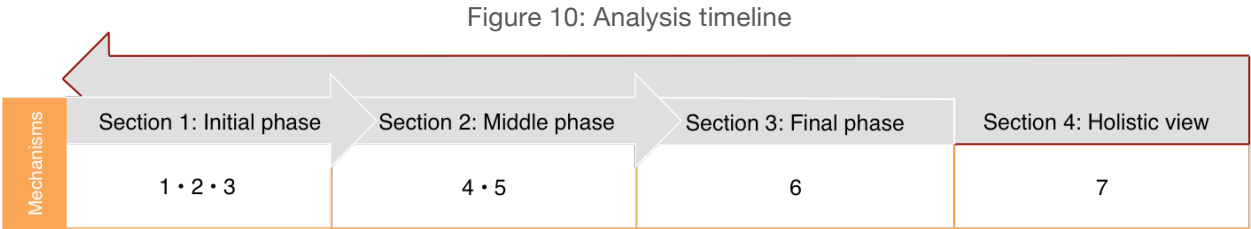
Clients' risk-taking is a recurring theme among consultants when discussing gender balance in their processes. Alex believes that clients have become more risk-averse, narrow-minded and shortsighted over the years. More focus is on candidates' previous experience rather than future potential and Alex believes this makes it harder for women since they often do not have the same amount of experience as their male counterparts. Andy describes a case where hiring a man instead of a woman involved lower risk because of the fact that the man had more relevant experience. In Case2, Robin describes the client representative as having a personal drive to promote women. The SC was a woman and Robin does not believe that the process would have looked the same if the client representative had not been willing to take risk. Robin means that industrial CEO positions historically have been male dominated, and therefore few women fit into the role descriptions, as they have not been able to gain as much experience as men. Thus, flexibility is important when appointing executives, for example by considering candidates with less experience from the industrial sector and thus "take more risk".

5. Analysis

Gender bias occurs in several stages throughout CSF's processes, even though it is an ESF with good intentions where employees are well aware of the gender equality issue. Our analysis shows that gendering has effects on the outcome of recruitment cases, either consciously or unconsciously, through consultants and clients. These actors are in turn influenced by societal pressure, stereotypes and the mere fact that gender equality is on the agenda. To guide this analysis, our narrative builds on the timeline of a recruitment process divided based on characteristics⁴⁹ that can be ascribed to what we refer to as an initial, middle and final phase. We have identified seven mechanisms

⁴⁹ As an example, networks are more prominent in the beginning of recruitment cases, whereas clients have most impact in the end.

contributing to the scarcity of women in top management, which are presented throughout the analysis in accordance with the order in figure 10. To further help build our narrative, we present a modified model on GOS (Fagenson, 1991, 1993; Wirz, 2014), illustrating the interaction between different dimensions and how they are closely intertwined. The model helps us show how society permeates all dimensions. However, society is made up by us as individuals and our actions recreate societal structures, contributing to an everlasting circle. As a consequence of using the GOS model, a final section with a holistic view is presented in addition to the three phases.



Our own version of the model developed by Wirz (2014), based on theory by Fagenson (1991, 1993).

5.1. Initial phase: Networks and inclusion as the first challenge

We have chosen to emphasize networks in the initial phase as a starting point for our analysis and as a beginning to our narrative about the scarcity of women in top management. We have discovered three mechanisms we believe are essential in order to describe why more men than women are included in CSF’s processes from the very beginning. Before introducing these mechanisms, we describe below the implications of male dominated networks and argue for their essential role in individuals becoming PCs.

All consultants state that there is a majority of men in their networks, confirming one reason mentioned by previous studies to gender bias early in recruitment processes at

ESFs (Dreher et al., 2011; Tienari et al., 2013; Fawcett & Pringle, 2000). The consultants discuss three factors contributing to this pattern. They state that top management positions historically have been dominated by men, that male dominated networks reinforce the continuance of this and that the roles to be appointed influence the gender distribution⁵⁰. Further, how Sam and Andy talk about their networks seems to suggest that the networks are relatively constant over time⁵¹, which could reinforce the male dominance. If CSF mostly appoints men, and SCs become individuals that CSF is keen to keep contact with for other assignments in the future⁵², it contributes to a reproducing circle of male dominance. Once men are in the networks, they unconsciously continue to recreate the male dominance together with consultants by default. Additionally, this could be reinforced by the current business society in Sweden, in which most top management teams still are dominated by men⁵³. According to empirical data, consultants are concerned with knowing the right individuals, often from certain companies⁵⁴. If top management positions at those companies are dominated by men, it probably influences the gender distribution in their networks.

Our analysis shows that both consultants and research together build a strong case for professional networks being a central influencing factor for gender balance in recruitment (Coverdill & Finlay, 2007; Holgersson, 2003; Fawcett & Pringle, 2000; Dreher et al., 2011; Tienari et al., 2013). An interesting addition to this is the database information, which shows that the gender distribution in CSF's cases is rather constant from the moment candidates enter the process until the SC stage. Moreover, most cases where there have been only male candidates on the shortlist, have less than 10% women included in their processes as PCs⁵⁵. This extreme distribution can not be found in cases with a female SC. The database patterns indicate a connection between number of women included in the processes and the gender outcome of a SC, suggesting that once women are in the process, they remain there to the same extent as men. Therefore, one could argue that the very beginning of recruitment processes seems to be crucial in order to contribute to gender parity in top management, especially since consultants have a gatekeeping role (Doldor et al., 2012). Although similar patterns have been highlighted by literature before, there are still few answers to why women are less likely to be contacted by search consultants (Dreher et al., 2011; Holgersson, 2003; Fawcett & Pringle, 2000) or what the root causes of the gender-biased consequences of networking really are.

⁵⁰ See 4.3.1.2.

⁵¹ See 4.3.1.1.

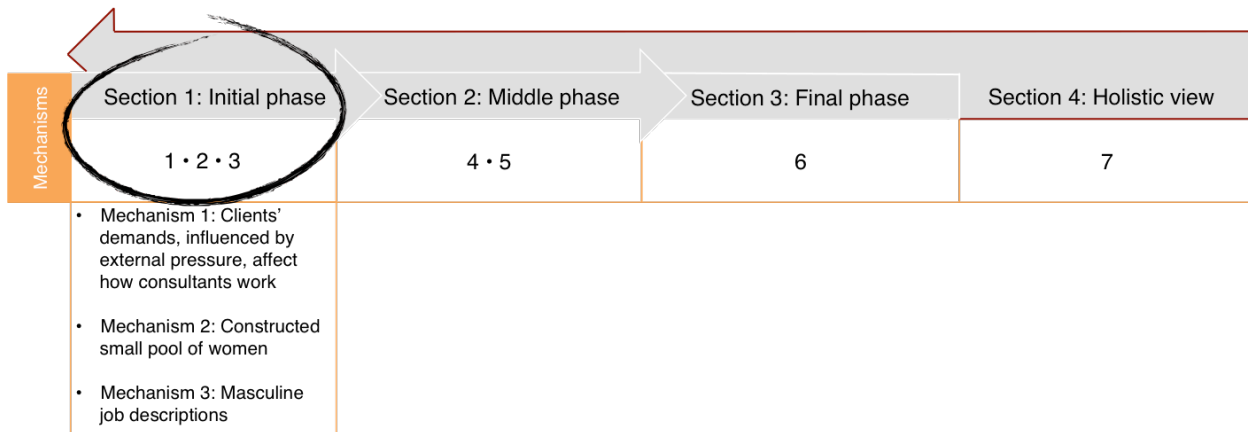
⁵² For sourcing or as PCs.

⁵³ See 1.1.

⁵⁴ See 4.1.2 and 4.3.1.2.

⁵⁵ Case 7, 9, 10, 14 and 17.

Figure 12: Analysis timeline, section 1



5.1.1 Domino effect of external pressure

The first mechanism is that clients' demands, influenced by external pressure, affect how consultants work with gender balance in recruitment. As mentioned by Sam, the demand for women in the market has created a business opportunity where ESFs that promote gender equality have an advantage. However, if clients sometimes do not demand women, this business opportunity ceases to exist since ESFs as consultants are dependent on their clients (Coverdill & Finlay, 2000) and deliver what the client demands. Consultants state that if promoting women is not rewarded, the incentives are reduced and they do not have time and resources to actively seek women only to contribute to a "greater cause". Robin even points out that clients need to ask for female candidates in order for the consultants to include more women in the search universe⁵⁶.

This can be illustrated with some of the selected cases if looking at table 3. In Case6, the client demanded a 50/50 gender distribution, which also is reflected in the process. In Case16, women from the client board reacted negatively on a first longlist with only men, and it is clear that the longlist was reviewed and more women were included after this first meeting. In Case17, the client did not care about gender diversity⁵⁷, which is reflected in the process where there are no female sources and only 3% female PCs. These cases suggest that there are more women in assignments where clients require gender balance and show how the services of ESFs to a great extent are produced together with clients (Sturdy & Wright, 2011). Thus, clients must either demand women or consultants must actively seek women for idealistic reasons, in order to achieve gender balanced processes.

⁵⁶ See 4.3.4.1.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Just as we have described the consultants as highly dependent on their clients, the clients are in turn influenced by institutional actors, such as media and other interest groups (Steiner & Steiner, 2011; Engwall, 2008; Furusten, 2013). Case6 is an example of a company conforming to external pressure (Oliver, 1991). The company was highlighted by an institutional actor for their male dominance and this led to an aim in finding a woman to their management team (Engwall, 2008), which is reflected in the process' gender distribution⁵⁸. However, Robin mentions another more active response to institutional pressure (Oliver, 1991), when companies try to “paint the facade in bright colors” in order to seem gender equal⁵⁹. They aim to control their environment and communicate gender diversity by placing women at HR or communication positions while not necessarily working actively for or being genuine about gender equality in other regards (Brunsson, 1993). Further, both consultants and data point towards publicly listed companies being more concerned with gender diversity in top management appointments, and consultants believe that this is a result of the attention given to them. Here, database information shows that 6/7 cases with female SCs and only 7/13 cases with male SCs were publicly listed⁶⁰. Thus, the examples suggest that change takes place where the media and other institutional actors put their spotlight.

5.1.2 Constructed pool of women and risk

The second mechanism is the constructed small *pool of women*. Consultants are clearly aware of gender when working with cases, but there is a shared view that a fixed *pool of women* functions as a limitation for achieving gender equality⁶¹. The fact that consultants talk about female PCs as belonging to something they refer to as the *pool of women* indicates *doing gender* (Risman, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Gherardi, 1994; Mavin & Grandy, 2012) in recruitment. We argue that by making this categorization of women, the female pool becomes small per definition. Throughout our study, we have never heard someone refer to a *pool of men*, as if the ocean of PCs from the beginning consists of men, with only a small fraction of women in it. Consultants talk about this as a predetermined number of “prepared and appropriate candidates” and that this is an objective fact rather than a construction dependent on interpretations and definitions of suitable candidates.

CSF's consultants actively work with expanding their female networks. At the same time, they have a view that there are few women out there who qualify for the roles they

⁵⁸ See table 3.

⁵⁹ See 4.3.4.1.1.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that there are more publicly listed companies overall among the selected cases and there could be two main reasons to this. Firstly, CSF could possibly have more publicly listed companies as their clients. Secondly, since the selected cases have been chosen on the basis that they involve women in their processes, this could indicate that assignments for publicly listed companies include more women, compared to other ownership structures.

⁶¹ See 4.3.1.4.

are appointing, which creates a paradox where their aim for gender balance clashes with gender-stereotyped definitions of PCs. For example, Michelle mentions that CSF's responsibility is to reflect the female candidate pool available in the market⁶². This reasoning suggests that CSF must take the existence of a *pool of women* into account that they in fact have been part of creating in the first place. CSF's consultants believe that the *pool of women* is limited due to the role, industry and educational patterns⁶³. We agree with these proposed reasons. However, the perceived *pool of women* is also a result of the tendency to focus on a *closed ecosystem* of top managers and preferred layers of candidates (Khurana, 2002; Faulconbridge et al., 2009) and the active decisions related to definitions of appropriate candidates. Thus, the perceived small *pool of women* is governed by narrow views on qualifications that create a barrier to expand searches outside of *closed ecosystems* of top executives. Such ecosystems might also fuel the proposed lack of creativity among ESFs when placing candidates (Hamori, 2010). When analyzing the complexities of defining appropriate candidates and in our efforts to understand the reasons behind the perceived small *pool of women*, we came to the conclusion that it was closely related to risk. We have identified two types of risk, where one of them seems to be strongly influenced by the other.

5.1.2.1 Consultants' risk

Consultants' presenting candidates that clients are dissatisfied with is the first risk. Khurana (2002) states that consultants' tend to focus on a narrow pool of candidates in order to be able to present defensible candidates to clients, which supports the existence of a strong urge to constantly be comfortable with the candidates presented. This can also be related to consultants' legitimizing role (Khurana & Piskorski, 2004), since they need to be able to argue for the candidates they present, which creates a risk-aversion among ESFs (Hamori, 2010).

We suggest that this risk-aversion comes from ESFs' roles as consultants and the importance of the client-consultant relationship (Burton-Jones & Spender, 2011; Clark, 1995). Coverdill and Finlay (2000) state that one paradox of consulting is that the more successful ESFs are in creating strong client relationships, the more dependent they become on these clients. Given that this holds, the importance of delivering a good service in the eyes of the clients increases. Consequently, consultants are keen to present candidates that they are comfortable with and are confident clients will approve of. It is natural that consultants are more comfortable presenting individuals that they know from before. This reinforces the *usual-suspects bias* that in turn can contribute to *closed ecosystems* of top managers in their searches (Charan, 2005; Khurana 2002)

⁶² See 4.3.1.4.

⁶³ Ibid.

who also come to dominate labor markets (Faulconbridge et al., 2009). Thus, this probably makes consultants less prone to present individuals with less experience, but who nevertheless might have the capabilities required for the position in question.

5.1.2.2 Clients' risk

Selecting a candidate that has less or wrong experience according to clients' definitions is the second risk. Thus, the risk for clients seems to be dependent on their views of a successor. As an example, if their requirements are narrowly defined, hiring individuals with different experience will by default involve taking a risk because of uncertainty. According to consultants, more men have the experience required by clients for the positions consultants are hired to fill⁶⁴. The clients have restricted views on PCs and this can be illustrated by Case20, where the CEO described that "their world" has a shortage of women⁶⁵. This is also mentioned in relation to Case7 when Robin says that the SC is a man in the eyes of the client⁶⁶. Thus, it seems like clients also have narrow views of available female candidates in the market. Consequently, this contributes to the construction of the small *pool of women* and in turn gender imbalance in CSF's recruitment processes. This can be illustrated with Andy's comment about a case where a man was hired instead of a woman because he had more relevant experience according to the client, which in turn meant that he was a lower risk hire. The accuracy and veracity of this kind of reasoning is dependent on the definition of "relevant experience" and whether or not it has an impact on an individual's ability to become a successful manager in the client organization.

5.1.3 Masculine job descriptions

The third mechanism is the job description that lays as a foundation for all assignments, which is jointly created by consultants and clients. The job description has been shown to influence gender distribution, both through clients and consultants, and indirectly through sources as a result of gender stereotypes and interaction with consultants.

Several consultants express that a masculine benchmark exists and that job descriptions sometimes are characterized by masculine attributes⁶⁷. We suggest that many job descriptions probably are based on a previous successful manager in the position that is to be filled or attributes related to a successful manager in general. Previous studies have shown that the definition of a manager fits a man (Deal & Stevenson 1998, Wahl 1996; Koenig et al., 2011) and is built upon what people relate to as masculine attributes (Powell, 2012). Also, data shows that CSF has appointed more men as SCs during the last years, which could further contribute to the overall

⁶⁴ See 4.3.1.4 and 4.3.2.1.

⁶⁵ See 4.3.4.1.

⁶⁶ See 4.3.4.1.1.

⁶⁷ See 4.3.1.3 and 4.3.2.1.

masculine view of a manager since consultants provide advice (Richter & Niewiem, 2009; Vogl, 1999) that probably is based on previous knowledge. Given that this holds, and that job descriptions are created in accordance with our suggestion above, the job descriptions become masculine as a consequence.

The proposed masculine job description and how consultants talk about roles can create a domino effect through their networks and influence sources' views of appropriate PCs. If consultants unconsciously portray a role in accordance with masculine attributes, as even suggested by one consultant⁶⁸, sources might unconsciously be gender biased in their reasoning and thus relate their picture of SCs to men. The importance of the recommendations from sources is accentuated by consultants⁶⁹ and can be illustrated with data suggesting a connection between the gender of recommended PCs and the gender of SCs, as illustrated below.

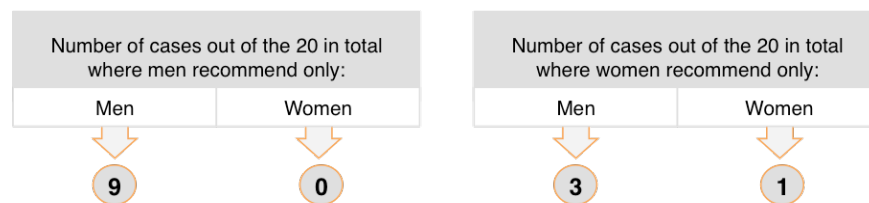
Figure 13: Male recommendations



Source: Table 3.

Data also points towards both genders having more men in their professional networks, and that women have more women in their networks relative to men, as can be seen in figure 14.

Figure 14: Recommendations and gender



Source: Table 3.

The fact that there are more male recommendations can also indicate gendered perceptions of managers. Deal and Stevenson (1998) write that both men and women agree on the descriptions of male managers, but that they have different views on female managers and that women attribute more positive characteristics to them. One implication if applying this line of thought when analyzing database information is that it could support our claim that the job description is masculine. Firstly, if the job description is masculine, and both genders have the same view of a male manager, a

⁶⁸ See 4.3.1.3.

⁶⁹ See 4.3.1.1.

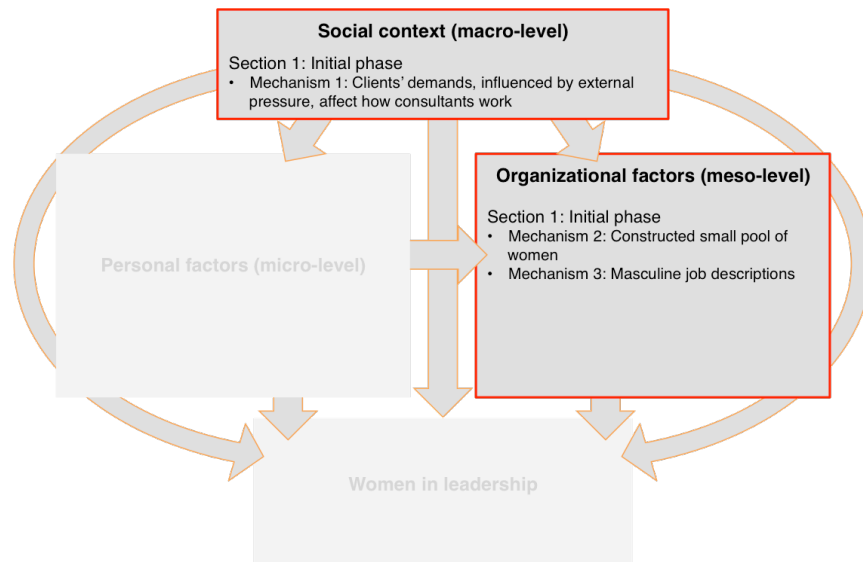
natural consequence is more male recommendations from both men and women. Secondly, the fact that male sources recommend fewer women could be a result of men viewing women as less appropriate as managers (Kwon & Milgrom, 2010; Deal & Stevenson, 1998; Vial et al., 2016). Moreover, the fact that female sources recommend more women in comparison to male sources could be a sign of women having more positive attitudes towards female managers. On the one hand, female sources could have more women in their networks who become top-of-mind when discussing a role with a consultant. On the other hand, the positive attitude towards female managers could make them more likely to think of women in their networks as fitting the job description given by consultants.

5.1.4 Key takeaways

Our analysis shows that there are three mechanisms that contribute to few women entering CSF's recruitment processes and in turn to the dearth of women in top management. The mechanisms restrict the search for female candidates through consultants' dependency on clients' demands, consultants' and clients' views of the pool as well as by the few women being top-of-mind PCs. Taken together, these findings constitute *doing gender* (Risman, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Gherardi, 1994; Mavin & Grandy, 2012) in recruitment. At the same time, a majority of the consultants highlight their work for gender equality and their objective views within this area⁷⁰. All consultants seem to have good intentions and there is no doubt that CSF is a firm that aims to promote gender equality. Yet, the consultants express a strong belief that they are constrained in this quest. We notice both a kind of hopelessness and a perceived inability to accomplish any major changes. We believe that consultants' perceived objectivity of their work and their "we-are-doing-what-we-can" attitude in one way make them less attentive and thus more likely to let stereotypes influence their decisions. These convictions of objectivity could contribute to unintended patterns of gender bias (Castilla & Benard, 2010). Further, we believe that this paradoxical way of behavior is deeply rooted in the unconscious part of the human mind and cognitive bias (Risman, 2004) playing out through interactions on an organizational level. An illustration of this is provided in figure 15, where the first mechanism is placed on a macro-level, and the two other on a meso-level. Further, the model shows how societal contexts govern clients' and consultants' actions on the meso-level.

⁷⁰ See examples in 4.3.1.2, 4.3.2.2 and 4.3.4.1.

Figure 15: Modified GOS model, first application



Our own version of the model developed by Wirz (2014), based on theory by Fagenson (1991, 1993).

5.2 Middle phase: Reinforcements of gender stereotypes

To continue our analysis, we will now shift focus from the initial phase of the process to the middle, where interactions between candidates and consultants begin to take place. Section 5.1 in the analysis is in congruence with data in table 3, pointing towards the initial phase as crucial for gender balance in recruitment. However, the relatively constant gender distribution later on in table 3 indicates that women are not disadvantaged in CSF's processes. Nevertheless, the analyses in 5.2 and 5.3 are important in order to demonstrate *doing gender* and how gender bias can exist in recruitment. A fourth and a fifth mechanism have been identified, which are outcomes of unconscious ways of working and recreate gender stereotypes.

Figure 16: Analysis timeline, section 2

Mechanisms	Section 1: Initial phase	Section 2: Middle phase	Section 3: Final phase	Section 4: Holistic view
	1 • 2 • 3	4 • 5	6	7
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mechanism 1: Clients' demands, influenced by external pressure, affect how consultants work Mechanism 2: Constructed small pool of women Mechanism 3: Masculine job descriptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mechanism 4: Contribution to homosocial spheres and ascription of qualities to gender Mechanism 5: Gender-stereotyped expectations as results of efforts to understand and explain patterns 		

5.2.1 Homosocial spheres and ascribed qualities

The fourth mechanism is the consultants' contribution to a homosocial sphere and their ascription of qualities to gender. The first argumentation for this builds on that Andy automatically ascribes a marketer role to women and compares this to a plant manager role, which he ascribes to men. He says that certain qualities specifically needed for these positions are ascribed to different genders. He relates words like "firm structure", "machine" and "filth" to men, while women are described as "communicative", "innovative" and "creative"⁷¹⁷². Interesting to note is that the role ascribed to men is a leadership role, while the role ascribed to women is of a supporting nature. Here one can see the categorization of men and women in the labor market, and the tendency to relate leadership positions to men (Wahl, 1997; Wahl, 1996; Powell, 2012; Koenig et al, 2011). Further, Andy only mentions two women in this context⁷³ and he describes them as "heavy" or having experience from standing "with her feet in the oil" or from "tough masculine environments". These kind of expressions illustrate how women fit into the roles he appoints when he portrays them as masculine (Heilman, 2001; Ridgeway, 2001). We argue that the consultant's perception of who fits into clients' management teams unconsciously contributes to a homosocial sphere. The sphere is preserved even though women participate, since they conform to male patterns (Lipman-Blumen, 1976). Thus, consultants might have predetermined views of the candidates they look for. Also, if consultants are embedded in their clients' homosocial spheres when working on assignments, it creates an environment where some individuals are more likely to fit in, and therefore in turn more likely to be chosen.

Another example of consultants ascribing qualities to gender is Michelle's comment about some younger male candidates who she believed lacked confidence and authority, which she unconsciously related to as feminine characteristics⁷⁴. Further, the fact that she felt the need to "request" authority suggests that such qualities are important in PCs and that the picture of PCs is related to qualities that are masculine in her opinion. That the qualities she described as feminine were unwanted in this context also supports an incongruity between behaviors descriptive of women and those associated with successful leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). One could also argue that this situation is a sign of men acting in discordance with traditional gender stereotypes and turning into gender deviants, which reflect negatively upon them (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

⁷¹ His description of women having HR and communication roles since they are about "colors" and "shapes", see 4.3.1.3.

⁷² See 4.3.2.2.

⁷³ When he is talking about GM roles within the industrial sector.

⁷⁴ See 4.3.2.2.

A scrutinization of the two examples above culminates into one demonstration of female candidates being favored for behaving in a way that is perceived as masculine, and one demonstration of male candidates being disadvantaged when behaving in a way that is perceived as feminine. We believe this exemplifies assumptions about gender-stereotyped behavior, regardless of sex (Rivera, 2012). Here it becomes clear how gender is a social construction and taken one step further, it also supports that what is perceived to be masculine behavior is rewarded in the contexts of top management selection (Koenig et al., 2011).

5.2.2 Efforts to understand and explain

The fifth mechanism is that consultants' efforts to understand and explain gender imbalance in their processes create gender-stereotyped expectations. Consultants state that candidates are not evaluated differently based on gender, but express perceived behavioral differences among genders⁷⁵. We have identified two perspectives among consultants where this can be discovered; their experience of candidates in interview situations and their perceptions of candidates' family lives and preferences when it comes to job opportunities.

Firstly, consultants believe that men and women behave differently in interview situations. They seem to have a more positive view of women and men are sometimes portrayed as dishonest. They also state that men have a more selling attitude and accentuate their achievements more. Even though this is told about in a somewhat negative tone, this might result in consultants being more prone to introduce these men to clients because of the comfort in knowing that they will present themselves in a more impressive manner. This is another implication of what is discussed in section 5.1.2 regarding the consultants' aim to legitimize and present defensible candidates (Khurana, 2002; Khurana & Piskorski, 2004; Hamori, 2010), rooted in the importance of impressing clients and maintaining good relationships (Burton-Jones & Spender, 2011; Clark, 1995; Coverdill & Finlay, 2000). The pattern further suggests that clients reward a selling and prominent attitude among candidates, which consultants more often see among men. This leads to two possible consequences; consultants being more likely to present male candidates to clients and clients being more likely to favor men.

Secondly, family implications and different attitudes to job opportunities are described as barriers for women when it comes to top management positions. Some examples are women taking more responsibility at home, being more loyal to their current employer, more analytical when considering new jobs or more reluctant to travel and commute in their work. Such perceptions among the consultants could to some extent

⁷⁵ See 4.3.2.1, 4.3.2.2. and 4.3.3.2.

be reflections of reality considering that data and consultants' stories about several cases support some of them. For example, data shows that women are less willing to travel or commute and that they are marginally more loyal to their current employer⁷⁶. However, the consultants' predetermined views can also influence their interpretations of individuals, depending on the perspective taken when analyzing this. For instance, some consultants point out that it is difficult to find women for senior sales positions since they involve a lot of travelling or commuting⁷⁷. If looking at the SD role among the selected cases one can see that 94% of all PCs were men, supporting this reasoning. However, if looking at this from another angle, it could also be that the data looks the way it does, because consultants reason the way they do. In other words, applying stereotypes and expecting individuals to be in a certain way without actually checking.

The two perspectives discussed above make us refer back to the construction of a reality that we discuss in 5.1.2. If consultants have predetermined views of available candidates based on gender, it probably influences to what extent they are creative in finding female candidates. Further, it can also contribute to consultants being content with their selection of PCs despite male dominance, since they have "done what they can" and reflect reality, which they in turn have been part of creating (Castilla & Benard, 2010). The fact that they are aware of the gender imbalance in their processes creates an urge to understand the reasons behind this. Gender stereotypes could be reinforced through experiences being amplified, colored or selectively remembered because of consultants' unconscious aim to understand this issue. Thus, certain behaviors or situations are ascribed to women in their processes, which reinforce the gender stereotypes already present in recruitment. Further, it also influences consultants' evaluation of individuals and interpretations of situations.

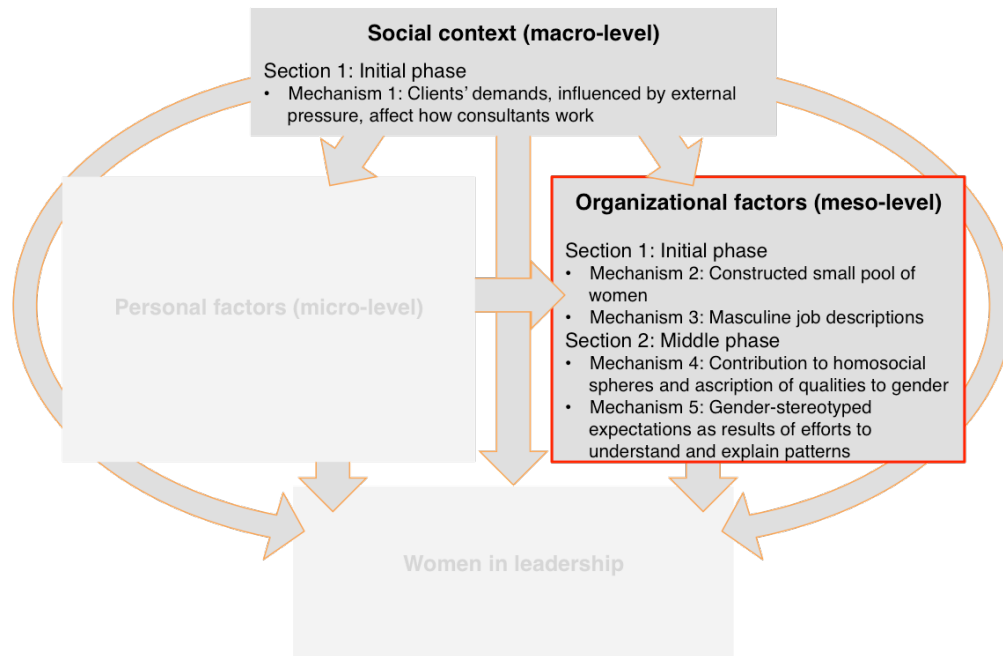
5.2.3 Key takeaways

The analysis above argues for two mechanisms that together could hinder women to proceed in recruitment processes. Thus, the stereotypes we find in our society become part of CSF's organizational processes through behaviors, assumptions and interactions of consultants. Therefore, mechanism four and five can be found on the meso-level in the GOS model. Similar to the key takeaways for section 5.1, we find ourselves in situations characterized by aims of objectivity but with gender-biased outcomes (Castilla & Benard, 2010).

⁷⁶ See figure 9.

⁷⁷ See 4.3.2.2.

Figure 17: Modified GOS model, second application



Our own version of the model developed by Wirz (2014), based on theory by Fagenson (1991, 1993).

5.3 Final phase: Consequences of client selection

At this point we proceed to the final phase of the recruitment process and discuss clients and their final choice. Here we describe the sixth mechanism; that gender bias is produced by personal chemistry being an accepted and common basis for candidate selection.

Figure 18: Analysis timeline, section 3

	Section 1: Initial phase	Section 2: Middle phase	Section 3: Final phase	Section 4: Holistic view
Mechanisms	1 • 2 • 3	4 • 5	6	7
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mechanism 1: Clients' demands, influenced by external pressure, affect how consultants work Mechanism 2: Constructed small pool of women Mechanism 3: Masculine job descriptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mechanism 4: Contribution to homosocial spheres and ascription of qualities to gender Mechanism 5: Gender-stereotyped expectations as results of efforts to understand and explain patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mechanism 6: Gender biases from candidate selection based on personal chemistry 	

Our analysis in 5.1.2 shows that there are narrow requirements regarding candidates' experiences and qualifications for the roles CSF appoints. Coverdill and Finlay (2007) argue that clients tend to rely on personal chemistry in candidate selection. Further, they state that personality becomes important in later stages because of the fact that the selected PCs often are homogenous with regards to requirements. According to consultants, clients use personal chemistry as a basis for candidate selection in several situations⁷⁸.

A common denominator for the cases mentioned in this context is that the SCs and at least one client representative have been men. For example, personal chemistry was the reason for selecting a man in Case3, even though the female candidate was more suitable on paper. This indicates homosociality (Lipman-Blumen, 1976) and similarity implications (Byrne, 1971; Rivera, 2012) and that men are more comfortable with other men (Powell, 2011, 2012). Thus, as long as it is more common with male representatives from client companies and the previous arguments hold, this will contribute to male dominance. Also, if men are more comfortable with other men and sometimes even more or less uncomfortable with women as suggested by Robin⁷⁹, clients can easily use the personality factor to justify not selecting a female candidate. With this reasoning, clients consciously or unconsciously apply gender discrimination. This is an easy escape for clients since this justification creates a mindset in which they are not discriminating but only choosing the candidate they believe is the best personal match. Further, it becomes difficult for others to question a decision made on this basis (Brunsson, 1993).

5.3.1 Key takeaways

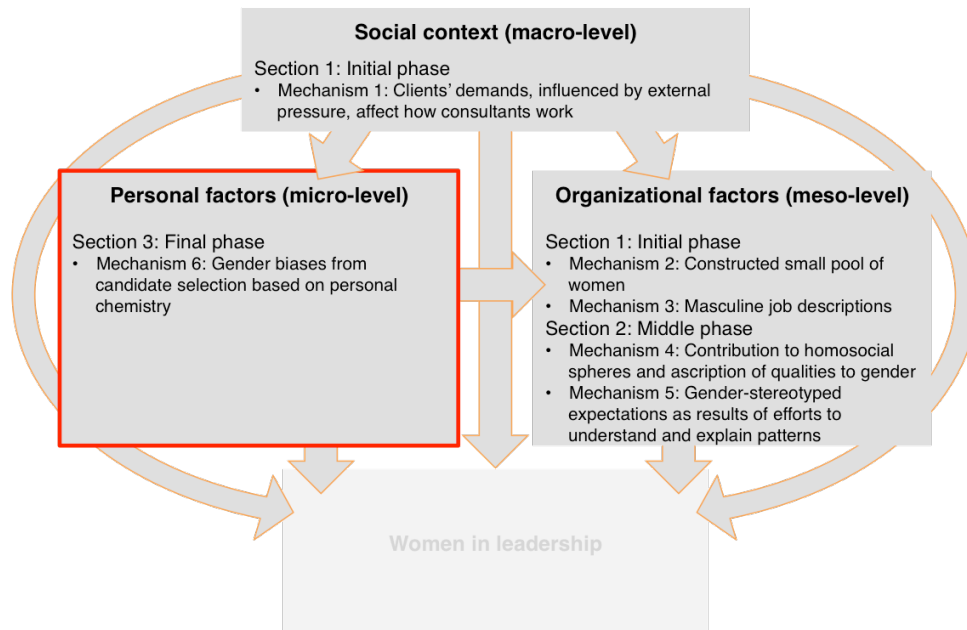
The sixth mechanism is inserted on a micro-level and involves gender-biased preferences and choices of clients, and how they are influenced by social contexts. Gender bias can be created consciously by clients using justification to be accepted by the general public. It can also be done unconsciously by clients being unaware of the implications of homosociality and similarity, which also can influence consultants if they are embedded in their homosocial spheres and work in accordance with what they believe is a good client fit⁸⁰. Hence, we have chosen to point the causality arrow from micro-level to meso-level, rather than the other way around as in the original model, since clients' preferences in this regard can have effect on the work practices of consultants.

⁷⁸ See 4.3.4.2.1.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ See our analysis in 5.2.1.

Figure 19: Modified GOS model, third application

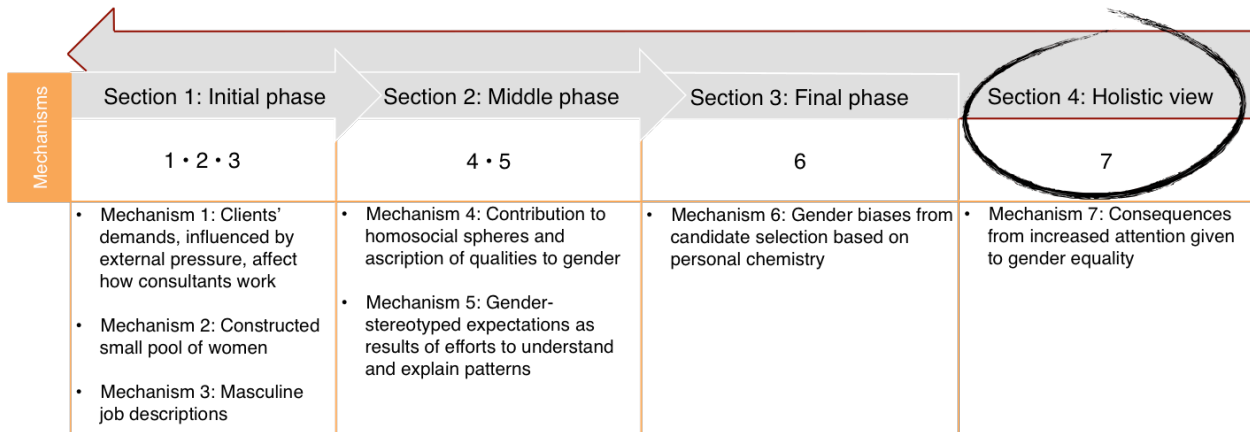


Our own version of the model developed by Wirz (2014), based on theory by Fagenson (1991, 1993).

5.4 Holistic view: Increased attention to gender equality

As a result of applying the GOS-model in our analysis, we came to the conclusion that it is necessary to discuss the scarcity of women in top management at a higher level. We therefore complete this chapter with a seventh mechanism, which is the increased attention given to gender equality and the unintended consequences of this topic becoming established in society. The attention given to this is also portrayed in the background. In today's society, the neutral way of being is to be concerned with gender equality and all actors seem to constantly consider this and also expect everyone else to do the same. Individuals expect that others' actions are influenced by considerations to gender equality, and that they thus have to adapt to this reality and change their interpretations and actions accordingly. We have identified two implications that are results from the fact that the gender equality topic is on the agenda in society, which thus can help us explain our point.

Figure 20: Analysis timeline, section 4



5.4.1 Categorization with consequences

The first implication is that the attention to gender parity in society leads to consequences through the continued categorization of individuals, where women are “others” (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Gherardi, 1994; Mavin & Grandy, 2012; Risman, 2004; Lorber, 1994). Women are not seen as just candidates in the processes, but are rather referred to as “female candidates”. Being a female candidate invokes attention and consequences, due to the mere fact of the gender. Our analysis below first illustrates the negative and then the positive consequences of this.

Data in figure 9 shows that female candidates are signed off due to wrong or insufficient experience more often than men. We believe that this could indicate two things. On the one hand, female candidates could be closer scrutinized in recruitment. This happens since women are rare in CSF's processes and therefore draw more attention to their profiles, which leads to more attention being paid to their weaknesses compared to similar weaknesses among male counterparts. On the other hand, women could be involved in processes as *alibi candidates*. A fear among clients exists because clients believe that consultants try to work for gender balance in their processes⁸¹, which creates a risk of them including female candidates that are less qualified for the position⁸². Both harder scrutinization and clients' fear of *alibi candidates* are supported by consultants and cases⁸³. Further, there is a reciprocal relationship between these two. To begin with, clients' fear of *alibi candidates* can contribute to a closer scrutinization of women. This in turn, puts pressure on consultants. Since consultants are aware that clients might be afraid of *alibi candidates*, they are careful to include

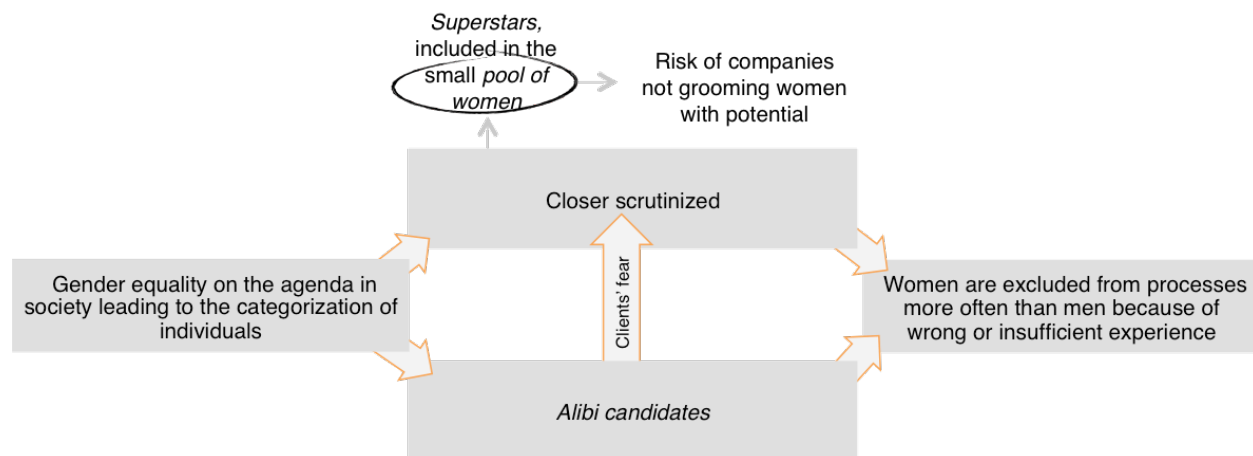
⁸¹ Either because of their own agenda or because of clients' demands.

⁸² See 4.3.4.2.2.

⁸³ Ibid. For example Case7, when a woman was signed off due to lack of a certain experience that other male candidates taken further in the process lacked as well. This was discovered during the interview with the responsible consultant, thus implying that the female candidate was closer scrutinized during the process.

women that are “flawless” in order to make sure that their lists satisfy clients (Clark, 1995). A possible implication of this is that women who make it to the lists have to be better than their male counterparts. This suggestion is supported by Kim and Love’s discussion about female PCs as *superstars*⁸⁴ and Bosak and Sczesny’s (2011) proposed lower confirmatory standards for male candidates. The female *superstars* become part of the constructed small *pool of women*⁸⁵, creating yet another implication. As argued by Alex, women that are suitable in the eyes of clients and consultants gain significant bargaining power due to the fact that they are few in the market and therefore mounted on a pedestal⁸⁶. As suggested by Kim’s story about a statement from a CEO⁸⁷, this could also lead to management teams being reluctant to invest in women with potential due to the fear of losing them once they qualify for and begin to belong to the *pool of women*.

Figure 21: Causality patterns



We have also found a conscious positive discrimination towards women at the expense of men. Benefits of being a woman can be found in situations when clients are eager to satisfy societal demands on gender balance in management teams, one example being when only female candidates are requested to fill support functions⁸⁸. Once again, women are divided into a separate group, this time being favored. This leads to the discrimination of men and thus contributes to the continuance of gender inequality and the reconstruction of gender (Risman, 2004).

⁸⁴ See 4.3.4.2.2.

⁸⁵ See 5.1.2.

⁸⁶ See Alex’s comment about Case11 in 4.3.1.4.

⁸⁷ See 4.3.1.4.

⁸⁸ See 4.3.4.1.1 and 4.3.4.1.2.

5.4.2 Gender equality mindset implications

The second implication of the increased attention to gender equality in society is a fear of being accused of applying a gender equality mindset. This implication can be illustrated by Case15, where two female client representatives rejected a woman due to her gender⁸⁹. Their fear was based on their assumption of how others, namely men, in the management team would interpret their choice of SC. They feared being accused of choosing a woman because of her gender in order to promote gender balance, when they in fact only wanted to choose the most suitable candidate. Interestingly, even if the woman had chosen, there would still have been more men in the management team. The reason to why the client representatives were afraid of others' interpretations of their actions could be that they were complying to existing norms of the male dominated management team. Hiring another woman, leading to the suspicion of them promoting women, could create an incongruity that clashed with the male homosocial sphere in the management team (Lipman-Blumen, 1976) or with a resistance towards women in male-dominated occupations (Kwon & Milgrom, 2010).

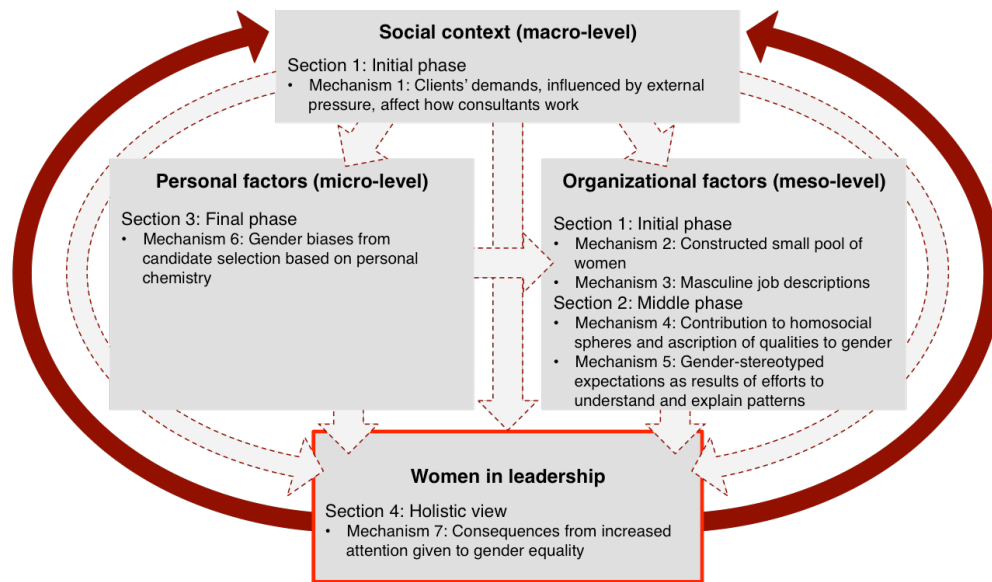
5.5.1 Key takeaways

Considering the two implications discussed above, it can be argued that today gender equality has become such an integral part of discussions regarding corporate management teams in Sweden that the topic itself functions as both an opportunity and a barrier for women in management. The attention to this topic, that is intended to promote women and help our society increase gender equality, also recreates the problem with gender inequality itself. It plants thoughts that only exist on the premise of individuals assuming that other actors in society constantly take the gender equality issue into account. Actors adapt their behavior in accordance with how they believe other actors in their environment reason and act, leading to unconscious discrimination. Our point is that the rules of the game change in accordance with individuals' expectations of adaptations to the attention of gender equality.

Thus, the seventh mechanism is a part of women in management in the GOS model, since this dimension involves complexities regarding the scarcity of women in top management. According to the model, this dimension is influenced by the other levels. To conclude this analysis we argue that this dimension in fact influences the macro-level through the attention given to, and the establishment of, gender equality in society, thus creating a complete circle of interdependency.

⁸⁹ It should be noted that this can not be seen as a sign-off reason in figure 9 since it was a comment from the consultant and not logged in the database.

Figure 22: Complete modified GOS model



Our own complete version of the model developed by Wirz (2014), based on theory by Fagenson (1991, 1993).

6. Conclusion

The research question in this thesis aims to identify mechanisms contributing to the scarcity of women at top management positions by exploring executive search practices at CSF through a gender lens. To answer our research question, seven mechanisms that recreate or contribute to gender bias in top management recruitment have been identified. These mechanisms have been discovered by exploring executive search practices, and are results of careful analysis of empirical data and our efforts to understand the patterns with help from the theoretical framework. Even though input from consultants has proven to be useful in the quest of understanding the complexities of this subject, we agree with previous research (Wirz, 2014) proposing that ESFs can not be held solely responsible. Instead, several actors are involved and together they unconsciously and consciously recreate gender bias contributing to the scarcity of women in top management. Hence, gender imbalance in recruitment is not rooted in executive search organizations per se, but rather originate from individuals' jointly constructed realities based on influences from the societal context they are embedded in.

The initial phase has the greatest effect on gender balance in recruitment, and the mechanisms are related to the inclusion of women in processes and influence whether or not they even are considered as PCs. The first and second mechanism, demands from clients driven by societal pressure and the construction of a *pool of women*, are

both rooted in society and influenced by the client-consultant dependency. The third mechanism is the masculine benchmark for job descriptions, affecting both consultants and their sources. The fourth and fifth mechanism belong to the middle phase and involve the contribution to homosocial spheres and the ascription of qualities to gender as well as gender-stereotyped expectations as a result of efforts to understand and explain gender imbalance in processes. The final phase consists of the sixth mechanism that mainly focuses on the client and how personal chemistry as a basis for candidate selection recreates gender bias. The seventh mechanism does not belong to any specific phase of the recruitment process but is rather present in all of them. The mechanism is gender equality itself and the barriers it paradoxically can create by gaining a foothold in society.

To conclude, the analysis has made it clear that societal factors lay at the foundation for issues regarding gender equality in top management selection. Gender stereotypes that are deeply rooted in our society seem to govern consultants' way of working and clients' preferences. These actors together contribute to the recreation of the gender biases we see in executive arenas of the corporate world today. As proposed in the beginning of this chapter by having the GOS framework (Fagenson, 1990, 1993) as guidance, we argue that the discussions throughout this analysis somehow are deeply interwoven with the society we live in. Society permeates all aspects of gender equality in top management recruitment, but at the same time, society consists of individuals, whose actions create and recreate societal structures and norms. Thus, the structures in society are recreated by the actions and interpretations of consultants, clients, candidates and sources. Fagenson (1991, 1993) argues that individuals or organizations can not be properly understood isolated from society and that when the system in which organizations and individuals are embedded in changes, the other components change as well. However, our final conclusion builds on our strong conviction that society can not be properly understood without understanding the effects of individuals integrating a gender equality perspective into their actions and interpretations, and that societal structures change as actions and behaviors of individuals do. Further, the interdependency between the macro-level and women in leadership indicates on a step forward regarding gender equality and that it is perceived as important in the Swedish society.

7. Contributions and further research

7.1 Theoretical and practical contribution

This thesis contributes to the existing research gap on gender equality and executive search in four distinct ways, which are described in section 1.2.2. The thesis provides

seven mechanisms discovered through an ESF that contribute to the scarcity of women at top management positions in Sweden. The empirical data and our analysis contribute to an increased understanding of ESFs' processes as well as what role they and other involved actors' play for gender equality. Further, the combination of empirical data in the form of real-life cases and consultants' interpretations and perceptions has enabled our study to identify dynamics of gender bias in particular search assignments rather than more general patterns from interviews. This contributes with several aspects and connections not previously emphasized. The information and comments about cases have been logged in the database in an uncensored way, without taking into account that an outsider would get access to it. This has given us a transparent view and enhanced the credibility of the contribution of our results. Moreover, we have contributed to theory by further developing the dependency perspective first suggested by Fagenson (1991, 1993) in our analysis that points towards society being influenced by the concept of women in leadership. Thus, the study extends previous research by contributing with a more comprehensive view on the barriers for women in reaching top management positions through executive search recruitment.

The findings in this thesis also have practical contributions. By highlighting both unconscious and conscious gender-biased behaviors in recruitment we can contribute to the acknowledgement of their existence. We believe that the key to change lies within actors involved in executive search recruitment being open for reviewing their own interpretation processes and actions (Kelan, 2010). An understanding of one's own contribution to gender biases is needed in order for change to take place. Giving attention to the mechanisms in our analysis could help consultants and clients understand their own possibly gender-biased actions and in turn help increase women's presence in top management⁹⁰. Thus, acknowledging sex category implications and *doing gender* well (Mavin & Grandy, 2012). Lastly, on the note that gender bias in recruitment exists despite most actors' good intentions we would like to highlight the importance of integrating gender equality work in everyday practices rather than it being a separate agenda.

7.2 Limitations of contributions

In addition to the methodological limitations mentioned in section 2.6, implications on *dependability*⁹¹ are presented in this section in order to enable a discussion about the generalizability of our contributions. *Dependability* of this thesis is relatively high given

⁹⁰ One example of a possible practical implication could be the expansion of the constructed pool of female candidates if clients', and thus in turn consultants', views of appropriate successors change and become more flexible. This can help disrupt the *closed ecosystems* of top executives.

⁹¹ The extent to which findings can be transferred to other settings (similar contexts) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

the congruity between some of our findings and results from previous research. However, two implications have been identified.

Firstly, *dependability* is partly altered by the specific context in which the study has been conducted. The use of recruitment cases as empirical data produces findings that might be partly dependent on their specifics. Further, the fact that Sweden is a country where the gender equality issue is particularly highlighted⁹² has implications on *dependability*, especially regarding the seventh mechanism since it might decrease generalizability of those findings to other countries. Secondly, mechanisms in our analysis are sometimes rooted in few examples from empirical data. However, we do not claim that the examples are present in all cases at ESFs, but rather aim to illustrate how gender can be done in recruitment.

7.3 Further research

An interesting area where our conclusion could be used as a building block for future research is further investigation of gender equality being on the agenda in society and what implications it has for women in management. This aspect has not been emphasized in any of the literature we have come across regarding recruitment and gender equality. Yet, implications of gender equality gaining a foothold in society is a key conclusion and contribution in this thesis. Another area for further research could be to explore our discussions about practical contributions; if an increase of women at top management positions can be achieved if individuals involved in executive search recruitment acknowledge their own behaviors and interpretations.

We also see room for further research with regards to our methodology. Considering that this thesis builds on empirical data regarding the industrial sector and specific recruitment cases, further research could examine generalizability of our results and if the seven identified mechanisms are present in other industries or settings as well. Moreover, it would be fruitful with more studies that build on actual recruitment cases and especially interesting with quantitative empirical data on cases in order to test the statistical viability of our results. Finally, we agree with Tienari et al. (2013) and believe that interesting studies could be produced if based on observations in a live setting at an ESF.

⁹² See 1.1.

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9. Appendix

9.1 Topics for interviews with consultants

These are the main topics used for the interviews in this thesis. All topics were discussed from a gender perspective with consultants at CSF.

Part one: The practices at CSF

1. General discussion about their processes
 - What processes look like
 - Where to find potential candidates
 - Networks and their composition
2. Critical parts in processes where individuals are signed off
 - Longlist
 - Interviews and evaluation
 - Shortlist
3. Clients and their involvement
 - Influences on the processes
 - Final choice - selected candidate
 - Responsibility and the client-consultant relationship
4. Gender equality work at CSF

Part two: Recruitment cases the consultants were involved in

1. Short description of the case from the consultants' perspective
2. Discussion of potential candidates with emphasis on shortlist
3. Clients' final choice
4. Discussion of database information