

# Women Who Decide

## The Gender Issue in Corporate Decision-Making

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### Abstract

The growing number of women in leadership positions has stimulated several studies on the influence of gender in the process of decision-making in corporate environments, where the role of the manager is still strongly associated with male characteristics. This study aims to identify which characteristics impact the decision-making process of women, and to investigate the tendency for women to become more masculine by adopting more aggressive and rational postures. In order to explore this, a study was conducted among women executives in management and director positions in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. A questionnaire containing questions about situations relating to day-to-day business and behavior in situations that require decision-making was conducted to professionals with over 30 years of age, with and without children, working in private companies located in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo with at least five years of corporate experience.

### Introduction

The prevailing vision of an organization defines it as a logical instrument directed at achieving objectives [1]. However, its success depends on the unified action of individuals with the same interests and a variety of purposes [2]. The vitality and competitiveness of the market, as well as the interdependence of individual transactions carried out in the same environment, is capable of generating uncertainties for the organization and influence the decision-making process.

Face to this scenario, the ever-growing presence of women in the Brazilian workplace is motivating studies on the issue of gender in the subject of decision-making. The concept of gender to be addressed in this paper defines it as the social construct of feminine and masculine, while men should have male feelings such as bravery, independence, rationality, toughness, violence, determination and self-confidence, while women should have female attitudes such as geniality, charm, helpfulness, affection, sensitiveness, intuitiveness, emotion, dependence and fragileness [3].

Schein [4, 5] established in his studies that both men and women occupying the same management positions displayed the same masculine characteristics, attitude and personality, thus raising the following question: do women in leading management positions adopt masculine behavior while making decisions, despite their own gender characteristics?

Starting from this assertion, the purpose of this study is to identify which characteristics can cause impact to the female decision-making process in a corporative environment. Interviews with professional women over 30 years of age, with or without children, and employed in private organizations located in the Rio and São Paulo region and with at least five years of corporative experience, and its subordinate teams, will be carried

out to investigate the hypothesis that by adopting more rational and aggressive attitudes can lead to the masculinization of women in a corporative environment.

To attain such objective, this study was structured into four stages: 1) theoretical references on the access of women to the workplace; 2) decision-making process in organizations and female decisions; 3) research methodology; 4) results and conclusions analysis.

## Literature review

### Women in the workplace

The first attempt of women to access the workplace occurred in 1917 during First World War with the consequent mass recruiting of men to the battlefields. Nevertheless, women effectively entered the workplace during the post-war period, when a lot of job opportunities came out in shops, banks, and public services. In 1919, women gained access to the university, thus conquering better positions, which according to Thébaud [6], were previously destined only to men.

Great philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato and Rousseau indorsed the “generic existentialism” movement. This movement addresses the way the two genders perform, that is, men have the ability to use their mind to dominate their bodily needs, while women are dominated by their own sensibility and aspiration [7].

According to Bruschini [8] the growth of admissions to the workplace in Brazil started between 1970 and 1980, due to the economic development of the Country. Women have been steadily conquering more space in the workplace, which is linked to a decline in the family income. According to Tanure [7]:

As mulheres têm conseguido conquistar mais espaço no mercado de trabalho e galgar cada vez mais posições hierárquicas nas organizações do mundo inteiro. Esta conquista tem sido adquirida sob forte influência da educação formal e da globalização. A educação das mulheres tem se equiparado à dos homens e, nas últimas décadas, tem sido comum encontrar um número significativo de mulheres com nível de escolaridade superior ao dos homens [*apud* 9].

However, in accordance with Betiol’s research [10], there is a feminine culture shaped to prepare the woman for her role as a mother in society, which has to be learned through a long process of socialization. Among the skills learned, flexible and integrated disciplines are also taught, as well as several types of procedures, a model that today is highly praised as good management practice. Nevertheless and contradictorily, the admission of women to the workplace disqualifies the specificity of its gender role, validated only within the domestic sphere. Such viewpoint reinforces the idea that a woman outside a certain environment needs to assume the specificities of the masculine gender such as rationality and control, because her characteristics lose their value in the workplace [10].

According to Betiol [10], such prejudice against women can be minimized by the fact that they are achieving higher levels of education that renders them suitable to enter the work force. In IBGE’s catalog on the Economic Active Population, from January to May 2012 [11], the masculine participation still dominates the entrepreneurial scenario, being 64% of male involvement, as compared to 49% of female participation. Such percentage has been growing since 2003, thus showing some progress of women’s rise in the market.

As stressed by Izraeli and Adler [12], it is important to understand that men and women have different characteristics of personality and behavior; due to the fact that the masculine model has been approved in the organizations and considered successful, the application of a new model is less probable to happen. Another issue addressed by the

researchers of this study is the fact that due to the shortage of women in leadership positions, they become frustrated especially due to the unequal opportunities for promotion, particularly if the position is one of leadership.

In accordance with Steil [13], the mere fact that a woman can get married, get pregnant and consequently resign from the company is certainly an important factor for some managers to avoid hiring women for leadership positions. According to Rezekcki [14], the reason why women are not more solidly inserted in the market in leadership positions lies in their lack of experience and career opportunities or even stereotypes. As to Engen [15] because the entrepreneurial environment is mainly masculine which emphasizes control, competitiveness and authority, women are left with less space due to their own characteristics, which are more related to interpersonal relationships.

In an attempt of trying to minimize the impacts suffered by women in the entrepreneurial environment on account of their masculinization, the United Nations Fund for the Development of Women (UNIFEM) and the Global Pact of the United Nations have created the Principles for Strengthening the Woman [16], which are based on the Calvert Women's Principles, the first code of corporative behavior to empower, promote and invest in women at world level, which was created in 2004.

The principal objective of the Empowerment of Women Principle is to bring to the entrepreneurial environment, the adequacy of policies and practices of the organization for the empowerment of women, as well as to create elements that will promote equal opportunities to both genders in the workplace. Such principles are regulated by the following items: leadership promoting gender equality; equal opportunities; inclusion and non-discrimination; health, safety and end of violence; education and training; corporative development, supply chain practices, and marketing; community leadership and engagement; transparency, data measurement and information.

In order to have equal opportunities of being admitted to the organization, as well as getting involved in the decision-making of the company, women should demand recruiting and retaining practices in the organization, taking into consideration the gender issue, and promoting women to executive positions, as well as to the higher echelon of the company. Once admitting women in key positions, the organization must offer flexible hours of work; allow the issuing of licenses and give equal opportunities for women at their return, giving them the same status and remuneration she had at the time of her license.

Also the decision-making item of the principles states that the organization needs to guarantee the participation of 30% or more women in its task force and in all decision-making and management issues.

### **Organizational decision-making**

Frequent changes in the market environment can cause impact not only in the behavior of the organization regarding problems related to its structure, but also in its leadership, processes and objectives. They also challenge the manager's ability to improve his/her decisions having in mind the productivity and management of the available resources.

In the vision of Herbert Simon [17] the organization is a complex system of decisions involving interdependent and interrelated units that form a set where human behavior can be coordinated starting from the knowledge of the decision-making process. It is up to the administrator to distribute decision tasks, with the purpose of influencing the behavior of the persons that are executing any physical work (operational level) in the organization, in order to achieve the integration of its members' behavior.

The human and behavioral dimension of the decision process shows the limitations of a model strictly linear and rational of several theories on Management. The managers make decisions within a limited and fragmented organizational process, thus making impracticable

a total rationality. The available information are partial and provided among several managerial tasks; the problems that arise are not structured and the information systems are almost always not updated and limited to long past data [18].

Although today there are systems that simulate future scenarios based on decisions made at the present time, March [19] postulates that it is impossible for a manager to be sure of future consequences due to the risks and ambiguities involved in the decision-making process. Where there are ambiguities, rationality finds it difficult to clearly identify the cause-effect relationships between facts, and managers tend to make mistakes when taking decisions based in old beliefs or avoiding alternatives, preferences and greater consequences of the problem [19].

Considering reason and intuition as complementary and inseparable aspects of the human being structure, Vergara [20] postulates that the organizational reality requires that managers resort to intuition in order to develop their decision-making, chiefly those occupying higher positions in the corporative hierarchy and where complex, ambiguous or uncertain situations are frequent and scarce the time and resources available to analyze systematically all alternatives.

Despite the lack of agreement as to the meaning of the word intuition, and several arguments indicating instances where intuition can lead to error [21], chiefly if the manager has doubts in situations that require serious assessments of the problem, there are several authors that stress the importance of intuition in the decision-making process. In accordance with Vergara [20], intuition can be a facilitator element for the admission of women to an organization, once they are considered more emotional and intuitive than men.

### **Decision-making by gender**

In Welch's [3] viewpoint, men and women differ in the way they make decisions. For men, it is an intellectual challenge, an affirmation of his capacity and independence; therefore they avoid asking for an opinion and are prone to act swiftly. For women, a decision is an opportunity to build a relationship, an act filled with significance and meaning for their lives, consequently this is the reason why they take their time and seek advice from others, in trying to reach a consensus.

Despite such differences, Welch [3] stresses that the different styles of decision-making of men and women are stereotypes and in reality they are just persons with a combination of attributes. According to the masculine stereotype, decision-making characteristics are the following: haste to act based on the little available information without prior consultation to other persons and without analyzing all possible alternatives. As to the female stereotype, decision-making characteristics are slowness to act due to the need of consulting other opinions, searching for information that can support the decision, analysis of alternatives and concern over the costs involved.

The struggle for power, money and influence greatly contribute to the appreciation of masculine qualities as compared to the feminine attributes, in the organizational environment [3]. This statement justifies the unequal opportunities between men and women aspiring to leadership positions. Welch [3] assures that to be accepted in the organizational environment, women must assume the male stereotype. Such observable fact agrees with Marcel Mauss [22] statement, in which he declares that individuals tend to copy what is successful. The perception of success is linked to the male style of leadership; therefore, to reach it, women fathom that they have to adopt the same behavior. However, women who plagiarized the behavior of men were generally negatively appraised (so-called "alpha women") and considered aggressive and/or inefficient [23].

The gender characteristics cannot be attributed to one or to the other sex [24, 3, 23]. According to such authors, the feminine and masculine characteristics can be found in men as

well as in women, according to their personality. A person is the result of the combination of female and male particularities. Therefore, one ought to take advantage of such differences and balance the different ways of thinking; however, it is important to take advantage of such different ways of thinking being more masculine sometimes and more feminine in others.

É tempo principalmente de fazer o elogio das virtudes masculinas que não se adquirem nem passiva, nem facilmente, mas que se afirmam em termos de esforços e exigências. Elas se chamam autodomínio, vontade de se superar, gosto pelo risco e o desafio e resistência à opressão (...) são as condições da criação mas também da dignidade. Pertencem a todo o ser humano da mesma forma que as virtudes femininas. (...) Longe de serem incompatíveis elas são indissociáveis, para que se pretenda o título de humano. Embora uma tradição milenar as tenha colocado em oposição atribuindo-as a um ou a outro sexo tomamos pouco a pouco a consciência que umas sem as outras acabariam se tornando um pesadelo: o autodomínio pode tornar-se neurose, o gosto pelo risco tender ao suicídio a resistência pode transformar-se em 'agressão'. Inversamente as virtudes femininas tão celebradas nos dias de hoje podem, se não forem temperadas pelas masculinas, conduzir à passividade e à subordinação [23].

### **Methodology**

The research carried out for the present study can be defined as quantitative. It has been developed into two stages. The first stage is comprised of empirical data gathered through an online questionnaire which was sent to executive women aged 30 and over, active in high rank positions of several companies in various sectors within the State of São Paulo and Rio, with or without children, with over 5 years experience in leading positions, with the objective of identifying the type of decisions that they used in order to reach their position, that is, if it was primarily masculine to the detriment of feminine characteristics inherent to its gender, or if they respected the style said feminine at the decision making time. The interest resides in the verification of how a determined phenomenon manifests itself in the activities, procedures and daily interactions. So, each questionnaire has the objective of identifying among some of the feminine or masculine characteristics accentuated in the literature, the impact of each aspect in the way women decide in the Brazilian executive women the viewpoint of themselves and also in the vision of their subordinates, thus revealing if there is a copycat of masculine aspects in female decision-making, in leading positions, as suggested by the authors above cited.

### **Results and analysis**

After the application of a survey sent to executive women with a leadership profile and position it was possible to identify which characteristics impact the women's decision-making process, as well as investigating its tendency to masculinization by adopting more aggressive and rational attitudes in situations relating to day-to-day business. Participated in the survey 30 women executive active in private companies located in Rio de Janeiro and San Pablo, all level of schooling completed in higher education, around age thirty-eight, average of seven years working in the company and four years from now in position of top leadership. Of this total, fourteen executives have children, not exceeding the number of two sons.

The survey revealed great diversity of business areas, with emphasis on engineering sectors, information technology and telecommunications. Based on the data collected engineering was the academic background that most executive women that is participating in this study are graduate.

The research was divided into two parts concerning the issue decision. First some statements about the work environment and alternative responses for classification decision-making have been presented. In this part of the research executive should respond according to the Likert scale for measurement of responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

The second part of the research showed a relation of twenty-one features for decision making, merged between male and female characteristics. The respondents should choose the five most characteristics that they identified themselves and scale them from 1 to 5 which 1 is the most used and least used feature 5. This made it possible to compare the statements noted in the first part of the survey selected in the second part in order to check possible inconsistencies characteristics.

The survey was also sent in the same questionnaire format for these executive subordinates in order to check if the view that the executive have about themselves in relation to decision-making is confirmed in the opinion of subordinates, people with whom they deal with day-to-day.

Based on the data collected the majority of executive respondents feel respected in the company where they work. When asked "I feel respected by all my colleagues in the company?", 100% of the responses were positive, with 74% strongly agree. Similarly, 87% of respondents agreed that the companies they work treat all employees equally, irrespective of race, gender or age. In relation to this statement 10% of executive respondents strongly disagree.

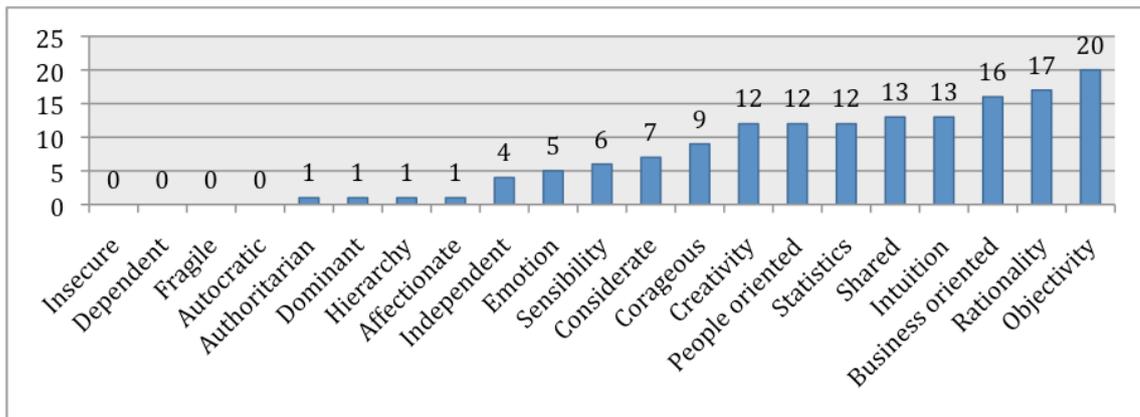
Although they affirm they are treated equally, when asked if they had the same opportunities as men in the company, 23% of executive fully and partially disagreed about this statement, confirming the theory mentioned that women still have fewer opportunities to reach leadership positions than men.

In statements about decision-making, 90% of executives say they are involved in making strategic decisions regarding to their management areas. When you need to make decisions, all executive affirm they use sensitivity and intuition, said as feminine characteristics according to the literature, however, on the other hand, 63% of executives agree with the statement that use objectivity and centralize decisions, which are masculine characteristics. This demonstrates that women, despite using female characteristics in their day-to-day, mixed with masculine features.

In the second stage of the research where the executive should select five characteristics of a total of 21 options available, most have opted to characteristics identified as male characteristics. When asked to list five characteristics to among the twenty-one available, the items listed in the first, second and third place were objectivity, reason and business-oriented, respectively traits described in the literature as masculine. Only fourth appear as feminine traits, intuition and shared management, with the same number of votes. Already in the fifth, three dashes were chosen the same amount of times, statistical data, creativity and people-oriented, the first, a male trait and the last two, feminine traits.

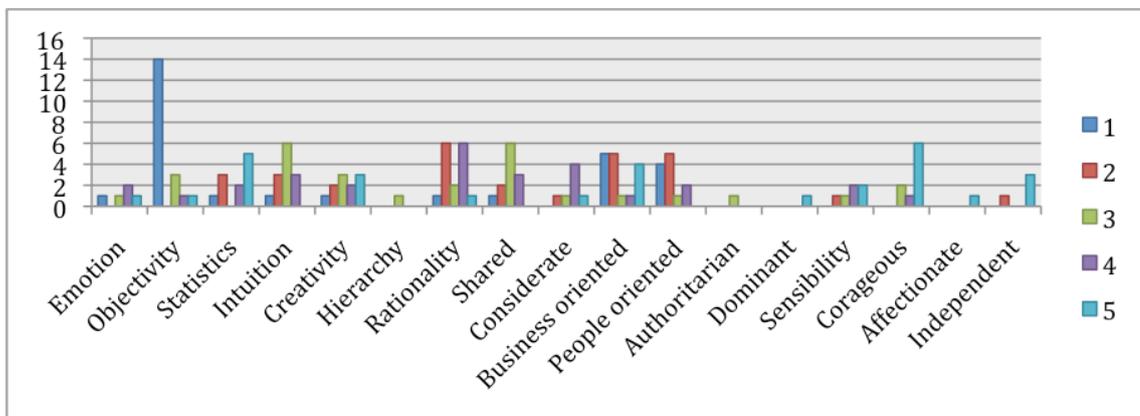
Executive decision-making relies on some male characteristics but also merges feminine characteristics as intuition, teamwork (oriented person) and information sharing and management. The analysis of data reveals that among the five selected, in the twenty-one available, exists a balance between male and female characteristics, as shown in Figure I.

Figure I. Features selected by the respondents



Within the characteristics indicated, as shown in Figure II, the main one mentioned as a priority for management was objectivity, a male characteristic, and only one executive indicated excitement as its main feature. Secondly, it was pointed out the characteristic reason, also considered a male characteristic. Thirdly prevailed female intuition and sharing features. Already in fourth place ranking indicates the reason again as a priority feature. Fifthly courage was appointed as principal, again a male characteristic.

Figure II. Prioritization of the most cited characteristics by the respondents



Despite the characteristics identified as female also appear in the ranking by subordinates, male characteristics appeared strongly in the responses and in all points, stressing that women adopt masculine postures in the workplace. Thus, the conclusions drawn from the research, from the point of view of the executive, they came to find the available literature on the subject, thus confirming that women in positions of leadership make use of male characteristics in the organizational environment. As mentioned earlier, to confirm affirms, subordinated these teams responded to the same survey, analyzing how they perceive their management.

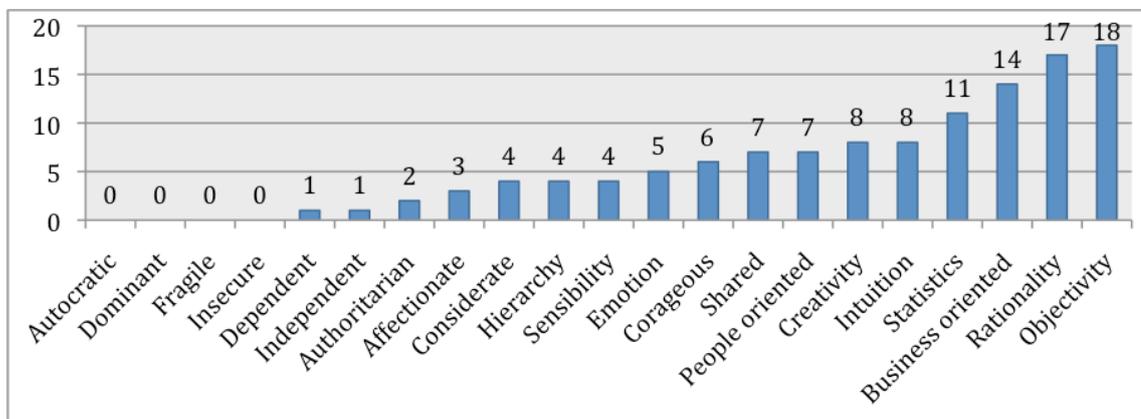
Twenty-four subordinates took part in the survey, which sixteen women and eight men with an average age of thirty years old, all with completed level of education or pursuing higher education. When asked about the affirms, 96% confirmed subordinates feel respected by their leaders and only 4% disagreed with this statement partially, but in spite of all executive have considered that are treated as equal, 17% of subordinates partially disagree

this statement and 13% of them believe that their management did not have the same opportunities as their peers to reach the position they are in today. Despite claiming to feel respected executive within companies, 29% of subordinate disagrees that the company respects the feminine and masculine legend in management.

Regarding to decision-making process, 100% of the subordinates believe the involvement of managers in their strategic decisions in the area, while 10% of executives do not agree with this statement. 88% say they are objective and centralize decisions, and 83% confirm that they are sensible and use your intuition to make decisions, thereby enhancing the assessment that these executives did themselves.

When asked about the predominant characteristics in the decision-making of its management, objectivity was singled out as the most used feature of the executive, following reason, and statistical data-driven business, predominantly male characteristics. Below is the Figure III with the general analysis of items from the point of view of the subordinates:

Figure III. Characteristics selected by the subordinates



From the characteristics pointed out by subordinates the first characteristic as used by the management was objectivity, followed by business oriented. Among the respondents, only one showed emotion as main feature. Second was reason appointed predominantly, business-oriented was the third and fourth reason. Fifth was a tie between the characteristics: intuition, reason, courage and sharing. Although the characteristics identified as female also appear in the ranking by subordinates, male characteristics were prevalent in all points, stressing that women in the workplace prioritize masculine characteristics for decision making.

### Discussions and Conclusion

Although female characteristics have been identified in the questionnaires of the executive, as in the questionnaires of the subordinates, the survey indicated the predominance of male characteristics, reinforcing that women adopt masculine postures in the workplace.

In a corporate environment where masculine characteristics such as rationality and objectivity prevail, it is reasonable to expect that women executives adopt postures according to this scenario where behaviors contrary to this context are unlikely to occur.

Whereas the study included a small sample of respondents, limited to executive women currently working in businesses located in the Rio-São Paulo, it is not expected that the data collected and / or conclusions obtained are conclusive on the object of study nor in the cities where were carried out as little in the country as a whole. However, it is expected

that this research will contribute to broaden the discussion around gender in the organizational environment and generate future studies to deepen understanding of the issues raised in this research, as well as launching other questions about the same phenomenon.

One possible way to go in future research is related to the investigation of the adoption of male posturing on issues related to the personal lives of these executives. Knowing whether these masculine characteristics remains outside the corporate environment will help us understand if women has to develop this male behavior to survive the organizational environment or the entry of women into the labor market also changed their nature, affecting as well their behavior in respect to personal decisions.

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