

Women in the Real Estate Industry

Introduction

Gender is an emerging topic in the real estate industry; scholarly works are however missing. A number of gender studies have been conducted in the construction industry cf. Cettner (2008), Kyriakidou (2012). This article focuses, however, on the real estate industry, i.e. managing housing and commercial properties, and is a contribution to the field of real estate industry. A group of scholars has focused on the importance of talent management (Phillips and Roper, 2009), i.e. attracting and retaining the best, brightest employees in order to achieve higher than average market share and elevated profiles. According to Phillips and Roper (2009, p.7), talent is “a core group of leaders, technical experts, and key contributors who can drive their business forward.” Gostick and Elton (2007) report that employees stay with their employers when they have quality relationships with their managers, opportunities for personal growth and professional development, a healthy work-life balance, a feeling of making a difference, meaningful work, and adequate training. Phillips and Roper (2009) suggest that additional attention should be given to increasing employee engagement with generation Y.

In order to attract and retain talent in an increasingly competitive market it is important to apply a gender perspective, as the real estate industry is a male-dominated industry (Lind and Lundström, 2009). A gender perspective implies that it is possible to understand how talented women can be attracted to work in the industry.

The overall aim of this article is to explore *how* graduate younger women working as real estate managers and women working as Chief Executive Officer's (CEO's) construct femininities and create a career in organizations dominated by men. I fulfil this aim by studying how they are discussing and negotiating their femininities using different personal strategies which enable them to work and forge a career in the real estate industry.

The article is structured as follows: first, the method of the study is presented. Thereafter follows a theoretical discussion about doing gender, relying on authors who have emphasized the role of the organization as such (Acker, 1990, 1992; Kanter, 1977, 1993; Wahl, 1992). Also theory about the role of motherhood is emphasized (Kvande, 1999). Thereafter follows a presentation of the context of the industry. The theoretical framework is used when presenting and analyzing the empirical findings. The article ends with a concluding discussion, emphasizing theoretical and practical implications.

Method

To fulfill the aim of the study to explore *how* graduate younger women working as real estate managers and women working as Chief Executive Officer's (CEO's) construct femininities and how they create a career in organizations dominated by men, I conducted interviews with ten women, five who works as real estate managers and five who work as Chief Executive Officers. By analysing how they are discussing and negotiating their femininities using different personal strategies which enable them to work and forge a career in the real estate industry, I learn how they construct their femininities in organizations dominated by men. The empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews.

To discuss the strategies used by women in the industry, the industry's gender structure was captured by mapping a total of fourteen housing companies and eight commercial companies. In each case, facts regarding the company's current situation were mapped (how many women and men are employed in the company, how many women and men are represented on the board of directors, how many women and men are represented on the management board, and how many women and men are working as CEOs). Annual reports from 2001 were compared to annual reports from 2008 to determine if there had been a change in the number of female and male employees between the two different years. Having this time perspective implies that a longitudinal perspective was taken, which is important as the ambition at this stage was to investigate if there had been any major changes in the industry's gender structure over the past decade.

The main argument for using annual reports when mapping the industry is that it is one way to acquire figures about the number of women and men employed in the industry. The figures neither say anything about why the industry is constituted as it is, nor about what kind of processes that have formed the structure. Although counting the numbers of women and men will only give numerical facts, it is an important way to create awareness of how the industry is comprised. It was also an important part of the interviews as the mapping opened up the interview.

In this study, the biological categories of women and men are used as a point of departure when counting the number of women and men in the industry. Even though it could be argued that gender structures cannot fully be understood by studying the biological sex (Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009), in this study it does however fulfil my purpose: to create an image of the industry to use during the interviews.

Apart from getting reactions during the interviews to the mapping of the gender structure, other questions were included to gain an understanding both about the interviewees career processes in the industry and about how they construct femininities in organizations dominated by men. Based on this data, it was possible to analyze which strategies they used. The first group of respondents the five women working as real estate managers represents a group of younger women; conversely, the second group of respondents the five women working as CEOs represents a more senior group of women who have made careers in the industry.

A purposeful sampling were conducted of five female real estate managers and five women who were employed in similar organizations as CEOs. Real estate managers gain important

knowledge from their experiences whilst working; accordingly, it is a valuable position if one wishes to become a CEO in the future.

The respondents are presented in the the two tables below, the first table presentes the young women, and the second the CEOs. The tables report type of company the respondesnts work in,previous positions, age and if they have children or not.

Table 1. Real estate managers (women)

Respondent	Company/Org.	Previous positions	Educational background; age	Children
A:1	Public housing	Real estate manager in a commercial real estate company	BSc; 33	1
A:2	Public housing	Different positions in the same public housing company	BSc; 31	Expecting first
A:3	Commercial	Real estate manager in a commercial real estate company and in a municipality	BSc; 34	2
A:4	Municipality	Real estate manager in a public housing company	BSc; 34	0
A:5	Municipality	Real estate manager in a commercial real esate company	BSc; 38	2

Table 2. Chief Executive Officers (women)

Respondent	Company/Org.	Previous positions	Educational background; age	Children
B:1	Housing	Head of real estate management departments in public companies	MSc; 53 years	2
B:2	Housing	Head of real estate department in a commercial real estate company	LLM; 51 years	2
B:3	Housing	CEO of a small family company	D.Tech; 55 years	2
B:4	Commercial	CEO in the construction industry	MSc; 58 years	2

B:5	Housing	Head of a public real estate department	BSc; 44 years	0
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Respondents A:1-A:5, the younger real estate managers, are all employed in the south of Sweden; data was used from a local university when sampling this group of respondents. The university offers a program in real estate management; they all graduated in 2001. Respondents B:1-B:5, the CEOs, are not geographically located in the south of Sweden and they have different educational backgrounds. There are only a few women in Sweden in these positions; I received help to identify them. I conducted interviews with four women working in the largest housing companies and with the only woman working as a CEO in a large commercial real estate management company.

This background data presented in the tables above is of interest and relevance when analysing the interview data later in the paper.

Theoretical background

Male-dominated Organizations

The real estate industry in Sweden is dominated by men. Moreover, it is an industry that historically can be related to an engineering context. Women in male-dominated organizations use different strategies to construct femininity (Kvande, 1999). Gender can be seen as a basic cultural code and can be understood as an ongoing negotiation in the interaction between women and men, and between women and between men (Haavind, 1992; Kvande, 1999). There are several possible ways for women to negotiate the meaning of femininity in a male-dominated organization (Kvande, 1999). Women and men can be seen as agents whose actions either challenge or confirm the existing gender order and *hegemonic masculinity* (ibid, p308).

Hegemonic masculinity was first introduced by Connell (1987, 2008); it refers to the dominant form of masculinity within the gender hierarchy, which, according to Acker (1990, 1992), plays an important part in legitimizing organizational power. The term hegemony refers to Gramsci's (1967) analysis of class relations; specifically, the dynamic that occurs for a group to maintain a dominant position. Hegemony can only exist through acceptance from subordinated groups. Although hegemonic masculinity subordinates femininities and other masculinities, it can also be challenged by them. According to Connell (1987, 2008), hegemonic masculinity in most contemporary Western societies is associated with whiteness, heterosexuality, marriage, authority, and physical toughness. Connell (ibid) also argues that the gender order in the world still gives men privileges over women.

Wahl (1992) has constructed the idea of gender structure, which includes three different gender distinctions within organizations. Gender structure includes three different traits which show the gender division within an organization: the number of women and men within the organization; the segregation between the sexes in occupations, professions, and positions; and the hierarchical division between the sexes' influence and power possibilities.

Four strategies

According to Kvande (1999), graduate woman engineers negotiate four ideal construction processes (called “strategies”). The four strategies are: *homeless*, *one-of-the-boys women*, *compensators*, and *challengers*. The four strategies are variations along the *sameness/difference* dimension. Women negotiate whether the meaning of gender should be sameness or difference from men. *Homeless* and *one-of-the-boys women* are in the *sameness* dimension, whereas *compensators* and *challengers* are in the *difference* dimension. The same person can change strategy over time and can even apply different strategies in different situations within the same organization.

Homeless is a *sameness* strategy; it is often used by young women who are at an early stage in their careers. Women apply this strategy because they want to fit in as much as possible. *Homeless* implies that they distance themselves from the norms, manners, and objectives in the organization, but participate according to the rules as a strategy to remain in the industry. According to Kvande (1999), these women are kind and clever, and tend not to participate in the competition with male colleagues; moreover, they are uncertain and undecided about both what it means to be a woman and to what degree they have common interests and shared values with other women.

One-of-the-boys is also a *sameness* strategy; it is based on participation and competition with the same means as men. Women who employ this strategy want to be like and to be treated like their male colleagues.

Compensators is a *difference* strategy; women who adopt this strategy distance themselves from the profession’s values and culture, and either do not want to or cannot participate on men’s premises (for example, due to family obligations).

Challenger is also based on the idea of *difference*. By using this strategy, challengers reject and criticize certain aspects of the organizational culture and norms. Challengers participate in competing for the opportunities and rewards in the organization, but gradually on their own terms. An important characteristic of challengers is that they do not deny that they or other women are victims of discrimination. They have experienced it, seen it, and admit that it exists; subsequently, they challenge it.

Kvande (1999) found that motherhood influences the gendering process. The strategies categorised as sameness are primarily adopted by graduated women who do not have children, while the strategies categorised as difference are primarily adopted by graduated women who have family or/and children. She argues that pregnancy implies that the woman erases the idea of gender neutrality at the workplace. Thereafter, childcare puts an end to the image of the woman as *one-of-the-boys*. As a result, being a mother confirms the identity as being *different* from the men in the organizations.

On the other hand, *sameness* strategies are based on a woman’s understanding of herself as different from other women. A strong feeling of being different from other women is common to those who adopt the strategies of *homeless* and *one-of-the-boys*; it is a consequence of their untraditional socialization (Kvande, 1999).

Context of the study – the real estate industry in Sweden

This part of the article reports the result of the mapping of the industry, reported in the method part above. The information found is considered to be important to analyze in relation to Wahl's notion of gender structure.

Some interesting facts in the mapping were found. First, there were no differences in the proportion of men and women working in the mapped companies between 2001 and 2008. Second, there were no women working as a CEO in the commercial real estate companies either in 2001 or 2008. Third, in the two housing companies with a woman as CEO, the management board consisted of a majority of women; on all the other management boards there were mostly men. And fourth, the number of women working as a CEO in the housing companies declined from three in 2001 to two in 2008.

Even though there was an increase in the number of women on the boards of directors in the commercial companies, there were mostly men on the management boards in the commercial industry; moreover, there were only men working as CEOs. In the two housing companies with women as CEOs, there were a larger number of women than men in the management group.

The mapping shows an industry that is male-dominant with few changes throughout the mapped time-period; moreover, the women who enter and seek to forge careers have to cope with being different and must construct strategies to negotiate gender.

Empirical findings

The empirical findings are presented and analysed under three themes: the first theme is the images of the industry; this theme primarily relates to the respondents' reactions on the mapping of the industry, which was shown for them in the beginning of the interview. The second theme is positions and strategy, and the third is becoming a mother. Thereafter follows a section in which the empirical findings are related to the four strategies by Kvande (1999). The three themes identified are of importance for identifying which strategy the respondents are using.

Images of the industry

When seeing the mapping of the industry CEO (B:2), working for a housing company, responded: "There is a hierarchical order in the industry: first retail centres and then commercial and then housing." CEO (B:3), working for a housing company, said concerning the hierarchical order that: "[working in] housing is less manly than working with commercial real estate."

Because there exists a hierarchical order in the industry and there being more men in leading positions in the commercial real estate companies, the type of organization is of importance, i.e. if it is a commercial or public organization. The public housing companies and the commercial real estate companies have different business concepts and different tasks. The housing companies are public-owned, have politicians on the board of directors, and have responsibilities beyond economic results. Similarly, the real estate department in the municipality is mainly responsible for facilities relating to day-care, schools, and institutions for the elderly.

One real estate manager (A:5) (who works in a municipality but who used to work in a commercial real estate company) said that the culture is more competitive in commercial real estate companies than it is in municipalities. She has had a male boss—younger than herself and with no children—who had no understanding of her being a mother; “I used to work in a commercial real estate company, and it is different kinds of people who want to work in commercial companies compared with municipalities,” she said. One CEO (B:1) from a housing company said that “I think the culture in some public organizations has created more equal opportunities.”

The image from a real estate manager (A:2) of a housing company regarding commercial real estate companies is clear; “I think the climate is tougher for a woman in the commercial companies; it is a feeling—I haven’t been working there,” she said.

The business-to-business concept in commercial real estate companies is affecting the dress-code; as one CEO (B:2), working for a housing company, said, “There are different dress codes in commercial and in housing companies; it is more formal in commercial due to business to business.” Another CEO (B:3), from a housing company, said, “It is more relaxed clothing in housing than in commercial companies.” Similarly, the CEO (B:4) working for a commercial company stated, “When I was younger, I wore a suit, but now I am older and I wear what I want—no suits anymore.”

There seems to be a tendency that the women working as CEOs think that a lot has happened to the gender structure of the industry during their careers; as one CEO (B:2), working for a housing company, said, “If you hadn’t told me about the mapping, I would have said that there are more women today. Maybe they haven’t reached the top positions yet? To get a top position you have to have a position in the hierarchical level, in the line.” Another CEO (B:1), who works for a housing company, said, “I think that maybe not much has happened over the past decade; it is about thirty percent women, but in the 1980s and 1990s I think more happened. I was alone in the beginning as a woman, but then something happened.” The same woman (B:1) explained that “it needs courage to employ a woman in male-gendered organizations; you don’t want to be criticized and then it is safer to employ a man.”

Being one of few in the industry has made the women visible, tokens (Kanter, 1977, 1993); one CEO (B:1), working for a housing company, said, “It was easier in the beginning to create a “brand”—when I was alone as a woman.”

The women working as real estate managers are more likely to be aware of the industry as male gendered regardless of organization; one real estate manager (A:1), working for a housing company, said, “This mapping seems correct to me; I think it is very male-gendered.” Another real estate manager (A:4), working in a municipality, said, “In the real estate industry, there are mostly men working—there are more men to choose from.”

The real estate managers are more aware of the gender structure in the industry; one woman (A:3), working for a commercial real estate company, said, “Women work mostly with finance and administration.” Furthermore, the same woman also said that “all of my bosses have been men.” A real estate manager (A:2), working for a housing company, said, “It is male-gendered, above all in the higher positions and we are two women out of eleven working as real estate managers.” Another woman (A:4), working for the municipality, said that “I am the only real estate manager in my organization—one out of seven.”

According to one woman (A:4), working for the municipality, the cause of the structure in the industry is both that “men employ men” and that “one does not think of a boss as a woman.”

How the women respond to the mapping seems to vary according to their position and to the number of years they have been working in the industry. The CEOs were more surprised that not much has changed, whereas the real estate managers found the mapping in line with their expectations.

Position and strategy

From the interviews it becomes obvious that it is a challenge to become a CEO. And, it is probably a greater challenge being a CEO for a commercial real estate company than it is for a housing company; as the CEO (B:4) for the commercial company said, “I am goal-oriented and willing to take risks and challenge myself.”

The real estate managers are all younger than the CEOs; accordingly, they are in another part of the process of making strategies to negotiate being women in the industry. One real estate manager (A:1), working for a housing company, said that “I feel like an upstart.” Another real estate manager (A:2), from a housing company, said, “When I go out and look at the construction work, I think of what I wear, I don’t want to challenge that I am a woman.”

Being a token (Kanter, 1977, 1993) is being visible as a woman; one real estate manager (A:2), for a housing company, said, “It can impede us women when there are a lot of men; sometimes it is hard to speak out and I sometimes feel that the expectations of me as a woman are greater than of the men.” A CEO (B:2), from a housing company, had the experience that “it can be an advantage being a woman in a male-gendered industry; maybe I had to prove that I could do it. It is maybe harder when you are younger than when you are older. I choose the path that everything is possible.”

Becoming a Mother

According to Kvande, there is a shift in strategy when becoming a mother. One real estate manager (A:1), working for a housing company, with one child said, “It is problematic being a woman and a parent of small children, wanting to pursue a career, and maybe having to work part-time.” A real estate manager (A:4), working for a municipality, with no children said, “I think paternal leave does have an influence; men are home some weeks and the women work part-time.” These two real estate managers had just recently realized there was something problematic being a mother and pursuing a career in the industry; the question is if they will challenge it or not.

The CEO (B:4), working for the commercial company, with grown-up children said, “I think bringing up children is a good experience when working as a CEO;” hence, she is challenging the male-norm. The industry should employ and use women over fifty said one CEO (B:3) working for a housing company, those women have grown up children, men over fifty can still have children.

Analysing the material from Kvande's strategies

First of all it should be said that Kvande's (1999) strategies and characteristics are ideal types; however, they can help us to understand the processes of entering into, of managing to remain in, and of forging a career in the industry. It is common that a woman might adopt to different strategies in different situations, contexts, and positions.

Based on the analysis done above that there is no respondent who adopts the homeless strategy as all have gone further in their careers in the industry. On the other hand, the strategy one-of-the-boys is a strategy that four of the real estate managers have adopted. One of the real estate managers working for a municipality (B:2) said: "I think of what I wear; I don't like to wear a skirt. I am the only woman out of seven working as a real estate manager."

I would argue that some of the real estate managers are beginning to use the compensators strategy and/or the challengers strategies. One-of-the-boys strategy is probably a strategy that all the CEOs adopted in their early careers. One of the CEOs is still using this strategy. She is the youngest CEO and only recently became a CEO. Yet, she has no children.

The strategy of the compensator is somewhat difficult since if one adopts this strategy to a high degree, one would probably leave the industry. However one of the real estate managers uses this strategy in a manner. She has small children to take care of and her husband travels frequently; consequently, she chose to leave the commercial real estate company she worked for in favour of a municipality, where she found it possible to combine being a mother and working as a real estate manager. She (A:5) stated: "It is different kinds of people who want to work in commercial companies compared with municipalities."

The challengers strategy has been adopted by one of the CEOs (B:4). She has a background in the construction industry, and she is a CEO for a commercial real estate company. This might be due to her previous employment as a CEO in the construction industry, due to her being the oldest respondent, or due to a combination of these factors.

After analyzing the CEOs, it becomes clear that they are in one way or another, using the strategy of being different – they challenge. They stress for example that they do not mind working in the male-dominated industry.

Moreover, they feel that being mothers and raising children is also an asset. They also have in common that they are all goal-oriented. This might be an adaptation to the hegemonic masculinity, but it seems to be a common way of thinking among the CEOs.

Age, combined with the process of forging career, has influenced the women throughout their career.

There might be situations when a woman consciously decide not to act as a challenger. This was for example shown in one interview when the respondent said that she dress in a certain way when she for example is going to inspect construction work.

As gender can be seen as an ongoing negotiation in the interaction between women and men, and between women and between men (Haavind, 1999; Kvande, 1999) it is possible to be inbetween different strategies. The two women working for a public housing company are aware of being different. They are both in a shift concerning sameness or difference; one of

them has a small child and the other one is expecting a baby. One of them (A:1) said, "I feel like an upstart. ... It is problematic being a woman and a parent of small children—wanting to pursue a career, and maybe having to work part-time." The other woman (A:2) said that "it can impede us women when there are a lot of men; sometimes it is hard to speak out." She also said, "I sometimes feel that the expectations of me as a woman are greater than of the men." Those quotes show that they have started to reflect upon gender structures, and how they themselves relate to gender, and which strategies they use.

Final discussion and contribution of the study

The overall aim of this article is to explore how graduate younger women working as real estate managers and women working as Chief Executive Officer's (CEO's) construct femininities and how they create a career in organizations dominated by men. I fulfil this aim by studying how they are discussing and negotiating their femininities using different personal strategies which enable them to work and forge a career in the real estate industry.

Kvande's (1999) four main construction processes are negotiated by women in the real estate industry. The construction processes were discussed in relation to the women working as real estate managers and the women working as CEOs.

There are different organizational contexts to be considered in the industry. On the one hand, the retail and commercial real estate companies have a more competitive business to business culture, with fast decisions and many changes in the organizations. On the other hand, the public housing companies and real estate departments in municipalities have public responsibilities and more long-term obligations.

When working as a real estate manager, some respondents faced different organizations in different contexts, leading them to negotiate a different strategy than they used within their own organization. That is to say, when they left the office they thought about how to dress to not challenge that they were women.

The women in this study are of various ages and are in different stages of their careers. Being a CEO requires using not only the challenge strategy but also the compensator strategy, or something in-between like a challenge–compensator strategy. Being a woman in a male-gendered industry implies that one is different and to create a career one has to use both strategies. A challenge–compensator could be a woman working at a strategic level for a municipality or housing company who is aware that she does not want to challenge the more masculine business-to-business culture; instead, she would want to have a strategy with a healthy work-life balance. Working in a public housing company is one way to achieve this strategy.

It is interesting to notice that only one of the real estate managers and only one of the CEOs work in a commercial real estate company, whereas eight of the respondents work in publicly-owned companies or organizations. In a further study it would be interesting to focus on why women tend to choose to work in public organizations. What are the strategies behind their choices? Is it, as presented above, a form of compensation strategy that women work in public organizations, that is to say they do not want to be part of the short-term, commercial culture that is dominating in the commercial organizations? Instead they choose to do careers in more stable and long term focused organizations, giving space to private life too.

To summarize, the strategy adapted by the respondents is a result of several factors; for example, the type of organization one is working for, the type of organizations one is interacting with, one's position of employment, and one's age, are all important factors.

I have argued that the younger graduate women working as real estate managers and the CEOs have different strategies to cope with being a woman in a male-dominated industry. To become a CEO, I contend that it is very important to adopt the challengers strategy. I agree with Kvande (1999) that there is a shift in strategy when having children. The analysis above shows that the CEOs have used different strategies during their careers; one important factor for their development was having children. Consequently, age and motherhood matter. But, it should also be emphasized that the embeddedness of the individual in an organizational context matters for what type of strategy or negotiation process she uses.

I have also argued, by referring to Phillips and Roper's (2009) article "a framework for talent management", that in order to retain talents and give opportunities for personal growth, professional development and healthy work-life balance strategies in talent management should be tailored not only for each generation but also to ensure gender diversity.

My contribution to the industry is the knowledge regarding how women use different strategies to negotiate and construct their femininities in the workplace. Moreover, my research has shown that different contexts—both inside and outside organizations—influence how women negotiate femininities.

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