

What Would You Sacrifice? Access to Top Management and the Work–life Balance

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This article is based on a current research, combining quantitative (human resources figures and statistics) and qualitative data (60 interviews with career managers, top managers and high potential talents, both men and women), conducted in a major French utility company on the subject of diversity and more specifically on the issue of women's access to top management positions. The main purpose of this research is to understand the difficulties women may encounter in the course of their occupational career linked to organizational aspects, including the 'glass ceiling' processes, informal norms related to management positions (such as time and mobility constraints) and social and cultural representations attached to leadership. The other perspective of this research focuses on the different strategies women and men build either to conform to the organizational norms or bypass them. The issue of work–life balance are therefore addressed both from a corporate/organizational standpoint and an individual and family perspective.

Keywords: managerial career, work–life balance, glass ceiling, women in management, organization

The formal and informal requirements of organizational careers

Even if a great amount has been written on organizational careers since the 1960s (Dalton, 1959; Glaser, 1968), these studies have rarely focused on the articulation between work and private life, as if it was possible to separate these two spheres of life. Conversely, women's management studies have shown the importance of combining paid and unpaid work in the analysis of women's difficulties in accessing power. Inspired by the American

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interactionist approach of 'careers' (Hughes, 1937) and the new French sociology of *cadres*¹ (Bouffartigue, 2001a), we propose to focus this article on the forms and dynamics of managers' careers in a French utility company, with a specific emphasis on work-life balance issues and the formal and informal requirements to access power.

In order to analyse occupational careers, Hughes (1937) recommends focusing on the 'turning points' of occupational mobility, the circumstances of choices and refusals, with a specific emphasis on the organizational criteria and actors of promotion. Studying medical careers, Hall (1948) reveals that a career can be conceived as a set of more or less successful adjustments to the formal and informal norms of medical institutions — stages, rituals and sponsorship system. Analysing an American industrial company, Dalton (1959) also stresses that the level of education or seniority has less influence on managerial careers than social origins and the membership of social networks. More recently, Kanter (1977) has laid emphasis on the impact of social conformity, structure of opportunity and distribution of power (mainly based on alliances with powerful sponsors and peers' support) in the success of corporate careers, also showing the gendered bias of organizational structures and processes. Since then and following the major contribution of Acker and Van Houten (1974), many researchers have explored the links between gender, power and organizations showing that 'gender differences are mobilised by organisational structures, rather than simply imported from elsewhere into an essentially neutral organisational arena' (Halford and Leonard, 2000, p. 44).

Following this line of research, we made the choice to analyse the organizational aspects of managerial careers in a large company, focusing our empirical survey on three main questions: What are the organizational norms required for accessing top management positions and their effects on work-life balance? What is the status of women? What are the strategies invented by men and women managers to conform to the prevailing career model or to promote alternative patterns?

Methodology: the embeddedness of organizational careers

We have chosen to make an in-depth case study in a large state utility company. This firm employs more than 30,000 people, is one of the largest French industrial firms and is quoted on the CAC 40. Since its creation in 1946, the company has never experienced any major restructuring. Apart from outsourcing non-qualified activities and the recent purchase of foreign subsidiaries, the stability of the company has protected qualified employees from the uncertainty of mergers and acquisitions. The deregulation of the French energy market began only in 2004 under pressure from the European Commission and, despite repeated union opposition (Wieviorka, 1996), the

partial privatization of the firm was decided in 2005 and the company is now facing a very disputed merger project with another European utility company. These recent changes have not yet affected the employment practices and career management rules. Job security is still guaranteed and the turnover of managers and professionals is very low (less than 1 per cent). The structure of opportunity is quite typical of a bureaucratic career pattern (Glaser, 1968): consisting of a 'closed internal labour market' (Paradeise, 1984), linear and vertical career movements, long processes of development from entry-level management jobs to upper positions, with a large number of moves (and tests) in between, a wide range of normative expectations (such as social conformity and adhering to a prescribed set of roles) and the requirement of loyalty to the organization. However, this career pattern is biased by the particularities of the French education system. The field of opportunities is indeed clearly structured and limited by the hierarchy of diplomas. Access to the highest managerial positions (and remunerations) is reserved to the '*Noblesse d'Etat*' (Bourdieu, 1989), coming from the most prestigious '*grandes écoles*' (engineering or business).

This 'cultural' background and the relation to the French State can partly explain the permanence of this 'old' career management system. However, in Europe and the USA, a contradictory debate has emerged in the 1990s about the end of internal labour markets and the emergence of a new career model based on flexibility, lateral and external mobility and individual responsibility and expertise for all managers and professionals. This 'post-entrepreneurial' career (Kanter, 1989) or 'portfolio' career (Handy, 1989) or 'boundaryless' career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) has been identified as an answer to contemporary business constraints and the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). However, empirical data are very few or limited to specific populations or professions. In France, quantitative studies point out that managers and professionals form a very heterogeneous group, and that external mobility depends on diploma, age, sector and economic circumstances (Bouffartigue and Pochic, 2002; Dany, 2004). Uncertainty is certainly growing for many employees, but managers (under 50 years old) and high potential professionals are still protected from these turbulences, mainly because companies want to retain them (Falcoz, 2001; Pochic, 2001). From this perspective, the firm we are studying is representative of an 'old model' that persists in many large corporations (Wajcman and Martin, 2001), at least for a minority of privileged employees. Moreover, we believe that, despite the important shifts of emphasis that have affected corporate jobs and careers, the gender gap in large corporations can still be analysed using the same theoretical grid (opportunity, power, culture and numbers).

Thus, in order to measure the 'glass ceiling' in this company and to select our interviews, we have begun our survey by a quantitative analysis based on the human resources (HR) information system. We were given access to an anonymous HR database of all the 9600 managers and professionals of the

company (covering all the qualified employees).² This database contained socio-demographic variables as sex, age, diploma (level and type) and family situation (family status, spouse's job, number of dependant children). It also detailed static occupational variables such as seniority, job occupation, job department, salary level, functional group (from GF12 to GF19³), full time or part time, location. We managed to cross this database with two pieces of confidential information: the label, 'high potential talent' and rank in the scale of responsibilities for top management positions (R4 to R1).

We interviewed 60 men and women managers from January to June 2005, including 36 senior managers (20 women and 16 men aged from 39 to 58 years) and 24 younger 'high potential' professionals and managers (20 women and four men aged from 23 to 44 years). Since 1994, this 'high flyer' label has been attributed to young professionals or managers if they are perceived as possible future senior managers. This selection relies on a set of formal and informal procedures handled by the hierarchical line.⁴ Our qualitative sample is representative of the diversity of job department (from finance and sales to more technical ones, such as transport or research and development [R&D]), family situation (single/couple, with or without children), type of diploma (engineering, business administration, university) and location (Paris area or 'province'). Interviews were taped and analysed through a thematic and a biographical grid (occupational, family and residential). It was thus possible to make a link between the way senior managers (men and women) have managed and perceived the work-life balance of their own career and the way they manage their subordinates along that dimension.

A technical firm with a late feminization

One of the main results of the statistics analysis is the demonstration of the clear process of horizontal and vertical job segmentation that affects women in the company, underlining, like in many other studies, the 'gendered take-over, exclusion and occupational closure' that is detrimental to women and beneficial to men (Witz, 1992).

The 'glass ceiling' permanence

If we look closely at the situation of women in the company, we are bound to acknowledge that the feminization of management roles has considerably risen in the last 15 years. Women count for 44 per cent of all managers aged 35 or less, whereas only 15 per cent of managers aged over 45 are women, as Table 1 shows. This disparity reveals the recent feminization of a company that used to hire and promote male engineers. However, if women are catching up at the first levels of management, they almost disappear when we look at senior management positions. They are only 26 per cent in this 'tilted'

group, which makes them switch from the status of tokens to that of a minority (Kanter, 1977). The inflexion of the curve occurs from GF17 onwards. This step coincides with the age of 35–40 years, when family constraints become strong. It is also a key stage before entering management positions. From this point onwards, the glass ceiling becomes very visible and women account for only 10 per cent of top managers, accessing these positions at the end of their career. Women seem to progress more slowly than men, experiencing repeated professional tests and challenges. Their career promotion is very progressive. They rarely skip one step of the ladder, sometimes accepting horizontal mobility, unlike their male colleagues who are much more vigilant to the statutory aspects of their career progression (it is not rare for engineers having graduated from the best schools to climb up the ladder two grades at a time). Women access the first levels of senior management (R4–R3) later than men, except for a few engineers coming from prestigious schools who ‘had the right to career promotion’ like their male counterparts, or experienced women with rare expertise (finance, marketing, sales) and social credentials either coming from other companies (and

Table 1: *Feminization rate of executives, managers and professionals*

Wage and responsibility scale	Young managers (< 35 years) (%)	Mid-career (35–44 years) (%)	End of career (> 45 years) (%)	Total (%)	N
R1			4.0	3.8	26
R2			7.5	8.6	70
R3		21.4	7.2	8.9	224
R4		22.4	9.6	12.0	359
Executive		22.2	8.3	10.3	679
GF 19		16.7	11.4	12.6	380
GF 18		29.1	11.3	16.9	496
GF 17		34.7	16.4	24.3	687
GF 16	44.7	31.6	18.4	25.6	704
GF 15	40.7	35.0	16.0	27.5	1083
GF 14	46.0	27.6	16.9	27.0	1487
GF 13	45.1	29.2	13.6	28.8	2075
GF 12	42.7	23.9	16.5	26.1	2055
Manager and professional	44.2	29.3	15.3	25.8	8967
N	1965	2732	4949		9646

Source: human resources database, November 2004.

entering the career ladder at the top) or having been mentored by male senior managers.

The glass walls: gendered corporate career paths

The glass ceiling is not only due to the late entry of women in the company and in the engineering schools, but is also linked to an obvious process of horizontal job segmentation. Women are concentrated in traditional 'velvet ghettos' (communication, finance, HR), as reveals Table 2, even if, in the last 10 years, the company has hired women with sales and marketing backgrounds and women with high technical expertise (mostly linked to R&D and geo-sciences). However, this relative diversification of women's careers confirms the fact that women usually build their career in narrow specialized fields, avoiding managerial routes (Savage, 1992). As a matter of fact, most of them are concentrated at the headquarters in Paris. Very few work in the traditional core departments (energy trade, transportation and distribution). They are more visible in the sales and marketing departments that are slowly

Table 2: Glass walls — horizontal segmentation of job occupations

Occupational groups	Feminization rate (%)	(Percentage)	N
Feminized job (women > 30 per cent)			
Communication	58.1	1.9	172
Law professionals	44.6	1.6	148
Research	35.3	3.5	314
Accounting finances	34.6	7.9	705
Marketing	32.9	10.7	963
Male job (women < 30 per cent)			
Human resources	29.5	16.6	1534
Data processing	24.3	14.9	1335
Sales and customer services	23.1	10.5	945
Hygiene and safety	22.8	5.2	469
Trade of energy	23.0	2.5	226
Exploration and production	21.7	0.8	69
Logistics	15.5	2.0	181
Infrastructure construction	11.9	4.0	360
Infrastructure management	11.2	7.4	648
Infrastructure conception	8.8	4.3	387
Total managers and professionals	25.8	100*	

Note: * small occupations groups are missing.
Source: human resources database, November 2004.

gaining prestige over technical ones (and are therefore becoming more masculine). However, even in those quite feminine departments, access of women to top management remains difficult.

A masculine career pattern

When exploring the requirements for success, we can distinguish three sorts of promotion criteria — structural, cultural and organizational — all of which involve drawbacks for women.

Formal specifications for career promotion: the gender-neutrality of the organization

The reconstitution of senior managers' careers reveals shared and quite inviolable norms and patterns. As we have already pointed out, senior managers have graduated from the most prestigious French schools of engineering and, more recently, from famous French business schools. This 'criterion of excellence' is very detrimental for professionals with university degrees, as Table 3 shows. Even if the ability to meet objectives and results becomes progressively a key factor for promotion, it does not compensate for the initial educational handicap. Part of the existence of the glass ceiling is related to educational background and the social hierarchy between diplomas for both women and men (Bauer and Bertin-Mouro, 1987; Pochic, 2005). This qualification criterion is in itself detrimental for women. They have entered engineering schools much later than men and are still much less numerous, accounting for only 25 per cent of all engineering students (Marry, 2004). However, since the mid 1980s the company has started to shift from the dominance of engineers to the recruitment of professionals with commercial and business backgrounds, offering more opportunities for women.

Despite this initial technical specialization, senior managers have accepted a high level of functional and geographical mobility. For the first 10 to 15 years of their career they have changed position (and most of the time location) every three or four years. Managers are not supposed to build their career in one site because they need to keep some distance from the local social context, showing their loyalty to the organization first. In that internal market, geographical mobility is often presented as the norm to access top executive positions. The majority of male executives have accepted at least one move in their career, in France or in a foreign subsidiary, explaining how risky it is to refuse this assignment. Once they have proved their technical abilities, engineers are supposed to be generalists able to hold any kind of managerial position — outside Paris and at the headquarters, in technical or functional departments — following the traditional engineers' career patterns (Bouffartigue, 2001b; Flamand, 2002). They are expected to alternate between

staff and line positions, usually between the Paris area and the provinces, through a 'spiralist' career model (Pahl and Pahl, 1971). This expectation of polyvalence does not apply to non-engineer professionals who are channelled into expert occupations peripheral to central management. The managerial side of the career is quite detrimental for those who do not want to experience management positions (including engineers) or who are confined to expertise paths. Even external assessment has been built to favour professionals who fit the 'technical managerial' career pattern and demonstrate the necessary breadth of work experience, including key 'hard' functions, confirming the hierarchy of career paths and diplomas (Guillaume and Pochic, 2007).

Career progression patterns also involve a strong correlation between age and career ladder steps. Very high potential professionals must be detected before the age of 35 and they need to reach the first levels of senior management positions (ranked GF18–19) before they are 40. In our sample, 186 persons have been labelled as having 'potential', with 35 per cent of women in the 'high potential' category and even 50 per cent of women in the 'very high potential' category (only 36 persons). As young professionals are hired in GF12 positions when they are 25 years' old, they need to spend less than three years in each position to be able to reach level GF18–19 before 40. This rhythm implies continuous involvement at work with no career breaks, and organizational awareness to avoid dead-end positions or organizational hazards that can slow down the career progression.

Last but not least, managerial careers are built around the learning of time availability, starting with 'on call' operational constraints and continuing with time-consuming responsibilities such as, 'head of cabinet'. This emphasis put on self-sacrifice is linked to the inheritance of a cultural conception of working involvement that refers to the notions of a calling and selflessness (Saglio, 1999). Like in many other state occupations, employees have chosen to dedicate themselves to the service of the state (and the nation) and are not supposed to count their time. But, more generally, this time-consuming pattern reveals the importance of loyalty in corporate careers and the organization's demands for total devotion. All senior and high potential managers work full time and, despite the fact that the legal working time is 35 hours a week, most of them put in very long hours. As in many other companies, 'those employed on a part-time basis have little or no chance of promotion to management positions as these are specified as full-time' (Brockbank and Traves, 1996, p. 85), as shown in Table 3. If geographical mobility requirements are less strong than before (except for new international assignments), time availability is getting stronger as the company is progressively switching from a bureaucratic and centralized type of organization to a more decentralized matrix-like model. Co-ordination meetings are proliferating and add to the norm of presence and the very French habit of endless and informal discussions. Overall, temporal norms associated either with career progression or working hours are very prejudicial for women. An intense working

involvement is required between the ages of 25 and 35 when they are likely to have children and family constraints. This typical organizational career pattern, linear and progressive, ignores individual life cycles and implicitly assumes that managers are male.

Table 3: Access to top management after 45 years old

	Men	Model M	Women	Model W
Diploma				
Group 1. Prestigious 'grandes écoles' engineering schools	50.0	**	29.0	**
business schools	51.0		35.0	
Group 2. Acknowledged schools or Bac + 5	43.0		21.0	
Group 3. Small schools or Bac + 4	23.5	ref.	10.0	ref.
Bac + 2	14.0	**	10.0	ns
Bac ^a or less	0.5	**	0.0	ns
Age	1.0	**	0.0	**
Between 45 and 54	12.0		6.0	
More than 55	10.0	ref.	6.0	ref.
Locality	20.0	**	8.0	ns
Paris region	17.5	ref.	9.0	ref.
Provinces	7.0	**	0.0	**
Working hours				
Full time	13.0	ref.	8.0	ref.
Part time (<35 h)	0.5	**	0.5	**
Family situation				
Alone (single or divorced)	6.5	ns	5.0	ns
Company couple (with a company employee)	11.0	ns	4.5	ns
Dual-earner couple (with an external worker)	9.5	ref.	8.5	ref.
Breadwinner (with an inactive spouse)	17.5	**	0.0	ns
Number of dependent children				
0	8.0	ref.	5.0	ref.
1 or 2	12.0	ns	5.5	ns
3 or more	18.0	*	16.0	ns

Notes: Significant level: **: $p < 0.01$ *: $p < 0.10$ ns: non significant. N = 534 executives + 4370 managers and professionals. In France, secondary school ends with the Baccalauréat. ^aBac + 2 means a diploma obtained with 2 year of studies after it. After the age of 45, on average, 12 per cent of men are in executive; 50 per cent if they have graduated from the most prestigious *Grandes écoles*. This difference in comparison to a Group 2 diploma (reference) is significant in a logistic regression model which controls the other variables.

Source: human resources database, November 2004.

Implicit requirements for career progression: the sacrifice of the spouse's career

The gendered foundations of career patterns also lie in the promotion of a specific type of family configuration — male breadwinner, inactive wife and numerous children (see Table 3). This company does not tend to suppress sexuality (Acker, 1990; Burrell, 1992) or domestic incursions but actually encourages a certain form of sexual and family life — heterosexuality and marital status — even amongst employees. A certain number of managers have indeed met their spouse in the company or have remarried another employee after their divorce: 11 per cent are in a 'company couple' (9 per cent for men, 15 per cent for women; see Table 4).⁵ In this case, the gendered division of work in the family is reinforced by the subordination of women at work as they often hold lower positions than their husband. Women are clearly handicapped by the social representations attached to sexual roles and household division of labour. Women are mainly perceived as housewives, even if they are not. Sex roll spillover will affect women regardless of the sexuality or whether or not they have children, and stereotypical attitudes towards women predicated on women's general lack of commitment to work because of their families is a powerful process structuring gender hierarchies. (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996, p. 34)

We can explain this emphasis on traditional division of sexual roles by referring to the organizational culture (Morgan, 1986) of the company and notably its paternalistic dimension. Beyond the underlying set of values that associate women with domestic life and men with public life, gendered relationships are embedded in a specific organizational culture that is the product of history:

During my recruitment test [in 1977], my manager said: OK, but you both (my husband and I) won't be able to have a career, one of you will have to choose, and it will be you inevitably. It was a really hard speech for a start in the company! ... In the distribution department, the standard is the inactive wife or better the schoolteacher (who can ask for a professional transfer each time her husband is moving). Dinners with managers are ridiculous, with the wives talking about their husband's career, saying 'We had this position' or 'It's outrageous, there is no curtain in his new office. (Woman, R3, 52, married, two children, graduate from a prestigious engineering high school).

Created after World War II by the state in a context of strong union activism, the company has developed an extensive internal social welfare providing pension schemes and medical expenses coverage for employees and their families. This paternalistic aspect of the company has been reinforced by the sociological characteristics of the managers recruited — male engineers with catholic backgrounds who had graduated from various *grandes écoles*

Table 4: Family situation according to job position

(%)	Executives R1-R4		High potential		Managers and professionals		Total
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Single	6.5	30.0	20.5	33.0	17.0	29.0	19.0
Company couple	9.0	16.0	7.0	11.0	9.0	15.0	11.0
Dual-earner couple	39.0	52.0	59.0	52.0	50.0	52.0	50.0
Breadwinner	45.0	1.0	14.0	4.0	24.0	3.0	20.0
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	562	63.0	116	73	6540	2238	9592

Note: frequency missing: 54.

Source: human resources database, November 2004.

sometimes linked to the Army (notably the prestigious Ecole Polytechnique). Moreover, the company's organizational culture is also closely linked to technical and productive constraints. The distribution of energy requires local industrial sites, widely spread across the country. The company needs to provide for all local management positions, even in remote places, while organizing career development paths that include headquarters activities in Paris. This need for geographical and functional mobility, associated with the importance of institutional and social activities (taking part in — and organizing — dinners and social events with local representatives and economic elites), implicitly requires a certain kind of family configuration and a division of roles in the family. Most executives' spouses are therefore inactive, acting their role of 'corporate wives' (Kanter, 1977). When they work, they are confined to a narrow range of occupations with low pay and low authority and they end up quitting their job after their husband's second or third professional transfer. In every case, male 'successful managerial careers are associated with extensive domestic support at home ... in the form of a wife' (Wajcman, 1996, p. 619) and sometimes with social support in their relations with colleagues or clients (Pahl and Pahl, 1971; de Singly and Chaland, 2002). In any case, this model of a 'two-person single career pattern' (Papanek, 1973) demands certain types of role performance from the wife which benefit the company without being rewarded or paid.

A masculine image of managers

Besides these informal norms of career, the difficulties of women to access senior management positions is also to be found in the qualities and attributes expected for fulfilling with justification the role of 'chef de centre', that is, plant manager (Guillaume and Pochic, 2007). Three types of abilities have to be gathered in one person. First of all, a good manager has to demonstrate technical abilities. Senior managers have spent the first 10 years of their career in technical and operational positions in the core departments of the company, dealing with energy production or distribution. So access to a higher level of management includes the preliminary ability to demonstrate technical skills and understand industrial processes, even if only one-third of the jobs actually require highly technical specifications.

Successful career paths also require leadership abilities and experience outside Paris, handling large teams of employees and technicians (blue-collar workers) in a difficult social context. Unions are very powerful in local sites and they have the ability to call for collective mobilization and strike, sometimes taking illegal action and using methods of intimidation such as confining managers or abusing them verbally or physically. Last but not least, managers have to show administrative ability. The very bureaucratic nature of the working environment linked both to the state's proximity but also to the

hazardous type of industrial production, places a strong emphasis on rules management.

If we can read images of masculinity in the dominant symbolism such as the idea of a ‘tough and forceful leader’ and the emphasis put on charismatic management style that contains an implicit exclusion of women (Wajcman, 1998), other aspects are less visible than in other organizations. For example, aggressiveness, competition and meanness are not suitable for gaining a position of power in the company. However, women seem to be penalized by a socialization pattern that is quite distant from the individualistic, strategic, unemotional and analytic approach that fits the dominant culture. Moreover, if very few women mention sexism or sexual harassment, some female managers do not always feel at ease with the male dominant forms of sociability (including content and style of communication, humour and jokes and body language). As in many organizations, the status of women is undermined by the numerical dominance of men and by the gendered distribution of power. Because of their numerical weight but also their central role in career promotion (Guillaume and Pochic, 2007), male managers play an active role in the reproduction of a masculine symbolic order. Women are constrained by the need to deal with the dominant culture, which means either being trapped in ‘role encapsulation’ (fitting pre-existing generalizations about one’s category as a group), accepting isolation or becoming insiders by turning against their own social category (Kanter, 1977).

Women’ strategies to shape their career routes

With such gendered foundations of career patterns, women executives often recall their feeling of being atypical, particularly for the first pioneers who were a minority during the 1970s. To illuminate women’ difficulties in accessing top management, we have distinguished their strategies towards two main organizational norms related to the work–life balance: geographical mobility and extensive availability.

Facing the forced geographical mobility norm

A few women managers have accepted the norm of forced geographical mobility, more often when they were young, single and without children. During their studies, they have sometimes experienced national or international moves. Some of them had even lived these repeated moves when they were young, being the daughter of a ‘spiralist’ manager, so they tend to consider this mobility rule as normal and neutral. A few have clearly chosen to remain single or childfree to be mobile at the beginning of their career. This correlation between access to responsibilities and living alone can be

measured statistically, as 30 per cent of women executives live alone (single or divorced), whereas this is only the case for 6 per cent of their male colleagues (see Table 4). These results are confirmed by national datasets on managers' careers (Pochic, 2005). Life-stories revealed that repeated moves become more and more difficult to negotiate when women have children, even if their husband is not leading an organizational career (such as a teacher, an expert or self-employed). The alternation between Paris and the 'provinces' has various consequences on work-life balance: in the Paris area more executive jobs for the partner/spouse are concentrated, whereas living in a 'province' means a better quality of life (a more spacious home, less commuting). When adapting to forced mobility, women managers usually build a specific lifestyle, acting as a divorced couple with geographical splitting during the week. As managers, they divide their subordinates in two groups: those who accept the same private costs to run their career and those who refuse to do so, but without looking at the inequality of their resources:

I know I'm quite atypical, because my husband has always followed me. He likes to say that I should thank him for the career I made.... My husband is a craftsman, a welder, he was working in the company when we met and he had a taste for travel. After the birth of our first child, he said: 'If you could move to the [French] West Indies, it would be nice, I would follow you, I would take a sabbatical year'. Then I moved. He has followed me every time since then. Each time, he creates his firm that he closes before leaving and then he creates a new one somewhere else. It's his choice, even if it is not the most interesting option economically speaking, but.... It has to do with his type of occupation: if I had married someone who had graduated from a business school like me, I would have perhaps followed him: who knows? (Woman, top manager R3, 45, married, three children, graduate from a business school and has led a typical managerial career).

As many women managers and professionals are married to qualified workers,⁶ we met also many 'tied movers' (Bielby and Bielby, 1992) who have accepted following their husband once or more in France (or the French West Indies⁷ or abroad) more recently. In opposition to the stereotypes on women's immobility, women who are married to another professional have entered this company for its wide labour market with job security. But this geographical mobility based on individual initiative is opposed to imposed mobility practices and sometimes disturbs the three years' rule in the same assignment. Therefore, this tied geographical mobility means delays in career progression. Women are forced to accept horizontal mobility at the first stages of their career (GF13 to GF13) and sometimes demotion at mid-career (GF18 to GF17). This volunteered mobility is considered by their line manager as an indicator of a family-orientation that can be detrimental to a successful career:

When they asked me to take another position in La Réunion for 4 years, my

husband decided to leave for a new job in Alençon [in metropolitan France]. He joined me 4 years ago and he was fed up, he wanted to have his own career progression. As soon as my husband left, I was in a position of demand towards the company. In that situation, you can't negotiate anymore. I asked my line manager to go to Alençon, and he said: 'We will see what we can find for you', but it was perceived as: 'She wants to follow her husband, you can't have everything, she will have to take what is available.' [...] These horizontal moves have cost me dearly, because now I must be the lowest paid director of all the company! (Woman, R3, 46, married but geographically separated for 8 years, two children, graduate from a small engineering school and has experienced three GF 13 posts).

As geographical mobility is risky for career progression and for family balance, many women managers choose to remain rooted in the Paris area, as 'tied-stayers' (Bielby and Bielby, 1992). These repeated refusals of mobility are characteristic of women executives living in couples with another executive, but it seems to become more common for the younger generations after mid-career, for high potential women but also men (respectively 52 per cent and 59 per cent are in a dual-earner couple, see Table 4). Despite the repeated pressures of senior directors, these women have managed to climb the managerial ladder in the Paris area, accepting in exchange long commuting hours (home-work), numerous business trips (national or international) and even uninteresting or rather humble assignments. This geographical stability objectively reduces their chances to obtain managerial positions outside Paris, because only 13 distribution units (out of over 100) are located in the Paris area. Only a minority of women — and men — have succeeded in bypassing this mobility norm, usually using their prestigious diploma and strong recommendations (mentors).

Conversely, this stability makes the organization of childcare easier. Women executives can delegate paid childcare and even children's education to the same selected professionals (such as nannies, baby-sitters, tutors) and sometimes to grandparents. This fragile balance also requires 'defensive strategies' (Nicole-Drancourt, 1989) towards the career of their husband, who must also refuse geographical mobility and sometimes accept lowering his own career aspirations. This strategy seems easier to negotiate in feminine departments and headquarter offices and more difficult in the masculine and technical departments spread all over the French territory. Life stories of 'rooted' top managers reveal that they have usually asserted this principle at the beginning of their career, referring to family matters, and that they have compensated for their 'handicap' by an intense functional mobility and an extensive availability. As managers, they try to defend alternative career management principles, based on negotiated time flexibility and limited mobility within one regional area:

With my husband, we didn't want to manage the problem of two simulta-

neous careers, which is extremely difficult, particularly at executive levels, and we didn't want to live separately during the week. It's the only limitation I insist on. And it has never been problematic for my career because I have always been clear about that, they recruited me knowing it... It has only been problematic for my appointment to R4. The director who received me began by giving me the usual lecture on mobility: 'You see, the direction of distribution has occupations located all over France, we can't afford to recruit people who are not mobile, etc.'. I answered: 'I would be very happy to become an assistant director, but if not being mobile is an obstacle, I won't. So if you want, I can save your time and leave now'. He said: 'Stay, we will see'. He grumbled and we began to discuss. After the interview, he said: 'I will take you on, but you can tell headquarters that you are the last one. (Woman, R2, 48, married, two children, graduate from a prestigious business school and made a career as expert in HR and communication).

Facing the extensive availability norm

Besides the geographical mobility criterion, career promotion has always been linked to time availability. There is 'a belief that commitment is represented by working full-time, — including being in early and staying on late; that personal circumstances should not impinge upon work' (Palmer, 1996, p. 140). More than any other categories, managers have always had a distinctive relation to working time (Bouffartigue, 2001b; Laufer, 1998). This assumption is reinforced by the obvious intensification of managers' working activities (Karvar and Rouban, 2004) adding to the traditional norm of managerial 'presence'. In this company, as in many others, men and women are now obliged to conform to the male model of working life, even if they are not equal in dealing with this time constraint. Three women's strategies can be reported.

The first one implies following the rules of the career and slipping into the long hours norm, while trying to respect the temporal horizon of the career promotion (reach a GF19 position before the age of 40). For young women, this pattern involves postponing maternity and getting established prior to taking time off (maternity leave). Very widespread amongst single women, women without children and a few married women senior managers, who had to conform to the masculine career norms because there were very few of them at the beginning of their career, this strategy requires delegating housework to other women, even if female managers continue to organize and manage these paying services, undertaking a great amount of the housework themselves. This continuous presence at work is made possible because women — and men — earn enough money to run a domestic company and pay their different employees, such as a nanny and a cleaner. Besides, in France, women do not have to choose between career and family as they have

access to different child-minding facilities — both run by the state and private — and they receive tax incentives when they hire a nanny. This is also linked to a certain ability to not feel guilty about the social norms associated with the image of the ‘good mother’. As Table 3 shows, having three children increases the probability of women to reach senior positions. But this unusual pattern is not statistically significant in itself (Model W) as it is often linked to a double-career configuration of two engineers who make use of huge external domestic support. Most of the time, these women are very demanding with their colleagues — male and female — and expect those who want a career to make the same sacrifices. Overall, they do not favour diversity management, either because it seems normal for them to adapt to this dominant pattern or because they do not want to get preferential treatment that could undermine their professional legitimacy. These women are usually not conscious of their particular material situation, compared to non-qualified women (Blum and Smith, 1988):

I can tell you a story. When I was pregnant with my second child, I told my boss that I was pregnant and he took my work right away and gave it to my colleagues. I was so upset that I did not take my maternity leave and I worked until one week before I gave birth. I was in good shape so I said to myself, ‘you (the boss) will look stupid, I will take it upon myself to handle my work as usual’. I went to see my boss who did not want to sign for my business trips because it was illegal, but I said to him that I would go in any case, whether he signed or not. I did not want to reinforce the image that when a woman is pregnant she is out of work for one year. I took only three weeks off and then I was back at work. (Woman, top manager R1, 48, divorced, two children, graduate from Ecole Polytechnique and has led a typical managerial career).

The second and quite opposite strategy refers to claims of work–life reconciliation and the preference given to family life, adjusting working time to fit with family constraints. This pattern is quite widespread among women with young children, and implies a very strict control over working time and the frequent use of chosen part-time work (Guillaume, 2006). This family availability is easier to organize in position of expertise and headquarters work. Many women top managers have experienced functional activities, asking for part-time work for a few years, before returning to the managerial career path. However, this close link between part-time opportunities and expertise creates in return some sort of a vicious cycle (Pochic, 2004). If expertise positions are the only ones offering work–life balance arrangements, even more women will choose these career patterns and get stuck in them for the rest of their career. It is very difficult for the company to understand that this experience can be a short-term one and that women can be ready to return to full-time work (and career promotion) after a while. Using part-time is very detrimental to women’s careers because it

infringes the double temporal dimension of daily long hours and fast rhythm of functional and upward mobility. Women understand very quickly that this 'choice' implies reaching a career ceiling that can be quite definitive when opting for part-time work at the beginning of their career. In this pattern many women experience guilt and a conflict of roles, and some of them put their work at a distance and transfer their full commitment to their family:

Yesterday, we had dinner with friends and they were ironic about the fact that I could work part time because I am working in this company (that is known to be family friendly). I said to them 'you know, you have to be brave to dare say: "I only work three days a week and at night I leave at five" '. It is always easier to stay at work than to leave. However, when you arrive at 8 in the morning and you leave at 5, you put exactly the same day as someone who arrives at 9:30 and leaves at 6:30, but it is not perceived the same way. I do it and I keep my professional conscientiousness for myself. (Woman, manager GF18, married with three children, graduate from a business school, specialized in finance).

Beyond these two patterns, a third one, which can be seen as new and innovative, is supported by women managers with children who want both a career and a family life. Working full time and sharing/delegating housework, they want a career with promotion prospects but they also want to educate their children and spend time with them (not using their free time for housework and domestic constraints). To combine these two aspirations they partly rely on their husband who shares an egalitarian representation of family responsibilities, but most of all, they try to promote 'flexible availability' with a very efficient organization of working time that is focused on competence, performance and results. They try to accommodate their working time to fit into their children's schedule — skipping lunchtime, working at night or very early in the morning, using mobile IT tools and optimizing business trips, while trying to deal with the time availability requirements (long hours, few holidays and short maternity leave). As managers, they try to convert their subordinates to this culture of performance in order to diminish the working hours of their own department or service. This very strict and planned organization of work can be seen as very innovative and rather blunt in a working environment where sociability and networking at work predominate. The interesting point in this pattern is the fact that it appeals to more and more men who are now in a situation of dual-career couples and have to share domestic responsibilities, taking their wife's career projects and constraints into consideration. Implicitly and above the innovative individual arrangements, this strategy is probably representative of a societal change where men and women are getting closer in the way they want to run their work-family life.

Table 5: Typology of strategies towards work-life balance

Availability (mobility)	Extensive availability	Flexible availability	Work-life reconciliation
Acceptance of forced mobility	Spiralist model (breadwinner or single)	X	X
Rooted career	Compensation model (women top managers high potential men)	Alternative model (women managers high potential mothers)	Family-oriented model (women expert or project leader)
Tied movers	Double-career model (high flyers' couple)	Alternate career model (high potential mothers)	Family-oriented model (women expert or project leader)

A typology of strategies towards work-life balance

If we cross the three types of strategies regarding mobility and availability constraints, we end up with seven career patterns. As we can see in the Table 5, the acceptance of forced mobility is always linked to extensive availability, giving shape to the 'spiralist' career model inherited from the past. The fact that there is no other time-management option in this configuration reveals a strong career orientation and the acceptance of its costs. If we switch to men and women with mobility constraints (rooted career), the table shows that they can opt either for an extensive availability to compensate their immobility (compensation model), build on their family constraints to promote work-life reconciliation (a family-oriented model) or try to promote a more flexible availability (alternative model). Finally, men and women managers living with a manager also have three options: they can try to lead two symmetrical careers at once, trying to move together and showing their commitment by putting in long hours at work (double-career model); they can manage their two careers alternatively (alternate model, knowing that women are more likely to accept a momentary disruption of their career for their husband's benefit); or they can again opt for work-life reconciliation knowing that their career will suffer (a family-oriented model).

Conclusion

Can we now conclude that women managers are promoting an alternative career model (Méda, 2002)? A few of them have slipped into the 'spiralist'

pattern, notably the pioneers (mainly engineers) who paid the price for their career orientation, usually being single, childless or divorced. However, many female managers in dual-career couples are not consistent with this organizational model, either following their husbands' career moves or remaining rooted in a specific area. This resistance to forced geographical mobility is obviously being progressively accepted by the organizational system, as many young high flying men are now in a dual-career couple. However, extensive availability remains a sign of distinction in the company. Putting in long hours at work is more than ever a means for being detected and selected from among people with very similar (excellent) profiles in an organizational context that is not results-orientated. Even if many young female managers with children are claiming work-life reconciliation, they are being channelled in 'female areas with few opportunities' (Crompton and Lefevre, 1992). Their family-orientation is interpreted by their line managers as a self-limitation and their explicit withdrawal from the competition for power. A few women executives and many young mothers are trying to defend an alternative model, described as 'flexible availability'. Promoting management based more on results than on excessive attendance, these women managers are often pictured as not very diplomatic, rough, direct, and very remote from the stereotypes of the *éternel féminin* (participating in dialogue, consensus, delegation and so on).

If we look at the structure of opportunity and the ongoing changes in the company — its privatization and internationalization processes — we can see opportunities for women. The labour market will probably be more open to new (female) core skills such as finance, business law, marketing and sales. However, the centrality of industrial risks and infrastructure management (storage, transportation and distribution) will surely maintain, or even reinforce, the predominance of the engineering diploma as a key to access responsibilities. The recent internationalization of the company can also shift the glass ceiling to international assignments (Forster, 1999). An international experience in a subsidiary might become the new 'regional' experience required for career promotion. Along with time availability, mobility requirements will remain the key factor for career promotion.⁸ If proportions really matter (Kanter, 1977), we can not expect a minority of women who are able to fit in the mobile and fully dedicated manager stereotype to reverse the self-perpetuating processes generated by tokenism, social similarity and peer attraction. Above all, there are two major limitations to this belief in balancing numbers: the persistent inequality in family responsibilities that constrain women's involvement at work, and the patriarchal nature of organizational structures that implies that men dominate not only as managers but also as men (Ressner, 1987). In this context, we believe that both individual resistances (women's strategies) and collective action (the modification of formal procedures through collective bargaining) will show their limits.

Notes

1. Since 2000 a network of French researchers in sociology, organizational studies and history has developed research on the evolution of the specific category of ‘*cadres*’ — salaried managers and professionals — in a context of major social and economic transformations: growing numbers, feminization, the instability of careers, the increase of experts and so on. For more details, see *gdr Cadres* (n.d.).
2. We were not able to obtain the same data for the employees of the foreign or French subsidiary companies.
3. Every occupation is weighted and put in classification scale from GF1 to GF11 (for the less qualified employees until the first levels of supervision), from GF12 to GF19 (for the qualified workers the *cadres*, a specific French category that includes managers and professionals) and from R4 to R1 for top managers. Wages are closely linked to these functional groups, apart from the executive positions.
4. For more details on high potential HR policies in France, see Falcoz, 2002.
5. Far from being rare this reality is clearly accounted in the HR database, where spouses are divided up into three categories: inactive, working in the company, working outside the company.
6. In France in 2002, 48% of women managers are in a dual-career couple (with another manager or professional), which is the case of only 24 per cent of men managers (Pochic, 2005).
7. This company has distribution units in the French West Indies, (Guadeloupe and Martinique) and La Réunion.
8. These two criteria had clearly been addressed in the ‘equal opportunity act’ signed in July 2004. Despite the fact that the only quantitative objectives were set on wage-gap compensation measures, the agreement also contained recommendations linked to women’s access to executive positions. These advices were specifically related to work–life balance: geographical mobility should not remain a condition for promotion and a choice to work part time should not be an obstacle to managerial careers.

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