



Programme “Society and Future”

Final report – “Research Summary”

RESEARCH CONTRACT: [TA/00/28](#)

PROJECT ACRONYM: **MAPO**

TITLE: “**Work-family balance and gender career gaps in Belgium**”

TEAM (indicating institution and research unit): MOSI, VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL

CO-ORDINATOR: —

PROMOTER(S): Marie-Anne GUERRY

RESEARCHERS: Anneleen BAERTS & Nick DESCHACHT

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The purpose of this summary is to disseminate the research findings via the internet.

Link to website describing the project team's work:

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Summary

The general goal of the MAPO-project is to offer a better understanding of gender career differences in Belgium. Women have more difficulties in building their careers than men. Women have lower wages, receive fewer promotions and have less access to jobs with authority. This is the gender career gap between women and men. The career gap is the result of a complex causal system of variables including personal characteristics (education, household situation, etc.), job characteristics and discrimination.

At the beginning of the research project, the aims were formulated as following: "the expected results of this project are mainly situated in the field of policy, but also in the field of fundamental research. At the level of fundamental research, the goals are (1) to translate the career as a multidimensional concept into an operational career scale and (2) to improve the quantitative foundation of the Markov methodology that is being used. The policy related goals are (1) to map and explain the career gap (2) to map and explain the bottlenecks in the development of the wage and career gap and (3) to evaluate the impact of the work/family balance on career differences between women and men."

At the fundamental level the career concept was clarified and its various aspects and dimensions were investigated. In the international literature a broad variety of career definitions exists. The career concept is used to denote two meanings. The first is a career as a chronological succession of jobs and labour market positions, e.g. from unemployment to a full time job and then ending the career in a part time job in another organization. This horizontal sequence of states composes the work history of a person. The second view understands a career as a movement along a vertical, hierarchical job ladder, within an organization or across organizations, characterized by differences in wages, position, authority or other rewards from labour. The researchers refer to careers in this second meaning. A promotion is then defined as every upward movement in a career. The MAPO-project was focussed on mapping gender differences in these promotion probabilities and their underlying causes. Because various aspects (wage, position, authority, etc.) are connected to a career, it is useful to distinguish between wage promotions, position promotions, authority promotions, etc. Although in the recent period a lot of research has been done on horizontal movements, the vertical career progress has been neglected. The reason for this is the crumbling of the classical organisational career (the 'death of the organisational career') and the movement towards boundaryless careers. Modern careers have become diverse, individualised and characterised by breaks and movements across organisations. However, this does not render research into vertical career progress irrelevant. There are no clear indications for the disappearance of organisational hierarchies. And in the meantime, the career gap between men and women remains. Although careers appear different than 50 years ago (we might refer to them as boundaryless vertical careers, whereby promotions are being made across the boundaries of organisations), they still exist and they differ substantially between women and men. These boundaryless careers, in the hierarchical meaning of a career, are more difficult to study than the classical organisational career. Within organisations careers can be mapped using position classifications. However, such classifications are difficult to use when studying movements across organisations. This fact, combined with limitations concerning data availability, compelled the researchers to measure careers through broader categories of occupational class, the level of job authority and the wage level. The career concept was broadened from a one-dimensional to a multi-dimensional concept accounting for these three career aspects. The researchers found that, apart from the well-known wage gap, career gaps exist for these other dimensions as well. In 2002 the share of women among Belgian workers with a high degree of job authority (so-called sanctioning

authority: having an influence on the wages and promotions of other personnel members) was only 20 per cent. Subsequently, a more dynamic view of the career-throughflow was given by also estimating position and authority promotions. As for wage promotions, men are more likely to receive position and authority promotions than women. Lastly, the influence of explanatory variables on position and authority promotions was estimated using a logistic regression model. The number of hours worked, the education level and work attitudes appeared to be important for both men and women and for both promotion types.

The researchers also used Markov-methodology to model careers by using the different career levels as states in a transition matrix. Such a transition matrix contains a lot of descriptive information and a summary of the promotion probabilities between the different career levels. Transition matrices were also estimated for various subgroups by splitting up the respondents according to sex, household situation, education, etc. But a Markov model offers more than a mere description: the model can be used for carrying out what-if analyses by looking at the effect of changes in some of the transition probabilities on the resulting equilibrium distribution. Moreover, in the transition matrices the accessibility of each career level can be evaluated and so-called absorbing states can be identified for different subgroups of respondents. One way to express the mobility at every career level is by calculating the expected number of years that subgroups remain in each level before moving to another state. The researchers estimated the effects of explanatory variables by using discrete time event history analysis, a regression method for longitudinal data that allows the study of events. Such an event can be a promotion from one career level to a higher one. An additional advantage of event history analysis in comparison with other regression methods is that fewer errors can be made in the causal interpretation of effects that were investigated. With ordinary regression techniques it is always possible that an apparent effect of an explanatory variable is in reality due to inverse causality. In this research data were used from the longitudinal Panel Study of Belgian Households (PSBH, 1992-2002). The PSBH contains data from eleven waves in which 8.741 adults were questioned every year. The panel is representative both at the household and at the individual level. The researchers controlled for attrition by using weight coefficients. The longitudinal character of the data set allows to follow respondents over time and to map career transitions such as promotions, transitions from part time to full time employment and labour market exits. Since the majority of the existing career and labour market studies use cross-sectional analyses, the study of transitions can produce new insight. Moreover, this data set contains a range of relevant variables that are often lacking in other data sets (e.g. work centrality).

The researchers underline the importance of involving promotion probabilities into career research. The example of the much talked-of glass ceiling that women would be facing in their careers, is illustrative in this respect. Quite a lot of studies point to the existence of a glass ceiling, merely on the basis of the limited number of women in top positions. At best this is little or not clarifying because widely varying mechanisms (not just differences in promotion probabilities) may produce this vertical segregation of men and women. The glass ceiling was defined as the set of obstacles faced by women in the higher career levels, which produces lower promotion probabilities than can be expected based on the objective characteristics of those women. The glass ceiling was thus distinguished from a situation of sticky floors, in which the most important obstacles are located at the lower levels. The researchers then looked at the characteristics of women that do seem to overcome these obstacles and move on to the top positions. They differed from other women regarding their educational level, age, work attitudes, domestic help and whether they worked full time or part time. Using a Markov-analysis it was shown that the transition of women to part time employment does not explain the limited number of women at the top. The fact that women often move to part time employment does have a (limited) effect on the wage gap among full time workers because part timers that return to full time employment usually end up in the lower career levels. A Markov-model that maps the flow of women through their careers shows that equal access to the top career levels also requires a better throughflow to the subtop. It was shown, however, that the obstacles in the

throughflow at the lowest career levels are not entirely responsible for the inequality at the top. Finally, the effect of the glass ceiling on the wage gap was estimated: the wage gap in net monthly wages (for full time and part time employees) would decline by about a quarter in the absence of a glass ceiling. The emphasis in this research was on the flows of women to the top. The need to involve longitudinal data and promotion probabilities in analyses on the wage gap and the glass ceiling was demonstrated.

At the level of policy oriented research, the career gap was mapped in its various dimensions: women hold lower positions, receive lower wages and have less access to job authority than men. To explain the career gap, various themes were studied in depth.

Firstly, the determinants and the consequences of temporary career breaks, i.e. full time breaks, part time breaks and unemployment. The researchers found that family variables play an important role in transitions from full time to part time employment and in transitions from part time to full time employment. Married women are more likely to change to part time employment and are less likely to change or return to full time employment.

Secondly, it was shown that women interrupt their careers more often than men. This happens in various ways. The interruption rate of women is 3.7 per cent (1.3 per cent for men), the rate of part time employment is 32.2 per cent (2.6 per cent for men) and the unemployment rate is 7.1 per cent (5 per cent for men). A negative effect of interruptions on the subsequent career can therefore explain part of the career gap between women and men. All the types of interruption (full time, part time and unemployment) had a negative effect on the wage level upon re-entry. A full time interruption of women and a part time interruption of men also seemed to lower promotion probabilities to higher positions. While the effect of an interruption is limited to a financial effect for women, interruptions also affect the level of job satisfaction for men.

Because career interruptions negatively influence various career aspects, they do not suffice as measures to reconcile family and careers (the work/life balance). The dangers brought by measures that promote part time employment are that on the one hand they allow working women to spend more time with their families, but on the other hand they do not allow building a successful career. Governments should therefore warn women for these risks and create real options to combine both a family and a career. The aim should be to enable women to combine a family with full time employment and a successful career. This requires substantial investments in measures such as child care and domestic help, both by governments and employers. On the other hand, practical measures alone will not suffice. Only by focussing on the structural obstacles that women face in their career throughflow and on the cultural stereotypes about both women and men, the career gap can be closed.

Thirdly, it was shown that the effect of the gender composition of the sector of employment on the promotion probability in Belgian clerical jobs does not differ between women and men. This contradicts various theories that predict an effect of the percentage of women at the work floor on the promotion probabilities of women and men. According to the token theory, small minorities are more likely to be discriminated against because they are highly visible so that negative stereotypes arise more easily. Another theory, that of the glass escalator, predicts an additional career advantage for men in female sectors. By including an interaction term between gender composition and sex in a model that explains the (position) promotion probabilities of men and women, the researchers were able to falsify both theories based on Belgian data. The gender composition has no effect on the promotion probability. Both in male as in female sectors, men appear to have a similar gender privilege. How can this conclusion be reconciled with the qualitative research on the phenomenon of the glass escalator? Respondents in female sectors suggest in interviews that they feel as if male employees in female sectors experience a glass escalator. According to the MAPO-researchers it is necessary to reinterpret the data from this qualitative research. Employees in female sectors may have the impression that men in these

sectors get promoted even faster than elsewhere, but this perception can be explained differently. The analyses point to a more or less constant gender privilege for men in all sectors. Suppose that a man gets promoted in an organisation with many men, than probably the impression will not arise that this man is enjoying a gender privilege. If the same man would get promoted in an organisation with many women, the perception will arise much faster, both in his own eyes as in those of his colleagues. Whether a man works in a male sector or in a female sector, he has the same gender privilege. His role as a token, however, increases his visibility and therefore changes – not his real promotion probability – but its perception. So tokenism does play a role. But it only plays the role of increasing the perception of the glass escalator. When it comes to job authority, however, the effect of the gender composition of the sector does differ according to sex. Women in male sectors face additional obstacles to obtain authority. Both in male as in female sectors it is mostly men who exercise job authority. But the few women that do obtain job authority are more likely to be found in female sectors. This fact is in accordance with the theory about the existence of a social norm that women should not exercise authority over men. This idea is also referred to as the ‘iron law of the anti-matriarchate’. In a way, this result is also in accordance with the token theory since it is the minorities that have additional difficulties in obtaining job authority. The explanations and the recommendations of the token theory therefore deserve some attention when it comes to gender differences in job authority. Further research will have to show to what extent these conclusions also hold for other countries. Only by carrying out comparative research we may gain insight into the possibly important role of the broader economic, political and institutional factors on the relation between gender and job authority.

Finally, the researchers also looked at the role of retention and exit behaviour in explaining the career gap. Women appear more likely to leave the labour force than men and less likely to (re-)enter it. Because top positions are often held by older employees, the number of women at the top is limited. Although this mechanism is often neglected in discussions about the vertical segregation of men and women, it explains about one third of the limited number of women in top positions and about one fifth of the gender wage gap. These women who leave the labour force often move into a situation of household work. This mostly concerns lower educated women with (young) children, who often exit after a period of unemployment. By focussing the policy attention to this target group through measures aimed at reconciling work and family, would be a purposeful way to help close the career gap through increased labour force participation. The number of women that leaves the labour market for household labour is declining over time, so there are no indications for the so-called opt-out revolution that some authors claim to see.

The researchers went on to investigate the obstacles that women face in their career throughflow. This was done by introducing a new measure, the Obstacle Ratio, which is the ratio of the promotion probability that women are entitled to based on their personal characteristics and their actual promotion probability. The promotion probability that women deserve is estimated within an Oaxaca-Blinder wage decomposition type framework. It was shown that the promotion probabilities of Belgian women are 14 per cent lower than the promotion probability they are entitled to (controlling for education, experience, etc). This indicates that there is a suboptimal allocation of the labour force within the Belgian economy. The obstacles appeared largest at the top: promotion probabilities of Belgian women at the highest level of the wage hierarchy are more than three times lower than those of men with identical characteristics. The fact that large obstacles were found at the highest career levels was interpreted as an indication for the presence of a glass ceiling. Important obstacles also exist at the lower end of the labour hierarchy, indicating that the often neglected phenomenon of sticky floors also contributes to the vertical segregation of men and women. These results show that both a glass ceiling and sticky floors may be operating at the same time in labour markets. We also demonstrated that discriminatory career obstacles have a significant effect on women’s decisions to leave the labour market. Women who encounter more obstacles in their career, are

twice as likely to leave the labour force than other female employees. Organizations that hope to keep their talent on board, thus have an interest in providing women with the promotions they deserve. For policy makers it is important to remember that in order to increase the share of women at the top, the obstacles preventing women from reaching the subtop should also be removed.

A final part of the MAPO research was aimed at the impact of the work/family tension on the gender career gap. The effect of this tension differs according to the direction of the conflict. It was expected that variables indicating Work interference with family (WIF) would have a positive effect on the promotion probabilities of employees and variables indicating Family interference with work (FIW) a negative effect. This was partially confirmed. Men whose wives take on the majority of the domestic work, have higher promotion probabilities than men who do a greater share of the domestic work themselves (FIW). Dissatisfaction with work time regulations and overtime hours may produce tensions with the family life (WIF) and have a positive effect on the promotion probability of women. Moreover, the descriptive analyses showed that working women do the larger part of the domestic work compared to their partner and that 77 per cent of the working mothers provide daily child care themselves, compared to only 47 per cent of the working fathers. This indicates that women more often experience FIW, leading to lower wages, positions and levels of job authority compared to their partner. In order to avoid the negative effect of work life on family life, the researchers suggest that the government increases flexible and affordable domestic help and child care. The negative effect of work life on family life may be reduced by reducing the work pressures on employees, e.g. by a general reduction in working hours. In this both the social partners and the government can play important roles.

The researchers also studied in depth the role of the partner in two processes connected to the gender career gap: wage promotions and transitions to part time employment of women. The probability of a transition from full time to part time employment for women is, as expected, higher for women who have a partner, but only when this partner is employed. Concerning the characteristics of this partner, only the income of the partner proved significant. The higher the wage of the partner, the more likely is a transition to part time employment. Having children, especially younger children, also increased the likelihood of moving into part time employment. Thus, having a working partner and children encourages women to work part time. Moreover, the researchers found that having a working partner has a negative effect on the probability of receiving a wage promotion. No effect was found from the characteristics of the partner. Some characteristics of the woman herself, such as the education level, the number of hours worked and the wage, do play an important role. So, it is having a working partner, rather than the characteristics of that partner that influence the careers of women. Women who have a working partner are less likely to receive wage promotions and more likely to move into part time employment. In spite of the increasing number of policy measures, both by governments and employers, (e.g. child care, work-at-home schemes, career breaks, etc) the combination of a family and a career remains difficult for Belgian women. As soon as financially possible, most women take a step back in their careers. The male breadwinner model has clearly not yet disappeared. It should be emphasized that these conclusions are not always the result of conscious decisions or female preferences. The lower promotion probability of women with a working partner could for instance be a result of employer's decisions in the selection process. It could be the result of statistical discrimination: the selection of men over women from the assumption that women are less motivated or more likely to move into part time employment or leave the organisation. Moreover, structural factors such as the availability and affordability of child care play an important role in decisions to move into part time employment. This turns these working women into a vulnerable group. Because they are (at least partly) dependent on the income of their partner, they may end up in financial difficulty when that partner's income is lost, e.g. in case of divorce or unemployment of the partner. The latter may be occurring more often in the near future as a result of the present economic downturn that seems to affect men

especially hard. Transitions into part time employment are often permanent and, when temporary, they affect future career prospects. Governments and employers thus have a responsibility in offering (more and better) measures that allow combining work and family. By work, we do not mean part time work, but especially full time work that enables women to develop their careers and to reach top positions. Only in this way the career gap between men and women can be closed.

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