

Gender, Occupation, and Promotion to Management in the Nonprofit Sector

THE CRITICAL CASE OF MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES HOLLAND

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Although one can assume the work values within nonprofit organizations promote gender equality in promotion decisions, there is preliminary evidence that in the nonprofit sector women are underrepresented in higher management positions. Whereas the mechanisms resulting in underrepresentation of women in management have been studied extensively in for-profit organizations, little is known about these mechanisms in nonprofit organizations. Is gender in nonprofit organizations—even given the underlying values of these organizations—an impediment to attaining a management position? This article presents a case study of employment patterns within the Dutch section of the humanitarian INGO Médecins Sans Frontières and focuses particularly on the effects of gender and occupation on transitions to management. The case study organization represents a “critical case” because the nature of this organization’s work environment can be expected to result in a relatively high percentage of women in management. Employee records (N = 2,247) were analyzed using event history models. We found that women made the transition to management less rapidly than men, even when controlling for factors like age, previous work experience, and nationality. However, gender differences were completely explained by occupation. Those employees in female-dominated occupations (in this case, medical personnel such as nurses) had a lower promotion-to-management rate than those in male-dominated occupations (in this case, nonmedical personnel such as financial officers), irrespective of their gender. This case study highlights the importance to nonprofit management research of studying the effects of occupational sex segregation on promotion.

Keywords: *gender, humanitarian aid, international nongovernmental organization, nonprofit sector, occupational sex segregation*

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EVEN THOUGH THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN in management has increased steadily during past decades (Powell 1999), “the rule of thumb is still: the higher up an organization’s hierarchy, the fewer the women” (International Labour Office 2004, 13). The finding that gender impedes authority attainment has shown to be “consistent and robust in state-level, national, cross-national, and cross-temporal studies” (Smith 2002, 509). Women seem to face a glass ceiling: “a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women and minorities from moving up in the management hierarchy” (Morrison and Von Glinow 1990, 200). However, the degree to which there are gender differences in promotion rates and chances is assumed to differ between types of organizations (see, for example, Powell and Butterfield 1994). Nonprofit organizations—in which women often form a large share of the workforce (Gibelman 2000; Mastracci and Herring 2010; Onyx and Maclean 1996)—are among the organizations that can be expected to pay attention to gender equality in promotion decisions. As Gibelman (2000) says, the “underlying values of the nonprofit sector, which include humanitarianism, charity, human rights, and human well-being, suggest that representative organizations would voluntarily and systematically seek to adhere to principles of affirmative action and nondiscrimination in their labor force practices” (254). Nevertheless, there is preliminary evidence that also in nonprofit organizations women are underrepresented in higher management positions (Gibelman 2000; Sampson and Moore 2008). Whereas the mechanisms resulting in underrepresentation of women in management have been studied extensively in for-profit organizations, empirical insights into these mechanisms for nonprofit organizations remain limited. The central research questions of this article are: Does the promotion-to-management rate differ between men and women in nonprofit organizations? If so, which role does occupation play in explaining these gender differences?

This article aims to provide deeper insights into promotion to management transitions in the nonprofit sector by means of a case study of employment patterns within one specific nonprofit organization: the Dutch section of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF Holland), a humanitarian international nongovernmental organization (INGO) that provides medical emergency aid. This case offers excellent opportunities to shed more light on gender differences in nonprofit promotion-to-management rates for various reasons. First, as is explained in more detail later on, because of its organizational and work characteristics, the study organization can be perceived as a “critical case” (Patton 1990; Yin 1984): it can be expected to offer an organizational environment in which a relatively high percentage of women in management can be found. By examining whether even in such a work environment women have lower chances to make the transition into management than men, the aim of this study is to improve our understanding of how persistent gender inequality in promotions to management is in the nonprofit sector.

Second, the data available in the personnel database of MSF Holland offer unique information about the intraorganizational employment transitions of humanitarian expatriate field workers over a period of several years. Whereas previous studies often analyze the underrepresentation of women in nonprofit management at one point in time (for example, Gibelman 2000), based on these longitudinal data it is possible to analyze which employees who enter the organization in nonmanagement positions make promotion to management and how fast they make this transition. Moreover, the records contain demographic information (age, nationality) of the staff and information about their work careers (humanitarian work experience, occupation). This offers the opportunity to examine whether potential gender differences in promotion rates can be explained by the factors listed. Given that men and women

often segregate into different types of occupations and that this is an important proximate cause of differences in earnings and career prospects of men and women (Bielby and Baron 1986; Reskin 1993), this article pays special attention to the role of occupational sex segregation in the promotion process.

Theoretical Background

In the academic literature, various explanations of the underrepresentation of women in positions of authority have been provided (see, for a review, Smith 2002). Human capital theory (Becker 1964) suggested that differences in individual resources in terms of skills and knowledge, which are assumed to be related to a person's productivity, account for differences in employment patterns. Although women's educational achievements have become more like men's during past decades (Grunow 2006), women spend much more time on home production (Coltrane 2000) and on care for children (Van Dijk and Siegers 1996) than do men. This might negatively affect women's human capital and consequently their opportunities for making the transition into management. Status attainment theories have claimed that women may be underrepresented in management because women are less likely to aspire to become managers than men (for example, because of family responsibilities). Structural explanations suggest that women have limited access to managerial positions because they are "disproportionately located in the most marginalized structures of the economy" (Smith 2002, 519). For example, women are disproportionally represented in occupations that have fewer positions of authority (Kraus and Yonay 2000). Other explanations focus on discrimination processes: stereotypes about men and women, or processes of similarity attraction (that is, male managers select incumbents on the basis of social similarity) might lead to a disadvantage for female candidates in the selection process compared to male candidates (Eagly and Karau 2002; Kanter 1977).

The overview of explanations of women's underrepresentation in management shows that a variety of factors might play a role in the promotion-to-management transitions of men and women. Therefore, even if nonprofit organizations seek to adhere to nondiscrimination principles (Gibelman 2000), differences between employees—for example, in human capital, aspirations, and occupation—might result in gender differences in promotion rates. Given that the employee record data used in this study contain no information about aspirations and limited information about human capital (that is, whether employees have previous work experience in the studied field), this article focuses on the role of occupations in explaining potential gender differences in promotion-to-management rates.

Gender, Occupation, and Upward Mobility

Although occupational sex segregation (that is, "women's and men's concentration in different occupations" (Reskin 1993, 242)) has decreased since the 1970s, most workers are still employed in sex-segregated occupations (Reskin 1993). Segregation into specific jobs is the proximate cause of differing career prospects of men and women (Bielby and Baron 1986). Reskin (1993) shows that female-dominated jobs have lower pay levels and are less likely to provide training on the job, benefits, and promotion possibilities than do male-dominated jobs. In addition, female-dominated occupations are, in general, characterized by relatively few positions of authority compared to gender-mixed occupations (middle category) and male-dominated occupations, which have the highest share of positions of authority (Huffman and Cohen 2004; Kraus and Yonay 2000).

The low number of positions of authority in female-dominated occupations can be the result of a sorting process: women are channeled into occupations offering few positions of authority (Kraus and Yonay 2000). At the same time, a status composition process might be at work: jobs with a high percentage of women are devalued by organizations (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993). Disregarding the reason of this disadvantaged situation in female-dominated occupations, the central argument that relates gender to promotion to management is “Since most women work in female-dominated occupations, and those occupations have less positions of authority, women are less likely to hold authority” (Kraus and Yonay 2000, 594) and might need more time to get such scarce positions. This leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Gender influences the promotion-to-management rate via occupational sex segregation.

Hypothesis 2. Compared to workers in mixed-gender occupations: (a) workers in male-dominated occupations have a higher promotion-to-management rate and (b) workers in female-dominated occupations have a lower promotion-to-management rate.

The “Critical Case”: A Humanitarian INGO

A case can be regarded as “critical” if it “permits logical deductions of the type: if this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases” (Flyvberg 2006, 30). It is thus a case in which a particular phenomenon is most (or least) likely to occur given certain conditions (see also Patton 1990; Yin 1984). In the current study this pertains to an organization in a particular sector that can be expected to have many characteristics that facilitate gender equality in promotion-to-management processes. At the same time the case allows for testing the hypotheses on occupational sex segregation.

The specific humanitarian INGO that served as the critical case in this study is the Dutch member of the MSF “family network” (Lindenberg and Bryant 2001, 34). Members of this network have the same name and endorse the same principles:

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is an international, independent, medical humanitarian organisation that delivers emergency aid to people affected by armed conflict, epidemics, natural disasters and exclusion from healthcare. MSF offers assistance to people based on need, irrespective of race, religion, gender or political affiliation.¹

MSF Holland is, as the Operational Centre Amsterdam, a central hub in MSF’s international structure (Korff 2012). MSF provides medical aid, water and sanitation, and psychosocial care by sending its own teams to the stricken areas. These teams of field workers comprise both expatriate workers and national staff. The staff is divided into three occupational groups: medical doctors, other medical staff (such as nurses, midwives), and nonmedical staff (such as financial controllers and logisticians²).

MSF Holland is assumed to offer a work environment resulting in a relatively high percentage of women in management and limited glass ceiling barriers for the following reasons. First, the mission and values of this humanitarian aid organization might countervail discriminatory processes. The essence of humanitarian work is to save lives at risk and to reduce

suffering of victims of “human-made” or “natural” disasters (Barnett and Weiss 2008), either by sending their own personnel to the affected area or by cooperating with local organizations. Humanitarian work can thus be conceived as acts “motivated by an altruistic desire to provide life-saving relief; to honor the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence; and to do more good than harm” (11). Because organizations with a humane orientation have proven to have a relatively high proportion of women in management (Bajdo and Dickson 2002), the case study organization’s value structure can be expected to promote promotion opportunities for women.

Second, the case study organization has many characteristics that have been found to be associated with higher percentages of women in management within private sector organizations, such as a large percentage of nonmanagement jobs filled by women and low average management salaries (Blum, Fields, and Goodman 1994). The organization pays the national minimum salary for first-timers in the field, whatever the position or occupation of that person. In addition, the organization is known for paying low salaries, also for managers, compared to other humanitarian organizations with the purpose of maintaining the voluntary spirit of its staff (see Korff 2012). The organization has a large number of annual management vacancies and a shortage of labor supply, which are also factors that have been found to be related to a higher proportion of women in management (Blum et al. 1994; Powell 1999). These characteristics are advantageous for women because an “inadequate pool of qualified sex-typical workers prompts employers to turn to nontraditional workers” (Reskin 1993, 251).

Third, the type of work in the studied organization can be of influence. Most field jobs in the humanitarian aid sector are characterized by full-time employment abroad, long work hours, relatively high levels of responsibility and power (Roth 2008); risky, uncertain, and complex work situations (Clarke and Ramalingam 2008; Taylor 1997); and a sacrifice in personal life because of the incompatibility of aid work and family responsibilities (Loquerio, Hammersley, and Emmens 2006). Work motivations of persons who select themselves into this type of work are likely to differ from those of nonprofit workers in general. Previous research has shown that women are more likely than men to enter the nonprofit sector because the work hours or work location are convenient for family reasons (Onyx and Maclean 1996). The wish to combine work and family might form an impediment to attaining a nonprofit management position for these women. Among the select group of women who chose to be employed as ‘field workers’ in the study organization, these considerations might play less of a role, because the women are aware of what they are getting into.

Whether gender differences in promotion-to-management rates can be found in this critical case organization is the core question of this study. On the one hand, the organizational context and the selective workforce might enhance equal promotion chances for men and women. On the other hand, even in such a specific organizational context men and women can differ from each other—for example, in their occupations—which might result in different promotion rates for men and women.

Methodology

The intraorganizational job transitions of the expatriate field workers of MSF Holland were the focus of this study.³

Data and Sample

The researchers were given access to the organization's employee registration database, which contained demographic information of the expatriate field workers as well as detailed information about their jobs. The sample comprised all employees of the organization who started to work in the field between 2003 and the end of 2008 in nonmanagement positions ($N = 2,247$).

To study how fast employees moved up to management positions, the employees' intraorganizational career trajectories—not the job contracts—were taken as the unit of analysis, for the following reasons. Because of short-term funding cycles, humanitarian aid organizations use short-term contracts extensively (Loquercio et al. 2006; Richardson 2006). Whereas in the domestic labor market the end of a job would often indicate that an employee has found a new job or has been promoted (Mills, Blossfeld, and Bernardi 2006), in MSF Holland the end of a job episode often indicates the end date of the short-term contract, which provides little information on upward mobility. Moreover, an employee could make the transition from a nonmanagement to a management position within a job episode. This relevant information would have been lost when using the job contract as the unit of analysis.

Measures

The following dependent, independent, and control variables were included in the analyses.

Dependent Variable

The number of days between the start date of the first field job and the date of making the transition from a nonmanagement to a management position was used as the dependent variable. Management positions were defined as coordinating positions that were scaled in a middle or higher salary level. The organization provided management training for employees in these positions. Employees who did not make the transition to management in the observed time span were treated as right-censored (Mills 2011). In other words, for these employees, the number of days between the start date of their first field job and the last date of which the registration data were available (December 31, 2008) was used as the time interval.

Independent Variables

The two main independent variables of interest were *gender* and *occupation*. To measure gender, men were given the value 0 and women the value 1. To measure occupation, all registered job descriptions were coded into three major occupational categories that were distinguished by the organization itself. Assuming that the distinction between these categories influences the images both employees and supervisors have regarding the occupational groups in the organization, it was meaningful to use these existing occupational categories to stay close to the organizational reality. The first category consists of medical doctors and medical specialists (reference group). The second category contains all other medical personnel, for example, nurses, lab technicians, medical officers, and coordinating functions in the medical domain. The third category includes nonmedical staff, including logisticians, financial controllers, and coordinating functions in the nonmedical domain.

Control Variables

The measure of *age* refers to the age of the employee at the start of the first job in the organization. In addition, we controlled for *nationality*. Given that the studied organization is a Dutch section of a family network of INGOs, it could be that Dutch employees have the best fit with the organization and therefore move faster into management positions.

Therefore, the Dutch were coded as the reference category (value 1). The employees from the ninety-one other nationalities in the sample were coded into three broad categories: other Western Europeans (value 2), North American/Australian/New Zealand (value 3), and other (value 4).

Humanitarian work experience was operationalized by means of the registered salary of the employees. A start salary (value 0) indicated that the employee did not have previous work experience in the humanitarian aid domain, whereas a higher salary (value 1) indicated the employee had previous humanitarian work experience. Within family networks of INGOs it is possible that an aid worker is formally employed in one organization but works on a project of a “family member” organization. Previous research has shown that applicants who are employed in the organization that is filling an open management position are more likely to be selected for a management position than others (Powell and Butterfield 1994); therefore a measure of *contracting organization* is used as a control variable. Employees who were employed by the organization under study received the value 0 (reference group), employees who were employed by a “family member” organization (including external personnel) received the value 1.

Analyses

The hypotheses were tested using event history models. In these models, for every small time interval from the start of an employee’s first field job, the effect of a set of explanatory variables on the probability of making the transition from a nonmanagement to a management position can be tested, given that up to that time interval the employee has not yet made the transition to a management position (Arosio 2004). The organization registered information in small time units (day). Therefore, time was assumed to be measured on a continuous scale (Allison 1984, 14), and a “continuous time” method was used to test the hypotheses, namely the Cox proportional hazards regression model.

A key assumption of the Cox model is the proportional hazards assumption. Initial analyses including all explanatory variables showed that this assumption was strongly violated for the nationality variable. In order to be able to control for nationality, the stratification method was applied. This means that for every nationality group a different unspecified baseline hazard function was allowed, while the coefficients of the other covariates were assumed to be constant across these groups (Allison 1984; Blossfeld and Rohwer 1995; Mills 2011).

To test the hypotheses, three Cox regression models were estimated. The first step in the analyses was to test for a general gender effect without taking other factors into account. In the second step, the control variables nationality (stratified), age, humanitarian work experience, and contracting organization were added to the model. In the third step, the occupational groups were added, to test the differences in promotion rates between the occupational categories (hypothesis 2) and to see whether occupation explains the effect of gender (hypothesis 1).

Results

The descriptive statistics, presented in Table 1, clearly show the diversity of the workforce of MSF Holland in the period from 2003 to 2008: the majority of the employees were women, the age range was broad, and employees came from countries all over the world. In the studied time period, 11 percent of the employees who started to work for the organization in nonmanagement positions experienced the transition from a nonmanagement to a

management position ($N = 253$). The median time it took them to make this promotion was 595 days, or about 1.6 years (not reported in the table). Whereas 57 percent of all studied employees were women, among the employees who made the transition to management positions, 45 percent were women.

The first step in the analyses was to test for a gender effect without controlling for other factors. Model 1 of Table 2 shows that female aid workers in MSF Holland made the transition to management positions less rapidly than male aid workers. This can be read from the result that the hazard ratio for women is less than 1. When controlling for the employee's age, nationality (stratified), humanitarian work experience, and contracting organization, this effect of gender remained statistically significant (see model 2). For age, a significant negative effect was found. Staff who entered the organization at older ages took more time to be

Table 1. Sample Characteristics, Total and by Gender			
Variable	Total N = 2247	Men N = 956	Women N = 1291
Promotion to Management			
No	0.89	0.85	0.91
Yes	0.11	0.15	0.09
Time until Promotion or Censoring (in days)	1142.29 (626.87)	1102.51 (619.79)	1171.75 (630.69)
Gender			
Man	0.43	1	0
Woman	0.57	0	1
Age	36.28 (8.96)	37.14 (9.32)	35.64 (8.63)
Nationality			
Dutch	0.12	0.13	0.12
Other Western European	0.49	0.46	0.52
North American/Australian/New Zealand	0.25	0.22	0.26
Other	0.14	0.20	0.09
Missing ^a	0.00	0.00	0.00
Humanitarian Work Experience			
No previous experience	0.58	0.57	0.59
Previous experience	0.40	0.42	0.39
Missing	0.02	0.01	0.02
Contracting Organization			
Employed by organization under study	0.77	0.80	0.74
Employed by a family member organization	0.23	0.20	0.26
Occupation			
Mixed/medical doctors	0.29	0.30	0.27
Female-dominated/other medical	0.38	0.18	0.53
Male-dominated/nonmedical	0.33	0.52	0.20

Notes: Standard deviations of continuous variables are shown in parentheses; because the results were rounded off, proportions do not always sum up to 1.
^aThere are $N = 5$ missing values on this variable.

Table 2. Cox Regression Models of Promotion to Management; Hazard Ratios

Variable	Model 1 exp (B)	Model 2 exp (B)	Model 3 exp (B)
Gender			
Man (reference group)	1	1	1
Woman	0.569***	0.569***	0.878
Age			
		0.968***	0.977**
Humanitarian Work Experience			
No previous experience (reference group)		1	1
Previous experience		2.027***	1.534**
Contracting Organization			
Employed by organization under study (reference group)		1	1
Employed by a family member organization		0.357***	0.414**
Occupation			
Medical doctors (reference group)			1
Other medical (female-dominated)			1.581*
Nonmedical (male-dominated)			4.774***
Number of observations	2247	2205	2205
Likelihood ratio (df)	20.1 (1)***	52.8 (4)***	138.3 (6)***

Note: On interpreting the results: If a hazard ratio is greater than 1, this means that the transition to management goes faster compared to the reference group. If the hazard ratio is less than 1, this means that the transition to management goes slower compared to the reference group. Models 2 and 3 are stratified by nationality.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

promoted. Aid workers who had previous humanitarian work experience made the transition to management more rapidly than those without previous humanitarian work experience. Those who are formally employed by MSF Holland make the transition into management faster than those employed by a family member organization.

In hypothesis 1 it was expected that gender influences promotion to management via sex-segregated occupations. As formulated in hypothesis 2, aid workers in male-dominated occupations were expected to have higher promotion-to-management rates, and aid workers in female-dominated occupations were expected to have lower promotion-to-management rates than those in mixed occupations. Because model 1 already showed that gender was related to the promotion rate, to examine the hypotheses it was tested whether (1) gender was related to occupation and (2) occupation was related to the promotion-to-management rate when controlling for gender (Baron and Kenny 1986). Analyses showed there was indeed a statistically significant relationship between gender and occupation (Cramer's $V = 0.393$, $p < 0.001$; Goodman and Kruskal tau = 0.083, $p < 0.001$). The group of medical doctors (55 percent women) could be perceived as mixed, the other medical group (80 percent women) as female dominated, and the nonmedical group (34 percent women) as male dominated. Model 3 in Table 2 shows that, when controlling for gender, occupation had a statistically significant effect on the promotion-to-management rate. The analysis shows that both employees in female- and in male-dominated occupations made the transition to management positions faster than employees from the gender-mixed occupation of

medical doctors. Therefore, the results are in line with part (a) of hypothesis 2, which states that workers in male-dominated occupations have a higher promotion-to-management rate than workers in the mixed-gender group. Additional analyses (with the other medical group as a reference category in model 3) showed that the promotion-to-management rate of the nonmedical occupational group was significantly larger than that of the other medical occupation ($\exp(B) = 3.019$, $z = 6.629$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that those in the female-dominated occupations moved more slowly into management positions than did those in the male-dominated occupations.

When controlling for occupation, the effect of gender was no longer statistically significant (see model 3), which indicates that occupation completely explains the relationship between gender and the promotion to management rate (Baron and Kenny 1986). Even though those in the other medical (female-dominated) occupation were also promoted faster than those in the mixed occupation group—contrary to the expectations in hypothesis 2b—the results show that gender influences the promotion-to-management rate via sex-segregated occupations, which is in line with hypothesis 1.

The finding that the promotion rate does not differ between men and women when the control variables and occupation are taken into account might indicate that discriminatory promotion processes are limited in the studied organization. Prior research has suggested, however, that discriminatory processes might be dependent upon the occupational gender composition. For example, Hultin (2003) showed that in female-dominated occupations, men have considerably higher chances of experiencing an intraorganizational promotion than women—they seem to take a “glass-escalator” (Williams 1992)—whereas in male-dominated occupations men and women have similar internal promotion chances. Additional analyses in which the Cox regression models were run for the occupational groups separately indicated that within each occupational group, the effect of gender was not statistically significant. The survival curves plotted in Figure 1 illustrate the limited intraoccupational differences in promotion rates between men and women.

The finding that women have a similar promotion-to-management rate as men when taking the control variables and occupation into account raises the question: Do women end up in similar types of management positions as men? Or do women—as has been shown in previous research (for example, Reskin and Ross 1992)—still end up in lower management positions in which they have relatively little authority? In Table 3 all transitions to management are divided into three categories: transitions to lower-level management, to middle management, and to higher management. The findings show that per management level, about 45 percent of the persons making the transition to that level are women.

Conclusion

Whereas the mechanisms resulting in the underrepresentation of women in for-profit management have been studied extensively, empirical studies focusing on nonprofit organizations are relatively scarce. Is gender in nonprofit organizations—even given the underlying values of these organizations—an impediment to the attainment of a management position? Or do these organizational value structures mitigate potential discriminatory processes? Results of a critical case study of employment patterns within an international humanitarian NGO—the Dutch section of Médecins Sans Frontières—show gender differences in promotion rates, even when controlling for factors like age, nationality, previous work experience, and

Figure 1. Survival Curves Estimated per Occupational Group, Stratified by Gender (Controlling for Nationality, Contracting Organization, Age, and Humanitarian Work Experience)

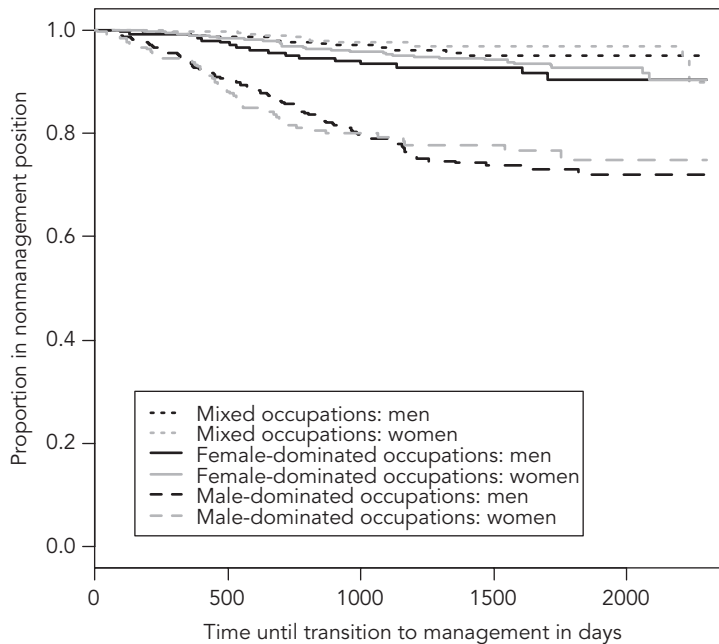


Table 3. Types of Management Positions to Which Employees Were Promoted, by Gender

	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Higher management (country manager)	3	60%	2	40%	5	100%
Middle management (logistical, medical, and financial coordinator)	44	56%	34	44%	78	100%
Lower management (project coordinator)	93	55%	77	45%	170	100%
Total	140	55%	113	45%	253	100%

contracting organization. Women made the transition to management less rapidly than did men in the study organization. Gender-segregated occupations proved to be highly relevant for understanding promotion-to-management rates. When taking occupation into account, the effect of gender was no longer statistically significant. Employees in female-dominated occupations had a lower promotion-to-management rate than those in male-dominated occupations. Whereas various studies have shown that there is a “glass escalator” for men in female-dominated occupations (Hultin 2003; Maume 1999; Williams 1992), in the studied organization there were no differences between the promotion-to-management rates of men and women within the occupational groups. This suggests that neither a “glass ceiling” nor a “glass escalator” exists for the studied field workers. Furthermore, female field workers were not concentrated at the bottom of the managerial hierarchy but were represented at all managerial levels.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the pure male–female distinction is of little importance in promotion-to-management transitions in the organization under study, at least when taking demographic, work career, and occupational characteristics into account. Given that in the ‘critical case’ organization under study many factors were assumed to contribute to gender equality in promotion-to-management decisions, this finding was in line with the expectations. It should be noted, though, that these findings do not necessarily indicate that there is no gender discrimination at all. Discrimination might already occur when selecting employees into the organization or into occupational groups. These processes have not been examined in this study.

The differences in the promotion-to-management rates of the occupational groups were only partially in line with the hypotheses. Instead of employees in the female-dominated occupational group (other medical), employees in the gender-mixed occupation (medical doctors) had the lowest promotion-to-management rate. The types of occupations under study most likely account for these findings. For example, it requires high educational investments, under strict rules and procedures, in order to become and stay a medical doctor in Western societies. Previous research has shown that medical doctors have a lower likelihood to reenlist for a second mission in the studied organization than those in the other occupational groups (Korff 2012), which might explain their lower transition-to-management rates. Moreover, the low promotion-to-management rates of both medical and other medical occupations might at least partly be explained by the limited number of medical management job openings. Only about 20 percent of the observed transitions into management are toward specialized medical management positions.

Opportunities for Future Research

Even though the employee records that were used to test the hypotheses were well suited for the purpose of studying intraorganizational mechanisms between gender and promotion to management, the nature of data at hand has two main limitations. First, it was not possible to test which specific work, workforce, or organizational characteristics (for example, the nonprofit character, or the selective workforce due to low salaries or risky full-time employment abroad) are responsible for the lack of a direct gender effect on promotion to management in MSF Holland when controlling for demographic, work career, and occupational characteristics. For future research it is therefore highly relevant to study the relationships between gender and promotion to management within a broader range of for-profit, public, and nonprofit organizations. By applying a multilevel approach (that is, collecting information about organizational characteristics as well as individual characteristics and outcomes), it would be possible to study to what extent and how mechanisms linking gender to upward mobility differ across organizational contexts.

Second, the scope of available information on individual background characteristics was limited. For that reason it was not possible to control for some potentially relevant factors in the job allocation process, such as education level, prior work experience in management, or individual career ambitions. Moreover, no direct measure for (perceptions about) the presence or absence of discriminatory processes in the organization was available. Such measures could be included in future research.

Despite these limitations, this study offers clear insights regarding the relationships among gender, occupation, and promotion to management in MSF Holland. The findings provide

preliminary evidence that mechanisms linking gender to the attainment of a position of authority are dependent upon organizational contexts. In the INGO under study the organizational context seems to have a “softening” effect on mechanisms that induce gender inequality in promotion rates. However, even in “softening” organizational contexts, other mechanisms—such as occupational sex segregation—might result in gender differences in promotion rates. For the design of effective human resource management practices, it is crucial to investigate closely the mechanisms resulting in the underrepresentation of women in nonprofit management. Clearly, additional research in a broader range of nonprofit organizations is needed to more closely examine which mechanisms are of importance in which types of organizations.

Notes

1. http://www.msf.org/msf/about-msf/about-msf_home.cfm.htm.
2. A logistician is an employee who has logistical tasks. Humanitarian logistics is defined as “the process of planning, implementing and controlling the efficient, cost-effective flow of and storage of goods and materials as well as related information, from point of origin to point of consumption for the purpose of meeting the end beneficiary’s requirements” (Thomas and Mizushima 2005, 60–61).
3. In this context, an expatriate worker is an aid worker with a nationality differing from the country of operation (for example, a British aid worker working in Liberia). National staff has the same nationality as the country of operation (for example, a Liberian working in Liberia). In this case, almost all Western employees are thus expatriate workers, Dutch aid workers included.

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