



The role of women in Bulgarian business: cultural perceptions

*Mariya Bobina¹, University of Iowa
Chief Assist. Diana Sabotnova, Ph.D.²
Burgas Free University*

One of the fundamental pillars of Bulgaria's progress as a civil and democratic society is its commitment to non-discrimination on nationality, race and gender. The country strives towards the equality and the development of women in all spheres of economic and social life. Institutional mechanisms stated in the Bulgarian Constitution (1991), Family Code (1985, amended in 1992) and Labor Code (1986, amended in 2001), The Law on Protection against Discrimination (2004), as well as by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 23) ensure equal treatment of men and women at work, in access to employment conditions, and ensure equal treatment of men and women.

Gender egalitarianism has been one of visible distinctions of Bulgarian business and management practices when compared to the other European Union countries. Hence, it is important to more closely monitor and analyze the evolution of the role of women in the modern Bulgaria and predict the contribution of gender egalitarianism to the sources of the country's competitive advantage.

This article responds to these needs of better understanding practices of gender egalitarianism. It is based on the authors' large-scale survey of Bulgarian managers and displays the results of empirical study of perceptions about gender roles in society as reported by business managers.

Gender Egalitarianism in Bulgaria: Basic Indicators

Generally speaking, gender egalitarianism is the extent to which an organization or society minimize

gender role differences. Modern social science literature displays the search for understanding of this phenomenon and its attributes in different social context. The components of gender egalitarianism traditionally include attitudinal domain with gender stereotypes and gender-role ideology (Beall and Sternberg 1993); and behavioral manifestation with gender discrimination and gender equality (Hendrix 1994). This dimension was partially considered in cross-cultural and comparative literature, in particular in G. Hofstede's research and application of Masculinity-Femininity dimension to different countries and societies (1980). Most recently, scholars analyzed the relations between gender egalitarianism and economic health in 62 societies; however the results were mixed and relations between gender issues and economic development were not found as significant (House 2004, 368).

While limited studies have been conducted on the phenomenon in Bulgarian context; the application of this concept may help to better understand the current trends in the country's transition to free markets; and to make stronger predictions about the dynamics in gender roles in Bulgarian business and management, and in a society at large.

Historic observations display the evolution of relations between the roles of women and men in economy and society. In medieval patriarchal Bulgaria the division of labor by gender was visible; attesting to the traditional gap in gender roles. However in the twentieth century, under Communism, the ideology of gender equality was promoted by the state aiming the inclusion of more women in the Bulgarian labor market.

The overview of the gender egalitarianism in the modern Bulgaria displays the situation when women are more involved in household tasks, form a significant share of employment in education and healthcare, and do typical clerical jobs. Under Communism Bulgarian women were also engaged in multiple family services however the later were ignored in official economic statistics. However, the presence of women is less visible³ in business administration, especially to the executive level; and in jobs related to technical sciences. While women have comparable levels of education with men, they lag behind in the levels of compensation.

¹ University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA52242, USA; corresponding author. Tel.: +1 309 912 4563;

E-mail address: mariya-bobina@uiowa.edu

² Burgas Free University, 62 San Stefano Boulevard, Burgas 8001, Bulgaria, E-mail address: dsmladenova@abv.bg

³ Starting with September 2014, Bulgarian national statistics include illegal activities, but still ignore domestic services.



The European Union statistical sources' data on gender roles in Bulgaria displays a comprehensive and somewhat optimistic picture when compared to many other European countries (Table 1). While lagging behind EU in life expectancy for both, women (77.40 vs. 82.21) and men (70.09 vs. 76.07), the gender gap in employment rates between men and women is smaller (9.8 percent) than the average in EU (13.3 percent); and the gender-tied pay gap in Bulgaria (13.6 percent) is also smaller than EU average (17.5 percent). Participation rates in business management and executive decision-making in on par with the European average indicators: sex distribution in companies' highest decision-making bodies in Bulgaria displays 11 women out of 100 executives compared to 12 out of 100 average for the European Union.

According to the World Economic Forum's assessments of workplace equality with the Global Gender Gap Index, Bulgaria ranks high in 22th position among 142 countries with the index 0.7444⁴ (WEF 2014). According to International Labor Organization, Bulgaria ranks 35th of 108 countries for women's percentage share of all managers. The percentage of women managers in Bulgaria is 36.4 of all managers; the percentage of senior and middle-level managers who are women in Bulgaria is 35.5 (ILO 2014). And according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Women National Parliament World Classification, Bulgaria ranks

67th out of 140 countries on the number of women members of the National Assembly, elected in 2014 (49 out of 240 members or 20.4 percent); and two thirds of judges in all national courts, at all levels, are women (IPU 2015).

Overall, statistical sources display relatively high level of gender egalitarianism in Bulgaria stemmed from the combination of historical traditions, the impact of gender equality indoctrinated by the Communist state, and modern efforts in Bulgarian society to comply with egalitarian values of the European Union.

Empirical study of managers' perceptions of gender roles in Bulgaria

In order to analyze the current trends in gender egalitarianism in Bulgaria, in October 2014 - March 2015 the authors conducted the survey of Bulgarian managers. Out of 420 questionnaires distributed among managers in manufacturing and service companies, 125 questionnaires were returned (response rate 30%). They were processed towards the creation of perceptual patterns in Bulgarian business leadership and management.

The concept and methodology of the survey were based on the leading-edge 62-societies' Global Leadership and Organizational behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research (House 2004).

	Bulgaria			European Union		
	women	men	gender gap	women	men	gender gap
Employment rates (2009)	64.0	73.8	9.8	64.5	75.8	13.3
Life expectancy at birth (2008)	77.40	70.09		82.21	76.07	
Part-time workers (%)	2.7	2.0		31.5	8.3	
Pay gap (2008)			13.6			17.5
Educational attainment (at least upper secondary level), aged 20-24	82.5	84.8		81.4	75.9	
Sex distribution of tertiary education graduates	61.4	38.6		59.5	40.5	
Sex distribution in parliament	22	78		24	76	
Sex distribution in companies' highest decision-making bodies	11	89		12	88	

Table 1. Gender-based statistics for Bulgaria and European Union (Source: Report 2011)

⁴ The highest possible score is 1 (equality) and the lowest possible score is 0 (inequality).



The theoretical foundation of GLOBE stemmed from previous comprehensive research by G. Hofstede (1980) and D. McClelland (1985) as well as the theoretical findings of F. Kluckhohn, F. Strodtbeck (1961), and H. Triandis (1995). GLOBE combined behaviorist and anthropological perspectives thus permitting a more comprehensive analysis and interpretation of cultural data measured separately but consistently in terms of two manifestations of culture: modal practices (“as is”) and modal values (“should be”) of collectives.

Following the methodology and traditions of the GLOBE research, cultural values and practices in the survey were measured on a 7-point response scale with respect to cultural dimensions including Gender Egalitarianism dimension. The authors administered a survey of middle managers in Bulgaria, making every possible effort to make it consistent with the original GLOBE study requirements. They translated the original questionnaire (English version) into the Bulgarian language and tested it with back and forth translation conducted by two different teams of native speakers. They approached middle managers of Bulgarian firms through several professional and business networks; with the distinctive support from the Burgas Chamber of Commerce. The respondents represented different parts of the country such as major cities Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, and Varna.

The average age of respondents was 41.8 years; 51 men (40.8%) and 74 women (59.2%) responded to the survey. Only two respondents (1.6%) were born outside Bulgaria (in Russia) and all are currently Bulgarian citizens. 18 respondents (14.4%) lived abroad on one country for more than a year; and 6 (less than 4.8%) lived more than a year in two or three countries. Mothers of only 3 respondents were born outside Bulgaria (Poland, Russia) and fathers of only two respondents were born abroad (Greece). In the families of 13 respondents the second language was spoken (6 – Russian, two – German, one – Polish, one – Greek, one – Romanian, one – Serbian, one – Turkish).

On average respondents were employed for 18.1 years, in a current organization 10.9 years, and in a management position for 7.3 years. 34 respondents (27.2%) have had experience working in multinational companies, 31 participated in professional organizations (24.8%) and 21 – in industrial or trade organizations (16.8%). On average, respondents had 14.9 years of formal

education; and 42 respondents (33.6 %) had received formal training in Western management techniques practices. Functionally, 30 respondents (24%) worked in general administration and planning; 9 (7.2%) – in research, engineering, technical support or production; 15 (12%) – in finance and accounting; 13 (10.4%) – in human resources management; 47 (35%) – in marketing, sales or purchasing; and 11 (8.8%) in after sales services. While all managers spoke Bulgarian language in their organizations, other languages were spoken such as English (46 respondents or 34 %), Russian (24 or 19%), German (6 or 4.8%) and French (3 or 2.4%).

Results of the study

Gender-related questions in the GLOBE research followed the mainstream traditions in social studies and addressed the perceptions about participation in education, striving towards achievements, perceptions of failures, attitudes towards health, and positioning in decision-making structures. The empirical data was collected separately with behaviors-tied questions and values-tied questions. And the survey also permitted assessments on gender-tied perceptions separately for men and women. The findings revealed the Gender Egalitarianism scores for Bulgaria that could be further compared to the average scores for 62 societies that participated in the GLOBE research.

On behavior-tied Gender Egalitarianism measures (practices, “as is”) Bulgarian managers scores high (4.42) far exceeding the average score for 62 societies (3.40). When positioned on the GLOBE rankings on Gender Egalitarianism, Bulgaria was on the top of the comparative list, displaying higher scores than the most egalitarian countries Hungary, Russia or Poland. However, the perceptual index was different and higher among women managers (4.51) than among male managers (4.28).

On values-tied Gender Egalitarianism measures (values, “should be”) the Bulgarian score was moderate (4.74) when compared to the average for 62 societies (4.74); and when compared to the GLOBE rankings, Bulgaria scored on par with Bolivia (22th), Mexico (23th), and Kazakhstan (24th). The gap in responses between women and men was more visible (5.01 vs. 4.27). Figures 1 and 2 display the comparative results of the study.

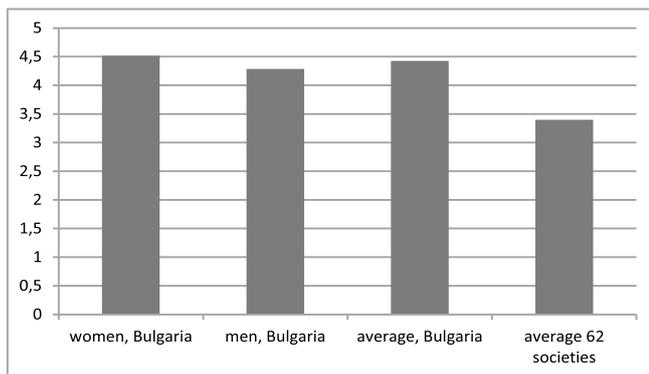


Figure 1. Practices-tied Gender Egalitarianism profile for Bulgaria

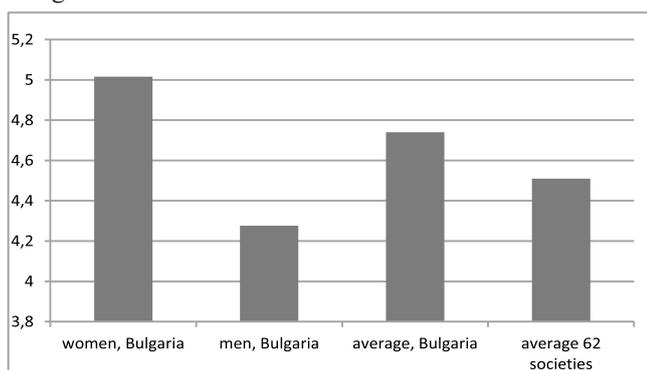


Figure 2. Values-tied Gender Egalitarianism profile for Bulgaria

Overall, the data on the perception of gender roles in Bulgarian business management revealed with the GLOBE research methodology reveals strong results on Gender Egalitarianism and suggests that this phenomenon serves as the important factor in business practices and in the economy at large. The study confirms the advancements in the equality of the roles of women and men and is consistent with the results of the other estimates by the international statistical authorities. It displays Bulgaria among the leading countries in terms of perception of the practices; and among the top 50 percent of 62 societies who participated in the GLOBE research.

Conclusion

The visible advantage of this study is the detailed and comprehensive methodology that contributes to the reliability and credibility of the findings. The results were consistent with the previous studies and in case of Bulgaria, at societal level, emphasized the importance of egalitarianism, with practices score visibly higher than all-country average; and with values score also slightly higher than all-countries average. These data attest to the idea that Bulgaria

remains an egalitarian society with expectations for minimizing gender roles. It may serve as the role model to the other countries and take the lead in promoting gender egalitarianism standards in the European Union. And considering the growing role of women in the labor force in the near future, the knowledge of trends and perceptions in this area may help Bulgarian organizations to capitalize on the roles women play as economic actors and create the unique competitive advantage.

REFERENCES

- Beall, A. & Sternberg, R. (Eds.) (1993) *The Psychology of Gender*. N.Y.: Guilford Press
- Gender equality in the European Union (2011) Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union
- Hendrix, L. (1994) *What is Sexual Inequality? On the Definition and Range of Variation*. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 28, 287-307
- Hofstede, G. (1980) *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- House, R. J., Hanges, P. J., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. W., & Gupta, V. (eds). (2004) *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications
- ILO (2014, June), *International Labor Organization Statistical Database, employment by occupation: managers*
- IPU (2015) *Inter-Parliamentary Union's Women in Politics Classification, women in Parliament, country ranking*
- Kluckhohn, F., Strodtbeck, F. (1961) *Variations in Value Orientation*. New York : HarperCollins
- McClelland, D. (1961) *The Achieving Society*. Princeton NJ: Van Nostrand
- Report on Progress on Equality between Women and Men in 2010 (2011) Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union
- Triandis H. (1995) *Individualism and Collectivism*. Boulder, Co.: Westview Press
- World Economic Forum (2014) *The Global Gender Gap Report, global gender gap index 2014, country ranking*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors acknowledge the support from Bulgarian-American Fulbright Commission and Burgas Chamber of Commerce in conducting this research.