

Kotsilieri, F. and Marshall, J. 2004. Hellenic women managers in the telecommunications sector: Living in transition. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 19(3): 177-191.

## HELLENIC WOMEN MANAGERS IN THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS SECTOR: LIVING IN TRANSITION

### *ABSTRACT*

This paper reports a research study into the career experiences and perspectives of a sample of women managers in the telecommunications industry in Greece. The study was conducted from a social constructionist perspective, seeking to explore how social and cultural factors affect the managers' perceptions. Tensions are explored between the research participants' relative satisfaction with their career progress and their limited representation at senior management levels. The strength of cultural expectations on Hellenic women to marry is noted.

The authors are the primary researcher and her research supervisor, respectively.

### *INTRODUCTION*

This paper explores how Hellenic women middle and senior managers in the Greek telecommunications sector perceive and make sense of their professional realities and career progress in the context of a society, which retains many traditional patriarchal structures and yet is undergoing change. Greece is currently considered by many as torn, not only geographically, between the East and the West. As a relatively recent member of the European Community, it is a society in transition, newly affected by the more demanding equality legislation of the Community. We wanted to study how this special positioning could influence the lives of Hellenic women in management.

The research focuses on those women who hold the necessary educational background to achieve senior positions and are prepared to allocate the (personal, emotional or other) resources necessary to climb the ladder of the corporate hierarchy, but may be impeded for reasons not fully under their control. In considering how Hellenic female telecommunications managers see their abilities and position themselves in relation to their male counterparts, this study is deeply influenced by social constructionist principles, as "*the experiences attributed to women, portrayed as contributing to their "nature", are not timeless and universal but are socially, historically, and politically located. [...] To presume that all women judge, think, or relate in a characteristic and universal manner denies the contextuality that [...] we know frames behavior*" (Bohan, 1997, p. 34).

In this Introduction we consider the general situation of women in employment in Greece and their progression so far into management positions, and then briefly consider the telecommunications industry in which the study was set.

At present, women's participation in the Greek labour force is only 49.7% in comparison to the 59.8% E.U. average (KETHI, Greek Research Centre for Gender Equality, 2002).

Diamantopoulou (2002), a former EU Commissioner in charge of Employment and Social Affairs, reports that “*One of the Union’s specific gender-oriented goals is now to increase the **female employment** rate to 60 per cent throughout the E.U. by 2010*” and notes the challenge this will mean for Greece. (Diamantopoulou, 2002, emphasis in the original).

There has so far been limited research concerning Greek female employment in general, hence little data is available to offer a clear picture of women’s career situation and prospects. It is indicative that the last survey on women in the workforce conducted by the National Statistics Service of Greece took place in 1984 (Miliori, 1993). “*Today there is ascertained a lack of current empirical research in Greece about the disadvantageous circumstances that surround female employment. The majority of presented studies elaborate on information collected from other sources*” (KETHI, Research Centre for Gender Equality, 2003).

For many years, Greece has been considered a country at a different stage of economic development compared to the majority of other E.U. state members. For example, whilst the 1957 Treaty of Rome included the objective of Equal Pay, which was translated into legislation through the E.C. Equal Pay directive in the mid-seventies, Equal Pay legislation was first introduced in Greece only in 1984. The last decade, however, leading to the finalisation of E.U. economic and monetary unification, has caused substantial changes to Greek societal and living habits, whereas government initiatives aimed at achieving a more integrated presence of the country in the E.U. Social changes are also contributing to this. These factors together suggest the increased presence of women in education and, eventually, in management jobs.

In recent years, Hellenic female students have come to represent almost half of business schools’ students but “*as a rule are disproportionately represented among the top 10 per cent of each class*” (Petraki-Kottis, 1996, p. 30). The females’ needs to pursue careers with prospects of advancement (Miliori, 1993), make women’s careers an extremely fertile area to study currently.

Petraki-Kottis and Dimelis (1992) notice that whereas higher education in fields such as literature or the arts could be considered as an end in itself, not necessarily fulfilling career purposes - particularly in the Greek traditional family context - Hellenic women’s labour market participation remains low even among economics or business administration graduates, with implications for both women and society generally.

Research concerning Hellenic female managers is scarce (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1998; Papalexandris & Bourandas, 1991). Petraki-Kottis (1996) argues that “*although the problem of women’s under-representation in management in Greece is serious enough, very little empirical work has been done so far to investigate the situation. Most knowledge about the problem is based on casual observation, individual case analyses and haphazard evidence*” (p. 30).

In 2002, women's presence in high and middle paid jobs had reached 36.6% and 32.7% respectively, as opposed to 59.2% in low-paid jobs (KETHI, Greek Research Centre for Gender Equality, 2002). Also, Mavridis (2002) warns that “*In the past - but also recently - most of the women, who are involved in the corporate management, have a relationship with the owner or founder of the firm*” (p. 21).

With particular respect to Hellenic women in the telecommunication area, Anna Diamantopoulou draws attention to the fact that “*on the whole, women are greatly underrepresented in the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) sector in all E.U. member states*” (Diamantopoulou, 2002 emphasis in the original). We have not found any research concerning Hellenic women in telecommunications, or any other hi-tech industry for that matter. The present study will therefore hopefully contribute to a better understanding of gender dynamics in a growing industry, which has not yet been sufficiently explored.

Debating gender issues in the Greek context is not new; these have preoccupied thinkers through the centuries. The notion of equality between the sexes can be found as far back as the early writings of the philosopher Plato, who initially argued for the same nature of men and women and, thus their equal rights to education and legal treatment (Dickason, 1976). However, he later abandoned this idea and espoused female inferiority to support the different societal roles attributed to the two sexes (Dickason, 1976). His successor, Aristotle, took the concept of women’s inferiority one step further by advocating the deformity of females and their ‘defective male’ status (Whitbeck, 1976). The persistence of discrepancies between the sexes has also been visible in academic literature:

*“From Aristotle’s notion of ‘woman as defective man’, through the Freudian explanation of most of feminist behavior as a reaction to the lack of penis, to the current insistence that ‘work’ means paid employment and that ‘productivity’ excludes unpaid household labor, social science has revealed a consistent proclivity to use men as the norm and to define women as ‘different’”* (Lips, 2001, p. 107).

In paying attention to issues of gender in Greece, we wondered if historical positionings of women and assumptions about their appropriate roles might be covertly present today in images of women in society and of their potential in management. In this respect, social constructionism (developed below) appeared an appropriate lens to help us explore how gender viewpoints can be synchronically constructed in each era and more or less altered through diachronic development.

Greek telecommunications firms were chosen for study as they combine innovation, progress and fast-moving ideas and are considered to be the technologies of the future. Hence they have an expanding range of jobs. They might therefore be ready to accommodate greater numbers of women managers than either traditional male-dominated technological areas such as engineering or more established bureaucratic organizations. Additionally, telecommunications are associated with more assertive, practical and technical skills on the part of employees than are other sectors. It would be interesting to explore the place of women in industries where job requirements may differ somewhat from those traditionally expected of females. We wanted to understand Hellenic women managers’ career aspirations at these changing times in this sector.

Telecommunications companies in this instance include both landline and mobile network providers operating in the Greek territory. There are currently one landline company, three mobile companies, and a small number of ‘alternative’ telephone network organizations. The Greek mobile industry is especially new territory (mobile phone communication was introduced in Greece in 1992), which has seen significant growth in the last few years.

## ADOPTING A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

The adoption of a social constructionist viewpoint enabled us to examine how gender is not constant, but created in and thus affected by, a wider context of social interactions. In this way, contextual factors, such as patriarchal societal structures, can deeply influence perceptions, expectations and behavioural enactments in accordance with specific temporal and situational circumstances. In this section of the paper we will briefly outline some of the key areas of ideas, which have shaped this study, and consider how they might relate to the experiences of Hellenic women managers.

### Gender is cultural, and creates expectations and behavioural prescriptions

From a social constructionist point of view, Gergen (2002) asserts that “*gender has been defined as the socially constructed pattern of behaviors, attitudes and emotions associated with one’s sex (defined as the biological basis of one’s body, given at birth), which gives one a gender identity as a woman or a man*” (p. 23).

Expectations and judgements about a person can be significantly guided by his/her sex, in a process of gender stereotyping (Lips, 2001), reinforcing assumptions and stereotypes with regards to the place, role and appropriate behaviour of men and women in society. If one considers men and women as two distinct groups carrying a social dimension, one can apply Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) framework of each society being hierarchically structured into different social groups that stand in power and status relations to one another, with women, in this case, in the “inferior” group. At the same time, “*social categories provide members with a social identity; a definition of who one is and a description and evaluation of what it entails*” (Zachariou, 2000, p. 4). Social categories may thus not only ‘describe’ their members but also prescribe appropriate behavioural norms, conduct, self-images and social identities for them.

A number of theories have attempted to analyse and justify both the reasons for and the ways through which gender differentiation is achieved and sustained, using as their starting points biological or social perspectives, or a combination of the two. Exploring how Hellenic women managers’ corporate aspirations might, to a certain extent, be socially constructed, invites an examination of how the wider environment (perhaps the patriarchal structures of Greek society, see below) encourages the adoption of deep-rooted perceptions by men and women in the workforce. Childhood learning, imitation and repetition can socialise a person into gender patterns and is thus a significant influence on the creation of ‘gendered’ people (Gergen, 2002; Lips, 2001).

Gender expectations are also received in adult life, as well as in childhood, partly through mass media images, as Diamantopoulou (2002) notes in the European and Greek context:

*“Compared with men, women are more likely to be portrayed as being married, younger, less likely to be in paid employment, and far more likely to be represented as victims of violence. In other words they all too often appear as being **powerless** or **weak**. And where women are portrayed as successful at work, the cost is often family failure”* (Diamantopoulou, 2002, emphasis in the original).

Berger and Luckman (1966), who studied how reality is constructed by individuals, examine the importance of the construction of specific roles, ascribed to and played by each member of society under appropriate circumstances, enabling his/her fuller participation in the social order. They claim that both potential performers and people around them are aware of the standards that shape performance and of the fact that knowledge of such standards is widely held (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Similarly, Eagly and Wood (1999) assert that, in many societies, men develop more powerful, dominant and instrumental behaviours, whereas women develop more subordinate, caring and emotional ones, in accordance with the professional or other roles they will later be expected to assume. The continuity and perpetuation of standardised, sex-signalling attributes, which seal individuals into pre-specified categories, can take subtle, indiscernible forms and appear in or affect a wide spectrum of everyday human activities and situations.

One might question whether standards of gendered behaviour are so explicit or there is room for a person to innovate in role performance, and how someone knows what latitude is possible. When gender roles are shifting, as they seem to be in contemporary society (although we might wonder if surface changes are matched by more fundamental change), standards may become unclear; different actors may have different expectations, some tacit. With specific reference to this study, we may wonder whether standards for the women participants who made it to the top are somewhat different from those applied to their less 'successful' female colleagues, or whether the former have had, to a certain extent, to create their 'own' standards for achievement.

We wondered whether Hellenic women managers would identify with and judge themselves against stereotypical female expectations, and how they would manage the consequences of being in roles which are still relatively unusual for women, especially in Greek culture.

### **People are social, learn gender through socialization and do gender**

From a social constructionist view, identities are not fixed. On the contrary, different situations and experiences trigger or demand varied behavioural responses on a person's part so that identity can be multifaceted, distributed, even contradictory: *"there are a number of contextual selves, the people we are in different relational settings. To be sure, there must always be limits and constraints on this multiplicity. But our descriptions of people's identities will need to register the contradictions between their personalities, responses and actions in different situations"* (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996, p. 223).

In a constructionist perspective people are not defined on the basis of an inner pool of characteristics, but present themselves through interaction with, and in the presence of, other people, leading to a joint creation of what might be termed 'personal' traits. This is a 'constructed' approach to what a person is, as opposed to an essentialist view. Burr (1995) proposes using the term 'identity', rather than 'personality' (which she sees as deeply essentialist), emphasising one's identification with a set of attributes rather than one's fixed inner human nature.

Thus, one's gender identity cannot be seen as simply stemming from a biologically pre-determined set of data; on the contrary, if one focuses on the constructed, situated, interactively created character of the body and its broader gender connotations, one can

appreciate how “*identities are produced within social interactions, not prior to them, and, once accepted, they influence the manner in which one conducts oneself*” (Gergen, 2001, p. 36).

West and Zimmerman (1991) offer an account of how gender and its respective male or female behaviours are construed and thus ‘performed’ through continuous human interaction and social doings. Reflecting above arguments they also claim that each person learns to both produce displaying acts in accordance with his/her categorisation as a man or a woman and to modify these acts in different situations to fit what is expected from him/her on each occasion (West and Zimmerman, 1991). A communal, interactive underpinning is therefore implied during both learning what is appropriately masculine/feminine and performing it:

*“When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas. In one sense, of course, it is individuals who “do” gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production”* (West and Zimmerman, 1991, p. 14).

Olsson and Walker (2003) draw attention to how gender is transacted through discursive practices and determines one’s conscious or subconscious judgements and actions.

The constructionist viewpoint thus shifts the focus from the person or sex/gender in specific to the context and, in the case of gender inequalities, to multidimensional influences on the realities and conditions of women (Bohan, 1997). Bohan (1997) argues that “*the vast majority of situations in which we function entail gendered prescriptions and proscriptions. As we do gender “correctly”, we legitimize the prescriptive quality of that circumstance for members of our sex, thus reinforcing and reproducing the gendering of those situations*” (pp. 39-40). West and Zimmerman (1991) reinforce the notion in that “*if we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category*” (p. 33). In relation to this, our research led us several times to consider the ‘paradox’ of women managers whose actions and professional choices may be simultaneously breaking and reinforcing gender-associated expectations, balancing - sometimes sub-consciously - what is pre-ordered with what can be achieved for their sex.

Applying the above gender-associated concepts to the study of women in management, we can consider whether societal influences are translated into organisational and individual expectations, whether characteristics of work settings provide cues for women and men’s differential self-presentation, and whether corporations ‘require’ or encourage - overtly or covertly - different kinds of behaviour from members of the two sexes.

### **Change and continuity in social patterns of gender**

If every one of us is identified with the respective group of men or women that we are supposed to belong to, there is little we individually can do to change general expectations about our self-representation and behaviour. Gergen (1999) stresses the fact that “*when our group is represented to millions of people we confront helplessness writ large*” (p. 42). “*It is not only a matter of public reputation, but as these reputations become shared so do they come to be the taken-for-granted realities. And it is these realities that inform public policies, educational practices, police actions and so on*”

(Gergen, 1999, p. 43). Requirements for gendered behaviour and how tightly these are held can vary substantially from culture to culture. The last quote shows clearly, however, the potential magnitude of the power - often suppressive - of socially constructed gender expectations. Even if 'being' a female is at the end of the day a cultural performance that can be modified through the adoption of alternative ways of presenting oneself and interacting with others, it is not always feasible for one to either step out of one's 'reality' and construct new possibilities of action or to find the strength to challenge a deeply rooted and taught status quo (Gergen, 1999). In which case we may be left with a sense of oppression. As more women enter management we may find that they are simultaneously formally accepted as legitimate whilst informally their rights to membership are in doubt, at least to other people, and sometimes also to themselves (Marshall, 1995).

### **Patriarchal social forms**

Theories exploring patriarchy address issues of culture and its potential constraints for women and men. As stated earlier, we were especially interested in Greece at a time of transition, as the society has traditionally been perceived as patriarchally based. Many questions remain with regards to what 'patriarchy' really means; whether it has always been the predominant model or succeeded earlier matriarchal forms of social organising; its interconnectedness with issues of power, economic structures and labour; and, not least, its evolution through the centuries and its transformation into different, more subtle patterns.

The concept of patriarchy has been addressed by a wide spectrum of theoretical viewpoints (radical, marxist and liberal feminists, dual-systems theorists and so on), patriarchal patterns holding a primordial place within the broader feminist problematisation. Here we will touch on some theories, which seem especially relevant to researching the current position of Hellenic women managers.

Patriarchal practices are not new, but can be traced back millennia. As Lerner (1994) points out, the first book of the Homeric epic poem "Iliad", which refers to Greek society of approximately 1200 BC, describes several times the enslavement of women and their "use" for the satisfaction of warriors; this practice was aimed at increasing status and power among men. In studying Greece, then, we are very aware of its long association with patriarchal social forms.

Gray (1982) defines patriarchy as a set of cultural behaviours according to which males' occupations and actions are considered more valuable compared to those of females. Walby (1990) perceives it as "*a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women*" (p. 20). Cockburn (1991) argues that this set of societal hierarchical structures strengthens the sense of solidarity among men and thus makes it easier for them to control women. "*Due to the systematic nature, patriarchy is not something in which membership is optional*" (Cockburn, 1991, p. 2). The notion of solidarity is also mentioned by Hakim (1996) who underscores that "*the key element which no one challenges is the idea that men organise collectively to further support their interests against those of women, through the labour market, law, political agenda, culture and ideology*" (p. 12). In the definitions above, the common denominator is an assumed structural inferiority of the female gender, which, according to Young-Eisendrath (1988) "*is the background of much of the received knowledge about women's everyday lives in patriarchy*" (p. 155).

In "*Woman, Culture and Society*", Lamphere and Rosaldo (1974) assert that they deem every contemporary society they have encountered so far patriarchal. Rosaldo (1974) explains this fact on the basis of females having traditionally been restricted to the household, thus the private arena. She then suggests that women will be able to ameliorate their status and conditions only if they act as a group rather than as separated individuals, and that females can have a much stronger position in societies where private and public sites are not greatly differentiated.

Walby (1990) conceptualises two different forms of patriarchy, private and public. The former takes place mainly within the household, where the female's labour is exploited by an individual patriarch, whereas the latter is usually related to public sites and the state, it thus has a more collective character. The procedures through which private and public patriarchy are established and sustained differ in that the first aims at depriving women of their options whilst the second seeks to attribute to females as a whole a lower and dependent status.

In private patriarchy females are directly and individually controlled by a man - usually the father or husband - who ensures that they are excluded from public sites and strictly restrained within the household limits. In public patriarchy, women have formal access to both public and private sites, but their exploitation comes indirectly from the combined activities of their male counterparts who tend to segregate them into inferior positions. Whilst in private patriarchy women's restriction is obvious and indisputable, public patriarchy may prove to be a far more serious trap for the 'second' sex. It can superficially appear as emancipation, but might in reality undermine women because it isolates them both indirectly and collectively. For example, segregation of occupations into male and female may well be retained (Cockburn, 1991).

All Western societies - including the Greek - seem to have progressed within the last century from a form of private patriarchy to a system of public patriarchal structures. Women have - or at least seem to have - escaped the bonds of their traditional domestic role and moved into the public arena where they challenge the societal patterns and conceptions created for them in their absence and seek to assert their equal status. In Greece, women have been increasingly 'breaking the patriarchal chains' in the last few decades with their massive entry into university education and the labour market, which has offered them the possibility of greater autonomy and life decision-making.

From the above ideas we see the multi-dimensionality of the patriarchal phenomenon and how it can underlie and permeate public and private arenas in diverse, more or less obvious, forms. It therefore seems of great importance to look into the ways in which societies bearing such structures can overcome potential disadvantages for women and promote more egalitarian modes.

Working with the above theoretical ideas, we set out to explore with Hellenic women managers where they think Greek society stands today regarding its patriarchal tradition, along with their views on the links this may have to their professional positions and development. We wondered whether the data would affirm these notions of public and private realms and how successful female managers would perceive their lives in such terms.



## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The collection of data was achieved through twenty-one interviews, conducted by the first author in Greece, which took place between April and December 2003 with female middle and senior managers employed by Greek telecommunications companies and the Greek subsidiaries of multinational companies. Interviewees were approached either through the Human Resources Manager of their corporation who then agreed to enable access, or through networking, and were all total strangers to us. Gaining access was a lengthy process, hindered by the small number of women in middle and senior levels in these companies. The interviewees varied in age between mid-twenties and early fifties. The sample included eight single women, eleven married women (eight with and three without children), and two separated women. All held at least a first University degree (and, in some cases, a Masters) relevant to their area of employment. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours and followed an in-depth, semi-structured format guided by thirteen open-ended questions. In the majority of cases questions were distributed to participants in advance to enhance discussion. Interviews were tape-recorded and full transcriptions made.

The number of telecommunications companies operating in Greece is relatively small (three mobile network providers, one main landline provider and four 'alternative' landline providers) and our research eventually spanned all but one of these organisations. It would, however, be inappropriate to over-generalise its findings given its modest sample size.

Interview questions were informed by the theoretical material explored above and by specific literature identifying challenges and choices for women managers, aiming to achieve depth and quality of understanding. They covered a range of issues in relation to discrimination, comparing professional capabilities and performance between the sexes, the combination of personal and professional lives, the influences of Greek culture and tradition, education and job choices, and images of male and female managers in the Greek hi-tech industry. These are some examples of the questions asked:

“How do you think people perceive the productivity/performance of male managers in comparison to their female counterparts? Why do you feel this is so?”

“Could organisational culture influence the commitment of women employees and, if yes, in what way?”

“Do you think of your male colleagues as equally capable professionally as yourself? If not, why is that?”

“In your opinion, could certain traditional characteristics of the Hellenic society have an impact on the position of females within the corporate hierarchy and, if yes, what kind of impacts and to what extent?”

The purpose was to explore collaboratively with participants what factors had influenced their images, expectations and career experiences as Hellenic women managers, and to invite interviewees to consider their perceptions of male and female professionals. In this respect, we found ourselves identifying with McCanney-Gergen's (1988) wish “*to encourage these women to consider the possibility that all concepts of social life are social constructs, which are open to negotiation of*

*meaning, particularly by the members of the affected groups*” (p. 98). Respondents were strongly encouraged to surface their experiences in their own words and bring into the discussion further issues they deemed important to the topic of Hellenic women managers’ careers.

Interviews were conducted within a participatory, feminist approach, seeking to avoid the creation of a hierarchical relationship with the researcher acting as expert and the participant as profane subject, on the basis of Oakley’s (1981) claim that there can be “*no intimacy without reciprocity*” (p. 49). We concur with Fontana and Frey’s (1994) suggestion that “*the emphasis is shifting to allow the development of a closer relation between interviewer and respondent, attempting to minimize status differences and doing away with the traditional hierarchical situation in interviewing*” (p. 370). These intentions were achieved. In all cases the atmosphere was relaxed and open, with participants appearing motivated and enthusiastic towards the overall endeavour, particularly given their time constraints. In one occasion, they even helped us find other potential participants (see below in Findings).

Following each meeting, interviewees were given, either verbally or through e-mail, an outline to check with them the prime researcher’s understanding of what had been discussed. The analysis of the interview data is still in process, so a preliminary account is given in this paper. Analysis has involved looking for recurring themes and significant issues, both in relation to the concepts addressed in the literature review and to additional topics raised by respondents. Attention was paid to whether there were differences between sub-groups of interviewees, such as those employed by multi-national corporations as opposed to those working for local organisations or those until recently owned by the state. The material has also been subject to a rigorous meta-commentary through the prime researcher’s self-reflections as an ‘insider’ to Greek culture who has now gained a different perspective from studying in the UK for four years and then returning ‘home’.

## ***FINDINGS***

Findings will be reported thematically, showing emerging themes and issues.

Interviewees worked in various organisational areas including marketing/advertising, the legal department, human resources, operations, public relations, strategy and technical departments. As organisations had different ways of depicting hierarchic levels, it is not possible to offer a consistent view of the participants’ seniority across the companies involved. They were all, however, classified as middle and senior managers – in accordance with our sampling intentions – with many of them holding the title of Director or Head of Department. None of them was yet a member of the company Board. This differentiation in terms of employment sub-sectors played a substantial role in the responses given and the additional issues they raised. For instance, Marketing Managers or PR Directors – who, by co-incidence, were members of ‘female-dominated’ departments – found it much more normal to receive equal treatment to their male counterparts and be given fair chances by the corporation and/or their family and friends. Mechanical or technical support staff, on the contrary, underlined a number of times the surprised remarks that often followed telling people their career choice and noted that people might expect someone in their post to show specific, male-stereotyped skills.

## Feeling 'accepted' as women managers

All 21 participants said strongly that in general they faced no problems with their male counterparts' attitudes. On the contrary, they felt that, at least at their current managerial level, they enjoyed full meritocracy and equal opportunities of professional development within the telecommunications companies' boundaries. One interviewee from the mechanical department of a telecommunications' corporation noted that "*in my progress there were no problems at all, and, at least in my department, nobody was ever preferred just because he was a man, there was no such distinction*". Another senior manager said strongly: "*no, there are no discriminations as such...*" and "*I have not been held back at all because of my gender*". To give a view of the circumstances surrounding her progress, one participant noted that her respected status in the company had followed this pattern all along: "*As far as I am concerned, even back then when I was on a much more junior level, I never had the problem of getting to the phone and passing on a request and not having it accepted just because I was a woman. [...] The internal approach of the company is brilliant, there are no problems at all*".

Such assertions, however positive, left unanswered questions for us about what the situation is for women in junior management posts, where they are more equally represented, and about reasons for the decreasing percentage of women with organizational seniority. Relating to the former, a noticeable discrepancy appeared between participants employed by private telecommunications corporations and those in organizations which until recently were owned by the state, and thus more affiliated to the Greek public sector. Whereas women in the former claimed to have been clearly valued by their organisations even when they held lower posts at the beginning of their careers, some of the interviewees from the latter group implied that things were not equally promising before they actually broke through 'the glass ceiling', and it was to the prime researcher's great surprise to hear one of them arguing that "*you actually have to flirt with many male bosses around to get high*" (Note: 'high' can be used in Greek as a slang word connotating 'promoted'). The researcher (as an insider of the Greek culture) wonders if this differentiation of opinions could be because ex-public sector organisations may still reflect the general mentality which has dominated the Greek public labour market for decades, one that encourages personal networking and acquaintances as a prerequisite to secure a good job.

Despite their personal satisfaction, again all 21 participants recognised the low numbers of women managers in the Greek telecommunications sector. A variety of reasons for the restricted representation of females at higher organisational levels were offered. Most of them had to do with ways in which women in general are perceived and, most importantly, perceive themselves, in the Greek societal context today, the 'provocative' combination of a female employee with the IT industry – and some of its areas in particular – notwithstanding.

More specifically, the images of a female with which they had grown up, and the expectations of family and friends when it comes to the choice between commitment to family or to a demanding career constituted major issues for most participants, especially when related to hi-tech domains such as telecoms. In one interviewee's words "*women usually start very vigorously...but after a few years, they are expected to start prioritising their family...The Greek society still, particularly in technological environments...they see women somewhat suspiciously*".

Such reflections, with regards to the role a Hellenic female in her late twenties or early thirties 'should' take, were linked by the majority of respondents to the deeply-rooted traditional patriarchal structures of Greek society, dictating the man as the bread-winner and his female partner as holding a supporting place in the family. This reminded us of Riley's (2003) assertion that "*no legitimate successor for the traditional male role of breadwinner/provider has become available and women's increased participation in the paid workforce has not been met by an equivalent decrease in their domestic responsibilities*" (pp. 99-100). This could be seen as relating to the perpetuation of old-fashioned images when it comes to the position a woman can occupy in the wider socio-economic system. On a similar note many of the participants underlined - albeit not in the specific academic terms - the passage from private to public forms of patriarchy, by drawing attention to how patriarchal practices have become subtler, so much so that they are often unnoticeable by a woman until she has left the family nest, finished her studies and is actually 'out there', in the workplace and at an age when she is supposed to start a family. This was put by one of the interviewees who found herself single at the age of 32, following an engineering degree and a few years of working long hours: "*I have heard many people say that they want their daughter to go to University...[...]... the social value is that the daughter has University education, which contributes positively to the status of the entire family*"; "*I am also asked, informally, in the corridors: "Aren't YOU going to get married?" and when I tell them that I will do so in due time and they realise I am 32 years old, they urge me to hurry...*".

### **Appreciating supportive partners**

In relation to life choices, a recurring theme in interviewees' responses were the challenges of combining personal (family) and professional lives. Many of them, both married and unmarried ones living with partners, attributed a large part of their success at work to their male partner's behaviour and support. One participant distinctively changed the old saying to "*behind every important woman there is an important man*", and said that she could not stress enough the importance of having an understanding and helping husband. Despite acknowledging the significant contribution of their male partner to their professional capacity to flourish, a number of respondents noted an interesting tension by admitting that they were often annoyed at the image of their partner/husband taking up domestic responsibilities such as washing the dishes, but accepted it as a 'necessary evil' to maintain some balance between the burdens of everyday life. We feel that this contrast between recognising the (male) partner's role in the household or childcare and the participants' discomfort towards it may mirror the opposition of more obsolete role-models which still inform people's expectations with current needs for more balanced role-sharing between the sexes.

### **Critiquing other women's limited expectations**

In parallel to naming socialisation, upbringing and role models as the main factors influencing women's slow influx into senior posts in the Greek telecommunications corporate hierarchy, interviewees repeatedly put the blame on females themselves, for failing to go beyond the prescribed limits set for them.

*"In my opinion, it is women's fault as well. It is their fault. It is not unachievable, you know, and I am offering my experience now which has been very positive. If you are devoted to both things (career and personal life), you can achieve both things. It's just that many of us will not break their*

*boundaries, believe in themselves, be different from the norm and claim this difference...". "Clearly, there is still today this tendency that the woman has to prioritise her home and this is something we may all have in mind, even subconsciously. I think it all comes down to how one deals with some situations rather than how other people tell him/her to deal with them because I am not sure that all these young women who 'decided' or their environment led them to decide, that they are more suitable for specific tasks are eventually happy..."*

This suggests that some, at least, Hellenic women are aware of the possible constraints that their constructed realities may create for them and of the need to surpass these. On the other hand, it can also indicate how the majority of them may still compromise for what is offered to them as 'the road to take' without inquiring into alternative choices, or finding the courage to take these.

The special features of the Greek culture and tradition (religion, Greek mythology, patriarchy) and their impact on the current societal or professional position of Greek females were extensively discussed in the majority of interviews. Albeit not in the exact terms, participants drew attention to how 'us Greeks' are expected to spend time with and honour traditions with our family and relatives, particularly during special days (weekends, bank holidays, birthdays and namedays), whereas, in other countries, where religious or other influences are not equally strong, one may have greater personal liberty as to how to spend free and/or holiday time. This concept referred directly to the specialities of the Greek tradition, which presuppose a close connection to family – and therefore traditional – structures, and thus forcefully communicate role models and 'acceptable' choices.

All participants strongly rejected any potential of overt historical or cultural influence on the gender expectations of younger generations of Greeks (i.e. of the ages of forty or younger), at least in the sense of widespread, systematic customs stemming from commonly accepted guidelines. Interviewees, however, underlined the role of the Greek educational system, which attributes a special place to the teaching of Greek history and mythology (myths, epics, tragedies), often without paying attention to gender issues and the messages present in these didactic accounts. The complexities of subconscious linking between images offered by school textbooks to children and adolescents, and the lack of 'corrective' teaching which would reveal possible deficiencies in the tacit models purveyed, can often end up, according to more than half of our interviewees, creating traditionally gendered people.

## **Networking**

Networking amongst female managers in the Greek telecoms industry appeared to us as an interesting and important aspect of the women's professional realities. When asked, all participants denied the existence and use of mentoring in the conventional sense of the term implying regular contact, meetings and support to a specific end. However, many of them recognised that their inter-industry mobility through the years offered them the possibility to meet and keep track of the professional progress of female counterparts in both their own and fellow companies (the limited numbers of corporations and women managers facilitating this). For most participants, day-to-day professional support and encouragement came from organisational colleagues of either sex, rather than from female peers within the broader sector. Many, though, admitted that noticing the development and successes of their female acquaintances in the broader sector had a positive effect, motivating them to keep up the

hard work and inspiring future endeavours. Whilst we could not, then, talk about a network similar to the 'old-boys' one, we witnessed this interorganisational 'alliance' between women managers in the sector on various occasions, usually by them asking us whether we had already talked to X person, or were planning to do so and providing us with names of female counterparts whose stories we "*definitely had to bear*". In one instance following such suggestions, one of the interviewees offered, and managed to obtain, three next-day meetings with female senior managers which meant access to an additional company we had been trying unsuccessfully to enter for months. This could be seen as reflecting an environment of mutual trust and attention to each other's needs.

### **Believing in increasing opportunities for women**

All interviewees were optimistic with regards to the future female presence in the Greek telecommunications sector. The phrase "*things are gradually changing, they just need time*" came up quite often and suggested that younger generations are increasingly leaving behind constraints from patriarchal societal structures and limited expectations about women's place, possibilities and professional choice. However, it was slightly disappointing to hear many respondents' argument that this process, albeit hugely welcome, would definitely be slowed down by Hellenic mothers because, interviewees said, mothers are still pampering their male offspring to such an extent that they end up taking women's attentive role for granted and therefore see women as inferior.

A senior Marketing Manager claimed: "*Women of my generation have reached my level, that's the highest one has reached...[...] In 3-4 years this situation may have changed a lot...*" Whereas one of her colleagues, the mother of a young daughter said that she dreaded to think what her daughter's prospects would be, if her partner was one of those 'pampered' males, not up-to-date with the need for differentiated roles between the sexes.

### ***DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS***

The findings above suggest at first glance that women managers in the Greek telecommunications sector today experience their professional realities in a quite optimistic and empowering way, recognising positive changes that allow them to benefit from more equally distributed opportunities in both personal and working arenas. It is interesting that these females do not seem to carry the perception of disadvantage we might expect based on theories, which outline the drawbacks of patriarchal structures and sex/gender prejudices. We may thus be encountering a transitional generation of employees, who have entered the labour force with different ideas and expectations and have managed to a great extent to create for themselves a more beneficial working space.

Having said that, however, statistics still do not seem to do justice to such claims. In a study among the largest Greek firms concerning the participation of women in management, Petraki-Kottis (1996) found that "*among the graduates of five or ten years ago the percentage of women who have since obtained managerial positions is relatively small and the importance of the positions of those who have entered the managerial ranks is much lower compared to that of their male fellow students*" (p. 30), with the situation being even poorer – with fewer and lower posts – in the case of multi-national firms' subsidiaries (Petraki-Kottis, 1996, p. 31). In the same vein, the success of this study was put at risk a number of times due to the lack of a large sample of suitably senior

women in the sector studied. Consequently, although it appears important, particularly given our epistemological viewpoint, not to disbelieve the respondents' truths, our meta-commentary cannot but note the discontinuity between their expressed perceptions and their actual presence in the higher managerial IT ranks.

We wonder if there are similarities to the results of Marshall (1984) who found in her study of women managers in the publishing and retailing industries in the UK that, at that time, most of the women interviewed were not initially willing to identify themselves as disadvantaged by discrimination, but then reported many ways in which they had to adjust their behaviour to avoid being devalued as female. For example, they did not want to be seen as emotional in any way, lest this affirm stereotypes of women and render them less legitimate as managers. Marshall said of this finding: *"it seems to me that this substantial group within the sample was allowing that there are potential disadvantages to being women, but they believed that awareness increased the likelihood of these becoming significant. They were happier to disregard these issues in their surface consciousness."* (Marshall, 1984, p. 152.) A few women in Marshall's research, who were very aware of disadvantages of being female at the time of interview, found this consciousness disabled them in relating to the work environment, and so was dangerous. Perhaps circumstances in Greece today may be similar, given the still-limited numbers and history of women in management roles.

We would therefore argue for a contradiction in terms, in the sense that Greece may be a society in transition yet still holding deeply established and tight bonds with family, tradition, personal and/or interpersonal relations, and the idea of 'external legitimisation' of human achievement by one's family, colleagues and community. The particularities of the Greek culture and customs (patriarchal structures of society, historic and religious factors etc), manifest in a wide range of formal and informal everyday activities, favour the linkage between micro and macro practices and promote specific expectations in accordance with one's sex/gender and other parameters such as age, background and socioeconomic position. The reinforcement of such norms and expectations depends of course heavily on personal and immediate or extended family characteristics, significant amongst which are the degree of religiousness, educational background and area of residence. As one of our interviewees noted, there are still quite a few families – particularly in areas where societies are 'closer' – who, despite the fact that they take pride in seeing their daughter receiving University education, later hope for her to join the public sector where, in the case of Greece, she will not have to work long hours, will obtain a stable salary and will have enough time to take care of her (future) family.

We suggest that the Greek societal context currently combines the 'old' with the 'new', the eastern with the western and an attachment to traditional practices with a desire for progress and development. In this regard, a Hellenic woman of today aspiring to higher management positions and making the necessary steps to that end may often be forced to experience the multifaceted, fragmented, contextually differentiated selves that Wetherell and Maybin (1996, p. 223) referred to, by having to be assertive yet submissive, emancipated yet traditional, home-oriented yet career-seeking, 'European' yet very 'Greek'. It is probably along these lines that the main contradiction appears between Hellenic female telecom managers being happy with their professional prospects and opportunities but at the same time uncomfortable with their male partners or sons engaging in domestic tasks. An important issue here would then be how this woman can hold these different selves 'gracefully' and

'lightly' to be able to de-construct them, evolve them, surpass them, re-invent them, empower and disempower them, at a cross-road of times and civilisations and under a tradition that is still both vivid and 'passé', so as to benefit from each one of them accordingly. And, of course, at the same time, where can be found the limits and constraints to this multiplicity of selves (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996, p. 223) and who would let these limits for her?

This study's findings constitute a contribution to a largely unexplored research area and should be treated tentatively as indicative of ways in which Hellenic female telecommunication managers make sense of their working realities. Further research is crucial in identifying factors internal or external to the organisation that influence these women's professional development, the perceptions and roles held by their male counterparts, and the extent to which these findings might apply to other countries with similar socio-economic background and structures (i.e. Mediterranean countries, Cyprus, Turkey etc), especially given that the majority of the project's participants worked for multinational firms or companies currently expanding to neighbour countries.

## **REFERENCES**

- Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, T. (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London, England: Penguin Books.
- Bohan, J. S. (1997) "REGARDING GENDER: Essentialism, Constructionism, and Feminist Psychology" in Gergen, M. M. and Davis, S. N. (Eds.) *Toward a New Psychology of Gender: A Reader*, New York and London: Routledge, pp. 31-47.
- Burr, V. (1995) *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, London: Routledge.
- Cockburn, S. (1991) *In the Way of Women: Men's Resistance to Sex Equality in Organizations*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: MacMillan Education.
- Dickason, A. (1976) Anatomy and destiny: The role of biology in Plato's views of women in Gould, C. C. and Wartofsky, M. W. (Eds) *Women and Philosophy: Toward a theory of liberation*, New York: Putnam, pp. 45-53.
- Eagly, A. H. and Wood, W. (1999) The origins of sex differences in human behavior: Evolved dispositions versus social roles, *American Psychologist*, 54(6), pp. 408-423.
- Fontana, A. and Frey, J. H. (1994) Interviewing: The Art of Science in Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, pp. 361-376, Thousand Oaks, California; London; New Delhi: Sage
- Gergen, K. J. (1999) *An Invitation to Social Construction*, London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage.
- Gergen, M. (2001) *Feminist Constructions in Psychology: Narrative, Gender, and Performance*, Thousand Oaks, California; London; New Delhi: Sage.
- Gergen, M. (2002) *Social Constructionist Theory*, paper presented at the Emerging Approaches to Inquiry conference, September 2002, Stroud, UK.
- Gray, E. D. (1982) *Patriarchy as a conceptual trap*, Wellesley, Massachusetts: Rounstable.
- Hakim, C. (1996) *Key Issues in Women's Work*, London: Athlone.
- Leacock - Burke, E. (1972) "Introduction" in Engels, F. *Origin of the family, private property, and the state*, New York: Pathfinder, pp. 7-67.
- Lerner, G. (1994) *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lips, H. M. (2001) *Sex and Gender: An Introduction*, California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Marshall, J. (1984) *Women Managers: Travellers in a male world*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.



- Marshall, J (1995) *Women Managers Moving On: Exploring career and life choices*, International Thomson Publishing, London.
- Mavridis, D. G. (2002) Cherchez la femme: Women as Managers in Greek Corporates: An Empirical Investigation, *Equal Opportunities International*, Vol. 21, No 7, pp. 21-36.
- McCanney - Gergen, M. (1988) "Toward a Feminist Metatheory and Methodology in the Social Sciences" in McCanney - Gergen, M. (Ed.) *Feminist Thought and the Structure of Knowledge*, London; New York: New York University, pp. 87-104.
- Miliori, P. (1993) "Greece" in Davidson, M. J. and Cooper, C. L. (Eds.), *European Women in Business and Management*, London: Paul Chapman, pp. 146-159.
- Oakley, A. (1981) Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms in Roberts, H. (ed.) *Doing Feminist Research*, London; Boston; Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 30-61.
- Olsson, S. and Walker, R. (2003) Through a gendered lens? Male and female executives' representations of one another, *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 24, No.7, pp. 387-396.
- Panigyrakis, G. and Veloutsou, C. (1998) Sex-related differences in public relations managers in consumer goods companies in Greece and Italy, *Women in Management Review*, Vol. 13, No 2, pp. 72-82.
- Papalexandris, N. and Bourandas, D. (1991) Attitudes towards women as managers: the case of Greece, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 2, No 2, pp. 133-148.
- Petraki-Kottis, A. and Dimelis, S. (1992) Labour Force Participation and Earnings of Women University Graduates in Greece: A Two-step Analysis, *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 13, No 9, pp.47-64.
- Petraki Kottis, A. (1996) Women in management and the glass ceiling in Greece: an empirical investigation, *Women in Management Review*, Vol. 11, No 2, pp. 30-38.
- Riley, S. C. E. (2003) The Management of the Traditional Male Role: a discourse analysis of the constructions and functions of provision, *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 99-113.
- Rosaldo, M. Z. (1974) "Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview" in Rosaldo, M. Z. and Lamphère, L. (eds) *Woman, Culture and Society*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, pp.17-42.
- Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. (1986) The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour in Worchel, S. and Austin, W. G. (eds.) *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Chicago: Nelson.
- Young-Eisendrath, P. (1988) in McCanney - Gergen, M. (Ed.) *Feminist Thought and the Structure of Knowledge*, London; New York: New York University, pp. 152-172.
- Walby, S. (1990) *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Cambridge: Oxford: Blackwell.
- West, C. and Zimmerman, D. H. (1991) "Doing Gender" in Lorber, J and Farrell, S. A. (Eds.) *The Social Construction of Gender*, Thousand Oaks, California; London; New Delhi: Sage, pp. 13-37.
- Wetherell, M. and Maybin, J. (1996) "The Distributed Self: A Social Constructionist Perspective" in Stevens, R. (Ed.) *Understanding the self*, London: Sage in association with the Open University, pp. 219-279.
- Whitbeck, C. (1976) Theories of sex difference in Gould, C. C. and Wartofsky, M. W. (Eds) *Women and Philosophy: Toward a theory of liberation*, New York: Putnam, pp. 54-80.
- Wright, R. (1997) *Women Computer Professionals: Progress and Resistance*, Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Zachariou, Y. N. (2000) *WHO AM I? A Socio-Cultural Psychological Study of the Comparative Strength of National and Ethnic Identity Among Second and Third Generation Immigrants in Britain*, Bath: University of Bath.

### **WEB REFERENCES**

[http://www.kethi.gr/greek/kethi/Actions/DRASIS\\_2002/equal.htm](http://www.kethi.gr/greek/kethi/Actions/DRASIS_2002/equal.htm) (website of KETHI, Greek Research Centre for Gender Equality, accessed June 2003).

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/employment\\_social/speeches/280202\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/employment_social/speeches/280202_en.pdf) (accessed June 2003).

[http://www.kethi.gr/dissertations/SINTHIKES\\_APASXOLISIS\\_ELLADA/SUMMARY.htm](http://www.kethi.gr/dissertations/SINTHIKES_APASXOLISIS_ELLADA/SUMMARY.htm) (website of KETHI, Greek Research Centre for Gender Equality, accessed June 2003).

[http://www.kethi.gr/greek/kethi/Actions/DRASIS\\_2002/equal.htm](http://www.kethi.gr/greek/kethi/Actions/DRASIS_2002/equal.htm) (website of KETHI, Greek Research Centre for Gender Equality, accessed June 2003).

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/employment\\_social/speeches/010302ad\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/employment_social/speeches/010302ad_en.pdf) (accessed June 2003)

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/employment\\_social/speeches/010302ad\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/employment_social/speeches/010302ad_en.pdf) (accessed June 2003).