



Challenging the Status Quo!

Headhunters and Gender Bias in Executive Recruitment



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And we did it again – in October 2023

Why Iceland?

- Iceland is a small country with 385.000 inhabitants in 2024.
- We have been a global leader in gender equality for 15 years.
 - When it comes to economic participation and opportunities, ranks 7th
- Women remain underrepresented in executive roles.
 - Ranks 44th when it comes to women as legislators, senior officials and managers!



Vigdís Finnbogadóttir

The world's first female to be elected a head of state, 1980

Introduction

- This paper investigates the exclusion of women from the recruitment process for top management positions, focusing on the role of headhunters in Iceland.
- Despite Iceland's reputation as a leader in gender equality, women remain significantly underrepresented in executive roles.
- This study addresses this paradox - by exploring how headhunters' recruitment practices both perpetuate and challenge gender bias



Headhunters – prior research

- Headhunters play a pivotal role in executive recruitment, particularly in top-level positions (Finlay & Coverdill, 2000).
- Gender biases arise throughout the stages of recruitment, with many consultants tending to favour male candidates due to ingrained expectations of competence and leadership (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998).
- Studies reveal that their reliance on networks and personal judgments can limit women's access to senior positions (Dreher et al., 2011; Tienari et al., 2013; Fernandez-Mateo & Fernandez, 2016).
- Headhunters shape the labour market by determining which candidates make it to long lists, shortlists, and final interviews, often through subjective processes (Peltokorpi, 2022; Tienari, 2013).
- Headhunters networks are male-dominated, resulting in recruitment practices that are exclusionary for women (Christiansen & Óladóttir, 2022).

Research objective



To analyze how headhunters' recruitment practices influence gender diversity in Iceland's top management.



Focusing on both the structural and behavioral biases that limit women's access to leadership roles.

The aim is to uncover both the barriers to and opportunities for improving gender diversity in executive leadership.

Research questions



- What role do headhunters play in the underrepresentation of women in executive roles in Iceland?
- Can they act as change agents in promoting gender diversity?

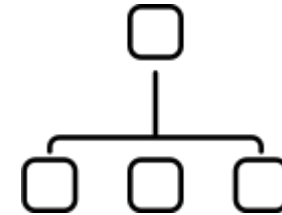
Methods



Data collected through semi-structured interviews with 8 headhunters.



Questions covered decision-making, roles and responsibilities, CEO competencies, advertising practices, and gender-related behaviours.



Grounded theory analysis using NVivo 14 software identified key themes and subthemes around gender and recruitment.

Key Findings 1

Structural Barriers

- Headhunters favor candidates with prior CEO experience, which disproportionately excludes women.
- Established male-dominated networks reinforce gender bias, limiting opportunities for women in leadership roles.



"When boards come together and are hiring a CEO, there is an inherent belief that someone who has done this before is more qualified than someone doing it for the first time. You end up with more men than women ... it's just about safety."

Key findings 2

Women are reluctant towards new opportunities

- According to the headhunters, women are more reluctant to apply to executive positions.
- Women are more unlikely to put themselves forward, resulting in fewer women being considered for top positions.



"Sometimes we have to really pursue women, calling them multiple times to get them to consider a role. It can take weeks just to get them to the table."

Key Findings 3

Role of Headhunters as Change Agents

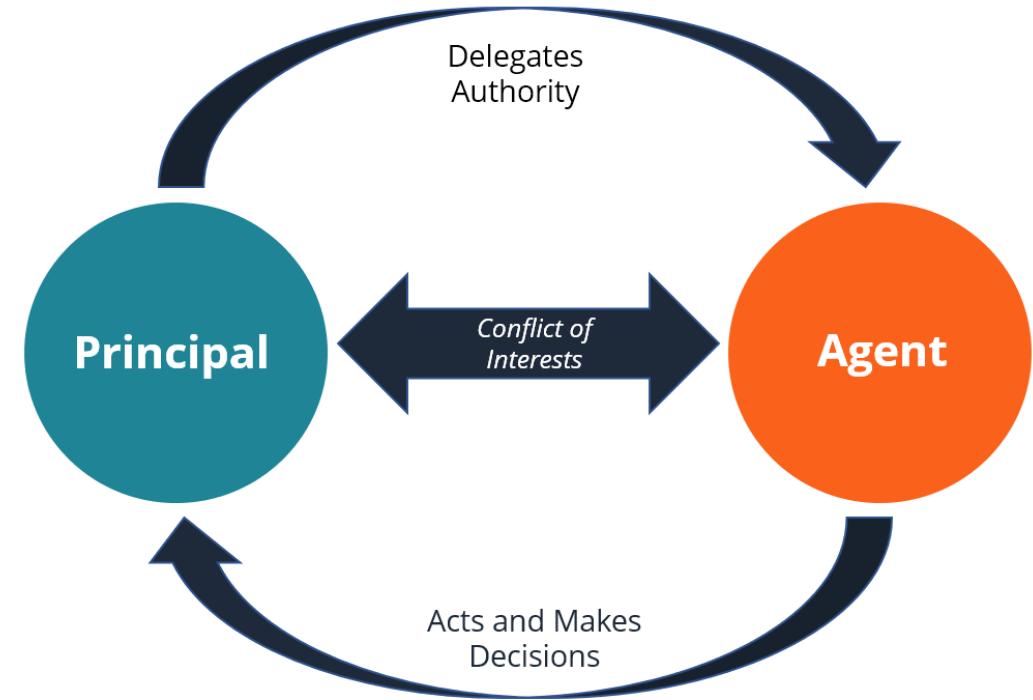
- Some headhunters proactively challenge gender norms by broadening candidate pools and considering non-traditional leadership qualities.
- They can influence boards by promoting women and offering diverse perspectives

"You don't need to have all this experience to be the most qualified one."

"It's about opening the minds of boards to see beyond just the number of years in the job."

Theoretical Contribution

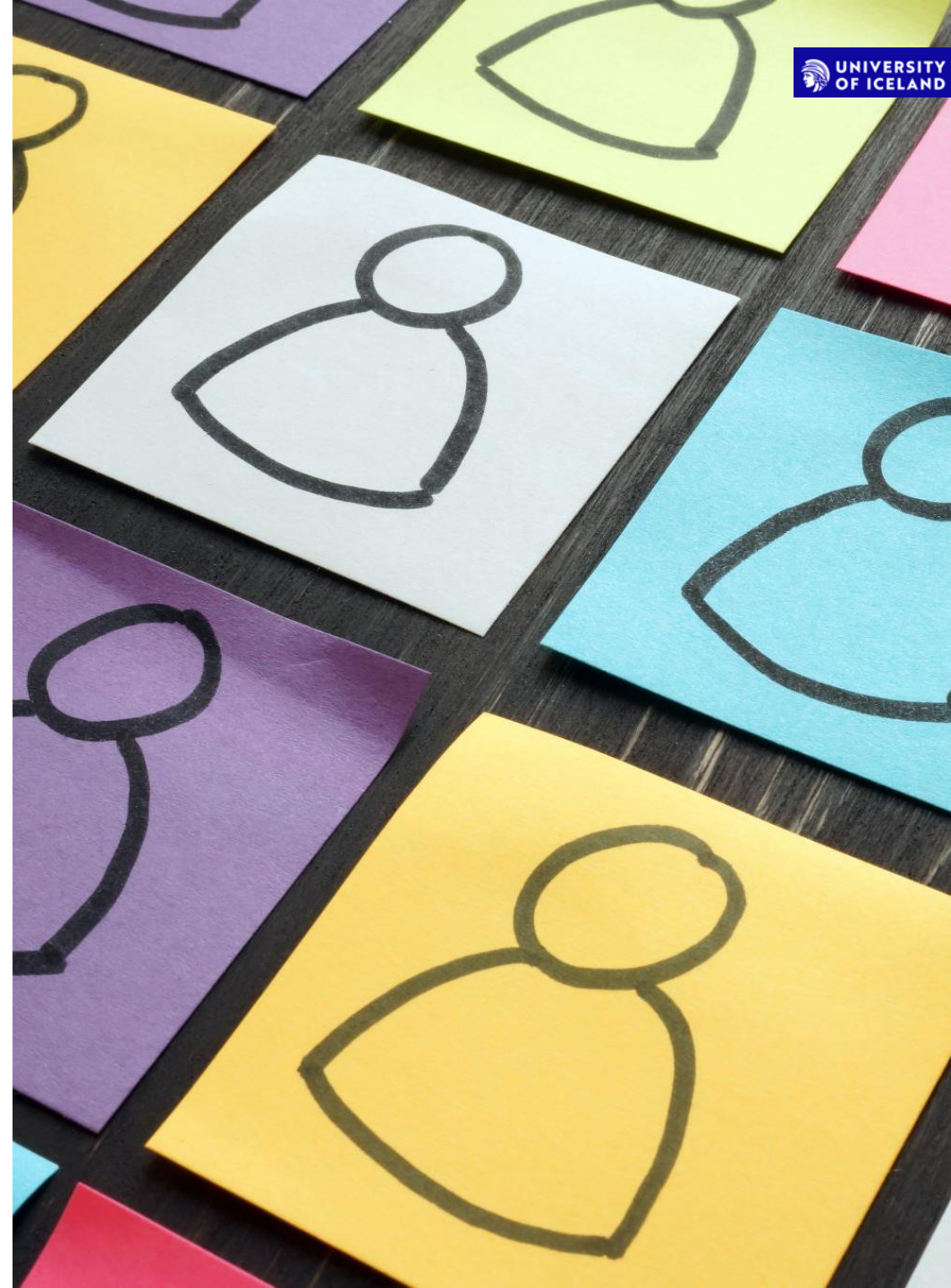
- Using agency theory, the study explains how headhunters, as both gatekeepers and change agents, can influence gender diversity in leadership through their recruitment practices.



Implications

For headhunters: expand networks and assess non-traditional candidates.

Headhunters may thus either align their goals with the broader objectives of promoting diversity or focus on delivering candidates that meet the specific, often experience-based, demands of boards





Conclusion

- Headhunters play a pivotal role in either perpetuating or challenging gender bias in executive recruitment. The findings highlight their potential as key players in promoting gender diversity in leadership.



THANK YOU

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