

# Access Denied? Exploring the Causes of the Low Representation of Women in Senior Executive Positions within Procurement

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# **Access Denied? Exploring the Causes of the Low Representation of Women in Senior Executive Positions within Procurement**

## **Abstract**

Recent surveys report the representation of women in senior executive positions within procurement as both very low and lower than in other professions. In this paper, the authors explored the causes of this. The authors interviewed 41 female and male procurement professionals from a range of sectors and seniority levels. Different views were encountered, but overall the findings suggested that female advancement within procurement is affected by both generic organisational and procurement-specific impediments, including inadequate work design, male-dominated cultures, negative stereotypes, high levels of travel and an aggressive ethos that characterises many procurement functions. The latter was said to be greater where procurement functions lacked 'cultural maturity'. The findings suggested that both the procurement literature and procurement profession need to do more to address these impediments to female advancement. Ways forward are suggested.

## **Keywords**

Procurement profession, recruitment and promotion processes, women, gender inequality

# **Access Denied? Exploring the Causes of the Low Representation of Women in Senior Executive Positions within Procurement**

## **1. Introduction**

The past few years have witnessed renewed efforts at greater gender equality in senior executive positions (Medland, 2016). Data is limited, but recent surveys suggest that action is particularly necessary within the procurement profession. A 2013 US Fortune 500 survey found a mere 7 per cent of executive procurement positions filled by women (O'Marah, 2013). Globally, the figure has been reported as 14 per cent (Procurement Leaders, 2016). These low levels of senior female representation come despite women accounting for 37 per cent of university procurement students (Green, 2014) and 41 per cent of global purchasing institute members (Everett, 2016). In the UK, the location of the research here, similarly low levels have been reported (Reynolds, 2013), despite women holding nearly 40 per cent of middle management procurement posts (Office of National Statistics, 2012).

What is also noticeable from recent surveys is that the low levels in procurement are not merely low, but lower than in other professions. For example, 21 per cent of US accounting firm partners, 23 per cent of UK marketing directors, 24 per cent of UK law firm partners and 55 per cent of US human resource executives are reported to be female (Catalyst, 2013; Office of National Statistics, 2012 Chambers Student, 2014; Burjek and Rafter, 2017). As if to illustrate matters, one national procurement institute recently described itself as 'not interested in this topic' (Everett, 2016).

There is considerable evidence that low female representation in senior positions is not just an issue of basic fairness. Gender-diverse senior management, via diverse attributes

and perspectives (Richard et al., 2013), has long been deemed better at responding to varied customer needs and enhancing financial performance (Ali and Konrad, 2017; Reguera-Alvarado, 2017). A lack of diversity, by contrast, can cause the loss of organisation-specific knowledge (where it is the consequence of high female employee turnover) and adversely affect the wider economy (Hewlett and Buck-Luce, 2005; Krawiec, 2016). Within the specific procurement context, a case for diversity can also be made. It is widely accepted, within the procurement literature if not always in practice, that a contingent approach is required when managing expenditure with suppliers, with a considerable segment of expenditure (often the most critical) requiring long-term collaborative relationships (Kraljic, 1983; Gelderman and van Weele, 2005). Arguably, this aligns with quantitative evidence regarding female attributes (Costa et al., 2001; Richard et al., 2013), flexibility of approach (Eckel et al., 2008) and work preference (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014; McCarty et al., 2014).

Against this background, the authors explore, via qualitative research, the causes of the low representation of women in senior executive procurement positions (chief procurement officer and procurement director-level). In particular, they seek to understand why it is even lower than in other professions, raising the possibility of procurement-specific causes. In undertaking this research, the authors seek to address a gap in the procurement literature. While there has been considerable research into low female representation in other professions, banking (Marthur-Helm, 2006) and law (Gorman and Kmec, 2009), for example, there has been no significant study on the procurement profession, despite discussion of human resource management issues within the procurement literature (Driedonks et al., 2014; Feisel et al., 2011; Kiratli et al., 2016; Tassabehji and Moorhouse, 2008; Wagner and Kemmerling, 2014).

The authors believe that providing such a study is important for three main reasons. First, the existence and causes of low female representation in senior procurement positions

needs to be recorded in the procurement literature, not least to encourage further research. Second, as mentioned, senior female representation in procurement is not merely low, but lower than in other professions. The discovery of procurement-specific causes of this would add conceptually and empirically to both the procurement and gender equality literature. Third, evidence within the procurement context is necessary to guide remedial action by procurement functions and national procurement institutes. Indeed, initial recommendations are provided, in accordance with the gender equality literature (Kossek et al., 2017).

## **2. Exploring the Causes of the Low Representation of Women in Senior Executive Procurement Positions: Potential Explanations from the Gender Equality Literature**

Explanations within the gender equality literature for the low representation of women in senior executive positions can, by providing an initial conceptual frame, assist efforts to understand the phenomenon within the procurement context (see Figure 1). This frame is partly shaped by the debate regarding the extent to which low female representation is caused by impediments.

On the one hand, the ‘opting out’ thesis contends that many women are not impeded, but forsake senior positions to either adopt the traditional female role at home (Belkin, 2003; Hewlett and Buck-Luce, 2005; Kossek et al., 2017) or at least be able to spend an ‘acceptable’ amount of time with their family (Barbulescu and Bidwell, 2013). Moe and Shandy (2010) argue similarly that some women ‘opt out’ to avoid being part of a ‘100-hour couple’ (both partners in professional roles), for fear it would have deleterious consequences for their children (Moe and Shandy, 2010).

Many in the literature, however, while not dismissing it out of hand, have questioned the extent to which the ‘opting out’ thesis can account for the extent of gender inequality reported (The Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Williams, 2010; Kossek et al., 2017) and

argued instead that women's career progress is indeed subject to impediments. Some have focused here upon the intangible impediments of overarching social structures and conditioning (Buzzanell, 1995; Heilman, 2012). A more mainstream, positivist approach, however, has identified a number of specific observable impediments to female progress that see women 'forced out'. Here, we follow Kossek et al. (2017) in (a) identifying three perspectives on such impediments – work-family, career preference and gender bias – and (b) arguing that research into gender inequality should involve all three perspectives, not least as they interact in practice.

**--- INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE ---**

The first perspective, 'work-family', particularly focuses upon work design, highlighting a frequent absence of flexible working policies aimed at employees with children. Due to the increasing number of men seeking to play a greater role in childcare (Moe and Shandy, 2010; Sallee et al., 2016), especially in certain countries (Seierstad and Kirton, 2015), such inadequate work design can affect both men and women. However, it is still a problem that predominantly affects women, not least because of a still-dominant societal expectation and empirical reality that women take the main responsibility for childcare (Misra et al., 2012; NatCen Social Research, 2012). As such, this frequent absence of work flexibility policies means that women with children often face an unsustainable combination of domestic and career demands, significantly impeding career progress (Stone, 2007; Purcell et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2016; Kossek et al., 2017). Research here also shows that, even where flexible working arrangements are provided, (predominantly female) employees are often stigmatised as being 'less motivated' when utilising them, finding themselves excluded from promotion opportunities (Hewlett and Buck-Luce, 2005; Purcell et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2013). For Bailyn (2011), this is partly as such arrangements are regarded as an 'accommodation' rather than a legitimate work form.

A second perspective considers the ‘career preferences’ of men and women, with male-dominated organisational cultures identified as a prominent impediment to female advancement (Stone, 2007). Such cultures are said to include a competitive ethos and male domination of meetings (where women are interrupted or ignored), something reported as inhospitable to women as they clash with a reported greater tendency towards modesty and an acceptance of the contribution of others to their success (Dyrchs and Strack, 2012; Faes et al., 2010). Indeed, research suggests that people with a preference to work within a ‘communal work environment’ (and more women than men are reported to hold such a preference) will often forsake opportunities within low communion work environments even if those opportunities would provide higher status and professional advancement (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014; McCarty et al., 2014).

Literature from within this perspective also notes that in male-dominated cultures ambition and leadership is often defined in masculine terms, putting women in a ‘no-win’ situation (Eagly, 2013; McCarty et al., 2014). Women are either perceived as unambitious or, if revealing ambition in masculine terms, seen to ‘violate gender role prescriptions’ (Sools et al., 2007, p. 429). Finally, such cultures are said to include exclusive informal decision-making, networking forums and social events, shutting women out of key decisions, information, referrals and support (Ibarra, 1997) and damaging their career prospects (Lutter, 2015; Peachey, 2013; Purcell et al., 2010; Roth, 2004).

Such male-dominated cultures have been widely reported to be perpetuated by homophily (Smith et al., 2012), the tendency – deliberate or the product of unconscious bias (Bielby, 2000) – of senior management (presently mainly men) to hire, associate with and promote similar employees (Durbin, 2011; Elliott and Smith, 2004). Third-party homophily, where male customers prefer dealing with male employees, is also believed to affect female career progression (Beckman and Phillips, 2005; Roth, 2004).

Within this perspective, there is discussion regarding the extent to which individuals or organisations should change in order to promote greater female representation at senior executive level. A recent prominent argument has been that women should ‘lean in’ (Sandberg, 2013). Others, however, have placed the emphasis upon organisations to change (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). McCarty et al. (2014, p186), for example, argue that ‘changing work environments is a more realistic and advantageous avenue to improving fit’ and that interventions should be ‘focused on concerted efforts to attract high communal people to positions, especially to positions of high status and power’. Such efforts could include ‘creating more collaborative than competitive cultures, rewarding teamwork and helping behaviors, and promoting mentorship and sponsorship for women’s career advancement’ (Kossek et al., 2017, p234).

A third perspective has investigated gender bias, reporting that a prominent impediment to female advancement is false and negative, yet pervasive, assumptions or stereotypes about women’s skills, competence and ambitions (Kanter, 1977). Research here reports that women are often perceived as less competent than men (Bigelow et al., 2014; Kray et al., 2014) and, as a result, have to work harder to reach the same organisational rank (Gorman and Kmec, 2007; Heilman, 2012). Similarly, men are often considered stronger leaders compared to women and play to this stereotype, with some success (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Johnson et al., 2008), not least as both men and women on selection panels can be influenced by the stereotype ‘masculine success model’ (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014, p460). Bias also affects those women that achieve leadership positions – their tenure often comes under greater scrutiny and has a shorter tenure, especially when most other senior executives are males (Cook and Glass, 2014). A different, yet complementary, strand of research within this perspective draws upon social role theory to argue that gender bias also creates gender role expectations. Consequently, women not only face judgements about their

competence to successfully perform leadership roles, but also judgements about whether their occupancy in such roles is actually desirable. Kossek et al. (2017, p234) note that ‘[gender-biased] prescriptions about desirable female behaviors’ are not commonly associated with effective leadership.

***A framework for exploring the causes of the low and lower representation of women in senior executive procurement positions***

As mentioned, existing explanations for low female representation in senior executive positions can, by providing an initial conceptual frame (Figure 1), assist research efforts within the procurement context. This frame, influenced by the categorisation of Kossek et al. (2017), is based upon three principles. First, ‘opting out’ explanations are not inconsistent with explanations that cite impediments and can therefore co-exist within the initial frame. Second, research should involve all of the three perspectives that cite impediments (work-family, career preference and gender bias), not least as they interact in practice. Third, because of this interaction, interventions from each of the three perspectives will prove less effective if implemented in isolation. For example, work preference-related interventions (say, cultural change to attract more managers with ‘communal’ preferences into senior positions) need to be combined with work-family interventions (say, non-stigmatized flexible working arrangements) – they support each other. Guided by this initial conceptual frame, the authors explore the following research question:

***RQ1: how can the low representation of women in senior executive procurement positions be explained?***

However, as mentioned, female representation in senior executive procurement positions is not just low but *lower* than in other professions, prompting the question of why, including whether there are procurement-specific causes. Gender research within the

negotiation literature (for example, Comer et al., 1995; Dion et al., 1997; Faes et al., 2010) does not suggest it is due to a lack of aptitude. Indeed, Faes et al. (2010, p. 96) conclude that women ‘outperform their male counterparts when negotiating’. Eckel et al. (2008) add that women are particularly strong at tailoring their approach to specific negotiations. The research proceeds, therefore, with a second research question:

***RQ2: how might the lower representation of women within senior procurement positions, relative to other professions, be explained?***

### **3. Data and Methods**

The research design here is based upon an ‘abductive’ logic, whereby the objective is to refine, adapt and develop theories and concepts (Meyer and Lunney, 2013). As with deduction, abduction proceeds from theory to data. However, there is greater emphasis on (iteratively) incorporating insights from the data that sit outside the initial theoretical/conceptual frame. As Timmermans and Tavory (2012, p. 173) comment: ‘Rather than engaging with the scholarly literature at the end of the research project [inductive approaches], abduction assumes extensive familiarity with existing theories at the outset ... [without] advocating a return to deduction’.

In this study, therefore, the authors developed an initial conceptual frame from the gender equality literature (Figure 1). It did so, however, with an acceptance that data collection might require those initial concepts to be supplemented or adapted (potentially with procurement-specific concepts). This did indeed occur, with the interview schedule also being amended as the data collection effort unfolded. The process enabled the development of an adapted, procurement-specific conceptual frame (Figure 2).

The qualitative data in this study was obtained from semi-structured interviews with current female and male procurement professionals. The use of interviews permits an

understanding of participant perceptions, not otherwise easily obtained (Carson et al., 2001), with concerns regarding reliability addressed via measures including careful interview design and anonymity assurances (Henn et al., 2009; Guest et al., 2012). In line with the abductive logic, the semi-structured interview approach, while informed by an initial conceptual frame, allowed the subject to be discussed outside of this frame. Indeed, as mentioned, the interview schedule was amended as data collection unfolded to formally recognise the emergence of an adapted conceptual frame (Henn et al., 2009).

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The majority were carried out via telephone due to the flexibility it provided interviewees. All face-to-face and telephone interviews were audio recorded, facilitating researcher-focus, interview flow and (following transcription) depth of analysis (Kvale, 2007). Transcripts were subject to thematic coding (using NVivo 11), with the data examined for themes and sub-themes (Ryan and Bertrand, 2003). Two of the authors were involved in the interviewing and coding, with agreement reached on code assignment and data interpretation to ensure inter-coder reliability (Saldana, 2013).

The themes and sub-themes were organised under headings, with the series expanded, where necessary, to reflect new themes emerging from the data. The top-level themes included: recognition of low female senior representation, costs of the low representation, impediments (or otherwise) to female senior representation and potential solutions. A series of sub-themes sat beneath, including impediments that were procurement-specific. The analysis of the data included an assessment of female/male, public/private, industry type and senior/middle/junior management interviewee responses, with any differences recorded.

A purposive sampling method was used to create a sample with relevant experience (Patton, 1990). As a non-probability method, purposive sampling cannot be generalised to a

population. However, this does not impact the validity of the results, which aim to provide initial insight via ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. As indicated above, the purposive sampling was stratified, so a broad range of informed perspectives could be gathered. The stratification included differences in seniority, so it could be ascertained whether/to what extent personal circumstances affected reported perceptions.

**--- INSERT TABLE 1 HERE ---**

The sample was UK-focused, consisting of current or recent UK-based procurement professionals. Further details of the sample can be found in Table 1. A total of 41 procurement professionals were interviewed between February 2016 and October 2017, of which 23 were women and 18 men. The initial interviewees (all women) were re-contacted towards the end of the data collection process so that the amended interview schedule could be explored with them. This yielded an additional 6 responses.

#### **4. Empirical Findings**

The low representation of women at senior levels within the procurement profession was recognised across all sample segments (although the public sector interviewees reported a slightly more positive scene). P1 commented: *‘Most of my team are middle-aged women. But everyone we report into is male’*. P25 recalled that, while he had worked with many excellent female procurement colleagues during his thirty-year career, he could only recall *‘a couple of exceptions where there have been some very senior females’*. The low representation was noted even in organisations committed to gender equality: *‘Within my [procurement] department there is a tendency for management positions to be taken up by men. This is not representative of the rest of the company’* (P6).

The low representation was believed (again across the sample) to have consequences. P12 talked of *'a huge talent pool there that is not being accessed'* by procurement functions. P24 cited *'reputational damage'* for procurement functions with unbalanced management teams. More specifically, both male and female interviewees believed that women could offer certain different (as well as many similar) attributes to procurement roles, improving decision-making. P10 commented on a recent supplier dispute: *'There was so much ego and [the men] were all very similar personalities ... [I]f they'd had more diversity ... I think somebody would have put the brakes on and we would have got to a different position'*.

#### ***4.1 Causes of the low representation of women in senior executive positions within procurement***

The first research question concerned potential explanations for the low representation of women in senior procurement positions. Here, we were guided by the initial conceptual frame (Figure 1).

##### *Opting-out explanations*

A small minority of interviewees (nearly all female, at different levels of seniority) did not believe there were significant impediments to female advancement within procurement. This minority argued that procurement possesses tangible performance measures (number of contracts signed and cost savings achieved, for example) that permit objectivity and transparency in recruitment and promotion. P11, for example, insisted that *'procurement is one of those fields where you can get on if you have the right skills and qualities, so I can't really see gender being that much of a barrier'*. P13 agreed that procurement facilitated objective selection, although also believed this might translate into practice more in the regulated public sector: *'Recruitment and career progression [in the civil service] is ... around meeting the competencies for the role and ... panels are gender-balanced'*.

Taking this view prompted the question of what this minority believed was causing low female representation in senior procurement positions. Some cited variable female self-confidence within procurement (discussed later). The gender equality literature also includes ‘opting-out’ explanations (Belkin, 2003, for example), with responses resembling such explanations indeed mentioned during the research. P5, for example, commented that it shouldn’t be assumed that *‘just because someone is capable and talented that they want to be promoted’*. However, it should be noted that only a very small number of interviewees provided ‘opting out’ explanations (a subset of the minority citing no significant impediments). Therefore, while such explanations need to be recognised within an explanatory framework, future research may well confirm it as a marginal causal factor.

**Proposition 1: A wish to ‘opt out’ of consideration for senior executive positions contributes to the low female representation in senior procurement positions.**

The majority of the interviewees (both male and female and those at different levels of the profession) disagreed with the above minority and believed that the low female representation within senior procurement positions was mainly being caused by impediments, including those prominent within the gender equality literature.

#### *Work-family explanations*

An impediment to both male *and* female advancement cited by the gender equality literature concerns inadequate work design, particularly in relation to employee childcare responsibilities (Williams et al., 2016). While this issue does affect both men and women with young children, this literature also argues that, because such responsibilities still fall disproportionately upon women, work design failings affect more women than men and consequently affect female representation at senior levels (Kitterod and Ronsen, 2012). The sample in this study largely agreed with this assessment. First, having children was seen as an

issue for women in procurement. P2 commented: *'I don't care what people say about equality, I have a daughter to take care of and that will never fit alongside a career at the top'*. P9 added: *'The only saving grace is that I didn't have a baby, because that would have been another thing that would have brought me down'*. The impediment was also noted by male interviewees: *'Women have a baby and take time out of a career ... they lose momentum'* (P29).

The career-limiting effect of having children was said to be partly due to risk-averse recruitment and promotion panels. P3 commented: *'I think women struggle to get promotions at a certain age, like at times when they might be expected to go and have a family. People get concerned about recruiting them and recruiting them into higher jobs'*. For P17, such attitudes can often be the product of 'unconscious bias', rather than conscious discrimination: *'This whole thing about "are they going to leave and have a baby?" I think many [recruiting] managers wouldn't think that that's going on in their head, but it probably is somewhere'*.

The career-limiting effect was also, however, ascribed to inadequate work design, in particular in relation to the provision and acceptance of flexible working. Not all interviewees had experienced problems here - some reported a flexible work environment, especially in the public sector where *'the policies are in place'* (P17). P5, working in the private sector, also described supportive conditions: *'I work very closely with a female [procurement] director who only works four days a week. So in that respect, yeah, they are quite flexible and open minded'*.

Many interviewees, however, reported less amenable attitudes within the profession. P19 argued that, from his experience of procurement, senior managers are *'not interested in your lifestyle or your family situation'*. With, as mentioned, the main burden for childcare still resting with women, this had a particular impact on female procurement professionals

with young children, many of whom reported negative experiences. P9 commented: *'As part of your interview process they all talk about this flexible working, managing your own time, but in reality ... they won't [allow it]'*. Even when flexible working was allowed, it was often frowned upon, particularly in the private sector. P13 commented: *'There is an assumption that the women do the childcare and that if women work part-time, or flexible hours or term-time, that there's a stigma'*.

In addition, some female interviewees reported poor handling of their return to work after having children, making it *'very difficult for women who have career breaks'* (P17). Because of this, P11 said women have to *'build themselves up again'*. This poor handling occurred even where the procurement function had 'return to work' policies. P41, a senior procurement executive responsible for such matters in his organisation, admitted shortcomings: *'As procurement, we've just got to be better at making it work. If we say we're up for job share we can't just leave it up to individuals to magically find a partner'*. The result of this poor handling, according to P3, was permanent career damage: *'My boss would say that she is two years behind her peers for each of the years she had off to have her children and she'll never be able to catch up'*.

**Proposition 2: Inadequate work design contributes to the low representation of women in senior executive positions within procurement by impeding the career progression of women with children.**

#### *Work preference explanations*

A second impediment reported was the existence of male-dominated cultures, discussed within the work preference perspective (McCarty et al., 2014). An issue was the common tendency for decision-making to be informal and exclusive. This was significantly, if perhaps not surprisingly, noticed more by the female interviewees. P12 believed it is *'more difficult*

*for women to be in that clubby network if they're in that male dominated environment'. P9 agreed, commenting: 'I have [been excluded from networks] in my career, definitely, mainly if you're working with males. They think they should go to certain events instead of you even though it's your job ... it holds me back, because I'm missing out on time with my managers'. However, some female interviewees disagreed: 'I've never been excluded ... I would always be going out with colleagues' (P13).*

A further aspect of this culture was a perception that male opinions had greater acceptance within procurement. For P31, a male interviewee, this manifested itself in *'a far more relaxed presentation style, jokey, more confident...There's that confidence to say, I've been here for ages, I'm the senior guy here, I can act a little like I'm one of the boys'*. P18, a female interviewee, commented similarly: *'I think males can blag it a bit more than women. They just have to say one thing and the men are completely taken on board, but [with] a woman they think, hmm, ... she's a woman, what does she know?'*

As predicted in the gender equality literature, many of the interviewees believed that homophily was perpetuating male-dominant cultures within procurement. P3 reflected: *'Culturally, you tend to hire people who are like you. So if all our leaders are 55 year-old, public school educated white men, they're the types of people they are going to hire'*. P12 added: *'For internal promotions, it's much more likely that the men will have deep trusting relationships with the CEO and other execs, than the women. There's a lot of promoting in the image of the leader and the leader tends to be male'*. Homophily was also mentioned with reference to third parties – in this context, supplier representatives. P2 reported that *'my male supplier [representatives] don't have as much time for me as the women'*. However, most believed that this was more of a problem in the past than now.

**Proposition 3: Male-dominated cultures (perpetuated by homophily) contribute to the low representation of women in senior executive positions within procurement.**

### *Gender bias explanations*

A final impediment in the initial frame, negative stereotypes about women, was also reported by the interviewees. P14 commented: *'I do think that some men have a problem with women in commercial roles... I worked for [name] and the new chief exec came in. He had a real problem with me and another woman there and it was because, and I knew, we were both in areas where we spent a lot of money and he didn't like it'*. P9 reported similarly: *'They want it in a male's hands'*. Where such stereotypes exist, women are believed to be under even greater pressure not to make mistakes in front of male line-managers. P21 illustrated the scenario: *'If a man messes up [a negotiation], well, don't worry about it. Let's have a couple of beers and we'll talk about it later. If a woman messes up, they'll say she doesn't know her subject in the first place'*.

**Proposition 4: Negative stereotypes contribute to the low representation of women in senior executive positions within procurement.**

### ***4.2 Causes of the lower representation of women in senior executive positions in procurement, relative to other professions***

The data in section 4.1, relating to the initial conceptual frame (Figure 1), suggest that the impediments reported within the gender equality literature are highly applicable to the procurement context and significantly contribute to the low representation of women in senior procurement positions. However, as mentioned, the senior representation of women within procurement is not merely low, but notably *lower* than in other professions. The research, therefore, explored beyond the initial frame, investigating in particular whether there were further procurement-specific impediments (research question 2). If there were, an adapted procurement-specific conceptual frame would be required. As it turned out, the research identified two main procurement-specific impediments.

The first (reported by both male and female interviewees) is the very high level of travel associated with procurement in an era of global supply bases – not unprecedented but an above-average level for a corporate role. This was believed to contribute to the lower level of senior female representation for two connected reasons: the high level of travel (and an expectation of availability for it) is often incompatible with the aforementioned still-dominant societal expectation that women have the main responsibility for childcare (Misra et al., 2012); the high level of travel also means that talented women (that wish to have children) look to other corporate professions with a lower travel expectation in order to fulfil their ambitions.

P9 noted this impediment: *'[Procurement] is a little bit swayed to men more than women ... because [of] the demands of procurement at a certain level. It does involve a lot of hours, a lot of travelling'*. For P14, this meant regular trips to China - *'I just found that it didn't work [after returning from maternity leave]'*. P15's experience, meanwhile, highlights just how much career progress women can lose: *'I was a global quality manager and had a team of ... about eight globally. UK, Germany, Singapore, India and the US - with a lot of travel and long hours ... I kind of knew I wouldn't be able to do that post-maternity leave'*. The issue was also recognised by women currently without children: *'I don't have kids now, but I couldn't do the job I'm doing at the moment with them because I travel too much. So that's an issue'* (P34).

To avoid relinquishing positions and progress within this 'high-travel' profession, P30 argued that many women with children needed to *'have a very supportive partner ... who allows you ... to pursue your opportunities [despite] the travel'*. For P31, all of this meant that, more than in the case of men, many women faced a choice between work and family and that this reduced the pool of women that have the possibility of making it into senior procurement positions: *'I worked with a woman now in a [global procurement role]. She is*

*very strong. But look at her profile and there is no work-life balance. No children ... There's a certain profile of female that tends to go up in procurement'.*

**Proposition 5: High levels of travel, affecting particularly women with children, contribute to the lower representation of women in senior executive procurement positions, relative to other professions.**

A second procurement-specific impediment reported (across all parts of the sample) is the aggressive ethos that is still believed to characterise many procurement functions and influence actions within them. This ethos is seen as going considerably beyond the above-mentioned male-dominated cultures. P12 commented: *'I think there's still a very large group of people ... who are the kind of macho chest-beating type'*. It was also alluded to by P10 and P15, referring to 'ego' and behaviour that was 'aggressive'. P26 even used the term 'bullying' rather than merely aggressive: *'The worst examples of bullying by far that I've seen are male - without exception. Some previous CPOs I've seen ... are downright bullies ... in a macho aggressive way'*. P39 attributed the ethos to the negotiation aspect of the procurement role: *'It has had a macho image because one of the core skills has been negotiation and the feeling is that negotiation is adversarial'*.

It was widely reported that this aggressive ethos and the work environment it created was, on the one hand, unappealing to more women than men – in the manner evidenced by the 'work preference' perspective (McCarty et al., 2014). P20 believed it *'is something that women definitely do not feel comfortable with in my experience'*. P37 added: *'If you shifted the emphasis in the types of skills that actually produce successful procurement people [away from being aggressive] you will get a shift in women coming in to the profession'*. The point here is not that certain women can't cope within such environments, but simply don't wish to (*'I think a lot of women don't like to have that tag of being aggressive'*, P21) and pursue

opportunities outside of the procurement profession where communal preferences are better valued (McCarty et al., 2014).

The ethos was also considered to be disadvantageous to women. This was in part because, according to both male and female interviewees, it undervalued managerial attributes which, according to quantitative research (Richard et al., 2013, for example), are more (although not, of course, exclusively) possessed by women. These include relational attributes (Costa et al., 2001; Weisberg et al., 2011), which are argued in the procurement literature to be highly applicable to the collaborative relationships that are a key part of a buying organisation's portfolio of supplier relationships (Kraljic, 1983).

P3 illustrated this argument, saying that an aggressive ethos meant '*a culture where firefighting, table-thumping and win-lose deal-brokering continue to have higher status than robust planning, sustainable sourcing and collaboration*'. P3 believed that '*at a general level, this plays to the style of men over women*'. A less aggressive approach to internal stakeholder management and the sourcing process, it was suggested, would benefit women as '*I think they're probably more effective than men [at such an approach]*' (P31). P24 developed this point with specifics: '*Females generally, we do better with the "soft skills". I'm talking about communication skills, relationship management skills, stakeholder management skills ... the ability to negotiate, to talk about it, to use body language, to know what's happening on the other side of the table and make judgements*'. A further key strength, however, was said to be that '*women can "flex the style" – be tough as well as manage relationships*' (P9). In this vein, P38 referred to women's ability to be '*polite but firm*'.

An aggressive ethos was also deemed disadvantageous to women because of its tendency to encourage negative and unfounded (Faes et al., 2010) stereotypes about women's negotiation capabilities. P38 commented: '*[In] some of the interactions I have with colleagues and suppliers ... [often I'm seen] as a bit of a laugh or a joke ... fine, I'll get*

*something past her ... I'm going to be a soft touch because I'm a woman'. P37 agreed: 'I think there is the sense sometimes that if you have a man negotiating you will have a better deal, because they will be tougher'. Again, as P3 alluded to, this related to arguably erroneous views of 'best practice': 'Softer relationship management is generally still regarded as a weakness [by many men in procurement]'.*

What can make matters worse for women is if they seek to emulate aggressive male behaviour, in an attempt to conform to the aggressive culture. P28 recalled a very senior female colleague having *'a very direct conversation with a supplier'* and the negative reaction in her organisation afterward. He believed that *'such language [used] by a male would [lead people to saying] that person's a go-getter, they want the best for the business, but, said by a woman, it was considered that she's being difficult'*. P34 recalled the same phenomenon: *'Even though she was effective, I heard colleagues say she was pushy. It feels there's a gender bias around those aggressive qualities'*.

The impediment of an aggressive procurement ethos was believed to be influenced by procurement function *'maturity'*, a term used by many interviewees. Maturity here was not necessarily concerned with process maturity, but with sophistication of approach. P3 made a distinction between *'professionalised purchasing ... mature by all the objective measures'* and *'cultural maturity'*. The latter was where *'relationship skills are apparent, in terms of your skill at managing stakeholders and navigating the organisation ... [and in terms of] sustainable sourcing and collaboration [with suppliers]'* (P3).

The relevance of procurement maturity is that in organisations and sectors where maturity is low, the ethos of procurement can be particularly aggressive. Such sectors included construction (P14), defence (P35), engineering (P34) and those sectors historically referred to as heavy industry (P5). The common thread with many of these sectors was,

according to P5, that they had '*historically been more male-dominated*' and that '*the legacy from that is still present in the current day*'. P9 added that procurement maturity could also be low in organisations and sectors where procurement is not seen as strategically or operationally important - financial firms, for example. In such firms, boards often '*just get in a male they like [to be head of procurement], that they feel comfortable with*' (P9).

Looking forward, there was cautious optimism on the part of both male and female interviewees that crudely aggressive approaches to procurement were becoming discredited and that this could assist female advancement in the future. However, a complex picture emerged. P25's view was bolder than most: '*I think for females to be successful and get to the very top [in the past] they had to show some of that little bit of aggression, fight and fire ... [But], the world was different then*'. Others saw procurement changing, but more slowly: '*I think procurement still has a way to go to achieve [a] level of maturity, but it's getting there*' (P20). Others still that the change would be confined only to certain organisations and sectors, those '*that have a high tolerance for risk, caused by their entrepreneurial attitude, or [where firms are] in emerging industries where radically different approaches are accepted or required*' (P3). P5 also thought that there was a '*shift occurring*' within procurement, but believed increased procurement maturity needed to be accompanied by wider cultural change within organisations for senior female representation to significantly increase. Overall, therefore, the procurement profession seems to be moving in the right direction, but in a manner that still very much suggested the need for further remedial interventions.

**Proposition 6: An aggressive procurement ethos contributes to the lower representation of women in senior executive positions, relative to other professions, as it conflicts with stated work preferences, encourages negative stereotypes and undervalues managerial attributes which (statistically) are more possessed by women.**

### **4.3 Discussion**

This paper explores two linked research questions: how can the low level of women in senior executive procurement positions be explained and why is the level in procurement lower than in other professions? The authors explored these questions using an abductive research approach, whereby an initial conceptual frame (Figure 1) guided the data collection, while simultaneously the data collection was permitted to adapt that initial frame. The context to the research was that addressing this issue was not merely a matter of fairness, but also about improving procurement outcomes. In addition to the evidence that gender diversity in executive teams improves firm performance (Richard et al., 2013), there is arguably alignment between contingent approaches to procurement (Kraljic, 1983; Van Weele and Gelderman, 2005) and female attributes (Eckel et al., 2008; Richard et al., 2013) and work preferences (McCarty et al., 2014) - an alignment noted by interviewees via claims that women were better able to '*flex the style*' and could '*put the brakes on*' unnecessarily adversarial situations.

**--- INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE ---**

As it turned out, the data collected led to an adapted conceptual frame (Figure 2) containing six propositions that can be used for future empirical testing. This adapted frame includes concepts from the initial frame as they were deemed by the sample to be highly relevant within the procurement context. These concepts were from the work-family, work preference, gender bias (Kossek et al., 2017) and opting-out perspectives (Belkin, 2003) (although we note that the latter was reported by a small minority of interviewees). While the applicability of this literature to the procurement context might have been expected, given the literature's maturity, it could not simply be assumed. In any case, the research here also uncovered two procurement-specific impediments (high levels of travel within the procurement role and an

aggressive ethos within certain procurement functions), necessitating the adapted conceptual frame. These two impediments provide a potential explanation for the *lower* levels of women in senior executive positions within procurement.

Looking at the different segments within the sample, the research revealed certain differences. However, before examining these, it should be noted that such differences were far less significant than the consensus that existed on the broad contours of this research topic. In particular, most interviewees across the sample (whether male/female, senior/middle/junior, public/private sector) believed it was self-evident that tangible impediments were largely responsible for the low and lower senior female representation within procurement. This is not surprising given the sheer size of the differential between male and female representation within senior procurement roles.

Nevertheless, differences were reported. First, while there was no pattern in terms of level of seniority, public/private or industry sector, those interviewees (admittedly a low number) who claimed that women did not face significant impediments to advancement within procurement, including those citing opting-out explanations, were nearly all female. Explanations for this were not obvious, although these female interviewees did, in some other parts of their interviews, appear quite keen to play down the differences between men and women in general (in the questions about mentoring, for example), perhaps because of a concern that differences (Costa et al, 2001) might be judged pejoratively (Bigelow et al., 2014).

Second, in terms of the impediments to female advancement, while there was a similar level of awareness across both male and female interviewees regarding the more visible impediments to female advancement within procurement (lack of flexible working policies and the aggressive ethos within procurement functions, for example), there was much

lower male awareness of the less-visible impediment of exclusive, male informal decision-making and networking. This was perceived to be an important barrier to advancement by many women in the sample, but by few men. This may, of course, be due to any form of exclusivity being more noticeable and significant to those excluded, but it does highlight a potential barrier to change.

Third, prospects for female advancement were reported to be slightly better within public sector as against private sector procurement functions, with a number of the identified impediments being addressed there, albeit imperfectly, via human resources policies and practices (regulated recruitment processes and a higher acceptance of flexible working, for example). However, public sector interviewees made clear that there were still impediments to female advancement in the public sector and that much-vaunted human resource policies (encouraging flexibility, for example) were not always proactively facilitated by senior management, leaving the onus on the individual to suggest work design solutions.

Fourth, the prospects for female advancement were reported to be different in different industries within the private sector. This was tied to the idea of ‘procurement maturity’, which in turn was thought to affect the extent to which there was an aggressive ethos within the procurement function. Construction and engineering, for example, were identified as sectors with low ‘procurement maturity’, a factor that made female representation in senior procurement positions in those sectors less likely. This links to a broader issue (discussed below) of low female representation being partly linked to (erroneous) perceptions of ‘best practice’ procurement.

Overall, the research findings here ‘lift the lid’ on both unjust and organisationally/economically damaging practices within the procurement profession and point to where such damaging practices might be most prevalent. The findings also allow an

initial consideration of how procurement functions within organisations might address those damaging practices. Here we return to Kossek et al. (2017), who argue that researchers should (a) base their research and subsequent recommendations for interventions on all three main gender equality perspectives (work-family, work preference and gender bias) and (b) consider the implications of their research at both the level of the individual and organisation. This we do below as part of an initial, yet integrated, set of managerial recommendations.

Given the aggressive ethos reported within many procurement functions, it might be viewed that the career preference perspective is ‘first among equals’ as part of an integrated approach. The individual-level implications of this perspective include calls for women to have greater confidence in their abilities and a greater willingness to express that confidence (Sandberg, 2013). Variable female self-confidence was indeed widely-raised as an issue within the research. P17, for example, cited ‘*internal barriers ... what goes on inside [some] women’s heads*’. P30 noted that women ‘*often say they’re lucky to be promoted, which is terrible because they were promoted because they were really, really good. You never hear a man say I was very lucky to be promoted*’. P33, reflecting on his career in procurement consultancy, commented: ‘*[Some] women don’t have self-belief in themselves and their abilities, which is in some respects better than their male colleagues ... [there is often] a confidence problem with female purchasers*’.

However, while there seems, therefore, to be some merit to ‘lean in’ arguments given the above interviewee responses (Sandberg, 2013), the aggressive ethos of many procurement functions means that a greater onus to change is surely on the organisation/procurement function rather than the individual. Specifically, organisations and procurement functions should precipitate cultural change so that communal work preferences (cited by more women than men) are better valued and not a barrier to advancement (McCarty et al., 2014). Such cultural change could be accompanied by creating incentives for teamwork and by promoting

mentoring and sponsoring (Kossek et al., 2017). Although progress is slow and uneven, some procurement functions were reported to be already well-advanced in this direction, showing greater '*cultural maturity*', meaning women (and indeed men with such preferences) no longer had to show '*aggression, fight and fire*' in order to achieve career advancement.

In line with Kossek et al. (2017), any interventions from a work preference perspective need to be accompanied by those advocated by the work-family and gender bias perspectives. This includes, in particular, greater acceptance of flexible working arrangements (reported as highly variable by the sample), including recognition that many women (and, of course, men too) feel unable at certain times in their careers (particularly due to childcare responsibilities) to commit to a high level of often long-haul travel. It would not be practical in many organisations for procurement managers to be excluded entirely from business travel, but a strong commitment to including work-family considerations within work design, recognising the high level of travel content of procurement roles and its potential to cause procurement functions to miss out on the contribution in senior roles of many talented women, could significantly decrease the number of such women lost to the profession.

There is also a need for organisational interventions to reduce gender bias within procurement (awareness-raising to reduce unconscious bias, for example). While such bias was reported to be diminishing in some organisations, it was still stubbornly present within others, contributing to: an aggressive procurement ethos (that clashes with communal work preferences), the stigmatizing of flexible working practices and greater scrutiny of female performance. The latter is reported to leave women with a smaller margin for error than men (Cook and Glass, 2014), with mistakes seen as evidence of fundamental unsuitability for high office. This can lead to unjustifiably shorter tenures for women in senior positions, which, in turn, affect their ability to initiate and embed the work-family and work preference-related

interventions recommended above. It also has the effect of sending negative signals to women lower down the procurement ranks and denies them of positive female role models and potential sponsors.

Kossek et al. (2017), therefore, emphasise that interventions within organisations to increase female senior representation need to be integrated and, crucially, mutually reinforcing. This is reflected in the above recommended interventions. Kossek et al. (2017) also discuss the need for interventions to be considered at the level of both the individual and the organisation. The magnitude of the inequality reported within procurement and the prevalence of an aggressive procurement ethos strongly suggest that the onus for change should be on the organisation, especially via the procurement function itself.

## **5. Conclusion**

The empirical findings reported in this paper suggest that the low and lower representation of women in senior executive positions within procurement (Burjek and Rafter, 2017; O'Marah, 2013; Procurement Leaders, 2016) is the predominantly result of numerous impediments that they face (see Figure 2). Some of the impediments are generic organisational impediments, well-discussed in the gender equality literature (Bailyn, 2011; Kray et al, 2014; McCarty et al., 2014), while others have been shown to be procurement-specific. There are a number of implications of the findings for the literature.

First, it is clear from the findings that this topic is a notable gap within the procurement literature. Not only is female representation in senior executive positions very low in procurement (and lower than in other professions), but it has been shown in this research to be caused by numerous impediments – access *is* being denied. Yet over many decades the procurement literature has been largely silent. This study has started to address this gap (and made initial recommendations), but further research is required into both causes and the

contention raised here that the onus for change is predominantly on procurement functions not individual women (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014; McCarty et al., 2014).

Of course, this paper has only focused upon senior procurement roles – gender inequality elsewhere in the profession may also exist. Nor is gender equality the only inequality that could be researched – indeed, other inequalities were raised during the data collection. This suggests the need for a new research agenda within the procurement literature, one that would join other valuable research into human resource management within the profession (Driedonks et al., 2014; Feisel et al., 2011; Kiratli et al., 2016; Tassabehji and Moorhouse, 2008; Wagner and Kemmerling, 2014).

Second, while the paper was mainly concerned with contributing to the procurement literature, it has also contributed to the gender equality literature. An empirical contribution is the identification of two procurement-specific impediments: the above-average level of travel involved within procurement (relevant to, but going beyond the work-family perspective – Williams et al., 2016) and an aggressive ethos within procurement (relevant to, but going beyond the work preference perspective – McCarty et al., 2014). The causes of gender inequality within the senior ranks of procurement, therefore, partly reflected the existing gender literature (Kossek et al., 2017), but not entirely.

Of further interest to the gender equality literature is that these two procurement-specific impediments were shown to be intrinsically related to the nature of the work task and perceptions of ‘best practice’ and are thus particularly challenging to address with the interventions suggested by that literature. The global nature of procurement (with its attendant travel burden), particularly in larger organisations, is a fact and thus requires a particularly determined commitment on the part of organisations/procurement functions to work-family policies that seek to ‘increase work-family resources and facilitate greater control over work hours and boundaries’ (Bailyn, 2011; Kossek et al., 2017, p239; Williams

et al., 2013). The aggressive ethos within procurement, meanwhile, is partly the result of an arguably erroneous view (given arguments for a contingent approach to procurement – Kraljic, 1983) within many procurement functions that ‘best practice’ procurement is synonymous with aggressive negotiation and contract management. This provides an additional barrier to the interventions suggested by the work preference perspective (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014; Eagly, 2013; McCarty et al., 2014), as this impediment is not simply a human resource policy issue, but also an issue of procurement philosophy.

Finally, the paper has also contributed to the gender equality literature by answering the recent call of Kossek et al. (2017, p243) to both ‘stop splitting disciplinary narratives in research and interventions’ and focus on both the organisation and the individual when considering interventions. The research here duly included all three perspectives on the impediments to female advancement and also considered whether the onus for change lay with the organisation or the individual. This facilitated an integrated and targeted (at procurement functions) set of recommendations for addressing this unacceptable and damaging level of female representation within the senior ranks of the procurement profession.

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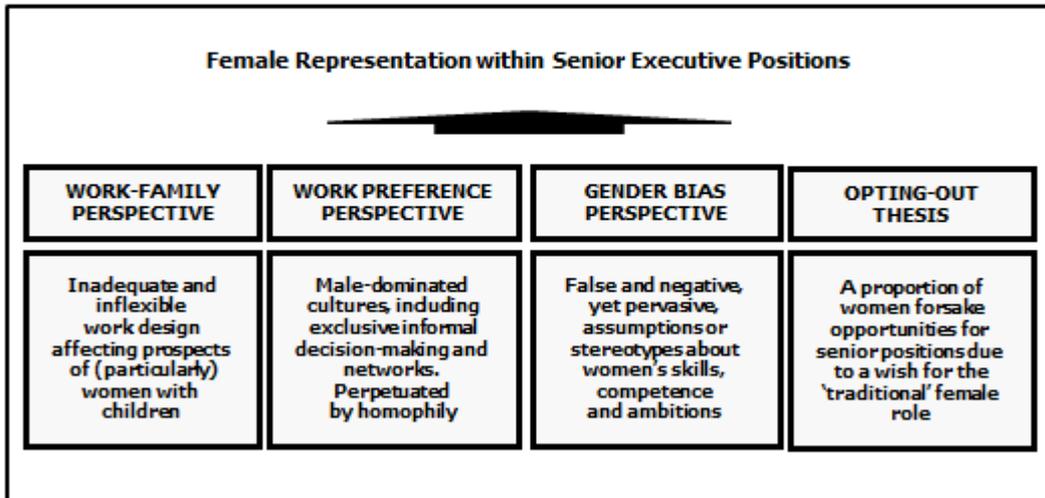
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**Table 1. Details of the Interviewees**

<b>ID M/F</b>	<b>Level of Seniority</b>	<b>Organisation Type</b>	<b>Turnover/ Employees</b>	<b>Interview Format</b>
P1 Female	Junior	Bathroom manufacture	£150-250 million/<1,000	In-person
P2 Female	Junior	Online retail	<100 million/<1,000	In-person
P3 Female	Middle	Aerospace	£10-25 billion/25,000-50,000	In-person
P4 Female	Middle	Waste management	£25-50 billion/150,000-200,000	Phone
P5 Female	Middle	Pharmaceuticals	£10-25 billion/25,000-50,000	Phone
P6 Female	Middle	Financial services	£50-100 billion/>200,000	Email
P7 Female	Middle	NGO	£5-10 billion/25,000-50,000	Phone
P8 Female	Senior	Aerospace	£10-25 billion/25,000-50,000	Email
P9 Female	Senior	Health retail	£250-500 million/1,000-5,000	Phone
P10 Female	Senior	Telecommunications	£25-50 billion/100,000-150,000	Phone
P11 Female	Senior	NHS trust	£150-250 million/1,000-5,000	Phone
P12 Female	Senior	Procurement agency	£10-25 billion (spend)/1,000-5,000	Phone
P13 Female	Senior	Procurement agency	£1-2 billion (spend)/<1,000	Phone
P14 Female	Middle	Interim	<100 million/<1,000	Phone
P15 Female	Middle	Aerospace	£10-25 billion/25,000-50,000	Phone
P16 Female	Middle	Aerospace	£10-25 billion/25,000-50,000	Phone
P17 Female	Senior	Retail	£5-10 billion/50,000-100,000	Phone
P18 Female	Senior	Higher education	£500 million-1 billion/5,000-10,000	Phone
P19 Male	Senior	NHS trust	£500 million-1 billion/1,000-5,000	Phone
P20 Male	Middle	Consulting engineers	£2-5 billion/10,000-25,000	Phone
P21 Male	Middle	Engineering	£10-25 billion/50,000-100,000	Phone
P22 Male	Senior	Construction	£1-2 billion/1,000-5,000	Phone
P23 Male	Senior	Nuclear energy	£5-10 billion/10,000-15,000	Phone
P24 Female	Middle	Local authority	£150-250 million/1,000-5,000	Phone
P25 Male	Senior	Travel industry	< £100 million/< 1,000	Phone
P26 Male	Senior	Health	£2-5 billion/1,000-5,000	Phone
P27 Male	Senior	Military engineering	£1-2 billion/<1,000	Phone
P28 Male	Senior	Publishing	£2-5 billion/10,000-25,000	Phone
P29 Male	Senior	Procurement consultancy	< £100 million/< 1,000	Phone
P30 Female	Senior	Procurement consultancy	< £100 million/< 1,000	Phone
P31 Male	Senior	Insurance	£25-50 billion/25,000-50,000	Phone
P32 Male	Senior	Transport engineering	£2-5 billion/10,000-25,000	Phone
P33 Male	Senior	Procurement consultancy	< £100 million/< 1,000	Phone
P34 Female	Senior	Engineering	£10-25 billion/50,000-100,000	Phone
P35 Female	Middle	NHS agency	< £100 million/< 1,000	Phone
P36 Male	Senior	Central government	£2-5 billion/10,000-25,000	Phone
P37 Male	Senior	Local authority	£1-2 billion/5,000-10,000	Phone
P38 Female	Middle	Financial services	£100-250 million/1,000-5,000	Phone
P39 Male	Senior	Procurement consultancy	< £100 million/< 1,000	Phone
P40 Male	Middle	Transport engineering	£2-5 billion/10,000-25,000	Phone
P41 Male	Senior	Public sector agency	£2-5 billion/10,000-25,000	Phone

**Figure 1. Initial Conceptual Frame: Causes Cited within Literature for the Low Female Representation within Senior Executive Positions**



**Figure 2. Adapted Conceptual Frame: Causes of Low Female Representation within Senior Executive Procurement Positions**

