**16 - Exploring the career aspirations of women in management accounting**

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**1. Background**

Despite men and women entering the UK accounting profession in equal numbers (Financial Reporting Council, 2022), there remains a significant underrepresentation of women in senior roles across all branches of the profession (GAAPweb, 2023). This is somewhat evidenced by a recent survey of accounting professionals (GAAPweb, 2023) which shows women occupying 66% of entry level roles, 40% of mid-level management accounting roles and as little as 18% of executive roles in the profession. Recently, there have been indicators as to the existence of a gender related ‘aspirations-gap’ (Azmat, Cunat and Henry, 2020; Powell and Butterfield, 2022), with evidence to suggest that there has been a decline in women’s aspirations to reach top management positions over recent years. This begins with the very earliest workplace experiences (Olsen and LaGree, 2023) and prevails through middle management stages (Beaupre, 2022).

**2. Research Aim and Objectives**

This research aims to address this critical issue by understanding the factors that influence the career aspirations and trajectories of female management accountants (FMAs) in the UK, through exploring their lived experiences, and uncovering strategies to support their career advancement. The objectives are:

* To identify the key factors that influence the career aspirations of FMAs.
* To explore the obstacles to and enablers of career progression experienced by FMAs as they progress through their careers.
* To understand how the experiences of FMAs shape perceptions of career opportunities and advancement.
* To identify strategies and interventions that can be implemented to support the career advancement of women in management accounting.

**3. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework**

The complexity and interplay of barriers affecting women’s progression through their careers is widely evidenced (Einarsdottir et al., 2018). The literature shows that gender disparity at senior management levels has been attributed to various factors including: gender based stereotypes and bias (Dalton et al., 2014), demands of personal life (Haynes, 2017), lack of promotion and networking opportunities (Cohen et al., 2020) and gendered personality traits (Eagly and Wood, 2014). Although the challenges have been studied extensively in numerous contexts, there is little focus on management accounting roles in organisations. The impact of gender on career aspirations to senior management is a well-established area of study (Powell and Butterfield, 2022) and it has been suggested that gender differences in aspirations may contribute to the underrepresentation of women at the higher levels of the organisation (Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2020). A number of studies from the early part of the 21st century focussed on levels of career aspiration being lower in women than men (Belkin 2003; Litzky and Greenhaus, 2007). However, Hoobler, Lemmon and Wayne (2014) found no relationship between gender and aspirations towards senior management. Other research suggests that women’s aspirations are complex, and affected by a range of factors that are not constant at all stages of career development, but change over the course of time (O’Neil and Bilimoria, 2005; Coffman and Neuenfeldt, 2014).

Given the complexity of the issue, the research will use the theoretical models of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994) and the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). SCCT provides a framework for understanding the career aspirations of women by considering their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. Lent et al. (1994) maintain that gender has relevance to career development because of reactions to gender in the organisational environment, particularly in traditionally male careers (Erickson, 2013). The model, therefore, provides a cognitive framework for the research to explore the individual level factors that affect career aspirations and can help identify the specific issues that drive or hinder women's progression. The KCM complements the SCCT by taking into account the different stages of a career and the interplay of different factors. The three parameters of the KCM (authenticity, balance, and challenge) interact with the SCCT constructs to influence career aspirations and trajectories across different career stages.

**5. Research Approach and Methodology**

This study sits within the interpretivist philosophy, which relies upon description and interpretation instead of measurement and prediction (positivist) to develop an understanding of the ways through which the participants perceive and experience their career aspirations. Interpretivism emphasises the importance of the subjective interpretation of phenomena by individuals. Aligning with the interpretivist philosophy, the epistemological approach for this research is constructivist. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2017), researchers who decide to work from a constructivist position hold an assumption that “there is no objective truth to be known” (p.54) and emphasise the diversity of interpretations that can be applied to the world due to the subjective experience of the respondents. In fitting with the above, the qualitative methodology utilised in the study will be phenomenology. Phenomenology is appropriate for studying complex experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017), such as career aspirations. It allows for a deeper exploration of the factors that shape these unique experiences and perspectives of women in their journeys through the profession.

**5. Research Methods**

Semi-structured interviews will be utilised to gather the stories of the FMAs, and is effective for qualitative research because it allows researchers to gain in-depth information from interviewees (Ruslin et al., 2022). The use of semi-structured interviews is likely to give participants the space and freedom to express their own perspectives in their own words (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The study will employ a stratified, purposive sampling approach. This will allow ‘information-rich’ subjects to be selected (Patton, 1990). Participant inclusion criteria, therefore, will be developed to include women currently working, or with experience, in management accounting roles with membership to a professional accountancy body. This will generate a homogeneous sample who could provide a contextualised perspective on the topic area. The population for the interviews will be stratified to include participants within the three groups: early career, mid-career and later career. The findings from the early career sample can then be analysed and used to inform subsequent interviews with mid and later career FMAs. It is anticipated that thematic analysis will be employed as the primary data analysis method for the qualitative interviews. Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research that involves identifying patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method allows for a flexible yet systematic approach to analysing qualitative data, making it suitable for exploring complex and nuanced topics (Bell et al., 2022).

**6. Importance and Future Impact**

The underrepresentation of women in senior management accounting roles poses significant challenges to the accounting profession, organisations, and society as a whole. The impact of strong female representation at higher levels within the organisation has been researched over recent years, with studies highlighting significant benefits improved financial performance (Green and Homroy, 2018; Fernando et al., 2020). Furthermore, if women’s aspirations for higher positions dilute across different stages of their careers, the gender imbalance at senior levels could be perpetuated, limiting women's opportunities for career advancement in management accounting roles. The research offers potential impact for FMAs themselves, the organisations that employ them and the profession of management accounting. The study will inform organisational initiatives with implementable strategies to support the recruitment, retention, and advancement of FMAs throughout their career journeys, leading to more diverse and inclusive workplaces. The research can also empower FMAs by providing a greater insight into their career development, allowing them to make informed career decisions, set realistic goals, and develop strategies to overcome barriers. The study's findings can have implications for the broader profession of management accounting. By understanding the factors that influence women's career aspirations, the study can inform the development of policies, initiatives, and best practices within the profession.

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