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Challenges of female executives' work activities: The hyper-efficiency operating mode

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper aims to examine the work experiences of female executives and the challenges of their visible and invisible work activities, considering the operating modes they develop to carry out their work activities.

Design/methodology/approach

This study relies on a materialist feminist perspective and a critical experientialist work theory, which considers both the visible and invisible dimensions of the work performed by female executives. The methodology is based on a qualitative research design involving individual and group interviews with 51 Canadian female executives.

Findings

The results reveal the hyper-efficiency operating mode mobilized by female executives, which combines strategies to take over and delegate work activities from the domestic sphere to reconcile the managerial work with their different life spheres.

Originality

A key finding emerging from these results relates to the invisible but omnipresent part of the work activities from the domestic sphere throughout the lives of female executives.

Keywords: work-life balance; work; women; management; female executives

Introduction

In recent decades, the relationship between work and other spheres of life has been a topic of interest in the academic world and public discourses (Dilmaghani and Tabvuma 2019; Kelliher *et al.,* 2019; Powell *et al.,* 2019). Some studies have considered the concepts of work-family balance or work-life balance to understand the configurations implemented between work, family, and more broadly, the different spheres of life, which may include personal activities and interests, voluntary and religious activities, etc. (Greenhaus and Allen 2011; Kelliher *et al.,* 2019; Brough *et al.,* 2020). This growing interest regarding the relationship between work and other spheres of life is consistent with the increase in women's activity in the labour market, specifically in professional and executive positions (Powell *et al.,* 2019). Historically, researchers have studied the conflicts, interferences and negative spillovers between work and various spheres of life using role theory (Kahn *et al.,* 1964; Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). Recent studies have looked at the potential for enrichment, facilitation and positive spillover between work and other spheres of life (Greenhaus and Powell 2006; Grzywacz *et al.,* 2007). Studies reveal flexibility strategies regarding work time and place through access to flexitime and teleworking (Chung and Van der Horst 2018). These strategies seem particularly favourable to the employability of post-childbirth women (Chung and Van der Horst 2018). Other studies suggest part-time work, mainly through flexible, reduced or compressed work hours (Chung and Van der Horst 2018; Beham *et al.,* 2020).

Regarding the relationship between work and other spheres of life among executives, some studies have revealed the particular pressures that affect this type of function in the organization (Júlíusdóttir *et al.,* 2018; Powell *et al.,* 2019). The work of executives is characterized by a high investment of time spent at work in contexts where hours are not accounted for to meet organizational objectives, promote job retention or determine compensation (Júlíusdóttir *et al.,* 2018; Powell *et al.,* 2019). These realities put pressure on executives' other spheres of life and can be a source of stress (Powell *et al.,* 2019) or dissatisfaction (Dilmaghani and Tabvuma 2019). Conceptually, several studies rely on conceptualizations of the balance between work and family or, more broadly, the executives' different life spheres (Ezzedeen and Ritchey 2009; Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Ford and Collinson 2011; Jayanthi and Vanniarajan 2012; Stock *et al.,* 2014; Mills and Grotto 2017; Collica-Cox and Schulz 2021). This concept identifies the interfaces and how executives balance their work demands (management/supervision) with those stemming from their private life. Despite the important contributions of these perspectives, the (managerial) work sphere remains conceptualized as distinct from the "private life" sphere. Thus, this conceptualization fails to consider the more invisible aspects of domestic work, which are not perceived as work. To address this gap, Powell *et al.,* (2019) highlight the need to mobilize new theories to better understand the connections between work and the different life spheres, beyond work-family balance issues. In this sense, it seems relevant to mobilize feminist theoretical perspectives to understand work and its divisions (Stock *et al.,* 2014; Mills and Grotto 2017) within management and concerning management/supervisory work activities and domestic work activities. In this regard, research shows that historically and still today, a higher proportion of men than women hold executive positions in organizations, and the persistence of a glass ceiling concerning the career advancement of women in the upper ranks of hierarchies (Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Júlíusdóttir *et al.,* 2018; Collica-Cox and Schulz 2021).

In addition, recent studies reveal gender inequalities between men and women in terms of domestic and family responsibilities (Júlíusdóttir *et al.,* 2018). As such, male executives are more likely to rely on their spouses or paid domestic staff for support at home with domestic and family

responsibilities, allowing them to work long hours (Heikkinen and Lämsä 2017; Júlíusdóttir *et al.,* 2018). Regarding female executives, studies show the negotiations necessary for an equal sharing of domestic and family responsibilities with their spouse and how they carry the bulk of these responsibilities, thus reducing the time available for professional work (Júlíusdóttir *et al.,* 2018). These findings raise questions about how female executives juggle their managerial and domestic work activities across a range of family (with or without dependent children) and marital (living in a couple or living alone) situations. Following these perspectives, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of female executives' work experiences by considering the challenges regarding their visible (supervision/management) and invisible (domestic) work activities among their different life spheres and the operation modes they develop to carry out their work activities. This reflection brings to light the necessity to further define the concept of work and the real work experiences of female executives by considering both its visible and invisible dimensions.

We combine two theoretical approaches to analyze the work experiences of female executives, a materialist feminist perspective (Hirata and Kergoat 2017) and a critical experientialist work theory (Molinier 2008; Dejours 2013; Dejours *et al.,* 2018) . These theoretical approaches will be presented and described in the section on theoretical perspectives. The following section presents a review of the literature on the challenges of work-life balance for executives.

The challenges of work-life balance for executives

Within the literature on executives' work-life balance strategies, several researchers have documented the realities of managerial work in terms of high workload and pressure, commitment to long hours, and organizational performance expectations, which make it difficult for executives to balance work and family (Jayanthi and Vanniarajan 2012; Stock *et al.,* 2014; Mills and Grotto 2017). Among the explanations given, limited time and energy resources place work and family in competition (Kahn *et al.,* 1964; Kasper *et al.,* 2005). These perspectives echo the "work-family conflict" concept, which presents conflicts and works' pressure and family life as mutually incompatible domains (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). On the executive side, tensions and contradictions between work and private life can arise when managerial work requires being fully engaged and controlling situations (Ford and Collinson 2011). These dimensions can cause interferences from work at home and work-life conflicts, negatively impacting their satisfaction (Dilmaghani and Tabvuma 2019) and health (Mills and Grotto 2017). In addition, some researchers have suggested that exposing parenting challenges and work-family issues can harm the executives' work performance (Stock *et al.,* 2014).

Furthermore, researchers have noted how recent research has been silent on the configurations implemented by executives concerning work-family balance (Jayanthi and Vanniarajan 2012; Stock *et al.,* 2014). The few studies available concern access to spousal support for male executives' family responsibilities. Thus, these contribute to the reproduction of the traditional division of gender roles where men assume the role of provider for the family and women support and care for family members in a traditional, heteronormative conception of the couple (Ezzedeen and Ritchey 2009; Heikkinen *et al.,* 2014). Among female executives, many take on full-time family responsibilities in addition to their full-time managerial work, as they are more likely to be in a relationship with a spouse who also works full-time (Ezzedeen and Ritchey 2009; Heikkinen *et al.,* 2014; Mills and Grotto 2017). Beyond these research based on gendered social norms surrounding the role of men and women in society (Eagly 1987), few consider the differences

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between male and female managers in terms of work-family balance and flexibility issues (Mills 2015). Moreover, researchers (Stock *et al.,* 2014; Mills and Grotto 2017) conceptualize managerial work as distinct and separable from non-work aspects such as marital status, child care and elder care (ex. Mills and Grotto, 2017) which contributes to keeping invisible and unrecognized the challenges experienced in domestic work activities and the configurations implemented to integrate and maintain themselves at work.

Research shows that female executives use different individual work-family strategies (Ezzedeen and Ritchey 2009; Vinnicombe and Singh 2011). Several female executives use flexible working hours and workplaces (Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Shaw and Leberman 2015) to optimize the conciliation between all their responsibilities. Others develop support systems at home, such as subcontracting domestic work to others (Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Coronel *et al.,* 2010). More broadly, maternity and role conflict continue to act as barriers in the work-family balance, which may also have organizational implications for female executives in terms of access to management positions (Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Coronel *et al.,* 2010), promotions (Ezzedeen and Ritchey 2009; Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Stone and Hernandez 2013) and their career trajectory (Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Vinnicombe and Singh 2011; Stone and Hernandez 2013). Despite these contributions on individual conciliation strategies, major data gaps remain concerning the configurations implemented by female executives regarding the visible and invisible work activities that promote their integration and retention process. In addition, few studies on female executives have revealed the need to consider both paid and unpaid work to analyze the challenges experienced by women in their rise to power (Guillaume and Pochic 2009). The following section presents the theoretical perspectives mobilized to study the work experiences of female executives through their visible and invisible work activities.

Theoretical perspectives

Researchers have shown the importance of developing tools to identify the configurations and strategies implemented by women concerning their work by considering an expanded definition of the concept of work (Anteby and Chan 2013). Materialist feminist perspectives raise the necessity to consider the indivisibility of female executives' work time and workplaces. They shed light on the existence of a sexual division of labour (professional and domestic, paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive, commercial and non-market) which attests to women's exploitation regarding the question of work (Galerand and Kergoat 2008). In essence, the work activities of the domestic sphere, which are still primarily carried out by women, are not considered as work (a principle of separation in the sexual division of labour) and have little to no social value (a principle of hierarchization in the sexual division of labour) (Delphy 1970; Kergoat 2012). Even if more and more women enter paid labour, these domestic activities do not disappear. They are separated while being rendered and kept invisible within production work. Moreover, domestic work activities are overshadowed in the workplace, even euphemized, revealing gender dominance surrounding this issue on the labour market, thus strengthening the sexual division of labour (Delphy 1970; Kergoat 2012). Despite these contributions, few researchers in the management field rely on this perspective to produce knowledge. Indeed, few researchers rely on social role theory (Eagly 1987) to consider the construction of social roles regarding social expectations about gender within society and the resulting normalized gendered behaviours (Mills and Grotto 2017). More broadly, researchers have pointed to the lack of engagement from management researchers

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with a feminist theoretical perspective (Bell *et al.,* 2019). According to these perspectives, it seems essential to consider a feminist theory to render the domestic work activities visible and account for their omnipresence to integrate them into the so-called "salaried" work and the daily strategies women develop (Haicault 2000). These theoretical perspectives regarding the concept of work highlight the necessity to be interested in the subjective experiences of female executives beyond the managerial sphere by considering their different life spheres (professional and family) as well as the gender challenges they face concerning the visible and invisible aspects of their work.

The critical experientialist work theory (Molinier 2008; Dejours 2013; Dejours *et al.,* 2018) makes it possible to analyze work while considering both its visible and invisible aspects, the challenges of work-family arrangements, as well as the strategies used by female executives. This theoretical perspective enables one to analyze the dimensions of the "real work" (*travail réel*) (visible and invisible work activities) and the subjective work experiences of female executives. More specifically, the "real work" (*travail réel*) consists of the gap between the task to be done and the activity that is done to fulfil that task (Dejours and Deranty 2010). The "real" consists of the concrete reality of work elements that cannot be anticipated, regulated or coordinated in advance by and through the work organization. This theoretical perspective enables one to analyze the dimensions of the social relationships and forms of pressure surrounding the persistence of the sexual division of labour in terms of social domination relations within and through work (Dejours and Deranty 2010). Combining these theoretical perspectives make it possible to analyze and identify the visible and invisible challenges within female executive's work as well as the individual strategies they put in place to reconcile their managerial sphere (supervision activities, visible work activities) with their family sphere (domestic work, invisible work activities). These perspectives also make it possible to connect female executives' visible and invisible work activities, which has yet to be done in the literature regarding management activities and the work-life balance of female executives.

Methodology

This research is part of a qualitative method that mobilizes narrative data collection through individual interviews (Mitchell 1981). This method is particularly relevant to identifying and analyzing female executives' visible and invisible work activities and their way of working to reconcile work and family. In this research, the executive population refers to positions held by women in the organizational hierarchy involving administrative power such as CEO, V.P., director, etc. (Júlíusdóttir *et al.,* 2018), direct management supervision or staff. After having received the approval of the ethical committee of our institution, participants were recruited through a snowball strategy that consisted of distributing an invitation letter to participate in the project via email, social networks and executive associations. Participants were selected to create a homogeneous sample based on two principles: saturation and diversification (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The saturation principle allows for an intensive study of the research object by selecting criteria common to all participants. These criteria are: 1) hold a management position for more than two years; 2) directly supervise/manage employees; 3) work in an organization with more than 250 employees. The diversification principle assures the sample's diversity by selecting different criteria. These criteria are age, type of training, sector of activity, marital and family situation. The characteristics of the 51 Canadian female executives in the sample are presented in Table I.

Insert table I here

Participants were asked to read and sign the consent form prior to the face-to-face interview. In-depth individual interviews were conducted and focused on themes connected to female executives' work experiences and their work-family balance strategies. We created an interview guide based on the theoretical perspectives selected for the project, which allowed participants to address these themes during the interviews. The themes included their work experiences, domestic work issues and career paths. These interviews were conducted in Canada by the researcher (first author of the article). Each individual interview lasted between an hour and a half and two hours. They were carried out in different stages to introduce an iterative process between the field and the theory, the treatment and the analysis of the material as it was being collected (Paillé and Muchielli 2016). This data collection process combined with a back and forth analysis strategy allowed for three key elements: 1) the analysis of new materials as it was being produced; 2) the emergence of new questions as the theory was being built; 3) the possibility to clarify certain aspects, all of which serve to guide the subsequent interviews (Paillé and Muchielli 2016).

Regarding individual interview processing and analysis, vertical phenomenological analysis of the materials using sensitive listening was conducted by reading and rereading the interview transcripts. This vertical phenomenological analysis allowed us to identify the elements of visible and invisible work activities and the work-life balance strategies that have been integrated and consolidated in a time-specific narrative summary for each participant. In parallel, an analytical work using the conceptualizing categories was mobilized to initiate the conceptualization and theorization work to deepen the understanding of the female executives' experiences (Paillé and Muchielli 2016). This analytical work makes it possible to construct categories using three dynamic analytical processes: analytical description, interpretive deduction and theorizing induction (Paillé and Muchielli 2016). The analytical description consists of building a category directly from the materials, naming and identifying the meaning of the phenomenon within the materials themselves. The interpretive deduction allows for the construction of a category by relating materials to theoretical concepts. The theorizing induction makes it possible to create categories by considering the linkages between experiences through sensitive and attentive listening to the materials. Analytical work using the conceptualizing categories also allows the interview materials to be compared horizontally so common categories can be identified from specific categories. The processing and analysis of the material provided a deep understanding of the dimensions of their work experiences and the strategies implemented by female executives.

Results

The materials' processing and analysis made it possible to construct two broad categories: 1) the diversity of visible and invisible work activities: 2) the hyper-efficiency operating mode and the mobilization of different strategies to reconcile visible and visible work activities. These categories will be presented in the following sections.

1- The diversity of visible and invisible work activities

The processing and analysis of the data reveal that every participant, regardless of her hierarchical level, the type of organization in which she works or her sector of activity is called upon to invest

herself in several different work activities related to the managerial work sphere such as: planning, organizing and coordinating the work to be done; team management; financial management; development and planning of strategic orientation; committees and meetings; customer relations; public relations, representations to partners and business developments; secretarial work and information and communication technologies (ICTs) management. These different work activities involve a high workload that leads them to sustain commitment and work long hours. They sometimes continue with supervisory work activities early in the morning (before going to the office), evenings, and weekends.

> *As president, the schedule takes up a lot of personal time. Because of the nature of our organization, we recognize the clientele, and that takes a lot of time. We have a lot of volunteers too. And it's very important to recognize their work and their support. But it's in the evenings, on the weekends [...] I have a 13-year-old child and I have to take care of him [laughs]. I've been away a lot. [...] It's a lot of time. - Florence*

Their work requires them to move swiftly from one activity to another, depending on the priorities of the moment. Female executives are called to prioritize work activities throughout the day, decide in which order cases should be treated, what needs to be reviewed or reworked in a context where there is much to do and where there are often other work activities waiting. In addition, they are called upon to manage contingencies and emergencies throughout their working day. They remain highly mobilized and invested for long hours in their management work to meet the expectations of the projects and mandates for which they are responsible.

> *Before I took the job, I didn't realize how many files I had in a day [...] A key, a lock change, a client in crisis, strategic planning; we are not at all in the same range of skills. – Diane*

> In addition to these work activities, the data processing and analysis reveals that the domestic sphere's work activities - family responsibilities that include caring for children and caring for ageing or ill family members, housekeeping and activities related to the survival of family members - remain ubiquitous throughout women's work life, whether they have children in their care or not, whether they live alone or as a couple. Although present for many of the female executives in this study, the importance and place given to this burden is likely to vary depending on if they are responsible for someone else's care (or lack thereof) and family and marital life plans. The following excerpts illustrate the varied ways in which they engage in the domestic sphere's work activities.

> *I still take care of all the food; I do the grocery shopping, I cook dinners, etc. I do the laundry. - Laurianne*

> *Everything that has to do with my children, discussions, feeling management, supervision, how things are going in their studies, that's all me. And anyway, the children come to me. – Simone*

> *I have the mental burden of meals, I like cooking a lot, but at some point, it's heavy [...] Sometimes I would like to arrive home and eat a shepherd's pie that my husband made. My husband is terrible in the kitchen. I would have to show him how to do it, but it's just another burden. - Vicky*

I don't have children, so that frees up a lot of the housework [...] My parents are getting older; my in-laws are getting older [...] everyone is far away, in X, Y and Z [name the cities], my aunt is in the hospital, my spouse's father is in the hospital, we take turns because her mother is no longer independent, we take turns, we move meetings, we go back and forth to X [name the city] the same day, in addition to work, which is a bit crazy. - Monia

Despite the weight of the sexual division of labour which separates professional and domestic work from the paid and unpaid work, female executives still struggle with all these work activities (visible and invisible), whether they have children under their care or not, whether they live alone or as a couple. Considering all their work activities, many female executives mentioned having little time for themselves due to their heavy workload, whether for leisure activities, meeting friends or playing sports.

I am a human being who has other spheres of life, with or without children, and it would have been easy to fall into the trap of only working. So I gave some space to my professional life, some space to my couple life, some space to myself, some space to my animals, some space to my friends, some space to my family [...] It is extremely important not to forget this balance, and it requires a lot of self-discipline [...] It is my biggest challenge to keep this balance between all the balloons I hold in my hand to stay in balance [...] I often say "I walk with my balloon bouquet in my hands on a wire. And I have to continually be aware of the balance I need to maintain so that I don't topple over on my wire." - Judy

Friends and personal life, it's been completely sacrificed for kids and work. – Paule

To promote their professional integration and retention in the workplace, female executives implement different strategies throughout their careers, articulated through a hyper-efficient operation mode. These elements will be presented in the next section.

2- Hyper-efficiency operating mode and the mobilization of different strategies to reconcile visible and invisible work activities

The hyper-efficiency mode of operation is characterized by various more or less visible strategies to reconcile the work activities of the domestic sphere with their managerial work activities, whether they have children under their care or not, whether they live alone or as a couple. The hyper-efficiency operation mode consists of analyzing, prioritizing and building continuous sequences between visible and invisible work activities to ensure that everything works.

As a woman, we manage, and it doesn't stop because I manage at home too. It's me who manages the residential operations. I organize the children's appointments and activities ... I must plan everything simultaneously. In my head, I have several small boxes, and when I'm here at my office, I have my "mother" box, my "wife" box, they are all there, I just need to open one from time to time to be sure that "yes yes I have an appointment to make" it never stops. Because I do this throughout my day, it's very invisible. - Barbara

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This hyper-efficient operation mode can incorporate various strategies to link the visible and invisible work activities. For example, flexible work time and location strategies can facilitate transitions between visible and invisible work activities. Some female executives mentioned choosing their place of residence in the proximity of their office to be physically closer to their office and limit travel time to reconcile work and family better. These proximity strategies between the spheres make it possible to facilitate the transitions to and from work and gain efficiency.

> *I chose to work close by and be close to the house and the school. It's in*
> *between; I am a few km from the house. – Laurianne*

In addition, several female executives use flexibility regarding their time and work schedule as a strategy. They modulate their time of arrival and departure according to the schedule of the other members of their family (children, spouse). They may choose to be absent during the workday to meet their children's. Some leave the office early to pick up the children at the end of the day but return to work in the evening, when the children are asleep, or on weekends.

> *Often, I organized it so that when they were smaller, at the elementary school and*
> *at the beginning, to be at home at 4:30 pm and I made them do their homework, I*
> *cooked supper, prepared the baths, etc., and at 7 pm, I started again and worked*
> *until 9-10 pm. – Isabelle*

Another strategy consists of outsourcing work activities to family members and salaried domestic workers, integrated into the hyper-efficiency operation mode. Some mentioned using this form of help sporadically at specific periods of their lives, while others have continuously had this form of support. Among those who hired salaried domestic workers, they often have a cleaning maid who comes to maintain the premises every week or every other week—for some of them, having the services of domestic workers to help with the interior maintenance of the house. Yet, they continue to do most of the day-to-day domestic work activities at home.

> *We hired a housekeeper just to allow us to breathe. She cleans every two weeks, we*
> *still do the cleaning the other week [...] it's not even a luxury, it's to improve our*
> *quality of life – Elodie*

Some female executives plan, organize, coordinate and manage work activities within the domestic sphere but delegate a significant part of the work activities explicitly related to housekeeping and babysitting to salaried domestic workers (one or more people alternately). To fill their presence at home, some of them have employed a nanny following the arrival of the children. They said they rely on these outsourcing strategies to optimize their managerial work and continue their professional ascent. Some mention how outsourcing comes at a high financial cost, especially when they have benefited from this form of help for many years. Conversely, other female executives said that because they "made a lot of money," they had no problem getting these different forms of help at home.

> *I organized [laughs] myself dearly. I always had a nanny at home for almost ten years.*
> *She took care of the kids, did the chores ... she didn't make my dinner [laughs] she*
> *made the kids breakfast and dinner. So the kids would come home from school and eat*
> *and the nanny would be waiting for them ... I got organized. [...] it was the only solution*
> *that was possible to give my best at work -Mia*

Although these activities are subcontracted to salaried domestic workers, some female executives mentioned continuing to bear mental responsibility for organizing, planning and coordinating these work activities, even if they are not the only ones responsible for their execution (or the primary person responsible for their implementation). Some have argued they need to reflect upon and prioritize the importance of the delegated domestic work activities, to whom they are delegated to make the right choices and be comfortable with them. In itself, this thought process is considered work. For example, indoor and outdoor maintenance can easily be delegated to a housekeeper. In contrast, childcare is best entrusted to their mother or kept for themselves, to preserve some time with the children. In addition, female executives who decide to subcontract housework find themselves responsible for hiring and managing salaried domestic workers, monitoring their work, managing their performance, and remunerating them. This workload is often invisible.

> *I took that domestic task and outsourced it. At that time, it seemed like the best model to me. So I had a woman at home full time [laughs] who was me [laughs]. And who filled in for me on everything, including running errands. But I still had the responsibility, the mental burden of that employee, her performance, her relationship with the children, the payment, and all the supplements around that couldn't be done by that person. And it was very demanding, and like any person who reaches certain decision-making positions, I had to travel a lot. -Estelle*

ICTs, including cell phones, also increase female executives' hyper-efficiency operation mode. The use of ICTs facilitates communication modes everywhere and at all times, whether for the visible or invisible work activities and the planning and organization tools available on the device. Globally, ICTs allow female executives to integrate and merge all their work activities (visible and invisible) and their domestic work activities while at their desks, keeping these activities invisible. Thus, ICTs contribute to maintaining the modus operandi of female executivess' hyper-efficiency.

> *My kids are always there [points to her cell phone]. Now they don't call me, but they text me. Otherwise, it's the work that's more on the phone than the family, but it does reassure me because I'm reachable at all times. [...] The cell phone is my efficiency tool. I am at work at all times, everywhere. Then, today with social media, we are in contact with our clients, our CAs, our children. We do broadcasting, all that is attached for me. There is nothing that is isolated, separate or that serves no purpose. [...] the objective is to attach and deliver and make it work. – Isabelle*

Discussion and originality

The following section discusses two main contributions of this study: 1) the visible and invisible work activities that constitute the actual work of female executives and 2) the processes of creating continuity and facilitating transitions between visible and invisible work activities. These two main contributions allow for a better understanding of the relationships between work and other life spheres based on the work experiences of female executives using new theoretical perspectives (Powell *et al.,* 2019) of the critical experientialist work theory and materialist feminist work.

The real work of female executives: the visible and invisible work activities

The work of female executives is characterized by a significant investment in terms of hours spent working to meet the expectations of the mandates for which they are responsible. These findings

confirm those of other researchers who have raised the important work-life balance challenges facing executives, where the realities of managerial work - in terms of high workload and pressure, high commitment, long hours and expectations of organizational performances - make it difficult for executives to balance work and family (Jayanthi and Vanniarajan 2012; Stock *et al.,* 2014; Mills and Grotto 2017). One contribution of this research concerns the heterogeneity and variety of aspects that make up female executives' visible and invisible work activities. Regarding managerial work, some researchers (Piney *et al.,* 2013) mention the concept of "polyactivity" to depict the need to intervene on several levels simultaneously in the relational, technical and administrative activities that characterize the work of female executives. However, in this study, female executives stipulate that the domestic sphere's work activities are interrelated, interdependent, and a part of their work activities. These lead us to think of a concept of "polyactivity", which seems more inclusive of visible and invisible work activities. Our study shows how female executives develop a hyper-efficient way to integrate different strategies linking their visible and invisible work activities throughout the working days. In this sense, these results align with some studies stating that female executives carry out most domestic work (Ezzedeen and Ritchey, 2009). These aspects remain ubiquitous and intertwined with their work activities. However, our work's specific contribution concerns how female executives go about their visible and invisible work activities more concretely, using a hyper-efficient mode of functioning, and promoting their job retention.

Broadly, the results of this study confirm that domestic work activities are an integral part of women's work. As the feminist researchers who worked on conceptualizing domestic work have pointed out, these activities must be included in the definitions of the concept of work (Kergoat 2012; Anteby and Chan 2013). Indeed, many of the female executives in this study report how throughout their lives, they experience continuity between domestic and salaried work spheres, in particular because of their hyper-efficient operation mode, which allows them to mobilize various strategies, as some researchers have mentioned regarding the women's work, but in a more general way (Molinier 2004; Hirata and Kergoat 2017). The mobilization of these various strategies, which contribute to their hyper-efficient operation mode, is built up throughout the work situations they experience, according to the evolution of the needs of their loved ones and the work to be done, particularly in the domestic sphere. They are thus at work in different ways, impermanent, moving, and called to be modified throughout their life course.

Moreover, our results are in continuity with those of Haicault (2000), which reveal that the simultaneity and non-separability of the life spheres characterize the mental burden of women's work activities and not the addition of different types of activities or services. More broadly, these results confirm the persistence of the sexual division of labour, where female executives occupy a position that barely allows them to completely disengage from the work activities of the domestic sphere even if they integrate into managerial work. They develop a hyper-efficient way of working by incorporating different strategies to try and hold together their visible and invisible work activities. Based on the critical experientialist work theory (Dejours and Deranty 2010), it is possible to think that the strategies constructed individually by the female executives in this study to develop hyper-effective operation modes enables them to cope individually with the pressures of the sexual division of labor. These strategies allow them to keep some of their work activities invisible and promote their integration and retention in management. However, the visibility of these individual strategies, particularly with colleagues, to move from the individual to the

collective and subvert social domination relations within and through work, remains to be constructed.

Creating continuity and facilitating the transitions between the visible and invisible work activities

To reconcile visible and invisible work activities, the female executives of this study mobilized a hyper-efficient way to build continuities between their different work activities. This strategy enables female executives to develop and fabricate a "compromise" to conciliate all their work activities. The hyper-efficiency operating mode includes all their work activities, including domestic work activities, which remain ubiquitous and inseparable from the work of female executives. However, they keep those activities invisible most of the time. The strategy of hyper-efficiency consists in seeing everything, being everywhere, thinking about everything, planning to articulate the different work activities in various life spheres and holding several work activities (managerial and domestic) at the same time and in the same space, or by facilitating the transition between time and space. Several female executives implement a variety of individual strategies to reconcile their different work activities (visible and invisible) while maintaining them invisible. The weight of the sexual division of labour which separates managerial work from domestic work activities, puts pressure on female executives to keep the domestic work hidden and act as if it did not exist. ICTs reinforce this *modus operandi* as they make it possible to manage several work activities (managerial and domestic) simultaneously within different spaces or facilitate the transition between space and time. Our results show how the managerial and family life spheres are intertwined throughout the daily life of female executives, which offers new insights into the visible and invisible issues of female executives' work. This hyper-efficiency mode of operation may lead them to aggregate and construct various strategies, including flexibility of work locations, work times, different delegation processes of domestic work activities and their implications. Among these strategies, the flexibility of time and workplace has mainly been named by female executives, concording with the results shown in studies regarding female executives (Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Shaw and Leberman 2015). More broadly, maintaining the invisibility of domestic work activities and the individual strategies that contribute to their hyper-efficient operation mode is an important advance for their integration and retention in management. However, this gain is limited in coping with the sexual division of labour pressures and the relationships of domination that mark managerial work. Compared to female entrepreneurs (St-Arnaud and Giguère 2018), female executives lack the authority to reappropriate the work organization to integrate and internalize domestic work activities within management, thus limiting possible subversions in the face of the sexual division of labour within and through work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study provide an in-depth understanding of the work experiences of female executives through the visible and invisible issues of their work activities and how hyper-efficiency functions to help them stay at work. The contribution of materialist feminism and the critical experientialist work theory allowed for a broader conceptualization of the issues surrounding the sexual division of labour. It opened on a redefinition of the concept of the work done by female executives, taking into account both their visible and invisible work activities and the strategies they implement. On the one hand, it showed the progress of individual strategies contributing to the hyper-effective mode of functioning mobilized by female executives. These strategies allowed them to integrate and maintain themselves in management. On the other hand,

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it revealed limited gains regarding the persistence of the sexual division and the relationships of domination in and through work that characterize management. Following these perspectives, this study contributes to renewing the perspectives for studying the relations between work and the different spheres of life, using theoretical perspectives on work experiences. This contribution answers the call of Powell *et al.,* (2019) about the need to mobilize new theories to better understand the connections between work and the different life spheres, beyond the issues of work-family conflict or work-family balance.

Implications of the study

It would be relevant to mobilize these theoretical perspectives in future research with a sample of female executives from the same workplace, to explore the possibilities or difficulties of moving from individual strategies to forms of collective reconstruction of the issues experienced at work, in an expanded definition of the concept. Moreover, these theoretical perspectives could also be mobilized in future research with a sample of male executives or a mixed sample of young executives. This could allow for a better understanding of how visible and invisible work experiences are lived and the functioning modes developed concerning the relationships between work and the different life spheres. These avenues would be particularly relevant in light of the unprecedented changes in the world of work since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of the practical implications of the results of this research, we hope they will lead to a better understanding of the issues female executives face concerning their visible and invisible work activities. They also offer avenues for developing more equitable and inclusive organizational environments concerning the different facets of the work experiences of female executives and other workers and for developing supportive organizational practices. Finally, these results have social implications and contribute to understanding the issues experienced by female executives for the actors in the practice field who accompany this clientele.

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Age	Less than 40 years old	7
	41-50 years old	19
	51-60 years old	21
	Over 60 years old	4
Initial training	Trained in management	23
	Trained in another profession	28
Sector of activity	Traditionally female (health, education and social services)	30
	Traditionally masculine	21
Marital life	Living with spouse	39
	Living alone	12
Children	With dependant children	33
	With independent children (grown-up)	14
	Without children	4

Table I : Characteristics female executive's sample