

Culture as "women's work"?

Gender in the Cultural Management profession in Iceland

(Working paper)

Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir, Bifröst University, Iceland

Njörður Sigurjónsson, Bifröst University, Iceland

Finnur Bjarnason, Bifröst University, Iceland

Abstract

This paper presents the findings from an online survey among 694 cultural managers in Iceland. The purpose was to map the organisational environment of Icelandic cultural and arts managers, as well as portraying the demographic environment. The findings confirm that women are in the majority within the profession, with a ratio of 63% to 36%, although men outnumber women in private sector cultural institutions (53% to 46%) which is noteworthy since top management positions worldwide, both in public and private sectors, are predominantly occupied by men (OECD, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2022). It further confirms that the female cultural managers are better educated than their male counterparts, with 90% of the women boasting a university degree compared to 80% of the men. Additionally, and which makes Iceland perhaps an exceptional case, women dominate at every level of management, and not only in middle and lower management roles. Finally, our figures also indicate that over 75% of those studying cultural management in Iceland are female. The paper presents some possible explanations for this development in light of both the increased participation of women in the labour market in general and the increased professionalisation and standardisation of the role of cultural manager, while seeking to be aware of gendered biases in research and literature about management. This is put into perspective with the possible future development of cultural policy, the instrumental and target-driven nature of which frequently dress it up as a profitable enterprise, whilst most of its ideological underpinnings render it more akin to a public service, such as healthcare and education. Speculating that cultural activity might be viewed as unpaid labour, which has traditionally been carried out by women, goes some way to explaining not only the developing gender divide

but also what has been a major source of friction within cultural policy between marketised policy making and non-economic values. These differences may have been underlined during the COVID-19 pandemic with the state offering extra support to culture which was seen to perform the vital task of keeping people's spirits up and connecting them to one another, without a clear commercial or transactional agenda to be exploited.

Introduction

Until recently, men held practically all important political, economic and managerial positions in western societies, and the drastic increase in women's participation in the job market reflects the many battles that have been fought and won by the feminist movement. Following the four waves of feminism from the beginning of 20th century to present day (see for example Freedman, 2007; Madsen & Scribner, 2017), the cultural sector has not been unaffected by the growing participation of women in the job market.

DiMaggio's first survey (1987) among arts managers in the United States indicated that they came from different backgrounds, although most of them were from middle-upper class backgrounds with a relatively high educational level. They nonetheless expressed a lack of practical skills and preparation, saying the occupation still seemed fragile and that it was difficult for arts and cultural organisations to find suitable candidates for management and director's positions (Dimaggio, 1987). Herron et al. (1998) conducted a survey of medium-sized cultural institutions in the United States, finding that the majority of senior management positions were appointed by men, while the majority of middle management positions were appointed by women. Where women and men were in similar positions, men were paid more, especially in senior positions, and the result was that within cultural management there was a 'glass roof' (Herron et al., 1998).

The cultural sector in the Nordic countries is, according to a recent study (Kulturanalys Norden, 2017) boasting a much higher number of women than men, for example, most private enterprise. In the North, women are reaching equal status and even dominance within the state-run institutions of the cultural sector, and approaching parity in managerial positions, with Iceland providing a positive outlier (Kulturanalys Norden, 2017). This is a welcome

development, since some earlier research had shown that the increased number of female employees did not necessarily reflect equal distribution of power.

While looking to France, Vincent Dubois (2015) offers some explanations for the feminization of cultural management. He points to the fact that women are more numerous in social sciences at universities, and these often lead to less well-developed professions, such as cultural management. The fact that the structure of cultural management careers is relatively unclear also leads to an influx of (often female) upper class people who want to avoid losing status in society. Although such jobs are often poorly paid, they can use them to maintain both social and cultural capital and avoid the teaching profession, which is no longer considered as desirable.

Secondly, despite the feminization of cultural practices possibly affecting the feminization of career paths in this sector, Dubois (2015) points to gender imbalances in the arts, with more men on the creative side and more women on the management and supervision side, which may be due to women giving up their artistic careers earlier. Thirdly, Dubois believes that it is now less likely that people from the lower and working classes can rise a social class through their role as cultural manager, as was the case 60 years ago. At the same time, it has become more common for applicants to be the children of people who either work, or used to work, in the cultural sector (Dubois, 2015).

In spite of the increased alignment of the educational requirements, and despite the homogenising effect on cultural management occasioned by institutions becoming more alike, not least within the public sector (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), many different jobs might claim the title of cultural manager. Some show stronger tendencies towards professionalization through a traditional education and career, such as that of the librarian or curator, whilst others, including various types of project management or the organisation of events, are less clear.

According to Dubois, it is this very lack of a clear structure of professionalization which makes cultural management an attractive option for women, as well as the fact that they are more often than men forced to give up their artistic careers. If so, the feminization of the sector might be seen as superficial, rather than representing real progress towards structural equality. Thus, instead of handing over power to women, the sector instead becomes rebranded as „women’s work“. According to Bolton & Muzio (2008), this can even lead to a process of de-

professionalisation, whereby „feminization is connected with decreasing earnings and autonomy, salaried employment, elongated hierarchies and managerial supervision” (Bolton & Muzio, 2008). This concern, as to whether the trend of feminization of the arts is slowly altering the status and organisation of the profession rather than challenging the male dominance, has been echoed in research on Nordic cultural managers (Kulturanalys Norden, 2017). This is also the conclusion of Dubois:

The very high rates of women who pursue cultural management careers should therefore not be seen as merely the reproduction of gender stereotypes, as these careers can also constitute ways to stray from well-worn paths. However, they do not constitute a challenge to existing inequalities in the gendered distribution of occupations, since the jobs accepted by these women are, for the most, part low-earning positions. This choice is arguably neither about reproducing nor about subverting masculine domination, but much more likely a matter of coping with it. (Dubois, 2015).

But although pay discrimination also extends to equal work, it is no surprise to find at the heart of cultural policy the dilemma that governments have embraced a marketized form of policymaking and evaluation, which are ill at ease with aesthetic judgements, calls for specialness, and non-economic forms of value (O’Brien, 2014).

Some of these points addressed above may direct us to think whether the historical, traditional idea of female unpaid labour (and the non-appreciation of it) may have reached the realms of the often unseen labour of the cultural manager, as the personal assistant whose part is to make things happen – to assist the star of the show by taking care of managerial and administrative issues that both are vital for the show, but also – as previously indicated – unseen and therefore perhaps more ‘suitable’ as ‘women’s work’. The culture of internship in cultural sector reinforces this idea as well: If you want to prove yourself, you need to ‘do your time’ – or as Brook & O’Brien claim (2020). “Unpaid labour is an important element of how precarity has been theorised. It is also an issue that is often seen as endemic to cultural and creative work” (p. 232).

The research presented here is from a survey aimed at exploring the profession of cultural managers in Iceland – a country sometimes represented as a paradise of gender equality

(Global Gender Gap Report, 2022). While this study does confirm that the profession has become dominated by women, it offers some further nuance as to the distribution between state run and private enterprises.

Method

For the survey, we decided to cast a wide net, defining a cultural manager as someone who bears responsibility for one or more fundamental aspect of a cultural organization, also defined in the widest sense. It therefore ranges from the top and middle managers in large Icelandic cultural institutions, such as the National Theatre, to those organising small exhibitions, concerts, and one man shows, where the artist herself is likely to play the role of cultural manager. It further includes not only those in charge of coordinating but also those in charge of marketing, production, outreach, and finance. Although this definition was immediately challenged by our results, which showed that only a minority of the participants think of themselves as cultural managers (45% of the women and 36% of the men), we nevertheless believe that a firm understanding of the cultural sector is a prerequisite, even if one's area of expertise is finance or marketing.

The survey was active between September 23rd and October 14th 2020, and was conducted online through Lime Survey. 694 invitations were sent out and 470 replied, 373 of which completed the survey (N=373) with the participation rate of 54%. Our aim was to understand better the background, education, and circumstances of those working in cultural management in Iceland.

The survey is limited to the traditional definition of culture as the visual- performing- and written arts as well as museums. The scope of activity covered by the survey encompasses the following: Literary publishing, Music publishing, Galleries, Film, video, and television production, Performing arts, Visual arts, Venues and other facilities for cultural activity, Libraries and archives, Museums, Historic sites and buildings or similar tourist attractions. This constitutes a narrower definition of the cultural sector than the UNESCO definition of the cultural industry (2009) or the EUROSTAT definition of the creative sector (2021), both of which include architecture, fashion design, computer game design, and more.

The survey was divided into four parts: The first part asked about the workplace, the second about the participants' education and experience, the third part about the effects of COVID-19 on their respective cultural organisations, and the fourth about demographic features.

The sample was compiled by collecting professional email addresses and was kept as large as possible. The database was assembled using webpages of various cultural organisations or other available online information, sometimes contacting chosen organisations to find which recipients best matched the definition of cultural manager as defined by the research team.

Findings

General demographic inquiries demonstrated that participants were almost entirely Icelandic (by ethnicity), or 98% and in terms of gender (see Figure 1), 63% were women and 36% were men (N=373). No respondent chose the option „Other” and 1% did not respond. This ratio is rather descriptive for gender ratio in surveys in general but according to Statistics Iceland, women made up 59,4% of those working in cultural professions but only 45,1% of those working in other professions (Statistics Iceland, 2020).

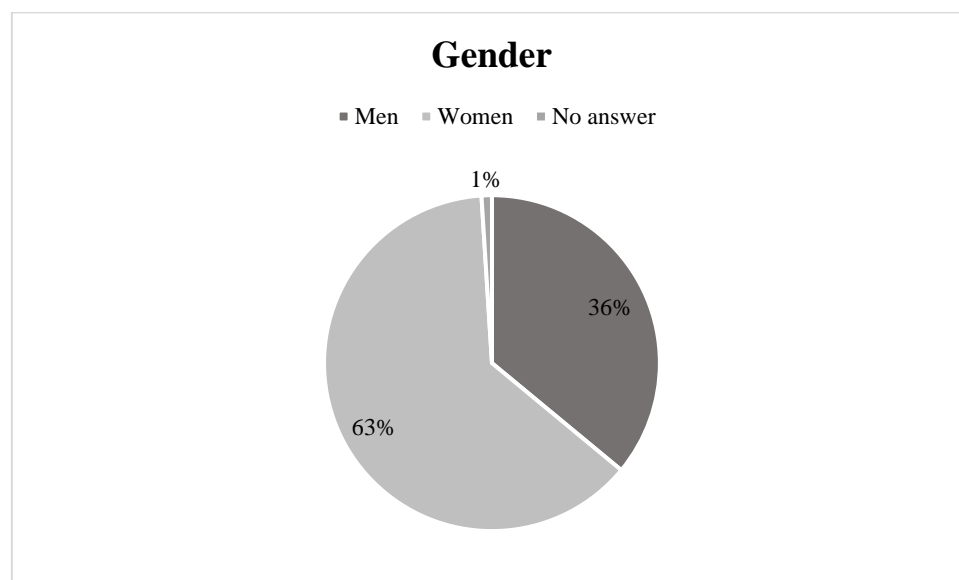


Figure 1: Gender ratio

Table 1 demonstrates the age division of participants, with the majority of participants from age 31-60.

Table 1: Age groups

Age groups	
21-30	2%
31-40	23%
41-50	27%
51-60	29%
61-70	15%
71+	3%

A large majority of participants (73%) had full-time employment and the rest in part time jobs, some as volunteers. About 37% had worked for 10 years or longer in the same occupation, 24% for 1-3 years, 23% for 4-6 years, 9% for 7-9 years and 5% for less than a year. When asked to define their occupation as cultural management, 42% agreed, 37% partly agreed and 18% did not agree. Cross tabulations did not yield any particular gender differences regarding these inquiries.

Some of the major cultural institutions in Iceland have women in top manager's positions – like for example the National Museum of Iceland, The Icelandic Symphony Orchestra, Harpa Concert and Conference Hall and Reykjavik City Theatre (in September 2022). In 2014, the three professional theatres (National Theatre of Iceland, Reykjavik City Theatre and Akureyri Theatre) were managed by women. Among participants, 39% claimed to have a management education and 17% of those who did not aimed at adding a management degree in the future.

Regarding higher management degrees, 60% had master's degrees or equivalent, 23% with bachelor, 3% with diplomas or other arts degrees and 7% with secondary school or vocational education. 2% had PhD and the same amount had only finished mandatory primary school education. Cross tabulations yielded a slightly higher ratio of female participants with university degrees, or 90%, while among the men, the ratio was 80%. In this context, it is important to bear in mind the lower ratio of men, or 36% of the total number of participants.

About 46% of participants worked in a government run cultural institution, 16% in a NGO and 25% in a privately own organisation. Looking at the gender differences in terms of organisational types, women (N=235) were more likely to work in government run cultural organisations and men (N=134) in private / self-own organisations (see Figure 2). When asked whether they had fears of insecurity and uncertainty of the future, 24% rather or strongly agreed, 41% rather or strongly disagreed, 16% were neutral and 19% did not respond, however, no gender differences were significant in the responses to this statement.

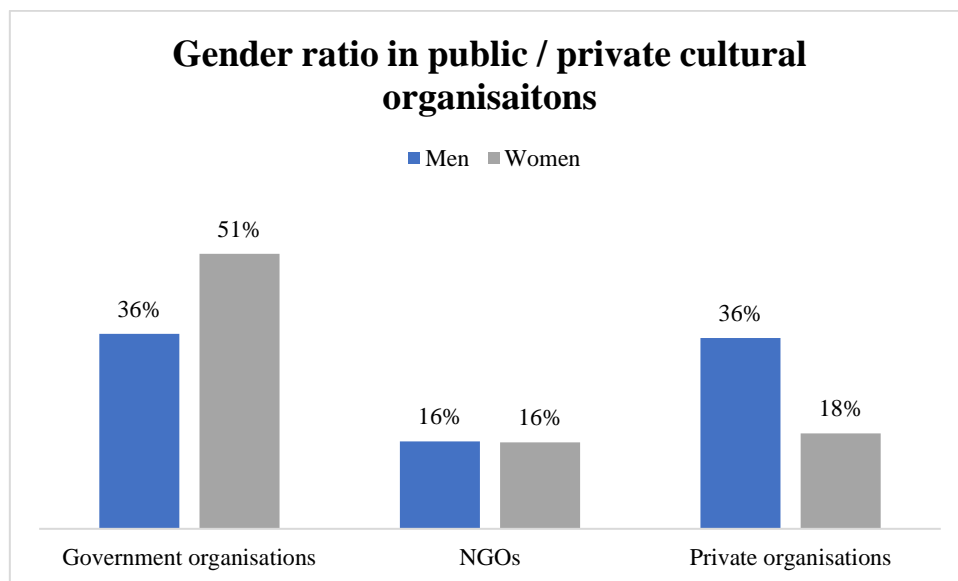


Figure 2: Gender ratio in public / private cultural organisations

Participants were asked to define the nature of their positions. Figure 3 demonstrates slight gender differences regarding managers and mid-level / project managers. Furthermore, it is interesting to note the low differences regarding CEOs. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that participants were allowed to choose more than one option.

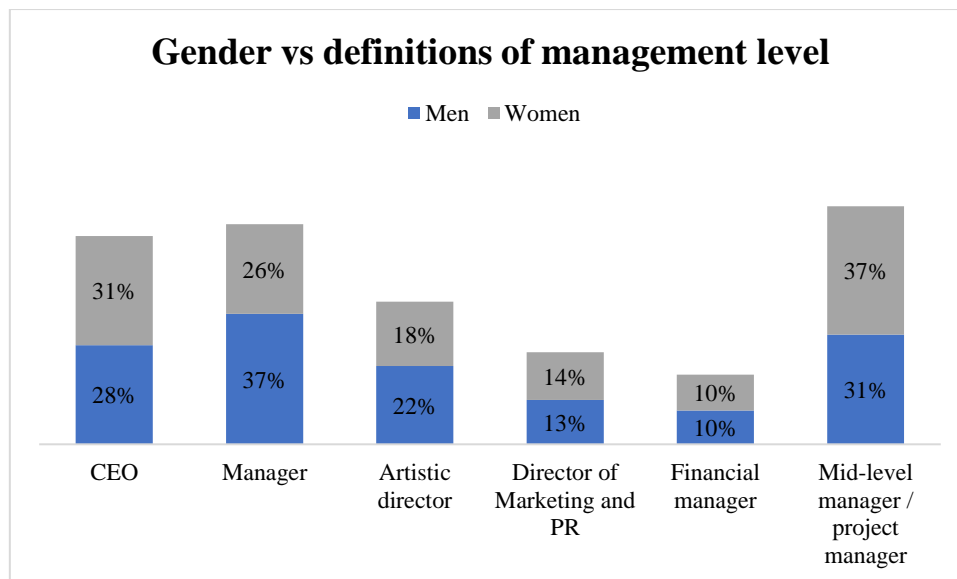


Figure 3: Gender vs definitions of management level

Participants were offered to either agree or disagree to various situational statements. Regarding the statement *My job is more important than the salaries*, 52% rather or strongly agreed and 8% rather or strongly disagreed, while others were either neutral or did not elaborate. Looking at gender differences, 58% of female respondents and 73% of male respondents disagreed. While asking whether their occupation was in line with their values and life perspectives, overwhelming majority, or 76% rather or strongly agreed and only 1% disagreed – the rest did not respond.

These findings – and the fact of the majority of women among participants, and of women in top management positions in Icelandic cultural institutions – are not surprising, given the fact that among students that have finished master’s degree in Cultural Management at Bifröst University, 75% of graduates are women (Bifröst University Statistics, 2022) and some of them have landed top management positions in the cultural sector and according to Statistics Iceland, in 2020, 66% of all university students in Iceland were female (Statistics Iceland, 2022). One of the participants wrote in comments in the end of the survey:

It is important to have a gender quota in this sector – it is important that both genders have a say and not all museums and galleries in the country are not only governed by men or women.

Discussion

Despite Iceland being on top of the Global Gender Gap Index for 12 years in a row, women are still underrepresented in top management positions, although they seem to do better in public institutions rather than private enterprises (see for example Óladóttir, Aðalsteinsson & Christiansen, 2019) and even in sectors (like education and healthcare) where women are most of the total workforce. Furthermore, there is still 12,9% gender-based wage gap between men and women in 2021 (Statistics Iceland, 2021). In the Nordic countries, there seems to be a rising trend in women dominating major management positions in the cultural sector. Our findings are in line with the conclusions of Kulturanalys Nord (2017) and, like Dubois (2015) discussed, a certain feminization has occurred within the Icelandic cultural landscape, while almost any other sector is dominated by men in top positions.

The somewhat unclear labelling and ‘fluid nature’ of organisational structures within the cultural sphere may appeal to women, but there may also be other factors at work. Personal interests, a stepping-stone into the cultural realm or networking by interning are probably reasons that need further inquiries – is in why this profession has been chosen (or not chosen). Dubois (2015) claimed that women are more likely than men to give up their artistic career and choose other professions within the cultural sector – for example as administrators, project managers, personal assistants to the masters and even taking on demanding, time consuming and unpaid internships – the unseen and often unappreciated hand that at the same time is vital for the show to happen - with the hope of being noticed and getting credit for their hard work by achieving permanent, paid positions.

Statistical data on salaries and possible gender pay gap within the Icelandic cultural sector is not available at this point – nor did we specifically inquire about the salaries of participants in this survey as the focus was more on the institutional environment and responses to COVID-19. In hindsight, it might have been valuable and have provided some indications on whether there was gender-based differences in salaries (although sensitive in nature). Furthermore, women who apply for top level positions are more likely to be better educated and have more related experience than male applicants, since they want to ‘tick all the boxes’ whereas men are less concerned about that (see for example Eagly & Carli, 2007; Böhmer & Schinnenburg,

2008). Our findings also present that female participants were more likely to work in public, state funded cultural organisations than private enterprises. The aspects of choosing job satisfaction over salaries, despite profession-related uncertainties, is one of the ‘myths’ around the cultural sector workforce that is worth considering in future studies. Furthermore, the fluid nature of cultural work and the criss-crossing with other sectors makes it more complex to map the perceived nature of cultural organisations, which must also be considered. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the organisational culture within cultural institutions (both government-run and private) in relation to equality and diversity is needed and a worthy subject for future research.

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