

**COPING WITH STRESS AND
SURVIVING THE MALE-ORIENTED
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE:**

**THE CASE OF EXEMPLARY
ICELANDIC FEMALE LEADERS**

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BACKGROUND



Experiences of exemplary women in leadership positions in Iceland and how they cope with the corporate ladder that is more slippery for women than men (Blickenstaff, 2005; Böhmer & Schinnenburg 2018; Eagly & Carli 2007; Acker 2006; Akande 1994; Bruckmuller & Brascombe 2010; Haslam and Ryan 2008)

Women more likely than men to shoulder responsibilities in their personal life (the third shift), even if they earn more than their spouse (see for example Doyle & Hind 1998; Nelson & Burke 2000; Belyakova et al. 2017).

Valuable lessons can be drawn from how women leaders cope with stress

METHODS

Data were collected through qualitative interviews, in this round (Oct 2019 – Feb 2020)

October 2019 – February 2020

Nine Icelandic women in leadership and management positions (who had obtained management awards), both in the public and private sector in the period

A part of a wider study among Nordic female managers,

Observes their experiences on the way to the top and the challenges they may have faced while climbing the corporate ladder

Particularly in terms of coping with stress and gender-related issues.



BAD EXPERIENCES OF TOXIC MANAGEMENT STYLES IN A MALE-ORIENTED ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Participants shared a number of horror stories of some of their previous (mostly male) managers – why?

1. Toxic management styles are more likely to flourish in a homogenous organisational environment (lack of equality and diversity) and are even rewarded at times (narcissism, scandals, corruption, unethical behaviours etc)
 2. Top-down management can negatively influence the corporate culture and have negative effects on the empowerment of employees - nepotism, „looking in the mirror“ and the fear of hiring skilled employees (who are even more clever than the manager)
 3. Challenging working conditions, stress and constant pressure can lead to worse decision-makings and a lack of communication
- **All the factors above are influential in terms of developing burnout**
(Schuh et al. 2012; Kellerman 2005; Higgs 2009; Allio 2007; Erickson et al. 2007).



DEALING WITH MANSPLAINING?

Women in management positions tend to be marginalised; either put on a pedestal or their skills and experiences questioned (Adams, 2015)

When I was young, I made speeches about how easy it is to be a woman in my sector, even though most of the time I was the only woman. That was simply because I wasn't taking anything away from anyone. The very day I became a threat, the shit show began, when I took something someone thought belonged to him.

Yes, sometimes people want to put me down and put me in my place [laughs]. I've also been in the position where group of men collectively decide to deliberately misunderstand me, when it suits them to keep things unchanged.

Gender-specific emotional labour!



ORGANISATIONAL HOUSEWORK: CLEANING UP THE MESS!

Men are more likely to be chosen into management positions in times of prosperity (Kanter 1977; Stroh et al. 2004)

However, if the boys have made a mess in the kitchen, it is always assumed to be a “good idea” to get a woman to clean it up!

The emphasis on women’s skills and capabilities as a “solution” and “salvation” during times of crisis can create a risk for female candidates and cause an unfair pressure on them to be the saviours of the company, to clean up after the screw-ups of their male counterparts (the glass cliff is slippery!)

(Axelsdóttir & Einarsdóttir 2017; Bruckmuller & Brascombe 2010, Haslam & Ryan 2008)





ICELANDIC FEMALE LEADERS ON THE ISSUES OF BURNOUT

Burn-out as a severe cause of too much stress, pressure and overwhelming responsibility

Lack of coping mechanisms and self-care (specifically vicious for female managers, particularly when burdened with family responsibilities)

Burn-out can lead to bad management styles, bad communication patterns and the organisation as a whole could suffer, if not treated with preventive measures

Coping with stress

Participants emphasized the importance of trust between employees and managers and that someone had their back, both at home and in the workplace

In addition, preventive measures like healthy living and regular exercise were a common theme

I had to spend 20 years acting like a guy in a suit – laughing at all the hoarse jokes and adapt to the male oriented culture completely ... Perhaps that experience has provided me with essential skills dealing with male colleagues in meetings.

I managed stress by confiding with another person ... Sometimes through tears ... That's just healing, otherwise you carry it in your bones ... and you get it out of the system and thus you need to be (open) perhaps this is gender-based ... Because we are taught that boys don't cry ... But this was my healing mechanism.



Can burnout make a good manager a bad manager?

Negative impact of financial worries, responsibilities and workload, particularly in the start-up phase

Burnout severely effects the manager's abilities and leadership styles

You stop seeing things you used to see as a manager; you are not as perceptive towards people as before and you are simply in survival mode. You don't notice how other people feel and that's when you stop being a good leader. I was just lucky to have a person who confronted me with this when I was in this mode – of course I didn't agree at the time but it is interesting to reflect on this afterwards and observe what I could have done better as a manager.

When manager's health is put at risk, the corporate culture is at risk and burn-out can lead to mistrust, lack of delegation and worse decision-making – an overall loss for the organisation, without preventive measures (Schuh et al. 2012; Kellerman 2005; Higgs 2009; Allio 2007; Erickson et al. 2007).





What's next?

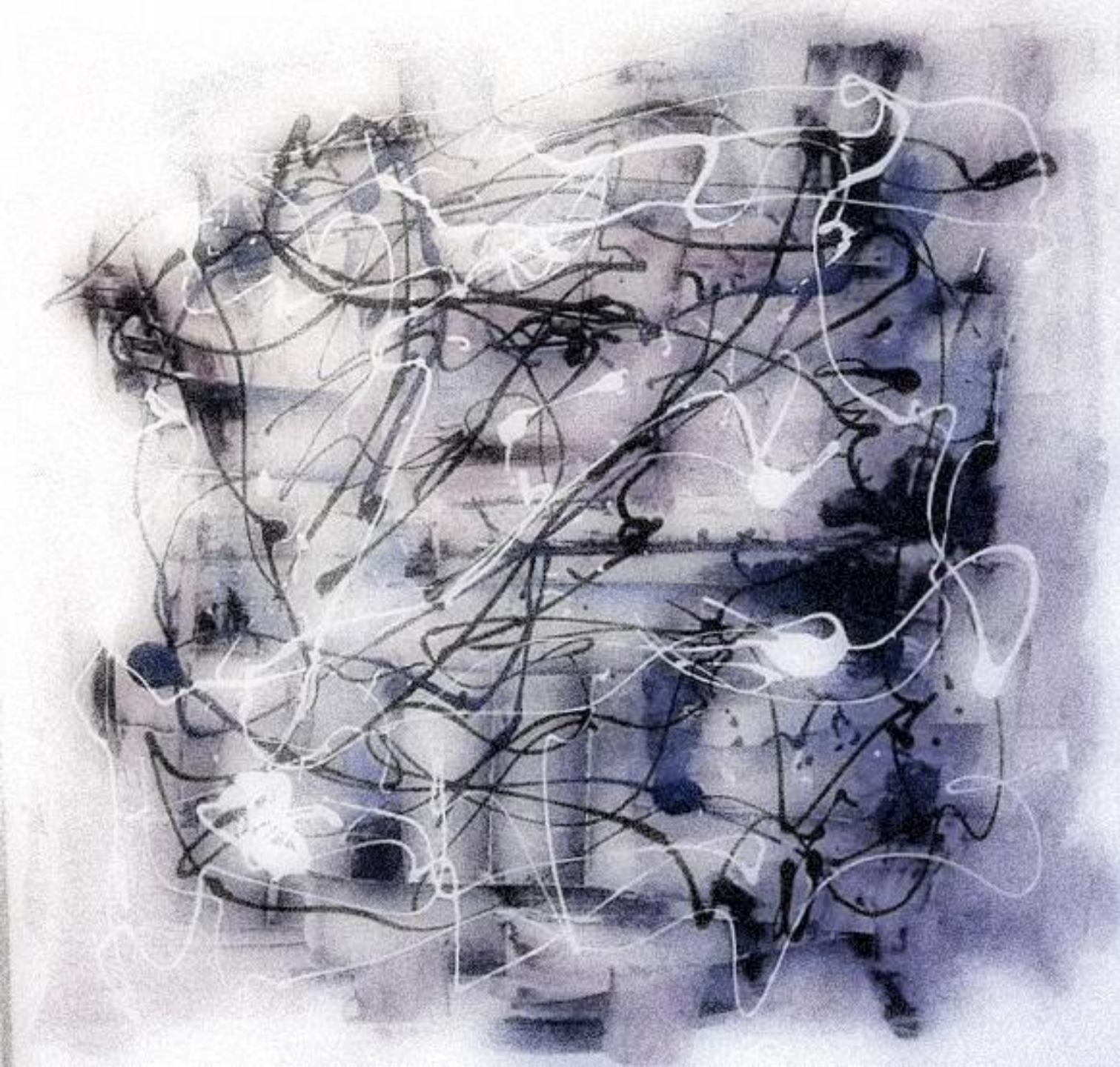
Expanding to more Nordic countries

Finland is work in progress

Sweden, Denmark, Norway

Focus on burnout vs. stress

Looking deeper at coping mechanisms



THANK YOU!

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