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Women in Public Relations: A Thematic Analysis of ECM Data (2009-2019)

Introduction

According to all available research, women in the communications industry face disadvantages; for example, in advertising, public relations and journalism, women began outnumbering men in the industry decades ago. However, they are still facing the glass ceiling and the pay gap, as well as sexism and discrimination (CIPR, 2019; Place and Vaderman-Winter, 2018; Topić, 2018; Crewe and Wang, 2018; Yaxley, 2013; Sleeman, 2019; UK Digital and Creative Sector Talent Insight Report, 2017; Stein, 2017).

In the advertising industry, scholars have recognised issues, such as the industry being slow to change. Creative departments are still predominantly staffed by men and there seems to be a recognition of the ‘old-boys’ mentality and (homo)-sociality (Grow and Yang, 2018; Weisberg and Robbs, 1997; Broyles and Grow, 2008; Crewe and Wang, 2018). In journalism, on the other hand, an issue of masculinity was recognized as a prevalent factor decades ago that has continued until the present day. For example, Graber (1980) argued that women have to merge into male-controlled newsrooms and the masculine newsroom culture. This means that whilst the number of women working in journalism has increased exponentially, the news values and information-gathering technique has never changed (Christmas, 1997). Some authors also argued that journalism’s culture is so masculinized that women who stay

in the journalistic profession and progress to senior roles “become so ‘bloke-ified’ by the macho water in which they swim that many younger women looking up don’t see them as role models for the kind of women they might want to become” (Mills, 2014: 17). Nevertheless, some authors also found that even when the so-called feminine topics, to which women have been confined for decades, enter the public agenda and the main news section, it is men who start writing about them (Topić, 2018).

In this chapter, we are focusing on women in public relations and their distinctive position within the public relations industry. To that end, we are analysing available literature and then moving on to analyse data from the European Communications Monitor collected in the period 2009 to 2019, thus providing a decade of trends among practitioners in European public relations practice relating to the position of women in the industry.

Women in Public Relations

Women in public relations is a theme of research that first appeared in 1968¹, becoming more prominent amongst public relations scholars since 1982 when the first larger studies started to appear. Since 1982, more than 200 research studies have been produced. For example, Topić et al. (2019) analysed 223 articles published between 1982 and 2019 in English, Portuguese, Spanish, French, Croatian, Serbian, Slovenian, Dutch and Georgian. They identified trends and issues reported in the literature per decade of research (1980-1989, 1990-1999, 2000-2009 and 2010-2019). The analysed literature predominantly related to practitioners; that is, scholars were mostly reporting findings on surveys, interviews and focus groups they conducted with practitioners, thus providing an overview of issues in public relations industries.

¹ The full reference for this paper is: Smith, R. W. (1968). Women in Public Relations. *Public Relations Journal* 24(10), 26-29. However, we have not been able to find a copy of this report; hence, we are not citing it in the reference list as it has not been used to underpin our chapter.

As the analysis has shown, the unfavourable position of women in public relations has turned full circle, with the same issues that were being reported in the 1980s returning to the scene during the last analysed period, 2010-2019 (Topić et al., 2019). Therefore, during the 1980s scholars reported that women face work discrimination (glass ceiling, pay gap, technician positions for women and educational differences between men and women) and bias (covert discrimination in promotions, chauvinism, stereotypes against women and feminization). In practice, this meant that women were facing a glass ceiling (Broom, 1982; VanSlyke, 1983; Scrimger, 1985; Cline et al, 1986; Pratt, 1986; Dozier, 1988) and a pay gap (VanSlyke, 1983; Cline et al, 1986; Miller, 1988; Lance Toth, 1988; Dozier, 1988; Singh and Smyth, 1988). This was, in large part, due to the fact women were confined to technician positions whereas men were fulfilling more managerial roles, thus enabling them to progress in their careers (Broom, 1982; Cline et al., 1986).

Besides, women were reported to be more likely to join the industry with a degree in public relations whereas men mostly joined with a degree in journalism (Theus, 1985). The bias was manifested in covert discrimination for promotions, such as creating new role titles to enable the promotion of men, which then also contributed towards the pay gap (Cline et al., 1986; Scrimger, 1985). In addition, women faced chauvinism, such as being seen as a flight risk, as it was believed that women would leave their job if their husband's career takes them elsewhere. Furthermore, stereotypes against women were openly promoted, such as "not suitable to be good managers, too emotional, lacking corporate spirit, not being good team members and simply not part of the gang" (Topić et al., 2019: 17). This is why some authors called public relations a 'pink ghetto' because, while women were allowed into the industry, they had no real influence or power within public relations organisations (Cline et al., 1986).

Fast forward to the period between 2010 and 2019 and it transpires that the same discrimination returned to the public relations scene, as the analysis of literature conducted by

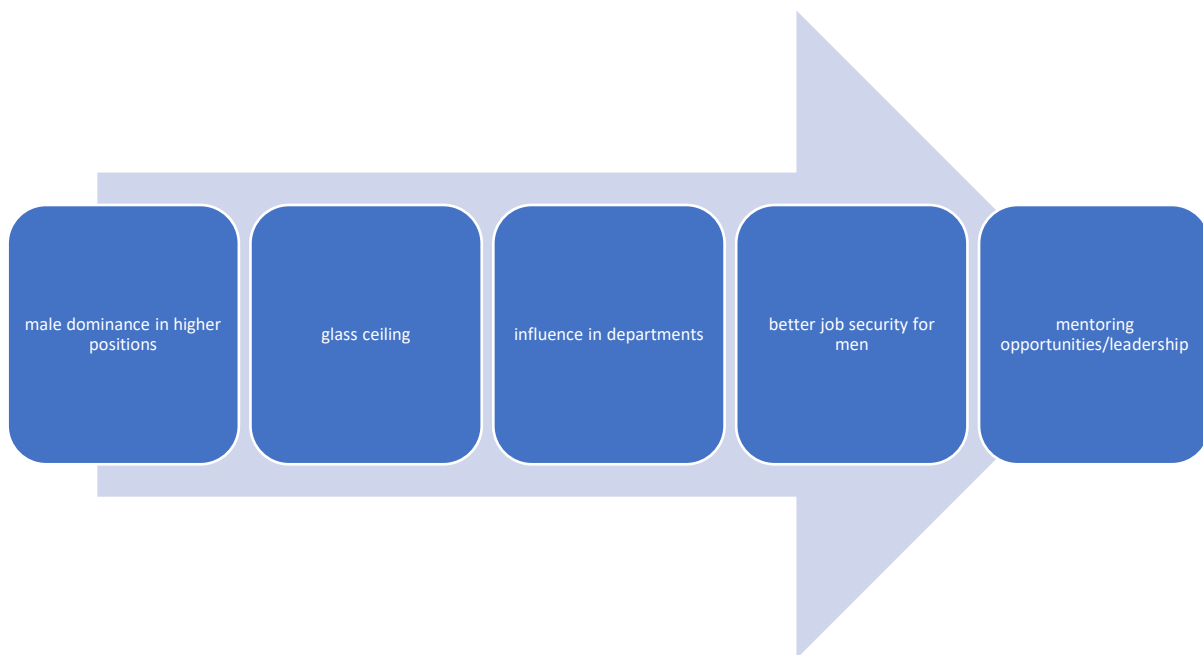
Topić et al. (2019) showed. The main themes in academic research conducted on practitioners were the same, work discrimination and bias against the women, albeit with some tweaks. For example, work discrimination now also includes recognition of the lack of diversity and masculinity in an organisation (ibid), as scholars are increasingly recognising these issues. However, the issues of the glass ceiling and the pay gap have remained (Dubrowski et al., 2019; Place and Varderman-Winter, 2018; Aleman et al., 2018; Tench and Topić, 2017; Soria and Gomez, 2017; Fitch and Third, 2010; Moreno et al., 2018a; Moreno et al., 2017; Moreno et al., 2015; Varderman-Winter and Place, 2017; Andrade and Sobreira, 2013). When it comes to bias against women, the latest period includes stereotypes about women's organisational and communications skills (Topić et al., 2019).

In other words, women in the 1980s faced the prejudice of “not being suitable to be good managers, too emotional, lacking corporate spirit, not being good team members and simply not part of the gang” (Topić et al., 2019: 17). However, the prejudice against women in the last decade shifted to the belief that men have better organisational skills whereas women have stronger media and communication skills and relationship-building skills (Lee et al., 2018; Verhoeven and Aarts, 2020). Thus, whilst the nature of the prejudice has changed with time, prejudice against women remains and they seem to be deprived of career progress and equality of opportunities. Some scholars also noted that a significant role in this process is also being played by popular culture, where women are often portrayed as a love interest, young, desirable and single, whereas men are portrayed as untrustworthy or unhelpful; thus, popular culture contributes towards the degradation of the public relations field as a whole (Fitch, 2015; Johnston, 2010).

Nevertheless, the European Communication Monitor (ECM) annually surveys practitioners and asks them, inter alia, about their gendered perceptions of work in the public relations and communications industry. Tench and Topić (2017) previously analysed the ECM surveys in

the period from 2009 to 2015 and they found that, as one issue gets resolved, a new issue emerges. For example, women participating in the ECM first reported that men dominate higher positions and women face a glass ceiling and lack influence in the department; as the ECM survey progressed, practitioners started to report better job security for men and a lack of mentorship opportunities for women to develop into leaders (figure 1).

Figure 1: The changing nature of inequality, according to ECM (2009-2015)



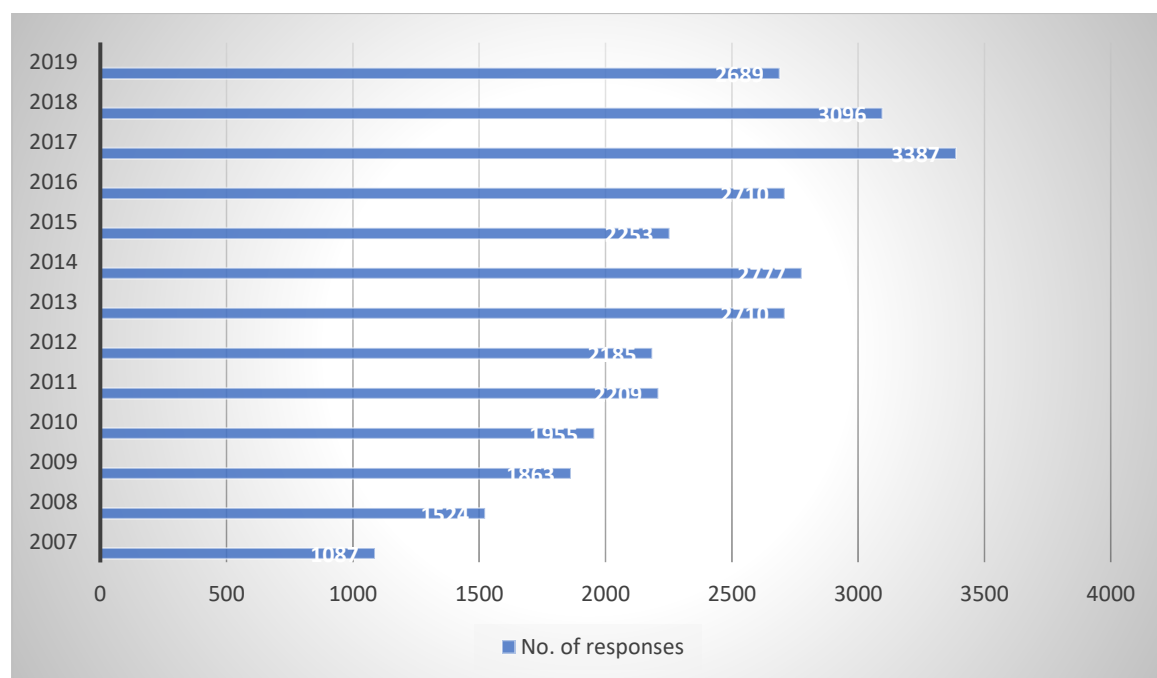
Source: Tench and Topić (2017: 18)

Method

In this paper, we are continuing the research we previously conducted (Tench and Topić, 2017) to consider data published after 2015 and to re-analyse ECM findings to provide a picture of the position of women in public relations in the ECM in a period from 2009-2019. Thus, a full decade of research on women's perceptions of their position in the public relations and communications industry will be captured.

The European Communications Monitor² is the largest and longest-running survey worldwide that monitors trends in the public relations and communications industries in Europe, having been conducted annually since 2007. Since 2009, the survey also monitors the position of women in the industry. Each year, thousands of practitioners participate in the survey (graph 1), thus providing a good overview of the experiences, feelings and perceptions of practitioners working in the field.

Graph 1: Responses in ECM surveys per year



In each annual survey, “the PR practitioners are asked to report on issues in the field, predict future development of the field, as well as to report on difficulties and inequality between male and female practitioners should they believe that inequality exists” (Tench and Topić, 2017: 9). Gender issues have been included in all annual ECM surveys, except in 2013.

² The European Communication Monitor is the largest transnational study on strategic communication worldwide. It has been conducted annually for over 15 years with more than 40,000 communication professionals participating. The North American Communication Monitor (NACM) and the Latin American Communication Monitor (LCM) are part of the Global Communication Monitor series, the largest regular global study in the field of strategic communication and public relations. The series has analysed trends in the field for more than a decade and covers more than 80 countries across Europe, North America, Latin-America, and the Asia-Pacific region.

Participants are regularly recruited from up to 50 European countries each year via personal invitations sent to professionals using email and sourced from the member database provided by the European Association of Communication Directors, as well as personal networks of the research team and the national coordinators and national branches of public relations associations across Europe.

The ECM consortium publishes a detailed report/book and video in May or June each year with the findings from the annual survey; this book and other support materials are available from the project website: <http://www.communicationmonitor.eu/european-communication-monitor-all-reports/>

For this chapter, we have downloaded these brochures and analysed data about the position of women in the industry, to look at the results collectively and to discuss whether circumstances are changing for women in public relations and the communications industries.

The ECM is not longitudinal research because the number of participants varies (graph 1) between years and the responses are anonymous; therefore, we do not know who the participants are and whether, for example, the same participants took the survey in each survey year or are unique for each year. Therefore, this chapter does not claim to offer any generalisation of results. Instead, we are conducting a trends analysis research using thematic analysis method to capture trends and reported issues in the public relations and communications industries over 10 years (2009-2019). Besides, questions are not the same in each ECM survey but depend on the trends identified by the research team in practitioner and academic literature, which then feeds into every annual survey. Additionally, some gender data emerges from other questions; for example, questions in 2018 included stress at work due to growing debates on workers' wellbeing and increased workloads around the world.

This then resulted in a different response from men as opposed to women, which was then captured in the results.

In this chapter, we are analysing all data concerning gender that has emerged over the years. To that end, we accumulated data in groups and, thus, we analysed the glass ceiling, salaries (pay gap) and general differences between men and women in perceiving and handling work issues.

The research questions set for the chapter were:

- Which data on gender was observed in the period between 2009 and 2019?
- Are there differences in the work experiences between men and women?
- Are the surveyed women reporting equality of opportunities?

We used thematic analysis to analyse and present the findings, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. This means that we analysed all ECM brochures with results of annual ECM surveys and then we divided the findings into the main themes. The thematic analysis can be defined as "a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs or explanatory principles" (Lapadat 2010: 926). The thematic analysis is a form of sense-making approach and it is particularly helpful for researchers handling large data sets (Rohwer and Topić, 2018) or for comparing data as we did with the analysis of ECM data. The advantage of thematic analysis is that it also helps in depicting where further research is necessary and capturing trends, with which it becomes a useful tool for researchers who wish to explore the field further, find research gaps and add to the existing knowledge.

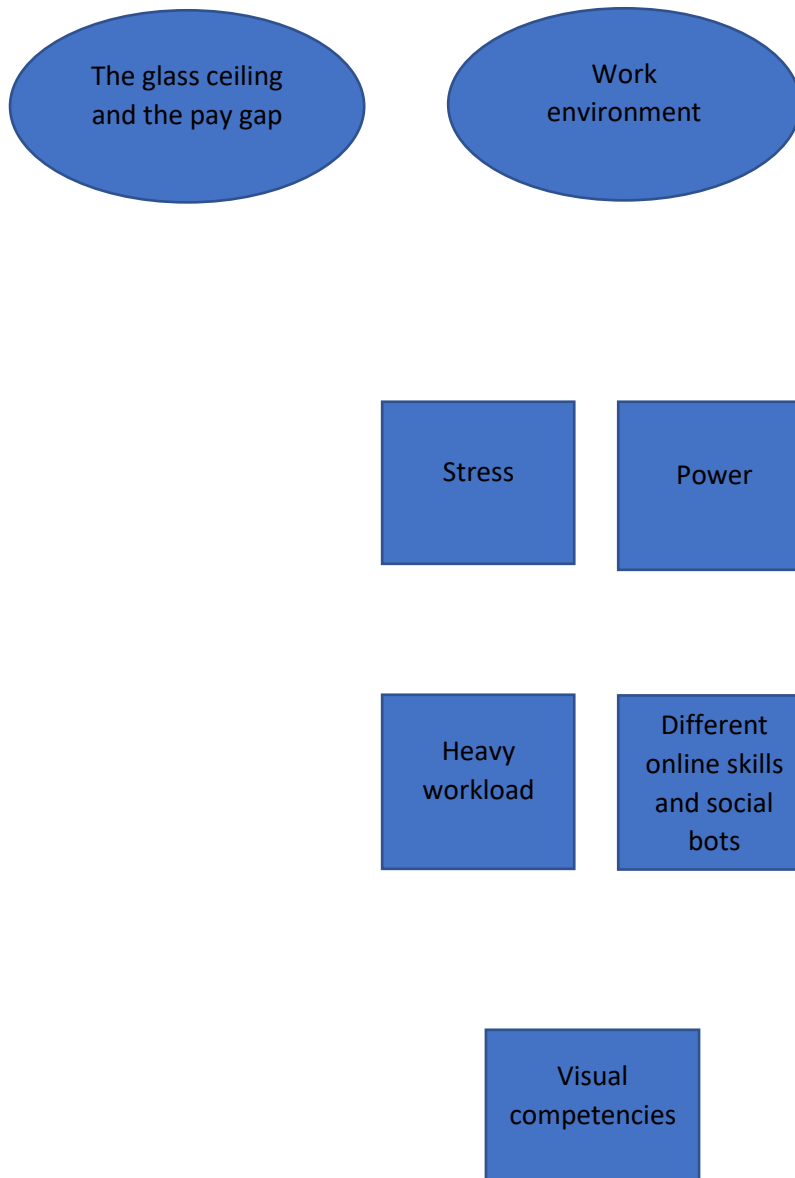
All of the published books from the annual ECM surveys have been researched and all data about the position of women has been extracted and analysed for this chapter to identify the main themes and incorporate practitioners' views on the position of women in the public relations and communications industries in Europe.

Due to the low resolution of figures in ECM reports, it was not possible to copy figures from reports to visualise the analysis. To avoid text-heavy description of figures, the figures from ECM reports are quoted in the text and page numbers from each report are used. The direct links to ECM reports are in the list of references.

Findings

The results appear to indicate that two predominant themes emerge from the ECM surveys, which are: (1) the glass ceiling and the pay gap; (2) the work environment (manifested through sub-themes of stress, lack of power in departments, heavy workloads, different online skills and understanding of social bots and different visual competencies).

Graph 2: Thematic Map of Main Themes in ECM surveys (2009-2019)



Theme 1: The glass ceiling and the pay gap

In this theme, practitioners observed that men dominated higher positions in 2009, especially higher positions in public relations and communications organisations whereas, in 2014, practitioners reported higher status within the organisation and job security for men. For example, in 2009, men were more present in the head of communication and CEO roles,

whereas women were more present in roles such as unit leader and team member (ECM, 2009: 14).

In 2014, women expressed dissatisfaction with work by showing less enthusiasm for work. In that, women showed more disagreement with statements on work balance, salary, job security, the appreciation of work by superiors and satisfaction with work (ECM, 2014: 40). This is a historical problem in the public relations industry and scholars have observed this issue since intensifying scholarships about women in public relations (Cline et al., 1986; Topić et al., 2019).

With regards to gender differences, pay gap data is the most consistently recorded data in the ECM, appearing in every annual sample except in 2012, 2013 and 2019. In every observed sample, it is possible to find differences in income between men and women with men holding the monopoly on the higher-earning positions. The situation changes slightly as time progresses; however, the difference remains. Nevertheless, in the year 2018, the ECM records a significant pay gap between men and women in higher positions, thus signalling that even when women do manage to break the glass ceiling, they are still undervalued and paid less (ECM, 2009: 84; ECM, 2010: 107; ECM, 2011: 130; ECM, 2014: 127; ECM, 2015: 101; ECM, 2016: 103; ECM, 2017: 103; ECM, 2018: 111).

Theme 2: Work Environment

In this theme, several observations on differences in perceptions and observations of the work environment, as well as differences in skills, have been recorded amongst practitioners. Therefore, women working in public relations and communication reported a lack of influence in the department in 2012 (ECM, 2012, p. 60), which is in line with literature where scholars have been reporting this issue since 1982 (Topić et al., 2019; Cline et al., 1986; Broom, 1982; VanSlyke, 1983; Scrimger, 1985).

However, the main differences seem to arise from differences in job roles and competencies. For example, female practitioners reported in 2016 spending more time on operational communication, as opposed to men reporting they are involved in the alignment process, such as managing communication activities and co-workers (ECM, 2016: 48). This is in line with the literature since the 1980s that reports women can be found predominantly confined to technician roles (Cline et al., 1986; Topić et al., 2019).

This also leads to the difference in skills where online skills, for example, differ in various dimensions and it is visible that women report higher skills in roles that can be seen as a technician, such as delivering messages via social media. This is opposed to men who report higher skills in roles that require managerial experience, such as knowing how to avoid risks and handling a crisis, which was reported in 2016 (ECM, 2016: 88). However, what is relevant to emphasize is that women do report fewer skills in more strategic roles but this can be seen to result from a lack of mentorship and experience, which has already been reported in relevant research (Tench and Topić, 2017; Topić, 2019). This then also leads to the situation of men reporting higher competencies in visual skills, such as design, animation, professional photography and professional video editing, which was reported in 2017 (ECM, 2017: 38).

Men also tend to perceive social bots more than women do, particularly in regard to bots as a threat to the reputation of the organisation, which belongs to the domain of strategic communications and management traditionally occupied by men (ECM, 2017: 48).

Finally, two of the most recent ECM surveys report on the work conditions and views and experiences of men and women, in light of the growing interest of scholars and the public about work environments and the wellbeing of staff. Therefore, female practitioners reported in 2018 having more stress and fewer resources to manage it than men have (ECM, 2018: 77)

whereas, in 2018, female practitioners labelled the stress at work as serious (ECM, 2018: 81). This data on its own would not call for much attention; however, the ECM from 2018 reports that the lack of resources is generally present at middle positions in the organisational hierarchy, which is where most of the women are centred (ECM, 2018). Thus, this is showing that the glass ceiling and unequal distribution of power and opportunities has an impact on general wellbeing.

Nevertheless, women particularly assess having a too-heavy workload and constant availability outside of working time via mobile phone and email as being stressful (ECM, 2018: 85), which corresponds with findings in some other studies. For example, Topić and Bruegmann (2020) interviewed 20 women working in journalism in the UK and many reported especially the sense of constant working and workload as stressful. This is showing that the communication industry(ies) suffer from a heavy workload and a lack of free time, which contributes towards general wellbeing and career prospects. It seems that this issue in public relations is particularly inherent to the experiences of women, at least when the ECM findings are taken into account. Not surprisingly, women practitioners expressed, in the same year, having less job satisfaction than men, which is in line with the general perception of stress due to heavy workloads and a lack of free time (ECM, 2018: 94).

Finally and perhaps most relevant to putting other data in a context, is the data arising from the ECM for 2019 where women reported trust and a good relationship with external stakeholders whereas men reported a good relationship with top leaders (ECM, 2019: 30). This immediately begs a question of whether heavy workloads and less job satisfaction have a lot to do with the fact men have connections at the top of organisations, which can reduce their workload, as well as indicate spare resources in their departments. Meanwhile, women are left to cope with what is left of resources and to struggle with work pressure. The fact that men have these contacts is a historical issue well known in organisational studies and not just

in the communications industries but more generally. Men have historically formed the so-called 'boys clubs' and 'old-boy' mentality (Crewe and Wang, 2018) and this has had an impact on the experiences of women in the industry.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have continued our previous research of ECM data (Topić and Tench, 2017) and analysed a decade of ECM survey data to capture the main data on the position of women in the public relations and communications industries. Whilst our first research found that when one issue gets resolved, new issues emerged (ibid), this re-analysis has confirmed those findings and has intensified them by pointing that the discrimination continues, which is in line also with the major analysis of the literature review conducted by Topić et al. (2019). In other words, this new analysis of the ECM data has shown that within a decade, women continually report issues with inequality. While first women reported inequality being demonstrated consistently through the pay gap and glass ceiling, they also started to report issues within organisations, such as stress, a too-heavy workload and a lack of resources as time progressed. What remained constant throughout the survey period is the pay gap, which looked as if it improved in our first analysis; however, when a decade was analysed, a different situation emerged. This finding is in line with other literature where scholarly work has shown that the discrimination of women has travelled full circle and women still face workplace discrimination, bias and prejudices (Topić et al., 2019).

Therefore, to answer the research questions posited at the start of this chapter, the data observed in the period 2009 to 2019 were collated into two themes, (1) the pay gap and the glass ceiling and (2) the work environment, with the second issue also having sub-themes of stress, heavy workload, different online skills and different visual skills and power. This means that the data found in this analysis is mostly in line with existing research on women

in public relations, as discussed in the literature review. The only difference is that this data shows more data normally analysed within the liberal feminist approach, such as pay gap and the glass ceiling, which is likely because of the European focus of the research. Conversely, other research quoted in the literature review section and a large literature report by Topić et al. (2019) is conducted predominantly in an individual national context. However, this data still shows some new trends in the position of women in public relations, such as stress, heavy workload and a lack of resources, which requires further exploration. The women surveyed over the decade of data discussed in the ECM findings consistently report the lack of equal opportunities and differences between men and women. In addition to the reported stress, a lack of resources on the middle level and heavy workloads, there is also a difference in the skill set between men and women such as visual communications, social bots and online skills. This raises a question of why women lack these skills and whether this has something to do with the lack of power within an organisation, as women already reported. In other words, women report a lack of influence and power and they also report being able to develop good relations with external stakeholders whilst men report a good relationship with senior managers at the top of their organisational structures, which could be a reason for the lack of skills, training opportunities and resources for women employees and middle managers. The literature generally recognises the problems with the ‘old-boy’ networks and (homo)sociality (Crewe and Wang, 2018) and it seems clear that this needs to be included in further research on women in public relations to establish the extent women are being excluded from these networks and how these networks work in the digital age.

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