TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TE ŪPOKO O TE IKA A MĀUI

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School of Management

MMBA 532: Business Research Project:

Equal Opportunities: Towards a greater understanding of the fulfilment of

Women's career aspirations in senior management.

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Abstract

Firms are beginning to understand that a key to economic growth and competitive advantage lies in gender diversity within senior leadership positons, yet the number of women who hold senior managerial positions remains disproportionately small. Research shows that many women who aspire to senior management plateau in middle management positons despite obtaining the necessary education, skills and expertise to advance. Therefore this exploratory study sought to understand how women approach their career decisions, within the context of their lived realities, by focussing on the research question "what factors or circumstances influence women middle managers career planning and advancement decisions? ". Eight women were interviewed who held middle management positons for at least 5 years. From analysis of the interview text five interconnected themes emerged: Trial and error, Mentorship, Self-confidence, Value alignment and Perceived organisational value. These themes add insight to the existing literature addressing how women approach their careers and lives. Furthermore the findings of this research indicate actions that can be considered by organisations to support the retention and development of women's career pathway towards senior management. Areas for future research are also identified.

Research Title

Equal Opportunities: Towards a greater understanding of the fulfilment of Women's career aspirations in senior management

Problem statement

There is an increasing body of knowledge that supports the existence of the glass ceiling where many women in middle management are not advancing to senior management positons (Bridget & Weyer, 2007; Gamble & Turner, 2015). Women have exerted their own

efforts to gain the necessary skills and expertise required to advance (Ragins, Townsend & Mattis, 1998; Weidenfeller, 2006; Wentling, 1992, 1996) and many corporates have sought to address the structural barriers in a bid to remove selection and promotional bias (BNZ, 2014). These changes have led to some increases in the number of women in senior management positions over time, but the numbers remain disproportionately small (Sinclair, 2005). There are many theories and suggestions as to what holds women back from achieving senior leadership positons to which they aspire, primarily researched through large scale surveys (Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007; Weidenfeller, 2006). This method of research tells us about the existence of the problem but not the lived experience of women who are plateauing in middle management positions. Women face many competing choices over the span of their career and as a result many women in middle management are choosing not to take advantage of senior management opportunities (McKeen & Burke, 1992). But to say women choose not to advance does not take into account the societal context in which the decision takes place. Considering firms are operating in an increasingly competitive environment and are beginning to recognise a key to economic growth and competitive advantage lies in gender diversity in senior leadership positions (Pellegrino, D'Amato, & Weisber, 2011; BNZ, 2014) then there is a need to understand the context in which women are making career decisions. Only then can firms determine whether there is a disconnect in the types of experience and /or structures they identify as critical to advancement, when gender is factored into the decision making process.

Research Question

This line of enquiry has led me to the research question "what factors or circumstances influence women middle managers career planning and advancement decisions "

Significance of the study

Firms in industrialised countries are facing increasing environmental pressure, with a diminishing available labour force and a corresponding growth in the need for specialised managers. Leading empirical research supports the key to competitive advantage is fostering a diverse culture where firms need to tap into all the knowledge and experience that is available for innovation and creativity (Pellegrino et al., 2011). Therefore economically firms cannot afford to cut off a piece of the talent pool. Current policies and processes for developing talent within corporates are not netting the desired results with many women plateauing in middle management positions. The current body of knowledge tells us about the existence of the problem but it does not tell us the lived experience of women who are plateauing in middle management positions. Therefore it is my hope that through the stories of women this research can provide further clarity on how they approach their career and lives. This in turn can support Human Resource professional to evaluate their current approach to talent management to address implicit and explicit gender bias that may exists within their corporate structures, policies and procedures.

Literature review

While the number of women entering the workforce has continued to increase and women are now graduating from tertiary institutions in larger volumes than men, women continue to be underrepresented in senior management positons (Wentling, 1992; 1996, 2003; Rose, 2003; Sinclair, 2005; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Weidenfeller, 2006; Cabrera, 2007; Gamble &

Turner, 2015; Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007; McKeen & Burke, 1994). Given the decreasing labour market and significant economic benefit to be gained through diversity, organisations cannot afford to cut of such a large portion of the talent pool (Department of Labour, 2011; BNZ, 2014). There are arguments that have been put forward over time to explain why women remain absent from senior leadership and measures implemented to address the identified barriers; but these have not had the scale of success that was predicted and inequality has persisted (Sinclair, 2005). Research supports women do hold senior management career aspirations and understand the actions required to achieve their goals (Wentling, 1992; 1996). Yet the general trend affecting women managers is that they are plateauing at mid-level management positons as they are unable to break through the glass ceiling as they approach the top of the corporate hierarchy (Bridget & Weyer, 2007; Gamble & Turner, 2015). Litzky & Greenhaus (2007) found there are gender differences in moving from desired aspirations (attitudinal aspect) to enacting those aspirations (behavioural manifestation) in pursuit of career goals. Specifically, in line with Vrooms expectancy theory, women have less self-belief that they would achieve the positons they sought. Given women experience more career disruptions and competing priorities than men e.g. family (McKeen & Burke, 1992) there is a need to better understand the context of the decision making process between desired and enacted career aspirations of women in middle management; given they are the talent pool for the senior leadership positions of tomorrow. In light of the above this literature review first outlines the labour market context of women's careers, then examines the women's career literature and specifically influences on the rise to senior management.

Background

A well-functioning labour market is one of the key factors facilitating economic growth (Department of Labour, 2011). Workforce projections in New Zealand reflect those of other industrialised countries where economic growth is expected to continue the shift towards service jobs and away from manufacturing (Weidenfeller, 2006; Department of Labour, 2011). Due to an aging workforce, and baby boomers now entering into the older age groups, New Zealand faces a significant slowdown in the labour force growth that has fuelled its economic growth over the past 10 years. This slowdown is projected to continue for the long term and will necessitate a sharpened focus on utilising and developing the existing skills of the workforce (Department of Labour, 2011). Moreover, this slowdown will create a gap in some service occupations, in particular the gap between available leadership positons and viable candidates with the Department of Labour (2011) forecasting the largest opportunity over the next five years by occupation will be for specialised managers. As the ageing workforce and the global war for talent combine to reduce the volume of available workers in New Zealand, it becomes increasingly critical that organisations attract, recruit, retain and develop the best talent (BNZ, 2014).

Competitive advantage through diversity

While women have been entering the workforce in increased numbers and are graduating from tertiary institutions in larger volumes than men (BNZ, 2014; Department of Labour, 2011; Sinclair, 2005) research demonstrates that women continue to be underrepresented in senior management positons (Still 1986, as cited by Nowak & Ward 1989; Wentling, 1992; 1996, 2003; Rose, 2003; Sinclair, 2005; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Weidenfeller, 2006; Cabrera, 2007; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007; McKeen & Burke, 1994; BNZ, 2014). Leading empirical research supports the key to competitive advantage is fostering a diverse

culture where firms need to tap into all the knowledge and experience that is available for innovation and creativity (Pellegrino et al., 2011). Simply put, more women in leadership means better business performance. Those companies with the most women on their senior teams showed superior growth in operational results, share price and equity. Furthermore, if only a third of the senior management team is women, then these companies outperform those without women in nine criteria that depict organisational excellence (Cooper Jackson, 2001; Weidenfeller, 2006; Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger & Meaney, 2008; Pine, 2011; Pellegrino et al., 2011). Beyond social and ethical responsibility, economically firms cannot afford to cut off a piece of the talent pool. Considering women make up 50% of the available workforce, then "very fundamentally, no country can get ahead if it leaves what amounts to half the population behind" (Melanne Verveer, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues as cited by Pellegrino et al., 2011, p. 18). Pellegrino et al., (2011) forecast the businesses and countries that will be the leaders of this century will be the ones who are best able to harness the innovation and creativity of their people. Where although increasing amounts of research recognises women are a growing force in the talent pool it's not a case of either/ or in the gender debate rather "the real power comes from women and men working together and using their experience to solve complex problems and accelerate innovation" (Pellegrino et al., 2011, p.7). Finally, an additional driver to ensure gender diversity within leadership is the growing role of women as consumers. The spending power of women continues to increase, which means women represent a growth opportunity for companies; but, women spend differently from men, therefore companies need to understand women's preferences to capitalize on this growth (Pellegrino et al., 2011; BNZ, 2014).

Career Aspirations of Women

Literature supports the view that women are aspiring to senior management and entering top corporations yet they continue to have problems reaching senior management positons (Wentling, 1992, 1996; Wood & Lindorff, 2001; Sinclair, 2005; Glazebrook, 2010). A follow up study on the career development and aspirations of 30 women in middle management who worked predominantly in Fortune 500 firms in the USA revealed the majority of the women managers had not attained the positions to which they had ultimately aspired. The majority also did not believe they were progressing as quickly as they think they should have. Yet, the majority of the women managers continued to aspire to top level management positions (Wentling, 1996). Similarly, a survey conducted by Wood & Lindorff (2001) indicated that although a majority of women who make it to senior roles have a real desire to lead, only a few think they have meaningful support to do so, and even fewer think they're in line to move up. More than half a century of research has been seeking to answer the question as to why women continue to be largely absent from senior management positons. Early hypothesis included 'the absence argument' which proposes that there were not yet sufficient women with the necessary experience and qualifications to enter leadership positions (McKeen & Burke, 1994; Sinclair, 2005). Moreover, as this was a woman centric issue which focusses on women's short comings there was no need for corporations to seek to address the issue , as it was predicted greater numbers of women would gain higher education and experience over time (Sinclair, 2005). McKeen & Burke (1994) identify there has been little evidence to support this position, rather an increasing number of women are preparing themselves for managerial and professional careers by enrolling and graduating from business qualifications, obtaining additional professional designations, working long hours, and obtaining the experience necessary for senior corporate management (Townsend, 1997; Ragins,Townsend & Mattis, 1998; Weidenfeller, 2006; Glazebrook, 2010) An additional

argument supported in literature is the invisibility argument, which implicates bias and discrimination against women (McKeen & Burke, 1994; Sinclair, 2005; Glazebrook, 2010). This argument concludes women do have what it takes to lead and do not necessarily lead differently than men. But they are perceived as leading differently. This line of reasoning focusses on the traditional view that leadership is a masculine quality and women displaying these masculine characteristics are perceived negatively (Sinclair, 2005; Glazebrook, 2010). The problem arising from this line of thinking is discriminatory judgement about leadership potential, or its lack thereof, which Sinclair purports, is difficult for women to identify or name, let alone challenge. Finally McKeen & Burke (1994) present a third hypothesis. This argument identifies corporate policies and procedures that make it more difficult for professional and managerial women to be successful. Corporations have tried to address this bias and become women friendly by supporting the career aspirations of managerial women through formal leadership training programs with variability in success. This approach is evident within New Zealand through organisations such as the Bank of New Zealand who have commissioned their own research, and won awards for their efforts as they have sought to address inequality in talent management practices embedded with the corporate structure (BNZ, 2014).

The Glass Ceiling

Despite an increase in corporate commitment to advance women's careers Wentling (1996) purports there remains a general trend that affects women managers, where they are plateauing at mid-level management positions. By definition mid-level management are those who implement policies and strategy as opposed to upper- level or senior managers who are responsible for developing policy and strategy (Van Fleet, 1988 as cited by Wentling,

1996). However, this trend is not new nor is it isolated to the US (Barsh & Yee, 2011, Silva, Ahmad, Omar, & Rasdi, 2012, Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007; Glazebrook, 2010). The Wall Street Journal in 1986 described this phenomenon by way of a metaphor, coining the phrase 'the glass ceiling' which symbolised the invisible barriers that qualified women confronted as they approached the top of the corporate hierarchy (Birgit & Weyer, 2007; Gamble & Turner, 2015). Since this time an increasing amount of research has taken place seeking to identify and understand the invisible barriers that are preventing qualified women from advancing higher within the corporate structure. In reviewing the literature barriers identified can be grouped as both organisational centric; such as corporate recruitment, retention, and promotion practices (Gamble & Turner, 2015) in addition to corporate behaviour and cultural causes; where bosses withhold guidance or support (Wentling, 1992), provide restricted access to career developmental experiences, stereo typing or sex discrimination (Pine, 2011; Wentling, 1992; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Ackah & Heaton, 2003; Cooper Jackson, 2001; Clarke, 2011), exclusion from career enhancing networks (Pine,2011; Silva, et al., 2012) and a preference for a traditional masculine leadership styles (Oakley, 2000 as cited by Weyer, 2007; Gamble & Turner, 2015). Or Women centric, where barriers included women's lack of career strategies (Nowak & Ward, 1989; Gamble & Turner, 2015), lack of motivation and political acumen (Wentling 1992, 1996; Still, 1986 as cited by Nowak & Steven, 1989; Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007; Wood & Lindorff, 2001), lack of experience in line management (Pine, 2011), lack of confidence (Clarke, 2011), risk adverse behaviours, lack of career mobility (Silva et al., 2012; Barsh & Yee, 2011) and personal preferences/social drivers contributing to a lack of desire or aspiration such as family commitments (Leeds & Leeds, 2015; McKeen & Burke, 1992, Litzky & Greenhaus 2007).

Breaking through the Glass ceiling

Studies seeking to identify the factors or strategies that have contributed to those women who have achieved senior management success are few. Available studies support that there is no one pathway to success; rather evidence highlights themes that can be said to be important to advancement regardless of gender. These include hard work, consistently exceeding performance expectations, a proven track record, risk taking which includes seeking out challenging assignments, having influential mentors, demonstrating expertise and managerial skills (Townsend, 1997; Ragins et al., 1998; Weidenfeller, 2006). However, in addition to the above women reported they had to adopt strategies to overcome environmental stereotypes where they believed they had to work harder than their peers (Townsend, 1997; Ragins et al., 1998) and develop a professional style with which male managers are comfortable (Ragins et al., 1998). Women also reported that they made more trade-offs to achieve balance (Weidenfeller, 2006) citing giving up on sleep, putting family needs before their own and minimising social obligations (Townsend, 1997). Although mentors are important for everyone, research supports they are particularly important for women seeking to break through the glass ceiling (Ragins et al., 1998; Gamble & Turner, 2015). This is because Influential male mentors, with established networks and credibility, can provide women with sponsorship into senior management networks, and provide inside information only accessible through the old boy networks. Moreover, mentors also can help buffer women from the adverse forces within the organization in addition to helping women navigate a path through the challenging and changing political terrain (Ragins et al., 1998). Additional strategies cited by successful women included a love of their job; where value alignment was important, the desire to leave a legacy, a good upbringing; where parents were role models, developing strategies to achieve work life balance (although women

reported this was an ongoing work in progress), networking imperative , and having support

from their manager (Townsend, 1997; Ragins et al., 1998; Weidenfeller, 2006).

Desired versus enacted aspirations

When difficulties exist for progression into senior managerial positions, managerial

aspirations appear to be an important attribute for advancement if already a manager (Terry

& Tharenou, 1998). In Litzky & Greenhaus, (2007) survey of 368 working professionals they

distinguished two dimensions of managerial aspirations; desired and enacted, to gain a richer

understanding of the effect of gender on aspirations to reach senior management
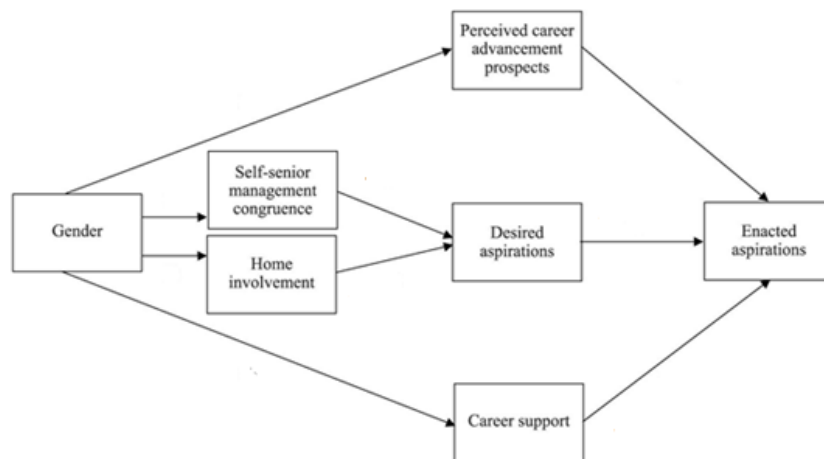
(See figure 1).

Figure 1: A process model of senior management aspirations (Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007)

Desired aspirations were defined as the extent to which one would like to become a senior

manager and represent the attitudinal component of an individual's pursuit of a career goal.

Tharenou & Terry (1998) state that desired aspirations produce a motivational force that

triggers persistence and effort toward achieving a goal. Whereas enacted aspirations are the

behavioural manifestations of the desired aspirations. So represent the strategies associated

with achieving managerial advancement. Such enactments can include politicking, networking, participating in developmental opportunities, and career planning (Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007). Litzky & Greenhaus (2007) findings supported the usefulness of distinguishing desired aspirations and enacted aspirations where the stronger individual's aspirations are to achieve a senior management position, the more extensively they engage in behaviours to help achieve that goal. However, they identified that consistent with Vroom's expectancy theory, enacted aspirations are not triggered by individuals' desire to enter senior management alone but also by their perception that advancement is feasible and supported by others. Expectancy is defined as "a person's estimation of the probability that effort will lead to successful performance. This estimation or belief is likewise based on the confidence a person has in his/her own capacities to bring skills to bear and influence outcomes e.g. self-concept, self-efficacy, locus of control" Lee, (2007, p. 789). Litzky & Greenhaus findings supported a difference in gender and the strength of desired aspirations, as women had less self-belief that they could or would achieve the positions they sought whereas there was no significant difference between genders when enacted aspirations were evaluated. Cooper Jackson, (2001) contributes some insight into why women's self-belief or congruence with desired aspiration towards senior management is more negatively associated than men. Cooper Jackson states that a common perception prevails where men are viewed as the leaders while women are viewed as the supportive followers in organizations. This includes that frequently women themselves, are less inclined to see themselves as leaders or seek leadership roles when working in male dominated organisations. Moreover, this perception of women as followers is strengthened by the lack of strong female role models due to the minimal number of women in key executive positions; it is then difficult to develop a mental model of women as leaders. Cooper Jackson, (2001) adds an additional and new perspective

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where she states "that women today are able to peek through the glass ceiling, and some question whether the executive floor is right for them. What they often see is the need to work long and hard hours, often without equitable pay, and in an atmosphere that is not always friendly towards them. This, coupled with projections of increases in lower and middle level management positions … we need to ask, how do we develop and reward those who choose lower levels of management as their career aspirations?" (p.31). O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) discuss the importance of organizational and societal contexts on women's career choices along with the importance of relationships. Where they use Powell & Maniero's (1992) analogy of a river bank, with success in careers and success in relationships as opposite sides of a river-bank where over time, women will be pulled more to one bank of the river than the other, or will continue to try to strive for a balance between the two. Relational context refers to the impact of important professional relationships such as managers, peers, clients and personal relationships such as spouse, children, parents etc. on a woman's life and career decisions e.g. research supports women are more sensitive to the career needs of their husbands rather than vice versa and their career involvement has a tendency to be influenced according to the attitudes of their husband (Silva et al., 2012). Research also supports that different career patterns exist for men and women (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; McKeen & Burke, 1992). In particular women face more career choices and career disruptions when choosing between investments in work, family, and timing of children than men do (McKeen & Burke, 1992). Therefore "to say that women 'chose' the mommy track or 'choose' more flexibility over career development activities are to avoid discussion of the environment in which this 'choice' occurs" (McKeen & Burke, 1992, p. 22).

Career planning and development

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Wentling (1992, 1996) sought to answer the question do women in middle management who hold aspirations towards a management career know what actions they must take to attain their senior management goal? The participants responded that they believed the activities they must take included; continue to demonstrate competency on the job, hard work, make major contributions in present and future positions or areas, continued education and training, take advantage of opportunities, networking with senior management and getting experience an exposure to other functions and areas of the company (Wentling, 2003). These findings would appear to be on point with the requirements cited for success yet these women had not yet attained the level of success they believed they should have. Wentling (2003) offers a reason as to why women may not have achieved the level of success they aspire to. Specifically that woman in middle management lack specific career strategies, including not obtaining proper technical training and not identifying what is most important for their careers. These findings were also supported by Weidenfeller (2006) study of women in executive management positons, where several women believed they would have advanced more quickly if they had taken control of their careers and developed career strategies earlier. However, women added that resistance from family and colleagues made career planning more difficult. Additionally, participants predominantly affirmed that it was their own personal efforts rather than corporate leadership development initiatives that were far more critical to their success. Moreover, these women attributed their own advancement to being driven by a desire to control their destiny through their careers and consistently exceeding performance expectations more than any other factor. Participants were not prepared to wait for potentially career enhancing opportunities to come to them. Rather they recognised they needed to be proactive in identifying opportunities and communicating this interest directly to their managers and others. Weidenfeller (2006) puts forward a potential

gap where it is possible that a disconnect exists between the types of experience organizations identify as critical to advancement and the experience of corporate women today, specifically the desire of high-achieving women to control their own destiny.

<u>Literature review Conclusion</u>

This literature review has shown that given the considerable economic advantage of gender diversity in senior management, the growing power of women as consumers, the global war on talent and diminishing labour force projections companies can no longer ignore the continued absence of women in senior leadership positions. Early arguments that have focussed on women's short comings allowed many firms to abdicate their responsibility to address the inherent bias and discrimination towards women within the traditional masculine view of leadership within the corporate hierarchy. This view leads to a discriminatory judgement about women's leadership potential, leaving many women plateauing in middle management positions trapped below an invisible glass ceiling. In more recent years firms have sought to address gender bias within the corporate structure such as recruitment, retention and promotional practices, however there is still some way to go to address the corporate behaviour and cultural causes, such as bosses withholding support or exclusion from old boy networks. To overcome these barriers successful women have had to adopt a style more acceptable to men and work harder than their male peers. Literature supports women are aspiring to senior management positons and know what it takes to achieve it. Yet literature also identifies some women are opting out of opportunities to advance due to more career and investments choices than men. Yet to say women have to choose one track over another at the cost of their aspirations to senior management does not allow for the societal context in which those decisions are made.

Research methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of women who have plateaued in middle management positons through the use of interpretive phenomenological research methodology. Interpretive phenomenology recognises that individuals exist in a world that they experience and subjectively interpret through language. So the aim of the researcher is to describe, understand and interpret research participants everyday lived experiences as they would appear to the person who has experienced the phenomena (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013). Phenomenology recognises that people seek meaning from everyday experiences expressed and interpreted through language, so therefore multiple realities exist. These multiple realities are made visible in a phenomenological study by the researcher presenting multiple statements that represent the diverse perspectives of the participants on the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 1998 as cited by Weidenfeller, 2006). An underlying assumption in a phenomenological study is that the researcher will actively interact with the research participants. Building a depth of trust that enables the in depth gathering of information and upholding their ethical responsibilities through the research process (Converse, 2012). The researcher develops questions designed to explore the meaning of a phenomenon for individuals by asking participants to describe their everyday existence. The researcher also works inductively through transcripts of participants statements about their lived experiences of the phenomenon and then seeks to define and cluster meanings (Weidenfeller, 2006). It is important in phenomenological study for researchers to focus on the uniqueness of a phenomenon therefore they must be able to look beyond their natural attitude, preconceived ideas and experiences by suspending or bracketing their pre-suppositions but Tuohy et al.,(2013)note in reality the ability to set aside

all thoughts, beliefs and influences is impossible. Further, Finlay (2008) as cited by Tuohy et al., (2013) purport that it is important for researchers to acknowledge and identify their pre-understandings as it can both guide enquiry and enable readers of their research to be clear about the study's context and any possible influencing factors. Finally phenomenological research methods differ to that of scientific, positivistic epistemology by seeking to gain knowledge for its own sake, where it is concerned with the 'what' not the 'why'. With the result being to provide a clearer and deeper understanding of what it is like for an individual to experience something and as a result increase personal understanding (kvale, 1996 as cited by Tuohy et al., 2013). This methodological approach aligns well to my interest in conducting this research which is to gain a deeper understanding of what it's like for women to make career decision within the context of their lived reality. Specifically how this reality may influence how they enact or apply effort towards achieving their career aspirations in senior management

Method

For the purpose of this research men were excluded as I was interested in understanding women's lived experience of what factors have influenced their career decisions. I chose to limit my study to women who had been in middle management positons for 5 years or more as my assumption is that these women have had or still have aspirations towards attaining a senior management positon but have plateaued in their career progress. Either by their own choice; where they may have chosen to remain in middle management at this point in their lives or they have encountered barriers that they believe has limited their career progression. Further, I am specifically interested in exploring women's career decisions within Litzky & Greenhaus, (2007) framework (see Figure 1) where consistent with Vroom's expectancy

theory, enacted aspirations are not triggered by individuals' desire to enter senior management alone but also by their perception that advancement is feasible and supported by others. Therefore my primary research question "what factors or circumstances influence women [middle managers] career decisions? " will serve as a priority focus for the interviews; supporting me to stay focussed on the essence of the phenomenon of career advancement decisions as perceived by the research participants. In line with phenomenological research the purpose of the interview process is to seek stories and descriptions from the participants to understand the meaning of what it is like for women who hold unfulfilled career aspirations in senior management. However, as my interest lays in exploring women middle managers career decisions within Litzky & Greenhaus (2007) framework I have developed additional research questions designed to focus participant's narratives within the framework. These include questions designed to identify self-senior management congruence and home involvement alongside perceived career advancement prospects and career support to determine whether they have influence women's career aspirations and ultimately enacted aspirations to achieve their career goals.

Resources

Minimal resources were required to undertake the research. Access to technology was necessary to support communication with participants which were undertaken by phone and email. For confidentiality all communication with participants was through my Victoria University email. Recording during interviews was done via an iPhone through a recording

App which was then uploaded to my computer. Both the iPhone and computer are password protected and for my exclusive use. Considering the small sample size required for this research and the wide networks I have in the Wellington region I did not anticipate having difficulty attracting enough participants. However, there was significant interest generated through my facebook networks with an additional 3 participants offering themselves and or another 3 offering their networks to me should the need arise.

Data Collection

My intention was to recruit 8-10 female participants across a variety of sectors that have held middle management positions for at least 5 years and have identified career aspirations towards senior management. Given the in depth nature of the interviews this sample size was an achievable number to identify, establish report, complete and analysis the interview data within the available time frame of this project.   Moreover, although the numbers are small there should be sufficient data to identify emerging themes that can build on existing knowledge or generate further questions for future research.

Locating participants

I used a snowball sample approach where I sought initial expressions of interest from potential participants and their networks that are known to me through my existing network through social media (Facebook), email and face to face contact. In particular I have extensive contacts throughout the health sector and MBA programme of which I am a student. My focus was in the Wellington region as this is where I have lived and worked for the past 8 years. So it is both a rich source for me to locate participants and convenient for me to conduct interviews within the time frame available. My assumption was that it was likely, as I have worked in the health sector for the past 27 years that this will net more participants from this

sector than others. However, by leveraging contacts through the MBA programme I intended to offset this bias as students are from a broad cross section of markets and industries. Prior to soliciting participants I had obtained approval from the Victoria University HEC. 10 women ultimately responded to my initial expression of interest. One participant responded to an email sent out to colleague's networks and was unknown to me, 7 participants were known to me through my networks as either previous colleagues in the health sector or fellow MBA students and 2 were stakeholders that I had had contact with over my career. However, only 9 participants were interviewed as one participant was too busy and we were not able to arrange a suitable time to meet. All women were very interested in the topic and asked for a summary of the findings. From those women who responded to my initial expression of interest I followed up with a phone call and email to explain the purpose of my research, time commitments, feedback mechanisms etc. and responded to any questions they had. I also prepared a participant information sheet (See Appendix A) which was provided to participants prior to their interview taking place. Consent (see appendix B) was also obtained prior to arranging interviews at a time and location that best suited the participants. I also recognised that the timing and location of interviews was important as participants needed to feel comfortable in order to willingly share their experiences. It was my assumption that most participants would prefer to meet during work hours given the business of people's lives. This proved to be the case for 8 of the 9 participants. It was expected that the interviews would take 60-90 minutes and in reality took anywhere from 45-70 minutes. Interviews were all conducted by me and recorded to enable accurate analysis of the findings. The interviews followed a process where I provided a brief background to the project, myself and how they were referred to me. I then confirmed some basic demographic questions such as industry, length of time in middle management positon/s, educational background, race, age,

relationship status and occupation of husband or partner if applicable, number of children and their ages if applicable.   During the interviews I used an open ended -approach to questions with a primary research question: "I would really like to hear your experience of how you have approached your career decisions" to be followed by additional optional focus questions should they be required (see Appendix C) to further explore the phenomenon within Litzky & Greenhaus (2007) framework . I did not focus on questions in any particular order but rather sought to dig deeper or seek further clarity to understand there those factors that have influences there career choices over time. More specifically additional questions focussed on the role of mentors, formal and informal career support both internal and external to the organisation, degree of home involvement and any impact on career congruence, the role of formal career planning, and the passing over of opportunities to advance (if any).

The 9 participants in this study were all in middle management positons and represented a broad cross section of public, private and non-profit organisations as well as a cross section of industries from finance, education, health, and community. Participants ranged in age from 36 to 59 years of age and all, except one, had children ranging from 2 to 30 years of age. Equally all participants, but one, were married. The women were all educated with 8 of the 9 holding postgraduate qualifications and 4 of the women currently obtaining/or have obtained a qualification in management at a master's level with the 5th in a topic related to their area of interest and expertise. The following table 1 provides a description of the profiles of the participants. Unfortunately when it came to data analysis one participant's recording had failed to record beyond the first 5 minutes. This meant there was insufficient data to include

the participant in the research so in the end 8 participants results have been analysed and included in this research.

	Jill	Carol	Lucy	Mary	Sally	Belinda	Kate	Jane
Years in current role	3	4/52	?	7	4	11	3	4 months
Industry	Health	Finance	Health	Not for profit	Education	Not for profit	Social services NGO	Health
Age	36	46	59	39	45	49	46	49
Relationship Status	M	M	M	M	M	M	S	M
Highest Qualification	Degree	Masters	Masters	7th form bursary	Masters	PG certificate	Masters	Diploma
Ethnicity	NZE	British	NZE	NZE Maori	NZE	NZE	NZ Maori	NZE
No. children	1 & pregnant	3	2	2	2	2	2	0
Ages of Children	2	11, 16, 19	27, 30	12 , 8	11	19 & 22	18 & 22	NA
Yrs. Middle Management	7	10	10	17	7	11	5	16.5

Table 1: Demographics of research participants

Data Analysis: quality and validity

To understand the meaning about the phenomenon given by the participants, Flood (2010) states researchers need to be able to suspend or bracket any preconceived ideas in order to be open to new ideas or multiple realities of the participants. To remain open to the experience of what it is like what it is like for women middle managers to fulfil their career aspirations like Weidenfeller (2006) I chose to engage in journaling as a self-reflection tool and process to identify my preconceived ideas about the career decision of women middle managers and as a tool to identify preliminary themes emerging. This process also provided an opportunity to be careful not to assume that the themes emerging from earlier interviews

would necessarily emerge in subsequent interviews. I found the participants stories fascinating and it was easy to want to look for similar themes in each subsequent woman's stories. This bracketing process was useful in acknowledging emerging themes then intentionally putting them to one side to remain open and fully focussed on each woman's narrative. Moreover as it is important in phenomenological study for the researcher to build a depth of trust which enables the in-depth gathering of information, discovery of underlying meanings, and accurately reflect the participant's experiences. The ability for me to engage and connect with the participants through strong interpersonal skills and the demonstration of active listening was necessary for success (Weidenfeller, 2006). This was also made easier as I already had positive relationships with 8 of the 9 participants through shared professional experiences and networks. Finally, in generating themes from the findings it is important to demonstrate that the participant's descriptions reflect their actual experiences. This will be supported through quotes and excerpts from participant's stories which represent their multiple realities. All participants were also happy for me to contact them again if I needed to clarify their meaning during my analysis. Further, as a part of theme analysis Van Manen (1990 p. 107) as cited by Weidenfeller (2006) noted that "in determining the universal or central quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is" (p.39) therefore I have repeatedly asked myself while I was identifying themes if the phenomenon could exists without this aspect. Finally I also discussed emerging themes and rationale with my supervisor and 3 of the participants that I have had follow up contact with over the course of this research. As I shared emerging themes with these participants they all confirmed the existence of these themes resonated with them.

Results

Through analysis of the 8 interview texts five central themes emerged: Trial and error, Mentorship, Self-confidence, Value alignment and Perceived organisational value. These themes were present across all research participants regardless of their positon or industries and provide further insight into how women approach their careers and lives. Furthermore, within these central themes sub categories that reflect women's different realities could be determined that positively and/ or negatively impacted on the strength of desired aspirations and ultimately the degree effort that was applied towards achieving those aspirations. Although each of these themes will be discussed separately it can be determined from the interview texts that these themes are interconnected, where the interaction of the five themes can either strengthen or weaken women's aspirations towards senior management and as a result to what degree they will apply effort to achieve it.

Theme 1: Trial and Error

- o Seeking career clarity and fit

- o Taking advantage of opportunities by being in the right place at the right time

"then I went to the UK, started working in the pub like every kiwi does, travelled a lot and did loads of odd job , worked in a building site, worked for a surveyor.. I did all sorts of strange thing ... it was great actually as it gave me a grounding in all sorts of different things. I suppose in a way it help me decide what types of things jobs I liked and the things I didn't, people I like to work with..." Sally

The first theme emerged as a need for trial and error to determine what career pathway to take. Trial and error is defined as "the process of experimenting with various methods of doing something until one finds the most successful" (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). Further analysis of the 8 interview text identified two sub categories for supporting women to determine their career pathway via this trial and error approach to career determination. These included Seeking career clarity and fit; where women were unclear what they wanted

in a career and were seeking jobs or careers that met their individual needs, interests and strengths and being in the right place and time to take advantage of opportunities

<u>Seeking career clarity and fit</u>

Although each woman's journey was different as they sought to discover what career pathway would meet there needs. All women used the same unstructured trial and error approach to do so. Jill spoke of not being clear about what she wanted in a career once she left school yet feeling the pressure to do so *"So if I really think back to even a high school thinking, you know there is always so much pressure to think about what you wanted to do even then, wasn't there in high school?, but I never really knew, I didn't have a grandiose idea" Jill.* Sally shared this same concern that she didn't know what she wanted to do so the focus on leaving school was about getting any job "*basically it was about getting a job. I didn't know where I wanted to work" Sally.* Other participants demonstrated that even when they had been clear about a career path on leaving school they soon abandoned it and tried other options until they found something that fit what they enjoyed, and matched their skill, strengths, family circumstances, and interests. Lucy shared *"at school I always wanted to be a doctor… I've got a very high IQ but I struggled with some of the maths and things like that, but I did go straight from 6th form to University to do a medical intermediate and then… didn't finish that because I didn't like the chemistry and physics and I wasn't very good at it, so I let that drift, and drifted into BSC and then I couldn't be bothered finishing that, because they wanted me to go on a fishing boat and count fish when I was doing fish and fisheries, so I left all that and then got married and went overseas for a year and I came back and decided I was going to be a nurse. My sister-in-law was a nurse and she seemed to have lots of fun, she had lots of friends who were nursing and she could combine her children with shift work, so it just*

seemed to make life easier". For Cindy and Sally this trial and error approach to finding the right career fit has been guided by the emergence of natural strengths in finance *"So to start with, I wasn't in finance but I very quickly saw that that was where my strengths were"* Cindy *"I had two jobs offered to me (after school), one in customs (which I always regretted not taking that job) and the other was working for a bank and I decided it was a regular sought of a job. In those days it was about having enough money to go out and have a good time. I wasn't really about thinking what my long term career would be but it made sense I like maths" Sally. A*nd finally Belinda and Kate shared the impact of single parenting and how finding interesting work needed to be linked to the ability to care for their children *"I was interested in community based nursing and I was interested in midwifery but then of course when I looked at that, the whole hours and the lifestyle was not going to work for a single parent with no support"* Belinda "*So, all the decisions that I've made in the early days... were based around how old my children were and what they were doing"* Kate.

Right time and place

Participants described many of their career opportunities arose from being in the right place at the right time to take advantage of career enhancing activities. Participants used a trial and error women approach, discarded those opportunities they didn't enjoy relatively quickly but often remained for long periods of time in the organisations if they did. Jill describes how through being in the right place and time she was able to discover her passions and find her "*career break*" where she described how she initially *got a job "it was in the marketing team and it was kind of an entry level. I was the EA and I was a terrible EA, because I just really wanted to do his job, I didn't wanted to support him and make his appointments. I had more*

ideas to share so I left there....Jill but through a chance encounter with a friend's friend she learned about the health and primary care environment and thought I would like to do that. This led Jill to look at what was being advertised in this field and Jill has remained within the organisation ever since. *"So there was quite a lot being advertised for the DHB it was a contract management job and I didn't know a thing about it really but it sounded quite interesting and thinking about you know, planning the health services for the district and so yeah, I applied ... I remember being absolutely thrilled and I thought Oh my god this is my break So I mean, gosh that's only like, well it's probably nearly 9 years now. But yeah, I just haven't looked back from there really" Jill.* Sally's unstructured approach by trial and error combined with being in the right place at the right time also led to a rewarding career experience. Sally had shared that she had tried many jobs and had valued the skills she gained, Sally also reflected she had been quite brave given the wide variety of jobs she tried *"I Kept falling into jobs ...I went to an interview.. I didn't really know what it was it was with this agency for an American company I knew. I met this women she was American and she was quite new , director of finance or something and she said this job is for an EA and I said I never been an EA and she said I've never had an EA so well be fine. So I started working for her. It was actually for a television company and it ended up being the most fantastic job, it was amazing. I got loads of opportunities to do amazing things and then ended up working as an EA for the president of the company. So worked there for a few years, got married in the middle of all that. Yeah I think I was there until I came back to NZ." Sally.* Belinda's journey to finding a satisfying career lay in finding a job that would enable her to care for her children as a single parent. Therefore job security and family fit were important. Through trial and error taking into account her existing skills and family needs Belinda used a process of elimination to find the right job for her *"I was interested in community based nursing and I was interested*

in midwifery but then of course when I looked at that, the whole hours and the lifestyle was not going to work for a single parent with no support and it was actually Massey [University] that said to me, why don't you look at [ ] and I went okay, and my timing was impeccable because it was when they were recruiting for [ ] and they wanted 10 nurses from Wellington and I was one of those 10 nurses". Belinda has since remained with the same organisation for the past 20 years evolving through different roles as opportunities presented and changing family needs allowed.

<u>Theme 2: Value Alignment</u>

- o Meaningful work

- o Family commitment

"One of the things I like about this job is that I get to change people's lives, I get to give them money, let them go to [ ]. It really opened my eyes that I was doing something useful and valuable and I got a good feeling out of it and partly I think when I look for other work there's got to be aspects of that in it that feels like I'm making a difference" Sally

The second theme to emerge was a need for women's careers to align with personal values. This included work-life balance, relationship and family commitments, meaningful work where the value added can be determined. Specifically two strong sub categories emerged from the text. All participants expressed a need for meaningful and interesting work where women could see the value they added in addition to demonstrating a strong family commitment, where women valued spending time with their children while they were still young.

<u>Meaningful work</u>

This desire for meaningful work motivated women to seek career pathways that met this need. Mary confirmed meaningful work as a driver for change where she stated *"If I start getting bored it's time to look for something else.. I need meaningful work".* Further, this need for meaningful work helped Jill find her career pathway in health, where she has worked for the past 9 years *"I don't know what it was about health but I did kind of like the concept of helping people and I suppose that social conscience, you know wanting to make the world a better place".* This need for meaningful work can also act as a driver for change where women are motivated to advance because they recognise they need more power and voice to achieve more meaningful outcomes. *"It's just that I guess I look at the future and think that I obviously can't do this forever because, well I need to let other people you know grow into positions but I also need to grow into other areas as well…I also think, what we've talked about before in terms of the politics and stuff is that we have to be strategic about where Maori work and the type of work that Maori do and make a difference." Kate.* However, this driver for change can also arise from frustration within an existing positon if women feel they can no longer make a difference. This situation arose for Lucy where she no longer felt she was able to add value in her current positon. Lucy had invested significantly in her career by engaging in a wide range of study, secondments, projects, and multiple applications to advance with variability in success. Although Lucy acknowledged she may have contributed to her inability to achieve her career aspirations as there were times when she needed a new challenge but hadn't known what she wanted to do within the organisation. This meant decisions made when opportunities arose through organisational change had not, in hindsight, been the best for her career. However, Lucy also felt that being in an organisation that has restructured frequently meant you were no longer as visible or had as much access to information to make the most of opportunities which can result in being passed over for advancement. This has

meant Lucy is actively looking for work outside the organisation as she has lost confidence that advancement will be likely. In listening to Lucy share her story her frustration at not being able to advance and engage in meaningful work was clear *"I've become very frustrated here, because I need to be doing something, I need to be active and I need to be making a difference".* Interestingly this need for meaningful work impacted negatively on some participant's career aspirations towards senior management as they were motivated to remain in positions of middle management because they needed to feel connected to the front line. By choosing to advance beyond middle management Jane and Belinda saw this as sitting at a desk all day. They were worried about being bored and being removed from people; where they would no longer be able to see the difference they were making. Jane described these concerns when she passed over an opportunity to advance *"I looked at the National operations role that was recently there and thought, I think I could do that, I build really good relationships and quite logical but it's quite removed from people with disabilities or clients. And I get really bored sitting at desk all day. I need that people contact".* Yet Jane acknowledge once she became bored in her existing roles and if she could directly see how the role above her might impact clients lives positively then she would seek the opportunity to advance. Belinda had also recently passed over an opportunity to advance and was strongly encouraged by management and peers to apply. Initially Belinda was seconded to the positon while the recruitment process was underway and for Belinda this opportunity enabled her to re confirm that middle management enabled her to achieve her career goals for meaningful work in a way senior management could not. *"I stepped in there more out of necessity than being a desire, if you like. So, actually when I went into it, in my mind it was only ever temporary but then when I got in it I felt this immense pressure from people around me to actually apply for it. But I just thought if I actually really wanted to apply for this, I would*

have, and I kept holding back which just said to me, actually this is not what I want to do and honestly after 4 months, it was never going to be for me Tina, because if I come back to what drives me every day it's about connecting at the front line and if I got anything out of the 4 months, I got that I cannot sit in an office all day. It's not me, I'm just not happy doing that and that's probably the time when I've felt the least stimulated in my working environment because as much as I moan and groan about stuff coming at me all the time, actually that's what keeps me going. I'm not driven by how many reports I can get out and how many meetings I go to and actually what I like about this role is the connection that I have with them and the work that they do. Because if I come back to what drives me every day it's about connecting at the front line". This need for women to believe they could add value also impacted career mobility across sectors. Jane talked about being unable to see how transferable skills like people management would add value to another sector. Rather Jane saw her value in her knowledge of disability with the transferable skills acting as an add on *"rather than actually acknowledging that the skills are around people management and this and that, I see it as my skills are around understanding people's disability and the rest is just to the side. That's what I can do, but I get that it's around providing good support for people that would be my highest skill and the rest are just add-on's to me"* . As a result Jane's career opportunities are limited within her sector.

Family commitment

Strong values around prioritising family also emerged from the text. Those women with husbands all stated their spouses were supportive and participated in the day to day parenting. Yet women all articulated a strong family commitment and desire to spend time with children while they were young. Therefore woman participants had chosen to put their

careers on hold, change direction or to take a back seat while their children were young. This need to be available for children was independent of whether they parented alone or had supportive partners. Mary described how she had been advancing well within her industry/organisation but *"Then I got to the point of wanting to have children, that had a huge impact on whether I took things further in the scope of the [ ] you had to be available up to 2 am and weekends… so I wanted something that would take me further and work for family"*. Mary was the only participant who had a stay at home dad and she worked full time to support the family. Mary shared that having her husband as *"a stay at home dad"* was a big factor on whether she could advance as one of their goals was *"that one of the parents had to be home with the kids after school"*. Mary added this gave her a *"huge level of assurance that they are being looked after, I don't stress if they are sick, take time off being viewed as the type of person always taking time off because the kids are sick…it's a nice place to be as a mum I think"* Yet, being available to her children was very important to Mary and when I asked about what a typical day incorporating home and work activities looked like for Mary she was still fully active in her children's lives.

"My typical work day? 6.15 start-Showers, children, lunches, breakfast those things you do getting the kids ready …. very rarely do I drop the kids my husband is at home …work… home.. help with homework, make dinner, my husband and I tag team cleaning, homework, we usually have a child each... they go to bed, we have quite time ..20 mins then go to sleep". Mary

For the women in this study this window of time of needing to be available for their children was in the preschool and primary school years; when children are 0-8 years old. But once children moved beyond this age women felt their children were more independent and so began to re-enter the workforce or apply new energies to developing their career pathways again. Carol described this as the muddle in the middle

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"I think the middle part of my career, it's the more moving job to job as presents and that's more because it's been around the children. So, very early on, you know I've gone in and gone and done my degree with plans in my head, with what I've wanted to do and then I suppose its quite a muddle in the middle, I've sort of done various jobs, managing some primary care stuff and things like that, but it had it had to fit in with family and things like that. And then, I think when I got – moved to NZ, my youngest was about 8 and the eldest were getting on that they could start looking after her and actually it then gave me an opportunity to start, right actually now I can focus on my career again. So yeah, the middle sort of mucks it up a little bit. Work part time, maternity leave, all those sorts of things that you have to juggle" Carol

However, even while there was a renewed focus on their careers children still underpinned what career opportunities women considered. With those organisations that were family friendly or enabled part time hours enabling women to align their need for meaningful work with the need to provide quality care and time for their children. At the time of the interview Jill was expecting her second child and was the only participant with pre-schoolers. Jill shared the parenting responsibilities with her husband and didn't see starting a family as necessarily hindering her career. Rather Jill shared *"I suppose it's helped a little bit, as having that opportunity to step aside for a little bit and kind of have a big think about what you might want to step back into and I think you get a bit more perspective on you need to really make it worthwhile to be, a) paying for all that day care and b) sending your child off to be cared for by someone else, you know, 70%, 80% of the week, it's a big decision, so you know you really want to be doing something worthwhile"* Jill

For Jill there was a trade off against time at work and time with family therefore if she was going to spend time away from family it had to be worth it. But equally while her family were young Jill chose to take time out for parental leave, return slowly part time but not exceed four days a week. Jill described her approach to the competing values of meaningful work and family commitment in her interview *" she [child]is there [day care] 8-5.30 so it's a*

significant day for her, and then we get home and it's all about her until bed time and you think that was a quality hour and a half, but you hope she will forgive you and then and you need time to try and have your own time, to breath and eat and clean up and then I mean I have to say, we probably both, I have to jump on and do something work wise that didn't quite get done because we had to leave at 5 but, I mean I do four days a week and I said to someone the other day, I think I would rather, I adamantly don't want to go to 5 days because I don't mind doing a bit of extra to keep the 4 days at 4 days because that day at home with my daughter is really special and I really look forward to it. For me that is really important to have that. So yeah I describe it as I would rather be exploited for 4 days than go up to 5 and 20% extra pay would be better, and I don't know if that is the right way of thinking about but yeah, I'm just a bit stubborn on keeping that day, so myself and not feeling I have to answer the phone or the email". Sally also demonstrates this where she shared that she is considering her next career move but finds it scary that she might not

receive the same support from a new employer *"even now if I think about looking for another job Um one of the things about the [ ]is that it is very family friendly , its comfortable, you know it , you know that if you have to take a day off to go do kid stuff that you can do it, unlimited SL there all those kind of things so I think it becomes comfortable it becomes kind of yep I know where I am with it. And I think definitely when I was going to have children I don't know if I would have thought about leaving my job, even if I wasn't that thrilled with it because I knew there were benefits to that so even looking outside the [ ] to me that is the scary part because I think would I have that same support from the people who knew I had a family because that's important to me ".* Lucy was the only participant with grandchildren and she too factors her grown daughter's needs into her career decisions. *"I have thought of jobs*

outside of Wellington but my daughter … this is her first year as a new entry to specialist practice and she has a 5 year old, so … I'm helping with childcare, so I can't leave the Wellington region easily and there have been jobs I would love to have applied for elsewhere"

Theme 3 Mentors

- o Formal vs. Informal
- o Organisational vs. Personal relationships

"Whether it be a manager or another manager within the organisation, I've used that quite a lot. It's a sounding block. Having an independent sounding block, you know you've got your family, you've got work colleagues but it's actually someone completely independent of that…what they've done in their career and things like that and actually their experiences, you know, helps you make some decisions." Carol

The third theme to emerge from the text was the importance of mentors in supporting woman to develop their careers. Specifically mentors acted as a sounding board to support good career decisions, building women's self-confidence and self-belief, in addition to first liner managers roll modelling management qualities that women could aspire to, and/or enabling opportunities for career growth into management. Mentors took a number of forms where they could be internal or external to the organisation alongside informal and formal arrangements.

Formal vs. Informal Mentors

All women spoke of the value of mentors in the development of their careers but only two women had engaged formal mentors within the past two years and saw immense value in them. Jill talked of how the idea of engaging a career coach had initially seemed a waste of time where they were just interested in taking her money but once she had taken the step found it very worthwhile. *"it kind of helped to frame up in my mind, you know what my skill*

sets are, where the gaps are, what I can kind of do next". Carol to had engaged in a formal mentor programme and when I asked Carol about the contribution of mentorship on career success replied "Big, Big" where she spoke of the value in having an independent "sounding block" when she was planning her next career move. However, informal relationships have been no less important in supporting women to make there next career moves. Karen talked of relying on friendships to remind her of her capabilities in the hard times. *"I don't know that I've had coaches or mentors. I don't think that I do have actually. …I have friendships with other women where we talk about things that you want to achieve and what you want to do and stuff. Probably one friend in particular actually, and she has probably been a big influence in supporting me and I guess more supporting my confidence around knowing I can do it. So she tends to – because you know when things get really overwhelming and you're 'I can't do this, you know it's too hard' there's all this pressure and all that sort of stuff, she will just remind you about the things that you can do and the strengths that you do have so that you do think, oh maybe I can do it".*

Organisational vs. personal

Others participants like Jane, Sally, and Lucy spoke of the impact their direct line managers had on their careers where managers either role model behaviours that women could learn from or equally what not to do. Jane commented *"when I look back I think I've had a really good charge nurse at [ ] , and I've always looked at her and thought if I could manage and lead people like her then I would classify myself as being a successful leader. Then I look at a manager I had at [ ]and thought if managed like him, then I haven't got it right. So he was as valuable as the good person because he taught me what not to do".* Sally shared how one of her managers role modelled a work ethic she wanted to emulate and enabled her to increase

her self-belief by demonstrating he had faith in her abilities " *he had an expectation you can do things …he always had more faith in me than I ever had in myself*".   As a result Sally had the confidence to engage in tertiary study and to apply for a new management role within the organisation that had more responsibility and a greater number of direct reports. Importantly Sally spoke of a trust relationship with her managers where she felt she could ask for career advice "I *trusted them that they had my back*". All participants had valued the support they had received both formally and informally and reported it had made a significant difference in helping them to gain the skills and confidence they needed to continue to advance or plan their next career steps. Belinda summed this up well when she spoke of two influential leaders within the organisation who had given her positive feedback and encouragement.

"you know when you get affirmed that you're doing well and it makes you want to keep doing well It was probably the first time that I thought, hmm I'm actually quite good at this, you know? I can do this. That I think made me more confident about taking that next step". *Belinda*

<u>Theme 4 Self-concept</u>

- o Lack Confidence

- o Market value

"To me that feels embarrassing. I don't know whether or not that's normal for woman in leadership positions or anything but even doing my studies, they say we are academics and stuff, and I feel embarrassed, like I feel embarrassed telling people that I'm doing my masters. It just feel weird that – you're in a leadership position and you're, I don't know it just feels, I guess because I just think I'm just the same as everybody else, I'm just doing a job that's different" Kate

The fourth theme to emerge was a weaker self-concept; where self-concept is defined as "the idea or mental image one has of oneself and one's strengths, weaknesses, status, etc. (Dictionary.com, n.d). Evidence within the text demonstrated women had an internal locus of

control and a weaker self-efficacy, where women believed they controlled their own destiny but were not motivated to seek advancement unless they had the confidence they could do the role. Further this lower self-concept was evident in the text when three of the participants who had been with their organisations for the longest expressed concerns as to whether their skills had value in the wider [job] market

Self-Confidence

Carol shared that about two years into a role with her employer an opportunity came up for the role of GM for Operations. The CEO at the time suggested that Carol might like to apply for it *"I was told that she thought that I may apply for it, I decided not to because I didn't feel comfortable enough at that stage, I didn't feel I knew the industry, I felt that I had lots to learn still. So I passed that opportunity up".* For Jane, her lack of confidence means she waits for the organisation to approach her for opportunities *"I don't put myself out there and say yep I can do this, I wait for people to come to me and that's a confidence, the thing around selling [myself]".*

Market Value

Many of the women in this study had been in their current roles or variations of their roles over a number of years. They spoke of a need to be challenged and a desire to advance that they recognised might only eventuate if they transferred to another organisation or sector. However, a lack of confidence in whether there skills would be worth anything and a lack of clarity on what else they might do means women often chose to do nothing. Belinda and Jill articulated this clearly when asked how they saw their career progression going forward. Belinda responded *"It's quite a funny thing, because you know, I mean – I'm not known for changing roles frequently, sometimes I feel I have to say I do get a little bit nervous about having been with one*

organisation for so long, because sometimes I think who else would want me? Or what am I actually worth out in the market place, what are the skills that I have? And I don't have any other qualifications but I do have skills and experience but is that worth now in the big wide world. So I do have those thoughts" these thoughts were echo by Jill *"I've nearly been here 9 years now, so sometimes you just, want to know what else is out there and what it's like to work in other parts of the sector there may be other opportunities here but I don't know yet"*. Jill recognised that it was up to her but before she would make the move she needed to talk to people and find out more about what it was like to work in other parts of the sector. For Lucy who was currently seeking a new job due to frustration with her own talked about knowing there were jobs out there and the need to keep looking but also added that the lack of success in finding a new role may be *"because I don't quite know whether I want to leave, I mean, for years here, I'm in a comfort zone, it's relatively handy to work, you're semi your own boss, you know, as long as you produce a reports and outputs and you go to the boss occasionally and telling what you're doing, easy to do, they pay me but I'm not challenged, I'm bored, frustrated".* However, Lucy described a number of times when she had applied for more senior roles without success and this has ultimately impacted on her confidence of what her skills are worth in the market *"sometimes you know, you think, when you get knocked back for roles, a certain number of times, you question Oh is that me?"* Lucy

Theme 5 Perceived Organisational Value

- o Organisationally led opportunities
- o Impact of first line managers

> *I've been quite lucky with opportunities coming up at the right times for me, within [ ]. And I've probably gently had a little bit of push from them along the way.*
> *Belinda*

The fifth theme to emerge was perceived organisational value where women spoke of gaining opportunities to advance in their careers because the organisation has come to them and encouraged them to apply for roles or given challenging assignments in which they otherwise would not have believed themselves capable. Women also spoke of having the opportunity to keep evolving into new [management] positons as the organisation grew or opportunities presented. Women talked of how this fitted well within their comfort zones and added to their feelings of worth and value within the organisation. Additionally the role of first line managers was significant in both enabling opportunities and giving women the confidence to continue to progress.

Organisationally led opportunities

The role of the organisation in women's career advancement was significant for the women in this study. Organisations had provided women with opportunities to build their skills and advance into management positons, subsequently building women's confidence in their own abilities. Sally shared how these opportunities to participate in challenging projects *"meant more and more, I thought if they had faith in me I must be able to do it"* she described she would initially feel nervous but each time she would *"muddle through and come out feeling more confident"*. Participants also shared how there organisation had invested in their leadership development by providing with training internal and external to grow their skills in leading people.

"Within [ ] they were really good around training, so they made sure that we all had the opportunity to go through the NZIM and Student management and there was some really good courses there that I got a lot out of around leading people". Carol

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Jill too recalled the opportunities that have been provided by her employer over the past 9 years " *So I started that role and I think I only had that role a really short time because another opportunity came up within internally quite quickly that one of the other managers, who I had got to know just quite quickly in the few months I was here, thought that I might be really interested in I guess, you know I didn't have a lot of experience, but she could see, I suppose my background and my potential and my passion in that area ".* Jane shared her journey into management by saying *"I never had to apply for any of the positions that I grew through in that company. They were always created around what my role was changing to. So, as the company grew and the requirements grew, the CEO's role grew so I moved up with that."* Jane.

Impact of first line managers

Many organisational opportunities to grow and advance were unsolicited by the participants and when the women shared their experiences they often seem surprised that the organisation had seen leadership capabilities within them when they hadn't yet recognised it within themselves. Women also talked about not having the confidence to act on their desire for more responsibility in management so having management reach out to them enabled them to build their confidence and strengthen their career aspirations towards management. Jane shared *"So I plodded along being a service manager and then, after 11 months, the general manager approached me and asked me if I would be interested in being the area manager for [ ], so I didn't technically apply for the position to that, so it was right in my comfort zone"* Karen described how she has continued to advance and achieved the ability to rise to a management positon because of her manager's belief in her ability; communicated
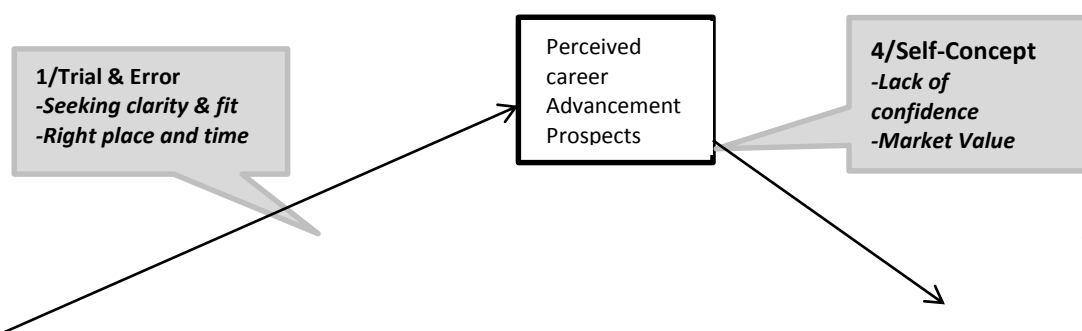
through mentorship, alongside putting in place the necessary training and opportunities to advance her skills.

"So I'd been working here for maybe a year and then I was – then they created a new role around parenting, and so I was just asked if I would be interested in doing that, and so I did. And then another role came up with [ ] and they asked if I would be interested in doing that. then it had been identified for a while that the supervisor that we did have wasn't – didn't have the right skills for the supervision, so yeah they supported me to do my supervision and my supervisor trained me and then when I finished that then I took on the rest – I took on the whole team basically. And then became the team leader of the whole team and then I guess [manager] was kind of mentoring me and then asked if I would do the – or didn't ask, said I need you to do the manager's job. So that's kind of how that has evolved". Karen

Discussion

Literature supports women middle managers do aspire to senior management positons yet most will not achieve it. There is a growing body of knowledge obtained predominantly through large scale surveys which seeks to explain why women continue to be absent. However, this method tells us about the existence of the problem but not the why. Therefore my interest in conducting this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the everyday lived reality for women in middle management as they make their career decisions. This line of enquiry led me to the research question "what factors or circumstances influence women middle managers career planning and advancement decisions?" The results of this exploratory study led to some interesting themes that are perhaps not surprising in themselves but do provide some further insight into how women middle managers approach their career and lives. Specifically, some influences drive or enable women to advance towards senior management e.g. line manager support, organisational led opportunities and mentor support and others drive women to choices other than managerial advancement e.g. lack of confidence, family commitments, and a desire for meaningful work. And finally, some factors can act as either a push or pull towards or away from managerial advancement e.g. fit

of role or organisation with one's specific needs, value congruence, and timing. These findings were widely supported throughout literature (McKeen & Burke, 1992; Wentling, 1992, 1996; Townsend, 1997; Ragins et al., 1998; O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005; Weidenfeller, 2006). As managerial aspirations appear to be an important attribute for progression into senior managerial positions if already a manager (Terry & Tharenou 1998) then understanding the factors which influence women's career aspirations towards senior management is advantageous when seeking to develop strategies to address the invisible barriers preventing women advancing. Litzky & Greenhaus (2007) found women had lower desired aspirations towards senior management than men, due to lower self-senior management congruence, a perception of less favourable career advancement prospects than men, and finally for other reasons that Litzky & Greenhaus were not able to determined. When evaluating the research findings within Litzky & Greenhaus (2007) process model of senior management aspirations, positive correlations can be made between the process components that influence both desired and enacted aspirations towards senior management and the 5 themes identified in this study. Figure 2 below depicts this alignment. This research builds on Litzky & Greenhaus's findings by adding further insight into the factors that contribute to women's self- senior management congruence. From analysis of the 8 interview text there was strong support for the positive relationship Litzky & Greenhaus found between self–senior management congruence and strength of career aspirations towards senior management. Self-senior management congruence refers to an individual's perception of the fit between a senior management position and his/her personal characteristics (Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007).

1/Trial & Error
-Seeking clarity & fit
-Right place and time

Perceived career Advancement Prospects

4/Self-Concept
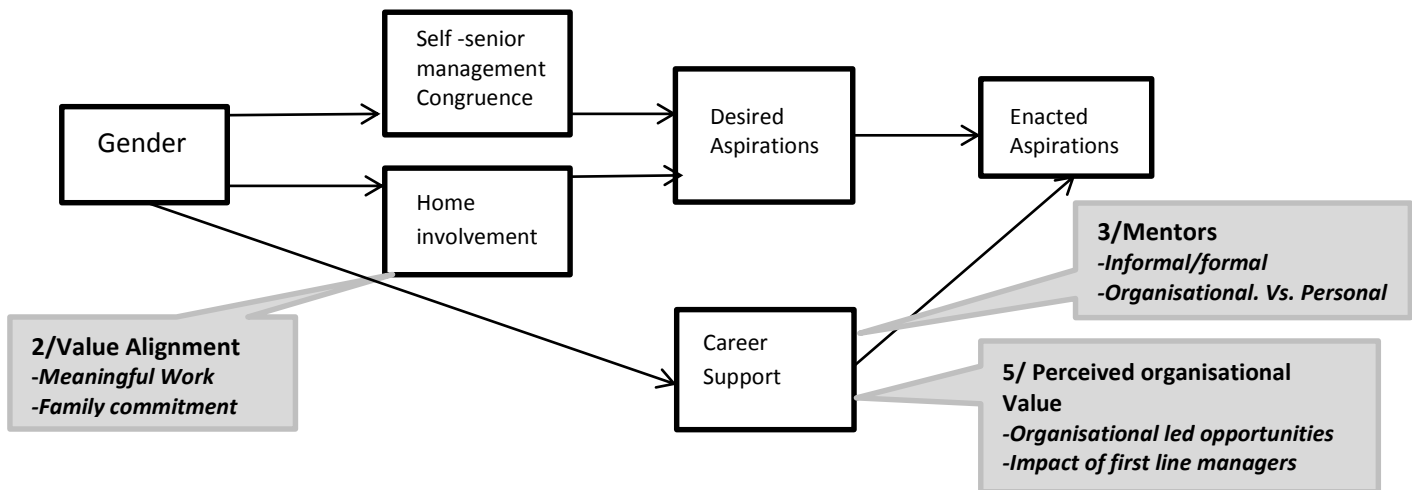*-Lack of confidence*
-Market Value

45

Figure 2: overlay of research findings within Litzky & Greenhaus's (2007) process model of senior management aspirations

In this study participants had not initially had career aspirations towards senior management rather this had developed over time, strongly influenced (positively & negatively) by 5 interrelated themes (see figure 3). This interaction of these 5 themes contributed to how participants viewed their self–senior management congruence and therefore the strength of desired aspirations and the subsequent likelihood of the application of effort to achieve them. Further, like Litzky & Greenhaus this study did not find a correlation between home involvement and desired aspiration as women all cited supportive families who shared household responsibilities. However, this study did find a negative correlation between home involvement and enacted aspirations where women delayed or did not seek advancement as they choose to prioritise family commitments particularly when children were young
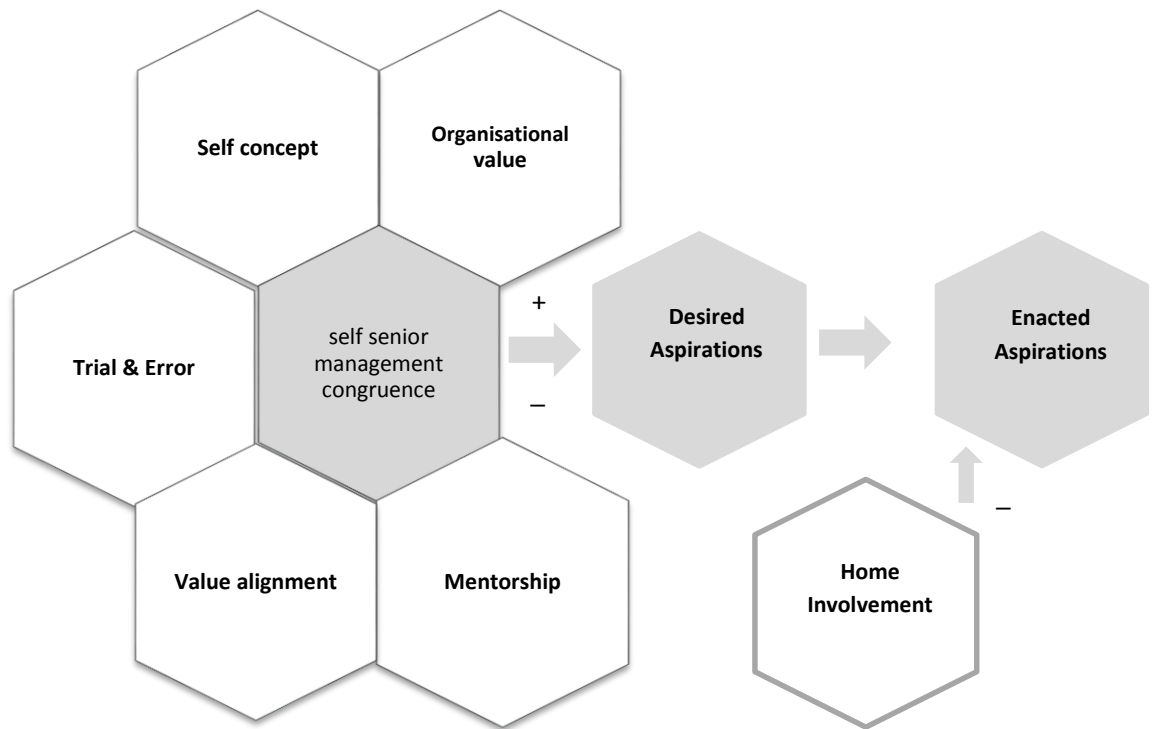
Fig 3: model depicting the interconnected factors that influence women middle managers senior management aspirations

In summary, the essential themes and sub-themes that have been identified in this research have lent support to previously documented research findings. Women participants have prepared themselves for managerial and professional careers by enrolling and graduating from business qualifications, obtaining additional professional designations, working long hours, and obtaining the experience necessary for senior corporate management yet had still encountered barriers within their everyday lived realities that impeded their ability to fulfil their career aspirations. Wentling (1996) supported by Weidenfeller (2006) suggests that women have not achieved the level of success they aspire to as those in middle management lack specific career strategies, including not obtaining proper technical training and not identifying what is most important for their careers. This was also supported by the findings in this study. The participants all identified they had not approached their careers with any formal planning rather the trial and error approach had dominated.

"I'm not a planner, at all. I went into the MBA, I thought actually this is a road to actually developing outside of finance and things like that, so I had that in the back of my mind where I haven't sat down and done a whole road map of what I plan to do. And probably if I had done that 5 years ago I wouldn't be in the job I was in today" Carol

Although each participants experiences were different the role of mentorship, support of first line managers and perceived organisational value should not underestimated. Literature does support that women respond better to more formal training opportunities and mentoring than their male counterparts and this was supported in this study with all participants identifying the positive role each of these factors played in building their confidence, self-belief and desire to attain a senior management position. Therefore organisations should continue to build their capacity to provide training and development opportunities for middle managers that ensure equity of access and opportunity. Furthermore given the positive role mentorship plays in supporting women to develop career advancing strategies then organisations should consider offering formal mentor relationships for women middle managers with career aspirations towards senior management. Moreover, the recruitment and development of first line managers to identify and develop women with leadership potential would also be recommended. Additionally, when considering the theme of value alignment and its sub categories of family commitment and meaningful work this provides support for O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005), where they highlighted the importance of organizational and societal contexts on women's career choices along with the importance of relationships. Here the struggle between balancing career opportunities and personal values such as meaningful work and family commitment was evident in the women's stories. O'Neil and Bilimoria liken this struggle to Powell & Maniero's (1992) analogy of a river bank, with success in careers and success in relationships as opposite sides of a river-bank where over time, women will be pulled more to one bank of the river than the other, or will continue to

try to strive for a balance between the two. Within this study the women with children all chose to be pulled to the family commitment side of the river bank by putting their careers on hold while there children were young and then navigating back to the middle as their children became more independent. Yet for Lucy the only participant with grandchildren this family/relational pull was still evident as she balanced the desire to advance with the desire to support her family. Belinda too expressed this struggle as she talked about the importance of work life balance and the desire to spend more time with her husband now her children were grown. Belinda did not want the extra responsibility senior management might bring as she didn't want to take work home.

"So, yeah the time that [husband] and I have is really precious to us, so and I don't really want to cut into that if I don't have too. That's probably the bottom line. But he would support me, if I wanted to do something different or he wouldn't hold me back, but for me it's about having that balance".

These findings highlight the importance of Relational context which O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) refer to as the impact of important professional relationships such as managers, peers, clients and personal relationships such as spouse, children, parents etc. on a woman's life and career decisions. Here professional relationships are key to ensuring talented women are not lost to the workforce. Sally highlighted the importance of the relational context working well when she spoke of her ability to return to the workforce because her first line manager provided her with the necessary leeway to negotiate between river banks. Along with supporting her to meet her childcare needs when requiring her to work overtime.

"When I was ready to return from Maternity leave I rang [my manger] and said I wanted to come back. He said could do whatever hours I wanted "Sally mother of twins.

My other influential manager was a woman. She was a hard worker, caring. If we had to work late she would ask 'do you need help with Childcare'? I thought wow they must think a lot of me so I would work harder". Sally

However, given the labour force projections of a growing need for specialised managers including middle managers then there is also a benefit in first line managers knowing there staff and identifying those who wish to advance and need support to remove barriers (i.e. more flexible hours, training, coaching etc.) and those who are fulfilled in middle management and require rewarding challenging assignments to remain engaged.

Summary of Recommendations for Organisations

Recommendations for organisations to consider include

- Provide formal mentor programmes including career planning at key milestones in women's career. Specifically early in women's careers, prior to and upon return from career breaks.

- Provide training and development opportunities for women

- Ensure first line managers receive training in coaching and mentoring staff

- To support succession planning ensure flexibility across work systems and roles with a focus on key deliverables not hours spent in the office.

- To support retention ensure part time roles do not require full time deliverables

Limitations and future research

The limitations of this small scale study are acknowledged as given the small sample size the results cannot be generalised to all women who have seemly plateaued in middle management. Although the results support findings within existing literature that women

middle managers seek to advance in their managerial careers but have a number of competing and interrelated factors within themselves, the home and workplace environment that impact on desired aspirations and ultimately the degree to which they will apply effort to enact those aspirations. Therefore this study would need to be replicated across a much larger sample size to determine if the emergent themes still held true. Furthermore, given the ethnic diversity of NZ a larger sample size that included Maori and Immigrants to NZ would also provide an opportunity to determine if minority groups approach career development opportunities differently to NZ European women. Particularly as one Maori participant viewed her career advancement decisions as a way of advancing the needs of Maori rather than self-promotion. Furthermore as this study only looked at those factors that influenced the careers decisions of women middle managers then it would be beneficial to undertake a comparative study to determine if men plateauing in middle management are impacted by the same or different variables.

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TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TE ŪPOKO O TE IKA A MĀUI

VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

APPENDIX A: Information Sheet for participant

My name is Bettena (known as Tina) Syme and I am in my final year of my MBA (Masters in Business Administration) through Victoria University of Wellington. Part of the programme is to undertake a Business Research Project. The topic I have chosen to explore is entitled

Equal Opportunities: Towards a greater understanding of the fulfilment of women middle managers career aspirations in senior management.

Many women having gained the necessary skills and expertise required to advance and many organisations implementing strategies to address the structural barriers in a bid to remove selection and promotional bias women continue to be underrepresented within the corporate senior management structure. There are many theories and suggestions as to what holds women back from achieving senior leadership positons to which they aspire, primarily researched through large scale surveys. This method of research tells us about the existence of the problem but not the lived experience of women who are plateauing in middle management positions. Women face many competing choices over the span of their career and as a result many women in middle management are choosing not to take advantage of senior management opportunities. But to say women choose not to advance does not take into account the societal context in which the decision takes place.

My interest in this topic is both personal as a middle manager myself with career aspirations towards achieving a senior management positon and a desire to contribute to the body of knowledge that will support Human Resource professionals to review their current talent management policies and procedures to ensure underlying gender bias is addressed. Considering firms are operating in an increasingly competitive environment and are beginning to recognise a key to economic growth and competitive advantage lies in gender diversity in senior leadership positions then there is a need to understand the context in which women are making career decisions. Only then can firms determine

whether there is a disconnect in the types of experience and /or structures they identify as critical to advancement, when gender is factored into the decision making

To conduct my research I plan to undertake semi structured interviews taking approximately 60-90 minutes at a time and place negotiated with the participant. The research is concerned with understanding what factors or circumstances influence women's career planning and advancement decisions with none of the opinions or statements made by participants during the interview attributed to them personally, rather all participants will be identified by a pseudonym. Participant information will also be kept strictly confidential with any raw data collected during the interview only available to myself as the researcher, and my supervisor, Dr Jane Bryson. All data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed within 1 year of the research project. You may also withdraw from the research at any time before 30.09.15.

Victoria University of Wellington has granted ethical approval as a teaching activity and this project has been reviewed by the Course Coordinator. Any findings derived from this study will be published in the Victoria University Library and excerpts may be included in academic publications and/or academic conferences. With your permission the interview will be recorded and a summary of the findings made available to you upon request. If you for any reason would like to make contact regarding this research please contact one of the following:

Student: Tina Syme   Phone: 0211529642   Email: symebett@myvuw.ac.nz

Supervisor: Dr Jane Bryson   Phone: + 64 4 463 5707   Email: jane.bryson@vuw.ac.nz
Thank you, Tina

APPENDIX B: TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TE ŪPOKO O TE IKA A MĀUI   **Consent Form for**
Personal Interview   **VICTORIA** UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

Personal Interview

CONSENT FORM

I agree to be interviewed by Bettena (Tina) Syme for the purposes of her MBA Business Research Project and consent to the use of my opinions and information. I understand that none of the opinions or statements that I make during the interview will be attributed to me personally, and that I may withdraw from the research before 30.09.15. I am also aware that the findings derived from this study will be published in the Victoria University Library and excerpts may be included in academic publications and/or academic conferences.

I have been informed of the purpose of the research and the confidentiality conditions.

I understand that raw data collected during the interview will only be available to the researcher, Bettena Syme and her supervisor, Jane Bryson.
I have been informed that I will receive a summary of the research findings upon my request

      Name: ………………….…………   Date: ………………………………

      Signed: ……………………………..

If you would like a copy of the research summary please add your email/address below:

      …………………………………………………………………………..

APPENDIX C*: Interview Guide*

Equal Opportunities: Towards a greater understanding of the fulfilment of women middle managers career aspirations in senior management

The interviewer will paraphrase the following to provide the participants with some background and context about the situation, describe the purpose of the interview, provide an explanation for the use of a voice recorder, and discuss next steps.

Background and context
There are many theories and suggestions as to what holds women back from achieving senior leadership positons to which they aspire, primarily researched through large scale surveys. This method of research tells us about the existence of the problem but not the lived experience of women who are plateauing in middle management positions. Women face many competing choices over the span of their career and as a result many women in middle management are choosing not to take advantage of senior management opportunities. But to say women choose not to advance does not take into account the societal context in which the decision takes place. The purpose of this research is to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of women who have seemingly plateaued in middle management positons

My interest in conducting this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the essential nature and meaning of what it is like for women middle managers to fulfil their career aspirations within the context of their lived experience and subsequent perceived available choices. A middle manager is someone who is responsible for implementing policies and strategy as opposed to upper- level or senior managers who are responsible for developing policy and strategy. This research study will describe and analyse the perspectives and experiences of women middle managers have regarding their career opportunities and decisions towards fulfilling their career aspirations in senior management.

The interviewer will ask if there are any questions before proceeding.

Demographics
The interviewer will ask the participants for their industry, length of time in middle management and length of time in current role , race, age, relationship status (if applicable), and number of children (if applicable).

Primary research question: "I would really like to hear your experience of how you have approached your career decisions"

Potential Follow-up Questions

▪ What is the highest positon to which you have ultimately aspired to? Has that changed? why?

- Can you describe for me a typical work day? Including any responsibilities you have outside of work.
- What career challenges do you face in achieving your career aspirations from an organisational perspective? please tell me a story that describes this experience
- What career challenges do you face in achieving your career aspirations from a home perspective? -please tell me a story that describes this experience
- To what degree has career planning featured in your life? please tell me a story that describes this experience
- Can you think of any factors that have assisted your career progression?
- Can you think of any factors that have hindered your career progression?
- Can you describe a key event or experience that have impacted your ability to advance at work - please tell me a story that describes this experience
- Can you describe key event or experience that has helped you to advance at work - please tell me a story that describes this experience
- Have you ever pass over an opportunity to advance? If yes please tell me a story that describes this experience

The interviewer will ask if there are comments before finishing the interview. The interviewer will thank the individual for participating in the interview and assure her of confidentiality of responses, and the opportunity to receive a summary of the findings upon their request. The interviewer will set aside time after each interview to recall and reflect on what was learned and insights gained from the interpersonal interaction.