

# The position of women in leadership roles in Serbia

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## ABSTRACT,

*This research aims at understanding the current position of Serbian women in leadership roles, regarding their position in the labor market, cultural factors and barriers, and making a cross-cultural comparison between Serbia and the Netherlands. First, existing literature was analyzed. Then the current position in Serbia was studied by obtaining data through interviews with five Serbian women. Analysis of the data shows that Serbian women are currently relatively well established in the labor market. Factors like the patriarchal system seem to still play a big role but are not perceived as a barrier by most women. Serbian women play most achievements and opportunities off on their own characteristics, instead of gender-related factors. Comparing the situation in both countries, it appeared that Serbia and the Netherlands took different paths and have established a different normal, but in the end barely differentiate on the matter of the position of women in leadership roles.*

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## Keywords

Leadership, Women, Serbia, The Netherlands, Gender equality, Opportunities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For the longest time, women have been excluded from any chance of performing leadership roles (Rhode, 2017). It was only since the 1980s that female leadership obtained visibility in the world (Klenke, 1996). Ever since it has been a slow process for women to get the same recognition as men, even when functioning in the same leadership positions. Despite the greater visibility, and the contribution they have made to leadership, female leaders are still seen as atypical leaders who go against the norms of leadership as well as of femininity (Catalyst, 2007). Women get across various boundaries while trying to climb to the top, because of, amongst other things, the patriarchal system, stereotyping, and cultural attitudes (Bernstein et al., 2009). This is also known as 'the glass ceiling' for women (Hymowitz & Schelhardt, 1986).

The glass ceiling is invisible, but it works effectively as a barrier for women. The cultural attitude in a country has a big influence on the way certain roles or traits are perceived as feminine or masculine according to Hofstede (Hofstede, 2001). In Serbia, for instance, this appears to be the case, since women there hardly attain decision-making positions, and they are paid less than men when they are in the same position. Also, Serbian women get fewer opportunities to advance and are more often dismissed (Torlak & Torlak, 2016). This cultural attitude was influenced by, amongst other things, the Yugoslavian war (Torlak & Torlak, 2016). This set back the position of women in Serbia and therefore, changed the attitude of the society, which is still visible in today's Serbia and includes stereotyping women as inferior, passive and having no expert knowledge (Torlak & Torlak, 2016). In the labor market, the majority of unemployed people still consist of women, not only in the sense of having no experience and work, but also the time it takes for them to find a job (Milica & Milica, 2019).

As mentioned before, culture can be seen as a key factor that influences female leadership and perceptions on females in leadership positions (Schunemann, 2020). The culture of Western and Eastern European countries shows several strong differences, and this has an impact on how people in these cultures view minorities and key social issues (Cooperman et al., 2018).

## 2. AIM OF THIS RESEARCH

The goal of this research is to explore the position of women in leadership roles in Serbia, and with what barriers and cultural norms and values they have to deal with. To make this cultural aspect more visible, cross-cultural research between Serbia and The Netherlands will be done. After the study on the position of Serbian women, this position will be compared to the position of Dutch women, using existing literature.

### 2.1 Central Research Question

Therefore, this thesis aims at addressing the as before mentioned gaps by answering the following research question:

*“What is the current position of women in leadership roles in Serbia?”*

## 2.2 Sub-questions

More specifically, this research question is broken down in several sub-research questions:

1. *What is the current position of Serbian women in the labor market?*
2. *What are the cultural barriers for women to obtain and hold leadership roles in Serbia?*
3. *How do Serbian women deal with these barriers?*
4. *What is the difference between women in leadership roles in The Netherlands and Serbia?*
5. *To what extent do they experience different barriers due to cultural differences?*

## 2.3 Theoretical relevance

This study will contribute by answering the central- and sub-research questions. A theoretical contribution is that the results from this study will either confirm theory from other studies done before, or not. Another theoretical contribution is that this research will give an insight into the current view on the position of Serbian women in leadership positions. Since the position of women in leadership is subject of change, it is possible that the findings from earlier studies are no longer valid.

## 2.4 Practical relevance

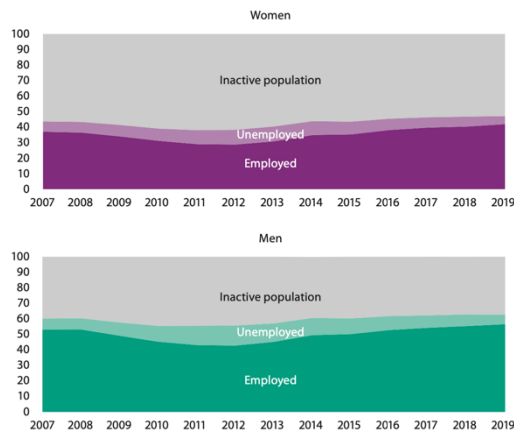
A practical contribution is that this study will give an insight in the barriers women in leadership roles experience and, therefore, can help managers or women themselves to see where barriers occur and thus where to dissolve barriers to promote women's careers. Furthermore, it can also help Serbian women who work in the Netherlands or the other way around, to get an understanding of what cultural aspects influence them in their work, either positively or negatively and how to deal with these aspects.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Equal opportunities

The culture of a country can have a big influence on leadership, and thus also on the way women are perceived as leaders as well as different leadership styles. This can eventually result in stereotypes and influence how women are being treated. Due to stereotyping women and men can get unequal business opportunities (Gupta et al., 2013).

Regarding equal opportunities between men and women in employment, Serbia is still trying to improve equality, for example, by adopting laws on gender equality. In 2021 the employment rate for Serbian men (20-64 years old) was 14 percentage points higher and their activity rate 13.8 percentage points higher than of Serbian women. These differences can be explained by various causes, five of the most common reasons for Serbian women's inactivity being: 1) inadequate support in balancing work and family; 2) employers' discriminatory treatment of young women; 3) the existing wage gap; 4) the unpaid work women do in their household; and 5) lower statutory retirement age (Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). In Figure 1. the effect of these reasons to women's inactivity are visible.



Source: Labour Force Survey, SORS.

**Figure 1. Serbian population aged 15 and over, by activity and sex, 2007-2019 (%)**

Even though Serbia has and still is establishing legal and institutional frameworks to create more gender equality, the situation in the workplace has not changed significantly yet and gender inequality is still reinforced and reproduced in different areas of the society, since the more power and responsibility a job has the less women are found. Andrić and Markov (2018) show that gender inequality is still present in Serbia, especially when talking about leadership positions. They found that underrepresentation of women in higher positions is visible and that a cause of this is the career development patterns that exist for women are slower than for men (Andrić and Markov, 2018).

### 3.2 The influence of the patriarchal system

Pavlović and Ljumović (2016) discuss challenges as well as prospects women leaders face on the Balkan. One of their main findings was the negative influence of the patriarchal system on the position and outlook of women in leadership (Pavlović & Ljumović, 2016). Patriarchy can be described as the degree to which a society promotes male privilege by being, male centered, male dominated, and male identified (Johnson, 2005).

Serbia, then still Yugoslavia, was a socialistic state (1944-1989). For women this had an advantage, because they were able to participate in society, they had paid jobs, since equality is central in socialism. Around the 1970s an economic crisis hit Yugoslavia, which made that nationalism became more popular. This was one of the reasons for the civil war in Yugoslavia (Korac, 2003). After the Yugoslavian war, which lasted from 1991 till 2002, people chose for charismatic leadership and ethno-nationalism, which was a result of the war they went through. The regime they chose to follow as a country had a big impact like, international economic sanctions and isolation, which led to an economic crisis and eventually destruction of the system of social welfare. All this together, changed the gender relations and the structures of families. The strong patriarchal system was reinforced (re-patriarchalisation), women massively lost their jobs and had to go back to their unpaid job as housewives, the traditional gender distribution reappeared (Vujadinovic, 2013).

Research from Vujadinović (2013) indicates that in Serbia the dominant gender regime still is the patriarchal system, but with adjustments of emancipatory trends. There has been a great acceptance of working women, since it is often a

necessity for the family to survive. However, this does not indicate great acceptance of successful working women. Successful positions in the labor market are still in favor of men. This becomes more visible when looking at private property owned by men and women. For example, 50% of Serbian men own a car, for Serbian women this is only 14%. Women are still the ones that perform most of the household work, regardless of their education level and if they are employed or not. They are also the ones who are expected to sacrifice themselves for the children and be ‘the glue of the family’ (Vujadinović, 2013). Women tend to have more private roles, whereas men are focused on public roles. Even when women obtain a powerful position in a public sector, there are various strategies to make them less visible to the public. For example, the use of prescribed and standardized morphological masculine forms of nouns indicating the social positions of power (Savić et al., 2009).

The massive unemployment of young women in combination with the outlook on labor and private property, sum up a mostly negative view on the position of women in a patriarchal system (Vujadinović, 2013).

### 3.3 Stereotyping

Isanović (2006) investigated the way women get portrayed in Serbia and thus, perceived in society and at work. She suggests that the media plays a big role in setting a standard and stereotyping the genders. The media does not only represent different situations, groups, and people, but they give a certain meaning to them. Gender is a social construct, which indicates that it is not fixed, but it is a process. In Serbian newspapers, men appear five times more often than women. Also, in 77,5% of the time, men have the central role in the Serbian newspapers, whereas women only occupy 13,3%, and these 13,3% where women play the central role of the story, are mostly found in a tabloid rubric. In figure 2 is shown that in stories about the world, economy and business, and politics, women are barely present, whereas women’s presence gets much higher in sections about entertainment and culture/art.

Section	Central role					Total
	man / men	woman / women	balanced (both man and women)	others (transsexuals, etc.)	other (organization, etc.)	
Current Affairs / Politics	85.1%	8.4%	4.4%	0.3%	1.8%	100% N=1351
World	83.5%	8.1%	4.9%	1.7%	1.8%	100% N=1303
Economy and Business	84.3%	9.6%	3.2%	0.3%	2.6%	100% N=720
Crime news/Accidents	80.2%	8.2%	8.1%	2.6%	0.9%	100% N=1712
Entertainment	46.6%	37.6%	13.7%	0.4%	1.7%	100% N=988
Culture / Art	68.9%	17.2%	11.2%	0.2%	2.5%	100% N=1198
Sport	88.0%	9.0%	1.3%	0%	1.7%	100% N=981

**Table 2. Relation between gender with a central role and thematic section in Serbian newspapers**

When looking at the headlines on the front page, men were again the main gender focused on. Women did not get any visibility in this case solo, only in stories shared with men. Overall, men dominate the daily news of Serbia, by far, where women are almost invisible. The world, as constructed by the Serbian journalists, is a men’s world, in which 80% of the time the central position is occupied by men (Isanović, 2006).

### 3.4 Female leaders in Serbia

Toskovic has done research on the position of female leaders in Serbia (Toskovic 2013). Her research resulted in two, contrasting, models that describe the obstacles and the factors that have an influence on the position of women in leadership positions based on empirical research.

The first model describes factors and behavioral aspects of female managers based on her own strengths and supportive environment. First of all, her strength can be a high education

level. She often has a family but is just as successful if she does not or is alone with her child. The women belonging to this model, did not experience prejudices about men/female roles in their family; they felt, like it was equally distributed. They are convinced that their leadership is equal to that of men with the same factors that stimulate a good career like, knowledge, ambition, experience, family support and support at the workplace. These women try to keep up with trainings and education, because they have the desire to stay up to date with their knowledge and expand their capabilities. Their description of needed professional competencies are organized, persistent in achieving goals, self-confidence, energy, and bravery. They also described trust, cooperation, enthusiasm, kindness, and willingness to assist others, to be competencies to gain respect.

The second model describes factors and behavioral aspects of female managers based on their own power. In this model women again have a high level of education and have either a family or are alone with their child. However, here women seem to be burdened with the expectation that they need to fulfill the tasks at home of their family. Also, in this case women feel that there are very few positions for women to become a leader and if so, they feel like they have to prove themselves more than men. Factors for failing ambitions being, poor recognition of knowledge, lack of ambition, family responsibilities, lack of support. Develops herself less business oriented. They are dedicated to their work but planning and use of time is not clearly established, which influences the achievement of goals and decision making in a negative way. Also, lack of self-confidence and self-esteem influences the way they have control and manage negatively. Other competencies like trust, kindness and enthusiasm lack often and they act more with their power, which creates distance between them and their colleagues. (Toskovic, 2013)

Where the first model describes women who do not seem to experience prejudices and barriers, the women described in the second model do, based on the support of their environment and their own strengths. These models make it appear that there are more than the influences from the environment, but also the mindset the women have themselves and that this can either influence their position in a positive or negative way.

To get a better understanding of what cultural factors influence the position of women in Serbia, a number of cultural theories will be discussed that shed more light on the Serbian culture.

### 3.5 Dimensions of Hofstede

Hofstede initially studied cultural differences between fifty-six countries and came with a model that scores societies based on five dimensions: power-distance, masculinity versus femininity, individualism versus collectivism, long-term orientation, and uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede found that most countries coped with similar problems, however, their solution methods differed due to culture (Eurib, 2020). Looking at some of the dimensions of Hofstede can help to understand why the position of women in leadership roles is, the way it is in Serbia and can help to compare it to the Netherlands later in this research.

Dogar (2021) discussed the cultural perspective and how this influences leadership on the Balkan, where Serbia is described separately as well as in the context of the Balkan as a whole. This study uses the dimensions of Hofstede to describe the culture of Serbia.

Serbia has a high uncertainty avoidance index, which indicates that it tries to avoid change in the society. Serbians are not very open for change and are likely to reject even minor changes in their society. They reject economic and political change, unless it becomes mandatory, and they have no choice in changing anymore. This could be an indicator for emancipation to go slower and, therefore, that women have a harder time improving their position in society and at work.

The power distance is high in Serbia. In countries with a high-power distance, like Serbia, the preferred leadership style is authoritarian. In these cultures, change in power does not mean a new distribution of power, so that more people get opportunities, but it only means replacement of the person in power, and the concentration of power does not change. In countries with low-power distance, equal rights play a big role. However, cultures with high-power distance do not have this, they expect obedience.

Further, Serbian society is collectivistic, which indicates that individual rights often become obsolete for the benefit of the group or entire society. In individualistic societies human rights and freedom are important factors that are being taken very seriously. In collectivistic societies, like Serbia, these are not priorities and therefore, collectivism can disadvantage individuals or minority groups, like women.

Serbia is a country in which the society is not focused on the future and therefore, scores low on future orientation. Serbians are more focused on the past and cultural norms of the past. This prevents Serbia from developing itself and preparing itself for the future. This again indicates that it is less inclined to create equal opportunities, which means that Serbians are more likely to stick to traditional patterns (Dogar, 2021).

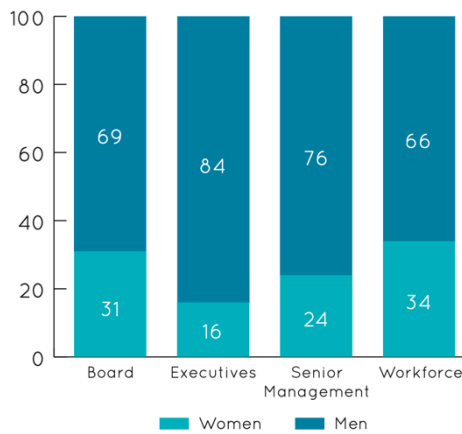
We will now turn to Dutch culture.

### 3.6 Serbia vs. The Netherlands

As in most European countries, for a long time the societal ideal for Dutch women was to be housewives and not needing to contribute to the household income, while men were the ones who earned the money. In the Netherlands, the Protestant and Catholic churches played a big role in propagating traditional role patterns for women and men. In the 1960s and 1970s, the importance of religion in the daily life of the Dutch decreased and more women stood up for themselves. When this issue became bigger, that is when gender equality became an agenda point for the government. Policies were adopted and established to improve the position of women in the Netherlands. In the 1980s and 1990s women got a chance, they developed themselves on the same educational level as men and became more present in the labor market. Between 1960 and 1980 the percentage of married employed women went from 7% to 33%. The Netherlands went from being patriarchal and confessional to a secular and more individualized society. However, the Netherlands was relatively late to this compared to other Western European countries. One reason was the lack of participation in World War I, where a lot of men were lost and thus women became more present (Leyenaar, 2021). Another reason was that for a long time in wealthier families the mother took care of the children and the household, and only in poorer families, because of the heavy workload for women, the father had to step in as well. Therefore, in later times, the bourgeois housewives became also the ideal for lower social in the Netherlands (Lamb, et al., 2014). In the current situation this is not the case anymore, since the more a woman contributes

to the household and childcare, the stronger the perception on unfairness is perceived (Koster, et al., 2022).

Currently, the Dutch employment rate is one of the highest rates in Europe, where Dutch men (20-64 years old) have a rate of 81,3% and Dutch women (20-64 years old) 71,6%. However, the majority of women work part-time (European Parliament, 2015). In figure 3 it becomes visible that even though Dutch women are almost equally present in the labor market as men, when it comes to leadership positions, their presence is not as equal. In 2021 there are more CEO's named Peter than there are CEO's who are women, which indicates that overall, in the labor market Dutch women have achieved a lot, but when it comes to achieving leadership positions there is still progress that needs to be made, which is continuing (Equileap, 2021).



**Figure 3. Female representation by company level in The Netherlands (in %)**

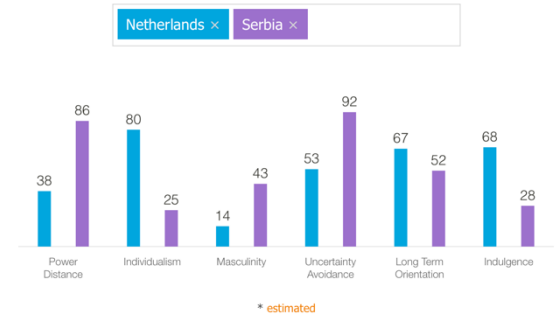
The uncertainty avoidance of The Netherlands is in the middle, which means the position of women in the Dutch culture is not unchanging and the Dutch society does not avoid uncertainty at all times, but they are often slightly later to change. People in this society feel the urge to work hard and are very precise and punctual. This can indicate that the emancipation was not pushed to the end to change, but it is a slower process than other similar countries that have a lower uncertainty avoidance.

The power distance in The Netherlands is low, which suggests that the power is decentralized and more employees from different positions in the hierarchy have a chance to express their views on different topics that influence the business. This is a culture where equal rights, being more independent and coaching leadership appears most often. Control and expectance of obedience is not appreciated in cultures with a low power distance, like The Netherlands.

The Netherlands scores very high on individualism, which means that they are not collectivistic and will not let their entire family regulate how they live. People in this culture are more focused on themselves, their human rights and freedom are important factors that are prioritized. This is a good base for equal treatment of men and women.

The Dutch society is a future oriented society. This indicates that they are open for change of their traditions or norms if the conditions change over time. They focus on the future, plan ahead and try to let go of the past if this is not relevant anymore. Equal opportunities and change of past normality's are very feasible in societies like these and thus create opportunities for women (Hofstede-insights, 2021)

As mentioned before, Hofstede can be used to compare different countries and their cultures based on different dimensions. A few dimensions and what this could mean for women's position were described above for both countries and an overview of all the dimensions is visible in figure 4. Based on Hofstede it seems that The Netherlands is a country with features that are more likely to have a positive influence on the emancipation and the position of women in society and at work than Serbia.



**Figure 4. Comparison of The Netherlands and Serbia based on the dimensions of Hofstede**

When looking at the employment rates Serbia in general has a lower employment rate than the Netherlands. However, when comparing male and female employment rates both countries have a similar difference of circa ten percent. Serbia has undergone a number of disruptive societal, economic and political changes in the past, like the Yugoslavian and Kosovo war, and is a country that is more opposed to change. Whereas, the Netherlands had a relatively stable past and is a country that is more open for change. This makes it for the Netherlands easier for traditional roles to get changed and accepted than for Serbia.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research design

#### 4.1.1 Inductive qualitative approach

For this research an inductive qualitative approach is chosen. Qualitative research can help to understand the interactions, nature, and strengths of the variables. It helps to look at the causation by observing and interpreting certain events. The qualitative approach takes a holistic perception, which keeps the complexity of human behaviour intact (Black, 1994). Since this research is about the position women have in leadership in Serbia, it comes down to human behaviour, data that, for this research, needs to be understood instead of quantified.

#### 4.2 Data collection

The data was collected through interviews with Serbian women who are in a leadership position. In this research leadership positions are defined as having a managerial or a higher position, since this is often where women struggle to get. The research is focused on women in Serbia, since women have had struggles throughout time to get accepted in leadership positions and in Serbia this could be different then from Western- European countries.

A total of five interviewees participated in this research. All were approached and explained what this research is about and asked if they were willing to participate. Four out of five interviewees were approached directly since they are privately connected to me. The fifth interviewee was

approached through one of the other interviewees since they knew each other through work and this way contact information was exchanged.

### 4.3 Research instrument

Semi-structured interviews are used to get relevant data for this study. This means that there is a pre-determined structure in questions and topics that are going to be covered, but with open-ended questions to get a conversation going. There is given a lot of space for the interviewee to describe their story with their own words, instead of only yes or no. Semi-structured interviews is a method which can help answering “why-questions”, instead of “how many-questions”. It can help to solve a more complicated research question about behavior. To get a real and deeper understanding of a case. Semi-structured interviews are also used to discuss more sensitive topics, which in this research is also the case. The gender approach from this research can come along with sensitive experiences of interviewees (Miles & Gilbert, 2005) For this research the process to understand the position of Serbian women in leadership roles needs a broader research instrument, therefore, this instrument is chosen, since the bigger story from people can be obtained.

#### 4.3.2 Interview protocol

The interviews consist out of eighteen questions, where at first more general questions are asked, like their age and employment position, whereas throughout the interview more sensitive and deeper question are asked. This build up is done to make the interviewee feel comfortable during the research. All interviews took place in English, but to make sure that no misunderstandings take place the interviewees are given Serbian translations of the questions. For the anonymity of the interviewees, neither their personal names nor company names will be mentioned in this research. In Appendix A, the interview questions are visible.

### 4.4 Data analysis

The data that came out of the interviews is analyzed, using the thematic analysis. This analysis has six steps, from which the three main steps are identify, analyze, and report. For interviews, the answers given are the data set that will be used for the research. It starts with reading through the data set and getting familiar with the data, so that you know in what direction answers were given and the depth of the content. After, the first coding of the data begins, which entails picking out a sentence or group of sentences from the data set that stood out and are potentially of great importance for the research. If after you have finished coding, too many codes are left, it can be necessary to go over the codes again to see if there is a possibility to collide some of them. Next, the finished coded parts will be grouped and there will be searched for overarching themes. These themes will then be defined, named, and reviewed to make sure that the coded parts within these themes are adequate. Lastly, the findings will be reported, in this case in a thesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 Interview results

#### 5.1.1 General information

In the first part of the interview generalities were asked, like age, educational background, and employment position. In table 2 an overview is given of the interviewees.

	Age	Education	Employment position
<i>Interviewee A</i>	48 years	Unfinished Economics	CEO
<i>Interviewee B</i>	42 years	High school	CEO
<i>Interviewee C</i>	57 years	Economics	Procurement director
<i>Interviewee D</i>	30 years	Economics	Sales manager
<i>Interviewee E</i>	54 years	High school	CEO

**Table 2. Demographics interviewees**

#### 5.1.2 Family / work balance

As mentioned in the theoretical background section, the patriarchal system still plays a role in the society of Serbia. This became visible when looking at the at-home situation of the Serbian women that were interviewed. Four out of five are married and all of them have at least one child. They all have similar ways of running the household, which means the women do most of the household work, like cleaning, washing, cooking etcetera. Interviewee C mentioned that her husband also does household chores and states “*My husband is engaged in the procurement of household necessities, and all the jobs that belong to the male sex (car repairs, repairs in the house)*”. All of the participants said that for Balkan women it is their job to do the household chores and that they think that they know what is best for their family and that they do not trust their husbands with these types of chores.

Since these Serbian women are the ones that do most of the work at home, the question is how they balance this with their work career. Various answers were given to this issue. Interviewee A mentioned that when her children were small and teenagers, it was very hard to balance work and household, since in both places a lot of effort, time and energy was needed, which she however managed to do, but sometimes at the cost of herself. But now that her children are grown up, she thinks she now has achieved a good balance. Interviewee E also struggled a lot with finding the balance and often offered her social life to make it work. Others mention that if you can plan and organize well, it is all possible, but it sometimes makes that you have to wake up at five in the morning.

### 5.1.3 Journey to the top

Interviewee A started with a study of Economics, but never finished it, because she got pregnant and never went back to university. However, this never stopped her from going after what she also wanted, a career. She started at a young age with working and did a lot of things from stocking shelves to cleaning services for companies. Eventually she got into contact with customers and achieved a sales position. She had a desire to start her own company and to create a place in the market which was hers and where she could see her own influence, and so she did. It needed hard work, persistence and eventually experience led her to a set of successes, which made her to what she is today, CEO of her own company.

Interviewee B finished high school but did not finish any other type of study. She became, however, CEO of multiple restaurants. She states, *“I was born for this”*. She always wanted to work ever since she was small and grabbed any opportunity that came by, to work. She did every type of job, cleaning toilets, stocking shelves etcetera and found out quickly, she never wanted to work for a boss. At some point she got into business with her dad in selling and buying ancient objects, which, after she learned, did on her own. After doing this for some years she bought her first own restaurant and as she says, *“I talked my restaurant full”*. She said that it does not matter what kind of work it is: just keep working and you will get where you want to be.

Interviewee C is a procurement director of one of the biggest companies in the field of chemical industry in Serbia. She finished Economics. Before she became procurement director, she was an independent procurement associate. She has always been in this role and says that she knew her strengths and this was always the job meant to be for her. Hard work, experience and education are the things that have helped her achieve the position she is currently in.

Interviewee D is sales manager and has finished a study of Economics. She works for her parent's company. People might expect that that made it easier for her, but she says that her parents do not treat her differently from other employees. She started at the bottom, packing goods to get familiar with the products in the company. After she got her Economics diploma she was allowed to work with the clients of the company under supervision. At some point she started to gain more trust from customers and got more experienced, this is when she was able to enter the finance sector of the company. This is what she studied for, but only the theory. After working in this area of the company for a while she got the position of sales manager. She was in the beginning confused on what she exactly wanted to achieve. As she rose in position within the company, she started to get a feeling of in what area of the company she wanted to work. She says knowledge, effort, hard work and experience is what led her to this position, but she says loving what you do is the most important.

Interviewee E finished her high school and after this she had no further education. She is CEO of her own company. She inherited the company from her grandmother, who at that time had eight employees, while now she is employing approximately one hundred employees. During the Yugoslavian war she had also the opportunity to work abroad, however, she chose to stay and run the family business. The leadership role was instantly given to her, which she describes as a lot of responsibility and pressure, but in the first years her grandmother mentored her. She was chosen to take over the company from many grandchildren and, therefore, she also thinks her diligence and abilities gave her this opportunity.

### 5.1.4 Distractions & barriers

In this case, interviewee A had a very clear memory about the beginning of her career. She first worked at a family company, which was located in Zagreb, now Croatia, then still Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavian war broke out and she had to leave and flee. When the situation settled and they all came back, the entire company was gone. She stayed employed and they found a way to restart the company. It became, however, hard to do business, since the roads were partially vanished and thus it was hard to transport good. The sanctions and embargoes also did not make it easier for the company. She says that after the market started to recover again, bombing, and economic sanctions came into play. People were exhausted and she remembers that the unemployment rate was very high. She says that this did not kill her career, but it did set her back and slowed it down, but as she stated, *“What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.”* She eventually started her own company. One of the other interviewees had similar memories, where the state of war and the afterwards following sanctions and change of political system had a big impact on her company and therefore her career, but she did not flee. She says that she was very bold and was so focused that she felt like there was a way to make it work and survive. She states, *“I tried to overcome them with dignity and move on.”*

The other women say they never really had serious events happening to them and since they have always known what they wanted, they did not let anything stop them from striving for it. Interviewee B says that only men distracted her when she was younger, but she also said that she has a big temperament and that this always helped her to keep her head in the game. Also, interviewee C mentions that her only struggle was that in the beginning of her career men treated her differently. She noticed that men were nicer to her or trying to get her attention, because they had a crush on her. She never saw this as a barrier or distraction since she could use it in a positive way.

### 5.1.5 Equal opportunities

Four out of five responds were that men and women have equal opportunities to become a leader. One stated *“We are under the same sky”*. Interviewee A does say that men and

women have the same opportunities, but women only survive when they have a lot of courage. They all work in fields where they have to work a lot along men, however, they do not experience any difficulties with this. They feel very respected and even think they can get a little bit more help when needed, because they are women. Another one also says that for women it is all about how they talk and act, not their gender, but their characteristics. Two interviewees say that they believe women can function better as leaders and work a little harder than men. One of them gives as reason that women have a warmer approach towards clients and, therefore, can often get better deals. Another one, however, describes that being warmer and more emotional, also sometimes is what distinguishes men and women in a more negative way, since when having setbacks, she says to cry and has a harder time dealing with it than, for instance, her husband, who can bear it better and easier moves on. On the other hand, interviewee B says that women can, if it is needed, be more serious than men. Interviewee D says that Serbia used to be a masculine society, where men got more opportunities and were more in power positions, but she says that nowadays she experiences nothing like that anymore, she states *"I know more women than men with high positions in various industries"*. She also thinks it is easier for women in Serbia nowadays to become independent and this makes that they can easier achieve leadership positions.

However, interviewee E had a different view on this. She started her career off being married and she experienced gender equality and during that time never felt that she received a different treatment than her husband. She says that this changed when she divorced her husband. She came to the conclusion that marriage, as an institution, had protected her over the years from a different treatment, but now that she is divorced, she thinks that men look at her with different eyes and that she is not protected in the way she was before.

### 5.1.6 Serbian women as leaders

One of the participants said that the model of independent women and women as leaders in Serbia was formed after the second World War, under the socialistic regime of President Tito. A lot of women also participated in the war with rifles over their shoulder. Those same women later worked in the government or were leaders for companies, and this was held onto in Serbia. She says a woman who is capable of being a leader will stand out in the Serbian society and will be valued for her capabilities. Interviewee D also says that a Serbian woman with an education, who is independent can become successful, and when this is achieved will be valued the same way as men are. Interviewee C says that women over the world are progressing every day, and this is not any different from Serbian women.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Data discussion

#### 6.1.1 Equal opportunities

The results from this study are not completely in line with the existing literature. In the literature about Serbia, equal opportunities were said to still being established, since it did

not come naturally, and the inequality was still noticeable in the workplace. However, the women that were interviewed did not seem to experience this inequality, this, however, is not the representation of the entire Serbian society. They addressed that Serbia has changed and that it might have been a society where equal opportunities were not the case, but this is not the situation nowadays. The youngest interviewee claimed that she knows more women in leadership positions than men, this might be the new normal for the newer Serbian generation. The older participants seem to use their gender as a way to get what they want; they use their female charm. However, one of the participants stood out. She is the only participant who is not married anymore, and she said to have noticed a big difference between the time she still was married and after. This could indicate that there is a connection between the equal opportunities and treatment, and your marital status as a woman. It seems from her experience that Serbian men treat a woman equal when there is a man behind her, then when she is on her own. In this case, the results from the literature review would be more accurate.

Most interviewees' explicit statements did not address gender inequality. However, when looking at the answers given in the interviews, it looks like there is a contradiction between their implicit and explicit statements. Some of the interviewees work in their family's company or inherited the company from family, and one interviewee never wanted to work for a boss. The fact that apart from one of interviewee, the rest work at companies related to their family or started it themselves, could also indicate that it is as a woman in Serbia hard to obtain a high position when working for a boss or a company not related to you. One interviewee also mentioned that as a woman you only survive when you have a lot of courage. This again could indicate that women actually do have a harder time to climb the ladder of success in Serbia and that the existing literature does match with the situation today, but to explicitly state this might be embarrassing for these women since it could be that they do not want Serbia to be perceived as behind. One interviewee also stated that Serbian women progress like women everywhere else, which could be an indicator for the protection of Serbia.

#### 6.1.2 Patriarchal system

The outlook on the patriarchal system described in the literature review and in the results of the interviews seem to correspond. Some women had stories about how the Yugoslavian war influenced their career in a negative way as also described in research done before. The patriarchal system, where influences of emancipatory trends, like paid jobs for women, seems to be the system in the Serbian society. The women that were interviewed, all had the same arrangements at home, the woman does the household and the men only, if necessary, things like repairs on the car etcetera. They, however, do not mind doing it, they prefer to do it themselves. When talking to these women it was noticeable that there was a cultural pride behind this, they



were proud of running the household the way their moms did it and even though some of them described it as a challenge to combine with their paid job, they were even more proud of getting it all done. It seemed as if it was part of their female identity, and they were convinced and proud that they performed these tasks better than men.

### *6.1.3 Distractions & barriers*

When talking about the distractions and barriers the women might have experienced during their career, the first aspects that came up were the Yugoslavian war and the changes that came with this, like sanctions and political changes. This played a big role for the generation that were at the start of their careers when this happened. They say it made doing business harder or sometimes even made it stop them from being able to work for some time. The youngest interviewee was not working on her career at that time, thus did not experience this, but also does not seem to have experienced any other barriers or setbacks. When it comes down to the barriers, they have faced being a woman, the only thing that comes up is that men liked her and therefore treated her differently, she did not mention it in a negative way, however, this could be seen as sexist behavior, which is not a positive indicator towards the position of women. It was noticeable during the interviews that when negative barriers were addressed in a question due to being a woman, this almost came across as an insult and a topic that triggered them. Some of the women wanted, in this case, to make clear that women really can do anything that they want and that they can do all the same things men do.

### *6.1.4 Female leaders in Serbia*

In the literature review there were two models described, which describes two different kinds of Serbian women in leadership positions. In the interview results there was a lot of resemblance, but all participants fit into one model, which is the first model, where women do not seem to experience a lot of inequalities, they are open for learning and are self-confident. They experience a lot of support from family and their environment and do not blame differences on gender, but are focused on experience, capabilities, and characteristics of people. All five interviewees fit perfectly in this model. However, there was a second model. It could be that this model over the years became irrelevant or that the participants in this research were all from one kind of group. From the research in the literature review the end note was, that the treatment perceived is mostly due to the woman's own mindset, which some women in the interviews also claimed.

One more remarkable point could be that since there would be so much pride behind doing the household chores and taking care of the children as a Serbian woman, why is a paid job next to this needed? Does the combination of a paid job and the patriarchal system at home make them feel proud, or is it only the patriarchal system at home enough to make them feel this pride? Financial factors could also play

a role for women to work, but if this would be the only reason women worked then the historical Dutch view on housewives would apply more, where being a housewife originally was an ideal and showing your affluence. During the interviews it did not seem this way. Since pride came also across when the interviewees talked about having a leadership position outside their house.

### *6.1.5 Serbia vs. The Netherlands*

As described before, The Netherlands used to be a patriarchal system, but times changed and so did this system. The Netherlands switched to a secular and individualistic society due to emancipation and the decrease of impact of religion on the daily life. Even though Serbia has also had emancipation, it never came as far as the actual system to switch. It did change from patriarchal to patriarchal with emancipatory influences, but the main system stayed patriarchal. It seems that the patriarchal system was a mostly a religion factor in the Netherlands, whereas in Serbia it came from religion, but got deeper rooted into the culture.

Even though Serbia still has a patriarchal system, it seems as if this did not stop women from climbing the ladder in society. The Yugoslavian war, but even more so, socialism seem to play a big role here. In the times where Serbia was a socialistic country men and women were treated more equally. In this case, it seems that the Netherlands is a step behind Serbia, since they did not participate in World War I. In Serbia it was earlier normal to see women participating in society, whereas for the Netherlands the women were longer in only housewife roles. However, the Netherlands did make very big steps once they started to make changes in the case of emancipation, whereas for Serbia this was furthermore a much slower process. In the Netherlands it seems to be the case that women are very well positioned in the labor market, however, not in leadership positions. It seems that in Serbia these types of jobs are very open and available to women, who also often take these chances. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, marriage seems to be an important factor. Where marriage as an institution seems to protect women from inequality, but when divorced this inequality gets more visible. This could circulate back to the patriarchal system, where thus in Serbia the opportunities and treatment of women in leadership positions is similar to that of men, as long as you meet other traditional expectations, like being married and taking care of the household next to your job. In the Netherlands, the importance of being divorced or married and who takes care of the household differentiates from Serbia. Since the societal system is different and, therefore, the importance of factors, like marital status is perceived differently. There seems to be a different understanding of emancipation between the countries.

## **6.2 Practical implications**

Managers who are in a position where they want to get more insight in their employees' situation or who want to take away barriers for their employees, in this case only women,

can focus on a few aspects. First of all, not recommended is to take a very direct approach in asking Serbian women about barriers they experience as a woman. This can come off as an offence and, therefore, they are more likely to not give an answer to this even if they do experience it. It is important that they gain trust, and that the manager works around the question to slowly get more information. Also, do not assume that aspects like household tasks are a barrier or a negative aspect, since it can also be a pride that is settled in the Serbian culture.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The position of Serbian women in leadership positions seems to be at first, from research done before, not positive. Opportunities for men and women are not equal in the workplace yet and their career development would be slower than that of men. The cultural barriers for women are described, which involve the patriarchal system, stereotyping in the Serbian society, and the Serbian culture, as can be seen from the Hofstede scores. However, looking at Serbian women in leadership positions today, some of these barriers seem to not exist anymore, have faded, or are not talked about. The barriers and distractions experienced by the women in leadership positions today do not directly have a link to gender inequality.

The patriarchal system is still dominant in Serbia. Women are responsible for the household and are still housewives, but this does not mean that it stops them from working and taking on leadership positions next to this. It makes Serbian women struggle sometimes but planning and persistence seems to be the key to making it work. Nevertheless, there are still women who do experience barriers within this system, which mostly comes to day light when as a woman you do not fit in the box of a married housewife.

Serbian leading women of today seem to have a relatively good position in the labor market. The Serbian women were, in an earlier study, distinguished in two types. The women in this study seem to fit in one type only. They state that the barriers they experienced are not due to society, but to a woman's characteristics, abilities, and knowledge.

Serbia and the Netherlands at first seem to be two worlds apart. Differences in history and systems of society make them have a different normal and path, but for the outcome does not mean a big difference. Serbia has had women in paid working positions for a longer time than the Netherlands, due to socialism and war. However, after the Netherlands switched from patriarchal system to secular system, they made quick progress. Women in Serbia nowadays are, as said before, next to their job also housewives, but Dutch women are not always or show no pride to be one. Nonetheless, Serbian women do not see this as a barrier and, therefore, do not interpret this as a step behind. In both, the Netherlands and Serbia, women are very active in the labor market, and when it comes to leadership

positions both countries can still make progress, but also already have made a lot of progress.

## 8. LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

In this research there were several limitations. The sample size that was used is relatively small to get all the different situations for a saturated and complete insight. The limited time and possibilities made that, Dutch women could not be interviewed, and the comparison was only made in a theoretical manner by using existing literature.

For further research it is, therefore, recommended to repeat the study with a bigger sample size. Also, it is recommended to interview both Dutch and Serbian women to obtain all the data yourself. Other aspects that are interesting to take a closer look at in further research would be the relation between the age of the women and the way they perceive their position, and the marital status in relation to equal opportunities. Also, the underlying understanding of emancipation per country is an interesting aspect to look at.

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Figure 1

<https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/PdfE/G20216001.pdf>

## Appendix A - Interview protocol

1. What is your age? (Koliko imaš godina?)
2. What is your level of education? (Koji je Vaš nivo obrazovanja?)
3. What is your family situation at home like? (Kakva je vaša porodična situacija kod kuće?)

If married or together:

4. The work related to home and family, is it equally distributed between you and your partner? (Posao vezan za dom i porodicu, da li je podjednako raspoređen između vas i vašeg partnera?)
5. Do you think the balance between your family and work is well distributed? (Da li mislite da je ravnoteža između vaše porodice i posla dobro raspoređena?)
6. How long have you been working in this field? (Koliko dugo radite u ovoj oblasti?)
7. What is your current employment position? And is this position in your own company or not? (Koja je vaša trenutna radna pozicija? I da li je ovo mesto u vašoj kompaniji ili ne?)
8. How did you achieve this position? (Kako ste postigli ovu poziciju?)
9. What other positions did you had before your current position? (Koje ste druge pozicije imali pre sadašnje pozicije?)
10. What encouraged you to go after this position? (Šta vas je podstaklo da odete na ovu poziciju?)
11. Has anything ever distracted you from developing your career and if yes, what? (Da li vas je ikada nešto odvratilo od razvoja karijere i ako jeste, šta?)
12. Have you experienced barriers while achieving your position? (Da li ste iskusili barijere dok ste postigli svoju poziciju?)
13. Do you think men experience the same amount or type of barriers? (Mislite li da muškarci doživljavaju istu količinu ili vrstu prepreka?)
14. Who supported you when facing difficulties in the development of your career? (Ko vas je podržavao kada ste se suočili sa poteškoćama u razvoju karijere?)
15. Do you think these leading positions were equally available to men and women? (Da li mislite da su ove rukovodeće pozicije bile podjednako dostupne muškarcima i ženama?)
16. What characteristics do you think are important for women to have to achieve and function in leadership roles? (Koje karakteristike su po vašem mišljenju važne za žene da bi ostvarile i funkcionisale u liderskim ulogama?)
17. Serbia is a masculine society, have you experienced difficulties at work because of this? (Srbija je muško društvo, da li ste zbog toga imali poteškoća na poslu?)
18. In what way do you experience the influence of the Serbian culture furthermore, on the way women are perceived in leadership roles? (Na koji način, dalje, doživljavate uticaj srpske kulture na način na koji se žene percipiraju u liderskim ulogama?)

## Appendix B - Quotes

Quote	Interviewee	Chapter
<i>“My husband is engaged in the procurement of household necessities, and all the jobs that belong to the male sex (car repairs, repairs in the house)”</i>	Interviewee C	5.1.2 Family / work balance
<i>“I was born for this”</i>	Interviewee B	5.1.3 Journey to the top
<i>“I talked my restaurant full”</i>	Interviewee B	5.1.3 Journey to the top
<i>“What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger”</i>	Interviewee A	5.1.4 Distractions & barriers
<i>“I tried to overcome them with dignity and move on”</i>	Interviewee A	5.1.4 Distractions & barriers
<i>“We are under the same sky”</i>	Interviewee A	5.1.5 Equal opportunities
<i>“I know more women than men with high positions in various industries”</i>	Interviewee D	5.1.5 Equal opportunities