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# Women attorneys and gendering processes in law firms in Helsinki

Marta Choroszewicz

## Abstract

This article provides an in-depth analysis of how gender dynamics are narrated by women attorneys practising law in law firms in Helsinki. It draws on Joan Acker's theory of gendered organisation and the theories of agency to examine how women engage with the processes that are gendering their career choices and life in general. This study draws on the narrative framework applied to interview data with nine Finnish women attorneys who are pursuing their careers in a highly competitive work environment. The findings point towards four processes, specifically increasing the recruitment of women, the ideal of a flexible lawyer, the norm of having it all and women's use of flexible work arrangements, which provide women with a sense of agency in devising their own methods of combining career and family. Yet, they do not challenge the male advantage instilled in the prerequisites for career advancement in this work environment.

Keywords: agency, gendered organisation, gendering processes, Helsinki, law firms, women attorneys, women's careers.

## Introduction

Finland, as an example of a Nordic welfare state, provides a challenging arena for the critical examination of women's disadvantages in professions and organisations due to its strong formal equality and a considerable number of equal opportunity legislations, policies and equality institutions (e.g. Holli & Kantola 2007). The Finnish state has a long tradition of proactive initiatives to support women's employment and the equal distribution of career opportunities between female and male employees in workplaces. Still, the formal equality prevalent in Finland has rather limited outreach to the private sector and to prestigious professional groups, such as lawyers (Korvajärvi 2012).

Women in professions in general and in law firms in particular pose an interesting yet relatively unexplored area of research in Finland. The Finnish

labour market remains highly gender-segregated both horizontally and vertically (Korvajärvi 2010; 2012). Women's participation in paid work is high, yet Finnish women tend to work in different professions and occupations compared to Finnish men (Korvajärvi 2010, 185). Women are overrepresented in the public sector and underrepresented in the private sector, with a considerably lower number of women occupying top positions (Julkunen 2010, 127; Korvajärvi 2012, 117–121). Even when women are present in a significant proportion in male-dominated professions, they fail to challenge the gendered character of professional ethos, as studies on women physicians and lawyers in Finland show (Riska 2001; Silius 1992; 2003). The women's share among the Finnish attorneys has not changed much during last 15 years and it stays at the level of 26 per cent (Choroszewicz 2014a, 48; 236). Thus, the issue of women's ability to gain access specifically to the upper echelons of professional and organisational structures serves as an indicator of gender equality, not only in the labour market but also in the social organisation of work and life. Yet, it appears challenging to embark upon a discussion of the barriers to professional women's career advancements in Finland due to its formal equality (Pylkkänen 2009), the myth of equal career opportunities prevalent in law firms (Choroszewicz 2014b) and the tacit character of gender impact in work life (Ylöstalo 2012).

The decision to focus specifically on women attorneys employed in law firms in Helsinki was prompted by the findings of a recent study on Finnish women attorneys. It demonstrated that the importance of the professional community decreases in favour of the increasing jurisdiction of law firms over lawyers' professional conduct, training and career opportunities (Choroszewicz 2014a). This influence of law firms over lawyers' career advancements is linked to the rising number of lawyers whose work is situated within organisations. Yet, with an exception of two empirical studies (Choroszewicz 2014a; Silius 1992), there is scarcity of research specifically on Finnish women lawyers' status in the private sector. The issue of women attorneys' disadvantages in career advancement is timely in Finland as women attorneys are still remarkably underrepresented in the upper echelons of the corporate segment of the legal profession in Finland (Choroszewicz 2014a). This is despite an ongoing increase in the number of women law students and law graduates in Finland (Silius 2003, 389; Suomen Lakimiesliitto 2011, 4). To bridge this gap of knowledge, this article draws on

original interview data with nine Finnish women attorneys<sup>1</sup> regarding their work and career experiences. The key theoretical and empirical aim is to contribute to the sociological analysis of professionals in organisations by demonstrating how gender dynamics is a central question in research on women's pursuit of demanding careers. The results provide important insights into the operations of law firms as an example of contemporary organisations employing a rising number of professionals, a reality that rests on processes that reproduce male advantage. These processes include increasing the recruitment of women, the ideal of a flexible lawyer, the norm of having it all and women's use of flexible work arrangements. The findings also show how women as social agents engage with these processes within their social environments to make career choices that work specifically for them in relation to their current life situation.

This article begins with a discussion on the masculine ethos of the legal profession. Second, I introduce a theoretical argument that draws on a gendered organisation and theories of agency, which allow for an exploration into the tacit operation of gender, as built into the processes of law firms and organisation of family life. Third, I describe data and the narrative framework of the study. Fourth, I discuss each of four gendering processes identified in this study. Finally, I conclude on the implications of the results as far as bridging gender inequalities in law firms in Finland is concerned.

## Women in male-dominated professions and in organisations

The examination of processes that hinder women attorneys' career advancement draws on two strands of research, which are occupied with dismantling gender inequalities instilled in male-dominated work contexts. Professions and organisations have historically been considered men's territories from which women have been excluded. Despite a decrease in formal restrictions for women to entry them, women continue to be situated differently, horizontally and vertically, in these work contexts (e.g. Hearn et al. in press). Scholars in the field of sociology of professions and organisational studies have focused to expose specifically the ways in which

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<sup>1</sup> To be able to practice law with the title of attorney, one needs to have, besides a Master's Degree in Law, additional qualifications (i.e. the bar exam and four years of work experience as a lawyer).

professions and organisations produce and reproduce women's disadvantage in career advancement (e.g. Acker 1990; Hearn 1982; Kanter 1977; Riska 2001; Witz 1992).

The legal profession is an example of one of the oldest and therefore most well-established professions, with a strong tradition in formal and informal mechanisms of exclusion directed towards women. The gendered nature of the legal profession and its negative implications on women lawyers' careers have been the subject of studies for the past four decades across countries (e.g. Epstein [1981] 1993; Hagan & Kay 1995; Schulz & Shaw 2003; Spencer & Podmore 1987). This body of research provides rich insights into the masculine norms, standards and values instilled in the professional culture that disadvantage women's positions in the internal hierarchy of the profession. The patterns of disadvantage include women's limited access to professionally valuable networks and information, training and work assignments, as well as lower returns from women's investments in human capital compared to male lawyers (Kay & Hagan 1998; Leiper 2006; Thornton 1996). Female lawyers also face greater stress regarding achieving work-life balance due to a hostility towards part-time work and flexible work arrangements, which is ingrained specifically in the private practice of law (Bacik & Drew 2006; Epstein et al. 1999).

The convergence between professional and organisational structures appears to be particularly prominent in the case of the legal profession and law firms. The last few decades have been characterised by significant global changes in the legal profession, which also become prominent in the Finnish context. The globalised economy and the emergence of global law firms expose lawyers to rising professional expectations and business pressures (Choroszewicz 2014a; 2014b). Law firms are nowadays crucial sites in the social reproduction of the lawyers' elite, as they are progressively seizing power over lawyers' access to prestigious career opportunities (Muzio & Tomlinson 2012). That elite status is still substantially held by men, thus ensuring their highly influential position in society (e.g. Bagust 2012; Bolton & Muzio 2007; Pinnington & Sandberg 2013). A similar observation has been made across law firms in Finland despite of pressures of national legislation

to engage in equality work advocated by the Finnish state<sup>2</sup> (Choroszewicz 2014a, 66–69). Thus, the issue of the embedding of the male norm in organisational rules, procedures and hierarchies (e.g. Acker 1990; 1992; Kanter 1977; Martin 1992) is also becoming relevant for contemporary lawyers in Finland. The limited inclusion of women is especially pronounced at the partnership level, which revives research attention to the issue of subtle gendering processes in organisations.

### Theorising gender, gendering processes and agency

The examination of processes that undermine women’s career advancements in law firms is situated in the scholarship of gendered organisation (Acker 1990; 1992). The aim is to explore gender presence “in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life” (Acker 1992, 568). Acker’s perspective rests on a structural dimension of gender that places men and women in different and unequal positions in society and work life based on different evaluation of women’s and men’s qualities, family roles, the division of labour, differentiated access to critical resources and thus power. Yet, it has been noticed that gender, as a structure built on the operation of professions and organisations, often disappears in favour of the view of gender as an individual characteristic that does not have influence on work (e.g. Choroszewicz 2014a; 2014b; Ylöstalo 2012).

According to Acker (1990, 146–147), gender differences and hierarchies in organisations are produced by five interacting processes: the gendered division of labour, gendered symbols and images, gendered interaction, gendered identities and processes of creating and conceptualising social structures. All the five processes are documented to contribute to the processes of inequality in Finnish workplaces (e.g. Jyrkinen & McKie 2012; Kantola 2008). Yet, in this article, I limit the discussion to the first two processes that have stood up as relevant specifically for the analysis of gender dynamics in the work environments of Finnish women attorneys. Acker’s (2012) concept of the ideal worker, who has no obligations outside the workplace and thus is favoured by employers in the search for workers who can maintain total devotion to full-time work, is central to my analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> Here I specifically refer to the Finnish state obligation put on employers with 30 or more employees to prepare annual gender equality plans.

on what basis lawyers' commitment to career is assessed. This ideal is considered to be inculcated with a male norm, because it rests on a life cycle and working patterns that are more typical for men than women (Acker 2012, 218). Thus, it may exclude many women as professionally committed workers because of their conflicted roles and life experiences, which rest upon the interdependence between the professional and private spheres.

While Acker's theory emphasises the oppressive character of social structures that undermine women's opportunities for career advancement, the chosen theories of agency (Ketokivi & Meskus 2015; Martin 2003; 2006) account better for women's engagement with the gendering processes. Ketokivi and Meskus offer relational perspective on people's actions in situations of disruption, where people feel limited or even unable to act independently. Their work could provide some more insight into the analysis of women attorneys' agency as enacted within a wider figuration of actors. Their perspective is central for the understanding of women attorneys' capacity to live up to career pressures on the one hand and to the ideals of motherhood on the other, which is facilitated by other actors, such as their spouses and other family members. Martin's study of gender as a two-sided dynamic process enables me to analyse how women attorneys draw on the gendered practices that are available to them as members of certain groups (Martin 2003, 353–354). Thus, gendering processes in organisations cover lawyers' individual use of a repertoire of gendered practices that are available to them due to, for example, their gender, age, job position, family situation and national context. Notions of "gendered" and "gendering" are used to underline that certain practices and processes yield a different impact on women than on men (Martin 2003, 354). Yet, while the former implies a more structured perspective, the latter refers to a dynamic and often subtle process of producing a gender impact under specific social circumstances.

The combination of these theories allows us to capture gender in practice in terms of what women say or simply rush over during the interview (Martin 2006). This I consider to be related to the collectively shared expectations of women lawyers as members of the legal profession and as women in a specific national context. These expectations are often perceived as contradictory due to the difficulties in combining the status of a lawyer and of a parent simultaneously (Tremblay 2015, 356). Thus, the dilemma of many professional women encompasses their ability of putting up with family life

so that it does not spill over into work. This dilemma pushes some women out of their organisations as a result of their lack of agency (Biese 2013; Biese & McKie 2015). Still, this article covers professional women who have more choices due to their occupation, age, job position, support of spouses and the Finnish national context. These appear as important aspects of the analysis of gender dynamics in law firms in Helsinki.

## Data and methods

The data consist of nine semi-structured interviews with Finnish women attorneys employed in law firms in Helsinki who differed in terms of age, career phase and family situation (Table 1.). Three interviewees were in the early stage of their careers (1–3 years of work experience as an attorney) and the other six were in the mid and late phases of their careers (11–36 years of work experience as an attorney). The interviewees ranged in age from their early 30s to 60s. Four interviewees were associates and five interviewees held the position of a partner or co-partner in their firms. They had, in total, 12 children, and five interviewees had children under 10 years old. The study covers the members of a narrow professional group who might appear as vulnerable to their organisations and professional community because of their professional status. Thus, no other specific information that could expose the interviewees’ identities to the public is provided in this article.

Table 1. The main characteristics of interviewees

No.	Size of a firm	Current job position	Age	Work experience (yrs.)	Children
1.	Large	Senior associate	34	3	No
2.	Large	Partner	63	36	Yes
3.	Small	Associate	46	16	Yes
4.	Large	Partner	40	11	Yes
5.	Large	Partner	41	16	Yes



6.	Middle-sized	Junior associate	32	1	No
7.	Small	Co-partner	41	12.5	Yes
8.	Small	Associate	36	2	Yes
9.	Small	Co-partner	47	13	Yes

The recruitment of interviewees took place through emails. It covered Finnish respondents who had previously participated in a survey in which they gave their consent to participate in a follow-up interview. These interviews are part of a larger dataset of 25 interviews and 304 survey responses on women attorneys' careers and professional status in Finland and Poland. The interview data were collected to enable a more interpretative approach to the results of the survey data. These covered one-third of female attorneys in Helsinki area. While the number of nine interviews chosen into this article may seem low, they belong to a larger data corpus (i.e. 25 interviews). The length of these interviews varied from 60 to 90 minutes and thus they provide rich knowledge on the processes that shape women's careers in this male-dominated profession. The themes raised in this article have appeared as dominant and recurrent across all interviews, which assert their importance for the interviewees. These issues have not been explored in Finland since the study of Harriet Silius on women lawyers (Silius 1992; 2003). The value of these nine interviews also rests upon the difficulty to get research access to this professional group, which belongs to professional and corporate elites (e.g. Karjalainen, Niemistö & Hearn, 2015; Welch et al. 2002). Yet, the qualitative character of the study and the low number of interviews do not allow far-reaching generalisations to be made.

A narrative approach to the analysis of data allowed to grasp the interrelations of gendering processes that occur in women's work contexts and in everyday life at home. The focus of the analysis is on the content of women's narratives in relation to common aspects of their work and career experiences (Polkinghorne 1988). I read the women's narratives as a source of detailed and rich retrospective knowledge on their individual perspectives, which were formed in the specific context of their profession, workplace and

the Finnish society. The analysis focused on the main research question, namely the exploration of processes that have gendered impact on the career choices of women attorneys. These were studied in terms of what women say or simply rush over during the interview (Martin 2006). The data analysis was organised into three phases. In the first phase of the analysis, I read the transcripts to select passages referring specifically to women's work and career experiences. Here, particular attention was paid to the meanings and roles each of the interviewees ascribed to gender as a relevant or irrelevant aspect in their specific work contexts. In the second phase, I analysed these meanings and roles in the light of Acker's theory of gendered organisation, which resulted in four processes. In the third stage, I drew on the works of Martin (2003; 2006) as well as Ketokivi and Meskus (2015) to account better for the differences in the ways in which the interviewees experienced these processes. Each of four processes is separately explored in the next section.

#### Process 1: Increasing the recruitment of women lawyers

In the interviews, Finnish women attorneys emphasise enthusiastically the positive impact of gender in the recruitment of law firms that are increasingly seeking female lawyers. The interviewees perceive this relatively new trend in recruitment as an argument against gender discrimination and an indicator of an improvement in women lawyers' positions in the market of legal services. For example, one interviewee employed in a small law office comments when asked about the role of gender in women lawyers' career opportunities in Finland:

*Every office tries to find a female lawyer because it attracts clients who want to choose between women and men attorneys. [3]*

In addition, the interviewees highlight the numerical turn in the gender composition in law schools and across law professions, which, in their opinion, results in women lawyers being seen as sought-after employees. Indeed, the numerical feminisation of the legal profession and of the law firms is reported to be a global phenomenon, which at first glance remains a success story (Bolton & Muzio 2007, 48–49). Yet, even in Finland, women lawyers' increasing presence among trainees and junior and senior associates masks the underrepresentation of women across senior positions (Choroszewicz 2014a).

Particularly enthusiastic about the increasing recruitment of women by law firms are the youngest interviewees, who have directly benefited from this process. They also more passionately argue against the negative impact of gender on women's legal careers, which may be linked to their lack of care responsibilities. Still, when asked about the presence of women across organisational positions, they admit that many women still work in assistant positions in their workplaces:

*You do not necessarily notice that there are more men lawyers because the overall number of women and men are the same but truth is that all the other women are secretaries. [6]*

Yet, some interviewees stress that the number of women among lawyers is increasing, which seems to provide them with the belief that women's career opportunities are also improving in the market of legal services. Indeed, the scholarship on the legal profession provides empirical evidence of the rising proportion of female lawyers entering the private practice of law (e.g. Kay, Alarie & Adjei 2013). Some of the arguments in favour of increasing the recruitment of women are the feminisation of higher education and the recognition of female skills across different areas of professional work (Bolton & Muzio 2007; Choroszewicz 2014a; Riska 2001). Yet, scholars highlight that these trends are not reflected in the number of women who remain in the private practice of law (Kay, Alarie & Adjei 2013) and who progress to the partnership level (Bagust 2012; Choroszewicz 2014a; Pinnington & Sandberg 2013).

While the argument for the increasing recruitment of women by law firms provides the younger interviewees with a sense of agency regarding their future career progress, the more senior interviewees appear to be at times more concerned with the situations they observe in their firms. The former feel partly responsible for the underrepresentation of women in the upper echelons of their organisations. Yet, they refrain from perceiving their organisations as explicitly responsible for this situation. Instead, they point to rising competitive pressures in the field and social challenges with regard to work-life balance as obstacles to women's career progress. An interviewee explains with some dismay:

*There are many young women who come to this field but still nowadays there are very few who stay in practice for whole their life, especially when they have young children. This concerns specifically all big law firms with business law. (...) in big law firms there are many young women lawyers who are not yet attorneys, maybe even more than men. So I am kind of ashamed that the situation is so bad, because I think we should be equal. [2]*

The increasing recruitment of women lawyers is positively experienced by the interviewees in their early 30s as a source of more opportunities to prove their qualifications in practice. Yet, as the accounts of other interviewees show, it does not solve the obstacles to women's career progress that women face when they approach senior positions.

#### Process 2: The ideal of a flexible lawyer

According to Acker, the gendered organisation works through the creation of widespread belief that jobs and positions come with particular expectations and requirements (Acker 2012, 218). These are used in organisations to assess whether employees are suitable and committed enough to their careers. Such expectations are also observed to exist in the interviewees' workplaces. For instance, the interviewees express their strong belief that the legal profession is not for everyone, but only for those who are extremely motivated and devoted to their work. Those individuals are distinguished by having an extreme interest in the legal work, referred to as "drive", "spark" and "spirit", which the interviewees perceive as central to lawyers' professional roles. Yet, these are presented as if they were a matter of innate inclination and personality of only some candidates, regardless of their gender. They present these characteristics as essential for successful performance as attorneys and thus these are used by law firms as criteria for lawyers' recruitment and promotion. As one of the interviewees in a senior position enthusiastically argues:

*Of course [the recruited person] needs to be a trustworthy person whom you can assume that clients will trust and who is (...) a genuine and enthusiastic person. And enthusiasm actually comes with a spark. We want people with a certain drive, and drive in a positive sense. It is not a drive for*

*personal benefits but drive to sort of do something for the benefit of the entire firm (...). You need to have a certain drive and spirit, because if you really like what you are doing then you will find the time and energy. [4]*

The interviewees from middle-sized and large law firms discuss the expectations of lawyers to manage intensive and often unpredictable working schedules as if these were purely dependent on lawyers' individual will rather than an aspect influenced by social circumstances. Thus, flexibility appears to be a new professional norm that distinguishes lawyers who are truly committed to their careers from others. This norm implies a particular orientation to work and life, which is seen as "natural" especially in senior positions. This orientation is characterised by an ability to prioritise work over other areas of life. This attitude is specifically strong among interviewees in senior positions. They argue as follows:

*Working as a partner in a firm like that it is a bit like working as an entrepreneur in a sense, it is a way of life, it is not just a job. This is what I do and I do it 24 hours a day if it is needed. But again if you work with transactions you have very irregular working hours, you work when you need to work. There are hours when I do not need to work so I do something else (...) The need to be flexible when you work and how you work and to be in a way on the clients' condition. [4]*

*Well you need to be available for the client whenever they need you basically (...) Because as attorney or being in a business life...you jump when the paying clients tell you to jump. [1]*

The pressure of flexibility is also linked to the expectation of lawyers to be available to clients at all times, specifically corporate clients, to keep them satisfied. This expectation is even rising with current technology that blurs the boundaries between professional and private lives (Choroszewicz 2014a, 97). The full availability to clients appears to be taken seriously, especially among interviewees from middle-sized and large law firms, whose salaries and employment contracts depend on the number of billable hours they sell to clients. The interviewees' accounts indicate that the demand of flexibility

applies to all lawyers, regardless of their gender. Yet, some interviewees acknowledge that the fluctuations in working time, which are prevalent in their workplaces, can be a challenge specifically to women. Still, they perceive it as the “proper” thing to do for female lawyers to live up to the pressure of flexibility:

*We are in a hurry if our clients are and it is quite difficult to know when they will be in a hurry...so here you need to be a bit of flexible in regard of that. This might be one of the reasons why some women could feel it as a challenging profession. [5]*

The interviewees’ accounts indicate the existence of certain informal expectations and norms of behaviour built on the image and the professional role of an attorney demonstrated as gender-neutral. Even though a few of the interviewees notice that these expectations could possibly have a gender dimension, they do not necessarily challenge them. Instead, some of the interviewees perceive them as inherent to their professional roles of which they are proud, especially when they are in a position to live up to these expectations. In addition, they expect the same kind of compliance from other female lawyers committed to their careers, even though this compliance could impose on women harsher personal choices due to their greater care responsibilities.

The pressures to comply with the informal expectations of flexibility and constant availability to clients may only intensify in the face of lawyers’ increasing dependence on employment within law firms. For example, in contrast to interviewees from bigger law offices, the interviewees from smaller law offices discuss having greater control over their availability to clients, as they do not feel obliged to tolerate their clients’ contacting of them outside office hours (Choroszewicz 2014a, 92). Thus, this rather informal pressure of flexibility may differ depending on the workplace. However, the accounts of interviewees in senior positions indicate that in some work environments, the pressure of flexibility is a prerequisite for career advancement. This pressure underlies the expectations of lawyers to meet the standard for billing hours and to work for clients who generate revenue for law firms. This expectation, in turn, implies subtly that lawyers, regardless of their gender and family situation, are in the same situation with

regard to achieving these prerequisites for career advancement. These are considered as predominantly dependent on lawyers' individual use of skills in accordance with the companies' economic interests. Thus, the most emphasis appears to be placed on economic efficiency of lawyers. A senior associate explains these organisational prerequisites for lawyers' career advancement as follows:

*Everyone gets there [to partnership] if they have basic capabilities, but of course there are differences. If you are good at selling and you are bringing in lots of money of course you will be promoted faster – that is just a natural law. This is business (...) So if you are an associate who brings in lots of money, of course you will be promoted much faster than someone else and this is just a fact that you need to accept in this field. [1]*

The ideal of a flexible lawyer imposes on lawyers, who strive for career progress, a need to be able to prioritise career demands over the demands of their private life to produce the best economic results for their companies. Yet, the ideal situates women and men in professionally unequal positions due to women's greater care responsibilities (Bacik & Drew 2006; Tremblay 2015). This is also more problematic for Finnish women lawyers than their male colleagues, as they spend more time on housework and childcare (Choroszewicz 2014a, 120–124). Thus, the ideal of a flexible lawyer favours the career advancements of lawyers who have few obligations outside of work. Due to the gendered organisation of family life, male lawyers are still more likely to live up to this ideal even in Finland.

### Process 3: Having it all—a successful legal career and a family

Professional women are specifically prone to the cultural expectation of having it all, which can influence their experiences with work and life. Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012) argues in her article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" that contemporary women are particularly pressured to have a successful career comparable to that of their male colleagues and to have a family life. This expectation can be specifically strong in a country such as Finland, which is internationally acknowledged for the high participation of women in the labour market and for an ample number of equality policies. Indeed, the norm of having it all is also present in some interviewees' narratives. For

example, one interviewee admits that being an attorney is demanding with regard to success and work-life reconciliation, yet she denies the existence of gender bias in achieving professional success. Interestingly, in her narrative, she rushes over a brief and incomplete remark that in some areas, bias is possible. However, she softens this remark up by adding that the bias is rather unlikely to happen in Finland:

*It [this profession] is demanding in the sense of combining family and work, I think that many women make the choice that they are not willing to make that effort. I am not saying that it would be any more difficult for any woman to succeed, I think that yes, probably in some areas but generally in Finland we have quite equal opportunities; it is really all about your own willingness and attitude, if you want to do it you are able to. And I think women more often just want less and are satisfied with less. [4]*

The end of the narrative shifts its focus from social structures onto individual women, who are argued to bear full responsibility for not being willing to do what it takes to have it all. In this statement, having it all is presented more as an individual and personal than as a structural and cultural matter linked to gender. I argue that such an account coming from an interviewee who holds decision-making power in her organisation reinforces the male norm of success prevalent in the legal profession. Thus, having it all appears to be a gendering process, because traditionally, men have had more opportunities to combine a successful career with a family life. These opportunities rested on a strictly gendered organisation of work and family life. Men's greater commitment to professional success was facilitated by their wives' full engagement in housework and childcare (Blair-Loy 2003). Some interviewees, whose professional choices have been influenced or they assume that they will be influenced by them becoming mothers, acknowledge the gendered nature of having it all due to women's greater parenting commitments. One interviewee who works as a partner in a large law firm admits that during her career she has made some professional choices that have lengthened her path to partnership. Two other interviewees, who are in their 30s and childless, are uncertain of whether they will be able to put up with intensive and unpredictable working schedules when they have children. Yet another two interviewees, who work in small law firms and have children under 10



years old, have admitted that they made their career choices to prioritise temporarily family over career. Nonetheless, their careers are important to them and they acknowledge the possibility that in the future, when their children are older, they may invest more in their careers. One of these two interviewees, who has three young children and a husband who travels often for work, explains:

*I cannot work so much, I have to limit myself and the family is more important for me. Of course work is important and I also want to be successful in work but I think I have so many years ahead of me that I can do more work when children are older. [8]*

The above-mentioned comment illustrates a contradiction between being a lawyer and a parent that is instilled in the norm of having it all. Both roles require complete devotion, specifically from women due to the intensive mothering ideology present also in Finland (Biese 2013, 62). This contradiction is still prominently a women's issue, even when women are pursuing careers in highly competitive work environments (Biese 2013; Blair-Loy 2003).

Yet, some interviewees in a senior position challenge the societal assumption that a woman must have a greater commitment to family life. Drawing on their own life experiences, they advocate the view that women should share their family responsibilities with their spouses, other family members and nannies so they are able to devote more time to their careers. The interviewees who expressed that women lawyers can combine a successful legal career with a family life emphasise that it has been possible for them due to the help they received from their spouses, who have participated actively in childcare and housework chores. In addition, the more equal participation of both spouses in family life has been also supported by the use of external help in housework chores. They argue as follows:

*I do not find it difficult [to reconcile work-life] but it requires a lot of flexibility and of course it probably also requires some understanding on the home side that you really share all the work with the family and you cannot do everything, I cannot do everything because then it would not work, but if you are both doing it, it is quite OK and of course some*

*external help will also help...it is mostly a question of arranging the practicalities and it requires some energy just to do it, because sometimes there is a lot of juggling to make a timetable work. [4]*

*I was on maternity leave from mid-June but I worked on the case whenever I could find some hours to do it and then my husband was left with... [child's name] for a week in...[month] when she was about four months old and it was a bit scary but it went well. (...) And then in November I actually started my maternity leave as a whole but then I came back to work at the beginning of March. So compared to typical Finnish maternity leave I was home for a short time and then my husband stayed home for over a year. [7]*

Thus, the interviewees' narratives on the norm of having it all appear to be related to their own abilities to combine often contradictory responsibilities of professional and family life. These abilities are related specifically to the spousal participation in childcare and housework. The help of a nanny or other external help that women mention is sometimes not enough for women to gain sufficient flexibility that is expected of them in their work environment. The analysis also shows that it is not only a women's choice to share their caring responsibilities with others. It can be also a matter of whether their male spouse or male colleagues are institutionally and socially recognised as parents who carry family responsibilities. Yet, the norm of having it all implies subtly that women nowadays can draw on their spousal support even though various studies, the present one included, demonstrate otherwise (e.g. Heikkinen, Lämsä & Hiillos 2014). The disparities in spousal support among the interviewees are reflected in women's differential abilities to make career choices that lead to career progress in their work environments.

#### [Process 4: Women's use of flexible work arrangements](#)

Flexible work arrangements are an integral element of Finnish equality policies, which call for a better reconciliation between work and private life as well as greater gender equality at the labour market. They are extensively used by employees in Finland (Plantenga & Remery 2010, 8). This trend is also reflected among the interviewees who narrate with enthusiasm different

forms of flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting, flexible work hours and flexible work options, which facilitate for women lawyers managing career and a family. Drawing on their own or their female colleagues' examples, they argue that flexible work arrangements provide many women lawyers with a sense of agency in devising their own methods of combining a demanding career and a family life. They emphasise their positive impact on meeting work-life demands specifically for women who can and want to resume working after their children have gone to sleep. One interviewee argues as follows:

*It [flexible work arrangements] has probably helped women more in the sense that women were more often the ones who took care and picked up the kids from day-care, now it is possible to do it and continue working later. [3]*

Yet, the interviewees stress the diversity of the ways in which women handle the organisation of work and life on an individual basis with regard to the type and intensity of legal work, the seniority of a job position, their personalities and their children's age. For instance, they notice that while some female lawyers' working patterns do not change after they become mothers, other female colleagues take longer parental leaves or simply they work less intensively. Specifically, the interviewees in senior positions are enthusiastic to share their insights on this:

*We have young women mothers as partners in our transaction department running big projects with very small children and they are doing perfectly fine. Whereas some other who have smaller children they want to move from one group to another in order to control their schedule better or they want to have a four-day working week and longer weekends. So I really think it depends on the individual and their personality and how you handle things. (...) But there are no men attorneys doing four-day weeks or asking to change their group when their children were born. [1]*

*I have seen my colleagues have done it in different ways, so there is no rule. I guess it is more than when you are a partner in a firm, then you make more arrangements in*

*order to have someone else look after your baby so you focus on the business more. For example, in our law firm young women lawyers – even when they are good lawyers and I know they would make a good firm partner – still want to stay at home as long as possible (...) the mother stays at home and the father works all day round, all 24 hours per day. [2]*

Interestingly, while the choices of female lawyers are shown to be heterogenic, the choices of male colleagues appear more uniform and only slightly affected by the fact of having children. These results show that the willingness of lawyers to use flexible work arrangements made available to them by their organisations differs not only between women and men lawyers, but specifically among women themselves. Some interviewees also argue that the use of flexible work arrangements is not always possible in the positions of greater responsibility, which entail an organisational expectation that lawyers will make more arrangements so that they can devote themselves more to work. Thus, women's greater use of flexible work arrangements may legitimise traditional gender-role expectations of women in family life while, at the same time, in organisations they are held to the same expectations for performance as their male colleagues who bear less family responsibilities. Indeed, the women's accounts illustrate how the use of flexible work arrangements contributes to women's juggling of a legal career and a family. In addition, scholars argue that flexible work arrangements may also contribute to a better retention of women lawyers in law firms, as women do not need to make clear choices between a career and a family (e.g. Bagust 2012). Yet, the gendered use of them, predominantly by women lawyers, may only maintain and strengthen the division of work and power along the lines of gender in and beyond law firms. In this manner, balancing the expectations of professional and family life continues to remain an issue of women lawyers.

However, some interviewees emphasise enthusiastically that flexible work options have been beneficial for them to stay professionally active during their maternity leaves. For example, one interviewee in a senior position provides an example of her firm, which has offered an opportunity to her of having constant contact with her work environment and taking additional training during her maternity leave. She recalls on this time as follows:

*Our firm gave me a laptop during that time [maternity leave] and free access to my e-mails. So I have not been working in any client-related assignment but I have been reading my e-mails every day just to follow [what is happening in a company] (...) In addition, I took the opportunity to participate in some external courses during that period of time, which my firm has sponsored me and said "that please do if you have time and energy to do that". [4]*

Yet, later, during the interview, the same interviewee admits that these kinds of flexible work arrangements are specifically offered to those individuals who are identified within the law firm as committed to their careers. These individuals are offered these flexible work options to recapture or maintain professional development during and after periods of intensive family life. The interviewees who have been offered these kinds of arrangements underline their significance to their career progress up to the partnership levels in their firms. Yet, these flexible work options seem to be accessible only to those women who are willing and in a position to devote some care responsibilities to other family members and to nannies. Thus, these arrangements enhance the career advancement of women who have the spousal support and, if needed, other resources to live up to the ideal of a flexible lawyer and the norm of having it all by making the necessary arrangements to prioritise work responsibilities over their care responsibilities. While some interviewees of this study have not regarded it as problematic, some other interviewees experience it far more negatively, especially when they feel and have a greater care responsibility.

## Conclusion

This article analysed women attorneys' narratives about gender dynamics in their workplaces in Helsinki. The findings pointed to the role of four co-existing processes that fall under Acker's theory of gendered organisation (Table 2.) and the chosen theories of agency (Ketokivi & Meskus 2015; Martin 2003; 2006). The production of the gendered division of labour and hierarchies was based on the law firms' efforts to recruit an increasing number of women lawyers and women's use of flexible work arrangements offered by their workplaces. The gendered images were based on the ideal of

a flexible lawyer and the norm of having it all, including a successful career and a family.

Table 2: Gendering processes in law firms

Gendering processes	
Gendered division of labour	Gendered images
Increasing the recruitment of women, women's use of flexible work arrangements	The ideal of a flexible lawyer, a norm of having it all

The findings also showed that the distinguished processes do not disadvantage professionally all the interviewees, as not all of them face similar challenges with regard to work-life reconciliation. The studied women differed in their orientation towards work and life and so differed their abilities to comply with the male advantage instilled in the organisational processes. These differences were shown to originate from the fact that the distinguished gendering processes in the interviewees' workplaces are related to those that occur in their private life. Women's experiences of these processes might also change in course of their life. The critical phase in which women are more likely to confront these processes is when they begin to plan for children. Even though in Finland women have access to good and affordable childcare, flexible work arrangements and more spousal participation in childcare and housework, as professionals who work in a highly competitive profession, they are pressured to live up to the individualistic prerequisites for career advancement prevalent in their work environments. These prerequisites are still biased towards male gender and thus, if women want to meet them, they need and are expected to organise their private life around demands of their career. Yet, this and other studies (e.g. Pinnington & Sandberg 2013) show that not all women lawyers want to and are capable of doing it. By refusing to prioritise their career over private life, women recreate the gendered organisation of their lives and careers, in which they carry greater family responsibilities. In their juggling of professional and family responsibilities, they are assisted by flexible work arrangements offered by their workplaces. Yet, the gendered use of these

arrangements undermines women's opportunities to comply with the norms of a flexible lawyer and having it all unless women use these arrangements to devise their own ways for career advancement. In addition, the findings also demonstrated that some women in senior position can reproduce the male advantage in their work environments by neglecting the gendered organisation of life in which many professional women still live even in Finland (e.g. Biese 2013; Jyrkinen & McKie 2012).

The findings also shed some light on the cultural change ongoing in law firms in Helsinki with regard to a greater recognition of alternative work arrangements (cf. Epstein et al. 1999; Kay, Alarie & Adjei 2013; Pinnington & Sandberg 2013). Thus, although the distinguished processes do not challenge directly the male advantage instilled in career advancement in law firms, they do provide women with flexibility to seek work arrangements that serve better their current life situation. In addition, the availability of flexible work arrangements empowers women to question gendering processes, which occur in their organisation of family life. Further research shall specifically focus on male lawyers and their experiences with regard to gender dynamics in their work environments. This is becoming a topical issue in Finland due to the attempts to develop more incentives for fathers to engage in the parenting project. Yet, there is no evidence of the outreach of these incentives to particular professional groups such as lawyers or doctors.

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