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# Perceptions of Working Conditions and Work-related Stress in Iceland

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## Abstract:

**Research Question:** This study examines the attitudes of 106 of Iceland's highest-level public officials towards their current work conditions and the constraints around them. **Motivation:** Rapidly changing internal and external environments create pressure on organizations to perform, which in turn place heightened demands and expectations on individuals who lead them. This situation demands to continuously revisit empirical evidence on perceived working conditions and work-related stress of top management. Furthermore, specific contexts, e.g., organization or country, might provide new insights and contribute to the existing body of knowledge. **Idea:** The aim of this study was to assess work conditions that could potentially contribute to work-related stress among top leaders in public agencies. In addition, gender differences regarding perceptions of workload, work-stress, and work-family conflict were examined. **Data:** A 10-item questionnaire was sent electronically to all 154 leaders of the highest government institutions in Iceland. The response rate was 69.2% (n=107). **Tools:** The items were selected and adapted from the QPS Nordic Questionnaire. All items were in five-point Likert-type format (1=*very rarely* to 5=*very often/always*), where participants indicated the extent to which they experienced a variety of work-related stressors. **Findings:** Results indicated that these leaders are potentially at risk of elevated work stress due to insufficient budgets and flexibility to control workflows. Likewise, there are strong patterns that indicate that, despite often feeling overworked and stressed, these leaders are given little feedback on their performance. Compared to men, women appear to feel that their workloads are more burdensome, and statistically significant findings support this. There were no significant gender effects for overall work-family conflict or overall work stress, although patterns suggest that in women they are slightly higher on both. **Contribution:** This paper provides information about public leaders' attitudes in Iceland towards stress-inducing work conditions, giving future researchers and practitioners a platform to better pinpoint how to provide necessary support.

**Keywords:** work-related stress, work-family conflict, human resource management, public organizations, managers

**JEL Classification:** J24, J28, J63

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## 1. Introduction

Leading and managing others typically involve challenging work demands and high levels of responsibility that can often result in high levels of mental stress (Muchinsky & Howes, 2019). Work-related stress among executives is a growing problem and scholars in recent years have responded by studying the subject with increasing frequency (Connelly & Gooty, 2015; Harms, Crede, Tynan, Leon, & Jeung, 2017; Russell, O'Connell, & McGinnity, 2009). The ever-increasing demands of modern society and the speed at which it expects the highest quality results have directly impacted work environments and the leaders and employees in them. The work-related stress resulting from this growing pressure to deliver during continuous environmental changes can have serious consequences for employees and organizations (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2004). Those working in public administration may be particularly susceptible to these negative effects, as they often face the same pressures but have fewer resources and less flexibility to help buffer them (Ríkisendurskoðun, 2011a). Similarly to that in the private sector, the workload of government employees has steadily increased and is a primary cause of their work-related stress (Ríkisendurskoðun, 2011b). The aim of this study was to assess work conditions that could potentially

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contribute to work-related stress among top leaders in public agencies. In addition, gender differences regarding perceptions of workload, work-stress, and work-family conflict were examined.

This article first presents a brief literature review of a) work-related stress, b) managerial leadership and stress, and 3) the public sector in Iceland. Next, the research methodology and findings are discussed, as well as their implications and next steps are proposed.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Workplace psychological health and work-related stress

Muchinsky and Howes (2019) discuss the importance of workplace psychological health which they define as, “the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of employees in relation to the conduct of their work” (p. 348). The importance of workplace psychological health cannot be understated as the effectiveness of all organizational operations is ultimately a function of its employees’ well-being and ability to perform at optimal levels. In fact, Cleveland and Collela (2010) suggest that organizations consider their workers’ psychological health as a criterion for judging their own success.

Hans Selye conceptualized stress as unspecific bodily reactions to pressure and external demands (Selye, 1956). Since Selye’s initial writings, the body of stress research has proliferated over the decades and extended into organizational and employment settings. However, the unprecedented sense of urgency that organizations and employees around the world face to deliver in response to societal and global demands create a particularly urgent need for continued investigation into work-related stress and the conditions that cause it. Concerning the scale of the issue, Muchinsky and Howes (2019) cite the findings of Brough, et al. (2009), who estimated that 10,000 Japanese individuals die annually from overwork.

In certain cases, work-stress can be beneficial. Challenge stressors, according to Muchinsky and Howes (2019), can include aspects of work that lead to a sense of accomplishment or improvement of skills. Moreover, they can lead directly to better outcomes (Mullins, 2010). However, hindrance stressors, Muchinsky and Howes (2019) note, are factors that inhibit personal fulfillment or effectiveness and create negative outcomes; it is these stressors and their impact that are in focus here. Podsakoff, LePine, and LePine’s (2007) meta-analysis provide clear evidence of the negative impact that hindrance stressors have on performance, commitment, and turnover. In some cases, what begins as a challenge stressor becomes a hindrance stressor. For example, employees usually increase their efficiency and performance in the short term under certain types of pressure (e.g., an occasional aggressive deadline); however, if the pressure persists for a long enough period of time (e.g., unrealistic deadlines become the norm), employees experience greater difficulty (Vinnuverndarstofnun Evropu, 2013).

Work-related stress is defined as an employee’s experienced or perceived inability to cope with the demands and expectation that their job requires (Quick & Tetrick, 2003). Thus, work-related stress not only influences employees’ specific task behaviors, but also how they perceive and interact with their environment, including other people (Russell, O’Connell & McGinnity, 2009). At a basic level, employees feel stressed when they perceive situations and their environment as threatening. In such instances, reactions are often physical, including rapid heartbeat, breathing difficulties, high blood pressure, and increased perspiration; as well as mental, including feeling anxious, depression, lack of focus, and decreased memory (Quick & Tetrick, 2003). The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis reacts to psychological or physiological stress which consequently triggers all the other bodily and/or mental reactions listed above (Bleker et al., 2018). Long-term stress in the organization can even cause mental health disorders and other physical health-related problems for its employees (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). As a result of it negatively impacting their performance, employees’ work-related stress can have considerable negative impacts on organizational performance (Muchinsky & Howes, 2019).

Many causes of work-related stress have been identified, including changes in work, lack of security, work-family conflict, long hours, high pressure to perform, poor support mechanisms, harassment, and bullying (Badawy & Scheiman, 2020; Nixon et al., 2011; Riggio, 2008). Organizational factors, such as structure, competitive environment, and social and individual communication, can also contribute to work-related stress. Furthermore, individual or personal skills and attributes can lead people to perceive and react differently to situations and thus experience the same stressful stimulus differently (Harms et al., 2017; Riggio, 2008). Nonetheless, even though stressors are often individually perceived and experienced, it is important for organizations to at least monitor baseline assessments of the psychological health and work-stress of their employees.

## 2.2 Managers and work-related stress

Research has indicated that stress is often a natural consequence of managerial and leadership roles (Bass & Bass, 2008; Day, Sin & Chen, 2004). Indeed, Gyllesten & Palmer (2005) found that managerial roles bring more stress than non-managerial ones. Due to the heightened potential consequences that their complex decisions might have (Harms et al., 2017), leaders' capacities to manage stress and turmoil in their environments are often stretched (Fiedler, 1992; Guðmundsdóttir, 2016). This also creates a potential trickle-down effect. Research suggests that managerial leaders often play an influencing role in their subordinates' stress levels (Harms et al., 2017). This may not only be from the working conditions they create for their employees, but also from the emotional climate they create from their own stress levels. Thus, managerial leaders can either decrease or increase their subordinates stress levels (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

It is often suggested that organizations and societies are currently experiencing a lack of effective leadership in general (Korzynski, 2014). While there are many dimensions of successful leadership, one would certainly be the ability to promote a supportive environment where others thrive, and produce quality and personally fulfilling work (Harms et al., 2017; Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta, 2009). As such, organizations must periodically take the pulse of their employees and their leaders to ensure that they have positive attitudes towards their work environments and do not suffer from the debilitating effects of undue levels of work-stress.

## 2.3 Gender and work-related stress

Despite the increasing levels of participation of women in the workforce over the recent decades, the European Agency for Safety and Health (2014) reported that substantial gender disparities still exist in terms of representation among senior positions in public administration institutions. Indeed, the Ministry of Welfare report indicated that in Iceland, one of the most gender egalitarian countries in the world, by 2011, only 30% of these highest positions in the public administration sector were held by women (Ríkisendurskoðun, 2011b). Progress towards achieving a better gender balance continues, as does general progress towards greater gender egalitarianism overall. In many ways, Iceland has been at the forefront in this transformation.

Minelgaite, Guðmundsdóttir, Guðmundsdóttir, and Stangej, (2018) describe how Iceland has attained the top standing in the world on the Global Gender Gap Index<sup>year?</sup>, which examines differences between men and women on economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The nation's commitment to achieving greater gender equality was exemplified by the efforts of many individuals and organizations, exemplified by the Icelandic government's legislative actions that required at least 40% of corporate board compositions to be represented by each gender.

As more women, particularly in Iceland, attain more leadership positions in both the private and public sector, an empirical question arises whether gender differences influence workplace attitudes and variables (Padavic & Reskin, 2002), including work-stress issues. The European Agency for Safety and Health (2014) has even questioned whether institutions should adjust their work environments to better manage gender-based work-stress. Liu, Spector, and Shi (2008) found evidence that men and women experience different stressors at work, with workload being the most commonly reported factor for the former, and interpersonal relationships and lack of autonomy for the latter. Guðlaugsson, Magnússon, and Jonsson (2014) found that women experience more work-related and personal life-related stress than men, resulting in insufficient sleep and tiredness. Other research has found similar evidence of gender differences in terms of causes of stress, responses to stress, and stress coping strategies (e.g., Watson, Goh & Sawang, 2011).

One area in which both genders suffer is work-family conflict. Arising from the challenge of balancing work and family demands, work-family conflict leads to lower job satisfaction, performance, and commitment (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering & Semmer, 2011), as well as poorer psychological (Frone, 2000) and even physical health (Wang, Liu, Zhan, & Shi, 2010). Historically, it has been presumed that women are more prone to suffer from work-family conflict than men; and there has certainly been research to support that (e.g., Guðlaugsson et al., 2014). However, in the light of evolving societal changes around traditional gender norms and family roles, studies such as Byron's (2005) meta-analysis have challenged this assumption based on the fact that men are increasingly reporting the negative impacts of work-family conflicts, sometimes to the same extent as women. As employees (and particularly managers) struggle to meet the commitments and demands of their work and homelife, they experience what Allen (2013) describes as a 'scarcity of time.' In turn, this creates stress and often creates conflict in both domains through a spillover effect. Dierdorf and Ellington (2008) found that work-family conflict is greater in jobs that require more substantial interactions among people to perform their jobs, which is not surprising given the additional time and emotional demands of managing interpersonal relationships.

To better understand the realities today that leaders and employees face in their work demands, work-stress, and work-family conflicts, empirical assessment is required. From there, informed decisions can be made as to how to address the findings. The primary objective of this study is to understand these issues in the context of Iceland's top government officials, and whether there are gender differences among them.

## 2.4 Public administration in Iceland

Many studies within various cultural and organizational contexts have shown that ensuring favorable working conditions and positive employee attitudes towards their work and organization is crucial for mitigating negative work-related stress (Bass 2008; Connelly & Gooty, 2015). This is not limited to the private sector. Perhaps because of their recognized criticality to serving their nations and fellow citizens while often operating with fewer resources and navigating through more bureaucratic channels to accomplish their work, government and public organizations are often keenly aware of the importance of providing a healthy psychological climate for their workers.

Employees and leaders from public agencies and governments around the globe have been a major focus of work-stress research. While much of such recent research has been conducted in the U.S. (see Muchinsky & Howes, 2019) and other western cultures such as Australia (e.g., Lindquist & Cooper, 1999); New Zealand (e.g., Haar, 2006); Canada (e.g., Houfort et al., 2018); and Italy (e.g., DeSimone, Cicotto, Pinaa & Giustiniano, 2016), the prevalence of work-stress research extends into eastern cultures as well. A small sampling of empirical studies on work-related stress among national governments in Asia alone include China (Hao, Hong, Xu, Zhou & Xie, 2015); Japan (Deguchi et al., 2016); Malaysia (Gould-Williams & Mohamed, 2010); and India (Naqvi, 2009).

Although relatively smaller by size and population, Nordic nations have similarly attended to the importance of understanding and managing work-stress in government employees. Two recent examples include Sweden (Erlandsson et al., 2012) and Finland (Kouvonen et al., 2007). Some evidence of work-related stress within the public sector in Iceland is available, such as the published work of Fjarmalaraðuneytið (2012) who found that managerial leaders in public administration experienced a considerable level of stress, primarily due to their perceived lack of support from supervisors and institutions. However, particularly for such a small nation that prides itself on promoting psychosocial wellness (Minelgaite et al., 2018), it is imperative to continue research in this area, ensuring not only that its government is effectively and efficiently run but also that the mental health of its administrators is considered in the process.

In 2015, there were 160 leaders (58 women, 102 men) serving in Iceland's highest public institutional levels (Fjarmalaraðuneytið, 2015), most of whom are appointed by the minister of the agency which they serve (Alþingi, 1997). Over recent decades, the role and functioning of Iceland's public institutions have undergone tremendous transformations due to factors such as globalization, changing citizen demands and expectations, technological advances, and national financial crises. The speed of transformation, scale, and complexity has been at times overwhelming for the nation's employees, but particularly so for the public sector due to its inherently less flexible nature. This has led to different demands being made on leadership of public administration globally and in Iceland (Fjarmalaraðuneytið, 2000; Ríkisendurskoðun, 2011b). The pressure under these circumstances is high and can affect those that are supposed to lend a supporting hand to their subordinates.

The abovementioned research does not elaborate on many aspects of work-related stress that could help managerial leaders and their superiors to improve work environments and determine whether all managerial leaders, regardless of sociodemographic characteristics, experience work-related stress similarly. The research presented in this paper attempts to contribute to filling this gap.

## 3. Methodology

A 10-item questionnaire was sent electronically to all 154 leaders of the highest government institutions in Iceland. The response rate was 69.2% (n=107), and the final sample included 67 (of possible 98) men and 39 women (of possible 56); one participant did not indicate their gender.

The items were selected and adapted from the QPS Nordic Questionnaire, which is a well validated and frequently employed measure of a variety of psychosocial factors at work (Lindstrom, Elo, Skogstad, Dallner, Gamberale, Hottinen, & Ørhede, 2000). Minor wording adaptations of the original items were made in order to address the specific context of management within public administration organisations in Iceland. All items were in a five-point Likert-type format (1=*very rarely* to 5=*very often/always*), where participants

indicated the extent to which they experienced a variety of work-related stressors. In addition, gender differences regarding perceptions of workload, work-stress, and work-family conflict were examined. A summary of the aggregate results for items more specifically related to work stress, as well as comparisons between men and women are presented in chapter 4.2. All items were in a five-point Likert-type format (1=very rarely to 5=very often/always).

Following Neuman’s (2006) recommendation, the questionnaire items were pre-tested by two public agency managers to ensure clarity and relevance of the questionnaire. Further validation of the questionnaire’s appropriateness included reviews and feedback on the items from a member of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, and another member of the State and Human Resource Administration.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Summary of responses to work- and project-related items

Presented here is a summary of the aggregate results for each of the 10 items to which respondents stated their relative frequency of experience.

**Number of hours worked per week.** In terms of hours at work, over 65% of the respondents indicated that they worked more than 50 hours per week. Almost 15% of the respondents reported working more than 60 hours per week, and no one reported working fewer than 40. This is thus an indication of the work demands that are put on these government leaders, which might undermine their work-life balance.

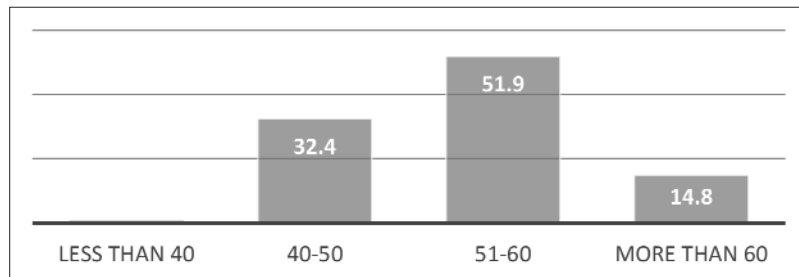


Figure 1: Reported number of work hours per week

**Clarity of work goals.** Overall, respondents reported having good clarity in work goals, as over 90% indicated they experienced them often or very often/always (see Figure 2). While the goals are undoubtedly challenging and likely a contributing factor to the number of hours worked, the fact that they are at least clearly stated likely reduces work-related stress.



Figure 2: Reported frequency of experiencing clarity of work goals

**Ability to finish tasks within desired timeframe.** As seen in Figure 3, respondents indicated that they are generally able to finish tasks within a desired timeframe. Over half (55.5%) felt that they were either often or very often/always able to complete their tasks, and only 5.6% felt that they were very rarely/never able to do so. On the one hand, these results are encouraging and suggest timeframes are less of a work-stress issue. At the same time, perhaps it is because these individuals work longer than 40-hour work weeks that they are able to complete their required tasks.

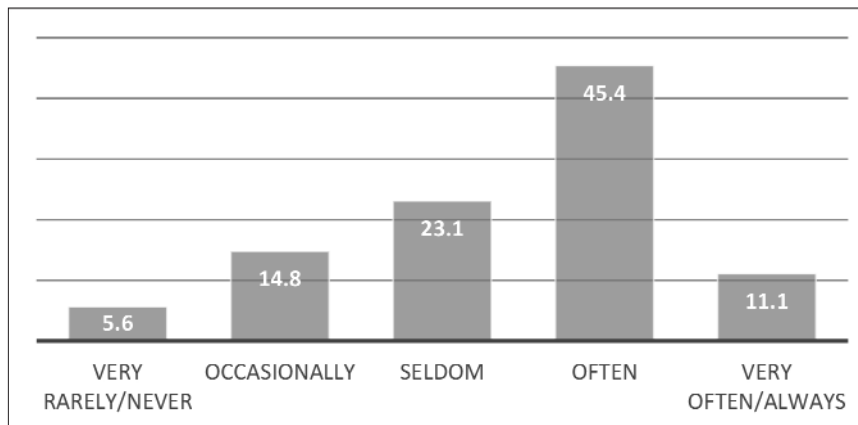


Figure 3: Reported frequency of ability to finish tasks within desired timeframe

**Sufficiency of the yearly budget for implementation of tasks.** As seen in Figure 4, these leaders struggle to implement their tasks within the constraints of annual budgets. Over one-third stated that they very rarely/never felt the budget was sufficient for their needs, and the percentages steadily decline for those who were more satisfied. Since these leaders are undertaking long work hours to accomplish goals they clearly understand, it would be reasonable to contend that not having sufficient resources to complete tasks is a source of work-stress.

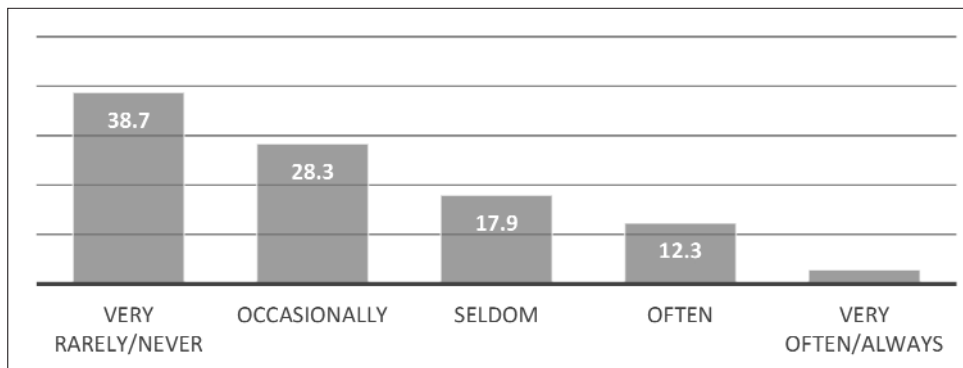


Figure 4: Reported frequency of sufficiency of the yearly budget for implementation of tasks

**Degree of freedom to reallocate funds from one project to another.** One possible solution for these leaders to address their insufficient budgets is to reallocate funds from one initiative to another. Figure 5 indicates that respondents felt that they had some degree of freedom to do this, although not resoundingly so. Most respondents were mid-range on this issue, with more having unfavourable views than favourable. That said, overall, this pattern is an improvement over satisfaction with the actual budget itself. In other words, while insufficient budgets may potentially elevate work-stress, at least there is a marginal degree of freedom to reallocate funds which may alleviate at least a small fraction of it.

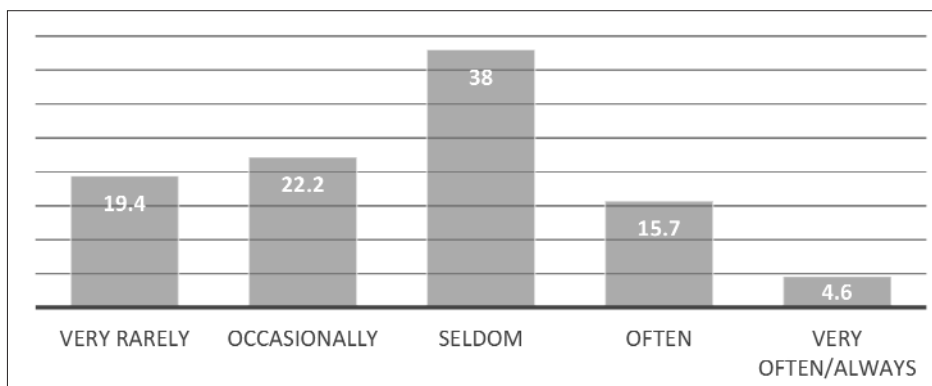
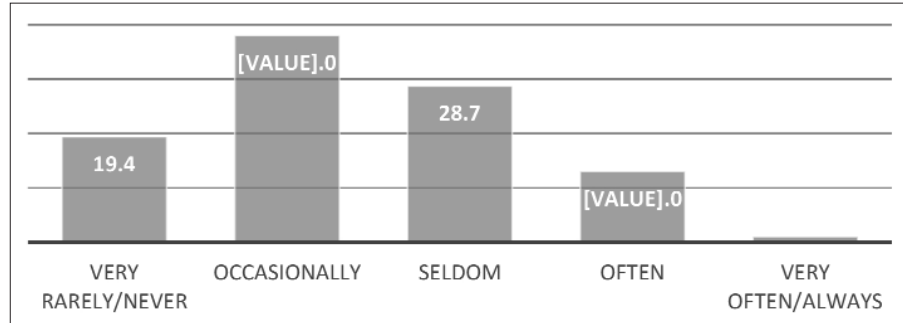


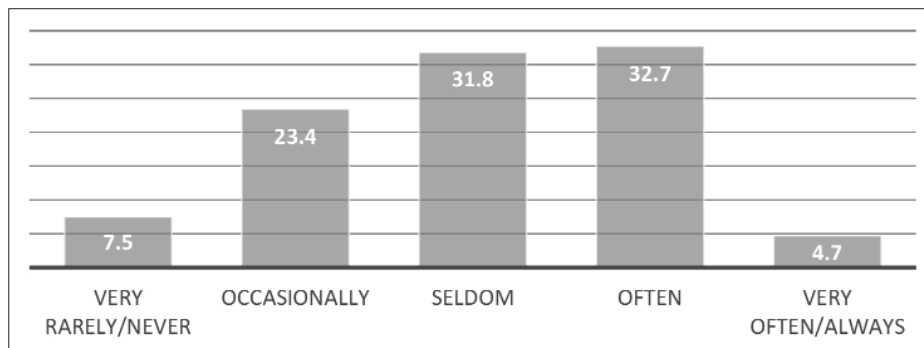
Figure 5: Reported frequency of degree of freedom to reallocate funds from one project to another

**Degree of freedom to influence the workload.** Figure 6 describes the degree of freedom managerial leaders of the public administration institutions have to influence their workload. Results indicate that over half (57.4%) felt that they can only occasionally or very rarely/never influence the workload, and no one perceived that they very often/always could. This could be another potential work-stressor, as it prevents many of these leaders from managing control of their work. This may be related to the longer hours worked which may potentially be a function of achieving their well-defined goals.



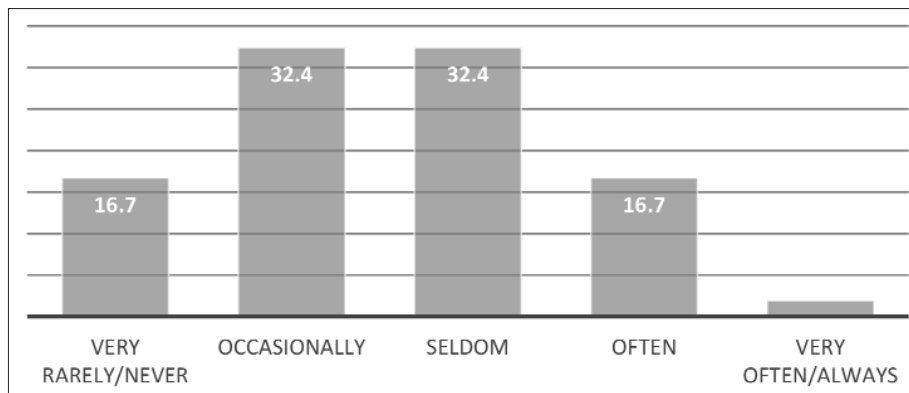
**Figure 6:** Reported frequency of degree of freedom to influence the workload

**Being informed at least a week before new project starts.** Figure 7 indicates that, overall, receiving advance notice of new project starts appears to be less of an issue than insufficient budgets or inability to influence workloads. That said, a considerable percentage of respondents still expressed negative attitudes about this. For those individuals, as is potentially the case with any of these items, this issue likely causes stress.



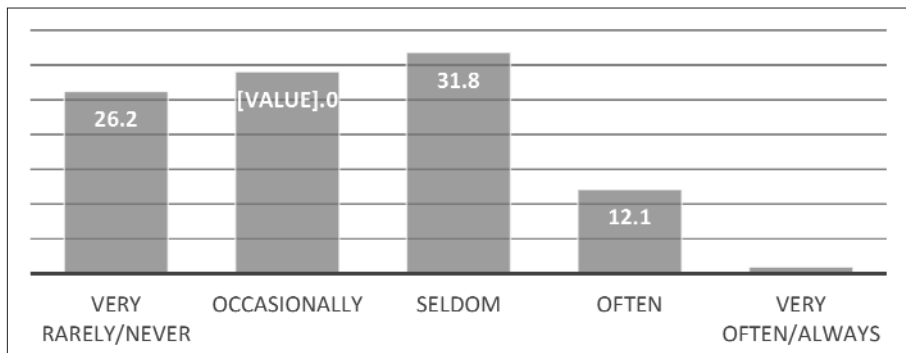
**Figure 7:** Reported frequency of being informed at least a week before new project starts

**Receiving assistance in project implementation.** Figure 8 shows how much assistance respondents believe they get from their corresponding ministry regarding project implementation. Over 80% of respondents obtain assistance only seldom or less often, which again may contribute to the longer hours worked. In addition to a generally perceived lack of resources, there is a similar perception of lack of help. Leaders, particularly in executive ranks, are generally assumed to have the capabilities to manage their functions on their own. While such expectations are not always unreasonable, the data here indicate that these leaders might benefit from additional support. Additionally, across the sample, this particular issue appears to be a legitimate source of work-stress.



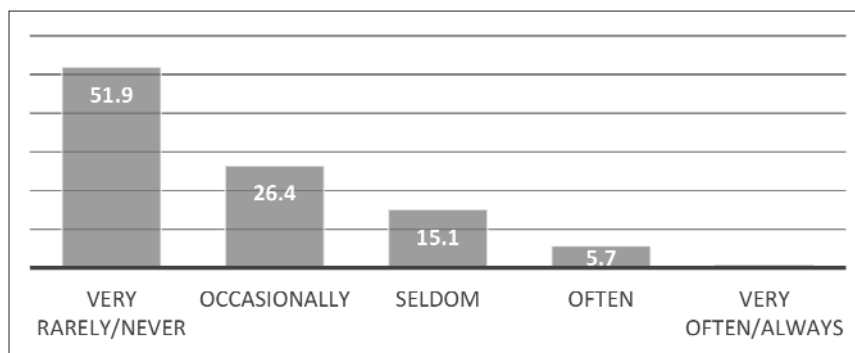
**Figure 8:** Reported frequency of receiving assistance in project implementation

**Acknowledgement from superiors for successful implementation of tasks.** Because there is no financial cost associated with it, one might implicitly assume that managerial leaders would be at least rewarded with supervisory recognition when a task is successfully implemented. However, as Figure 9 indicates, this is not the case, as 87% said their performance is recognized seldom at best. Concerning the earlier point about expectations that executive leaders should be able to manage their work with little or any assistance, the same might be said regarding their need for acknowledgement of a job well done. Nonetheless, the absence of acknowledgement would certainly not alleviate work-stress. Moreover, particularly for respondents who seek or require it as validation of their efforts, the absence may indeed cause stress.



**Figure 9:** Reported frequency of acknowledgement from superiors for successful implementation of tasks

**Receiving positive feedback for good performance.** Figure 10 depicts what might be the most prevalent issue facing this sample of leaders – positive feedback for good performance. Related to Figure 9, this may be because of perceptions that senior leaders should either not require feedback to validate their performance or should simply be able to assess and regulate their own performance. However, this pattern is even more negative than acknowledgement of successful implementation of tasks. Perhaps this is because it is ‘easier’ or ‘more obvious’ for others to monitor specific project implementations because of their more defined nature than it is to give feedback for more general performance. With well over 90% of the sample reporting little to no performance feedback, this is certainly a potential a work-stressor, if not an inhibitor to overall organizational performance.



**Figure 10:** Reported frequency of receiving positive feedback for good performance

**4.2 Summary and gender comparisons of perceptions of general work demands and stress**

Presented here is a summary of the aggregate results for items more specifically related to work stress, as well as comparisons between men and women.

**Perceived increasing workload.** Figure 11a indicates respondents’ perceptions of increases in their workload. Results show that no one felt that they very rarely/never experienced increasing workloads, and only 8.4% occasionally. At the other end of the spectrum, almost half (47.7%) of the leaders perceived that their workloads increase often or very often/always. This pattern is similar to the number of hours worked, which leads to the question of whether these trends will continue, and if so, to what extent will it elevate additional work-stress on these leaders.





Figure 11a: Reported frequency of perceived increasing workload

Figure 11b presents a more detailed view of gender differences on perceived increases in workload. The biggest discrepancy is in the frequency with which men and women indicated that they perceived accumulating workloads very often or always (only 6.1% of men compared to 25.6% of women), followed by an almost 13% difference in the opposite gender pattern for seldom. As the distributions for both men and women were sufficiently normally distributed and their variances equal, an independent samples t-test was performed to ascertain whether a statistically significant difference existed between genders. In comparing the sample means between women (M=3.79, SD=.89) and men (M=3.33, SD=.81), a statistically significant difference was observed,  $t(104)=2.76, p=.01$ . In short, women perceived their workloads to be accumulating more frequently than did men.

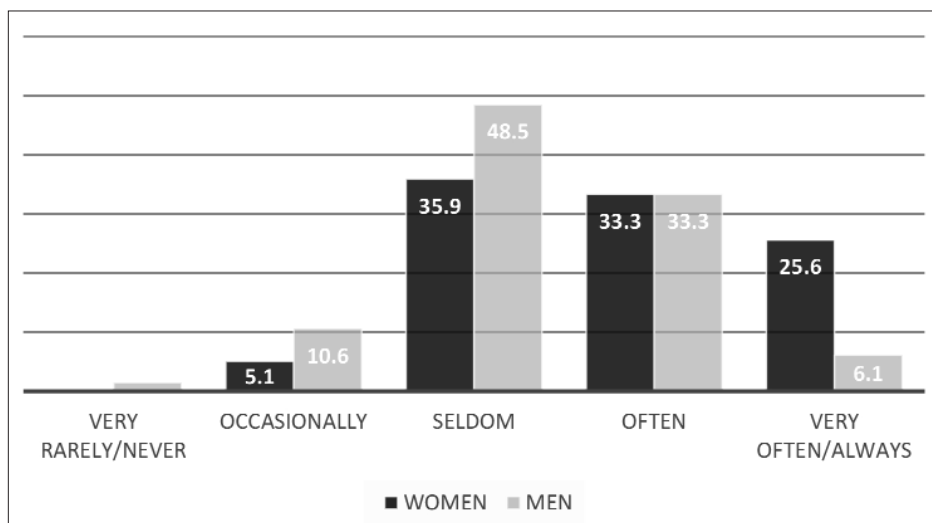


Figure 11b: Gender comparison of reported frequency of perceived increasing workload

**Work-family balance.** The sample’s work-life balance is presented in Figure 12a. The negatively skewed distribution suggests that these officials did not feel that their family demands have a particularly negative impact on their work. Somewhat surprising is the fact that, despite their heavy work demands and lack of resources and assistance, these leaders overall seem to have a better work-family balance than might be expected.

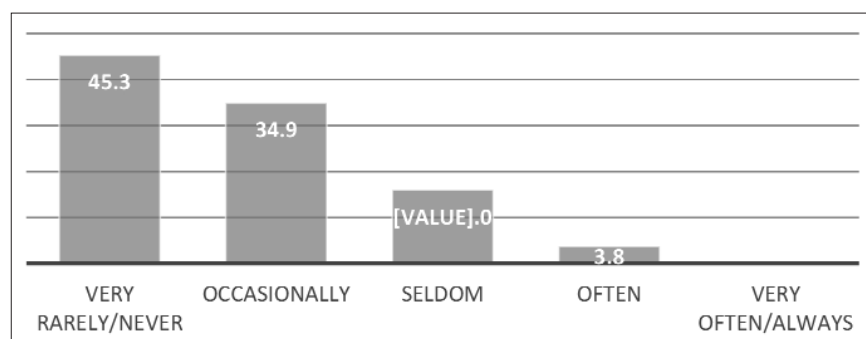
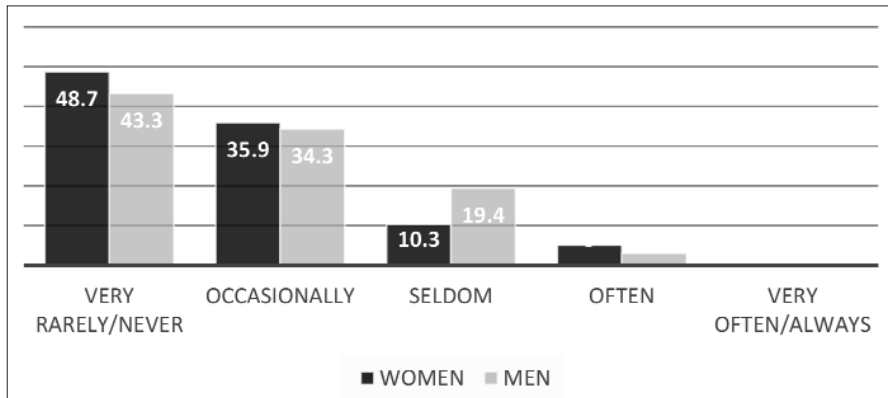


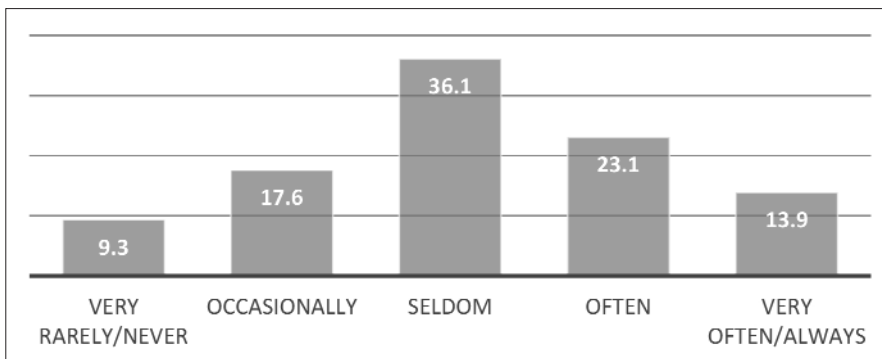
Figure 12a: Reported frequency of personal/family demands having a negative impact on work

Gender differences with regards to family life and its possible negative effects on work are presented in Figure 12b, as literature suggests such differences exist due to gender role related contextual factors (see 1.3). A t-test found that there was not a statistically significant difference between women (M=1.72, SD=.86) and men (M=1.82, SD=.85),  $t(104)=-.60, p=.91$ .



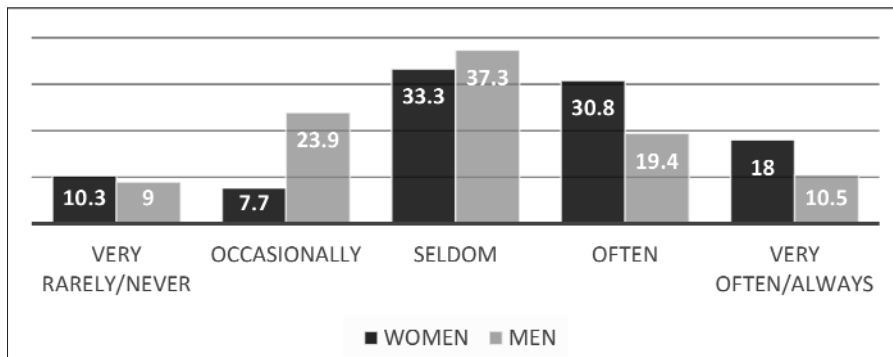
**Figure 12b:** Gender comparison of reported frequency of personal/family demands having a negative impact on work

**Work-related stress.** Figure 13a shows the frequency with which the leaders experience work-related stress. Again, a fairly normal distribution is presented, indicating variance in how much work stress they perceive. That said, over one-third still experience such feelings often or very often/always, which serves as a potential indicator of the negative impacts on the leaders and organization that would likely result.



**Figure 13a:** Reported frequency of recently experiencing work-related stress

Gender differences were analyzed in recently experienced stress. Figure 13b shows a trend where women (M=3.38, SD= 1.18) appeared to report work-related stress more frequently than men (M=2.99, SD= 1.11). However, a t-test did not detect a statistical significance at the conventional  $p < .05$  level. Using a more liberal  $p < .10$  criterion did indicate a significant difference, however. Probability levels aside, this result can at least be interpreted as a trend where women feel more work-stress.



**Figure 13b:** Gender comparison of reported frequency of recently experiencing work-related stress

## Conclusion and Discussion

### 5.1 Summary of results

Government institutions can be considered the lifeblood of nations, as they are tasked with ensuring the effective functioning of public services and the welfare of their citizens. Their leaders bear great responsibilities and the burdens of stress that their counterparts in private organizations also do; however, often without as many resources or perhaps as much public scrutiny. The challenges brought about by the rapid pace of technology and change, coupled with the increased complexities brought about by globalization, are newer sources of stress for these leaders. Nonetheless, while the same could be assumed for government leaders around the world, it is imperative that analyses of specific nations should be undertaken to better understand work dynamics and expectations in unique cultures.

The present study examined the attitudes of the top government officials in Iceland as they relate to potential work-stress. Results indicated that these leaders are potentially at risk of elevated work stress due to insufficient budgets and flexibility to control workflows. Likewise, there are strong patterns that indicate that, despite often feeling overworked and stressed, these leaders are given little feedback on their performance. Leaders generally feel that they can complete their tasks in the required timeframe, however, this is perhaps because they are working that much harder and longer in order that they fulfill these challenges. Although task clarity appears to be high, the lack of resources, control, and supervisor feedback can have a negative impact. Former studies have proved that workload (Figure 6) can not only increase stress levels, but that it is also one of the most frequent causes of burnout (Ivancevic et al., 2020), and the same also stands for the lack of feedback for one's performance (Figure 10) (Maslach & Jackson, 1984).

Compared to men, women appear to feel that their workloads are more burdensome, and statistically significant findings support this. There were no significant gender effects for overall work-family conflict or overall work stress, although patterns suggest that women are slightly higher on both. Both genders may be experiencing undue stress, but from an egalitarian perspective, at least they are doing so at similar levels, meaning this is potentially less of a 'women's issue' as has often been assumed in the past.

As discussed in the introduction, work-stress can have major negative impacts on the physical and mental health of employees and leaders, as well as on their own performance and that of the organization. As such, having empirical data to ascertain public leaders' attitudes in Iceland towards stress-inducing work conditions is essential to better understand exactly how to address the situation. The current study provides that information, giving future researchers and practitioners a platform to better pinpoint how to provide necessary support.

### 5.2 Limitations

As with all empirical endeavors, the study has limitations. The survey was a self-report measure that measured individuals' own perceptions. As such, rating biases such as social desirability are possible. The survey was also administered at a single place in time, so it cannot be ascertained whether responses reflected a consistent pattern of feelings. A longitudinal study would help to determine the stability of the results and potential changes over time. The data here represent a variety of distinct organizations, each with its own specific culture and leaders. The results, however, are dispersed across them so fail to incorporate whether there are differences among them (i.e., a stricter performance-oriented culture as opposed to a more supportive relationship-oriented one). Nuanced analyses within different government departments would delineate these differences.

### 5.3 Implications and next steps

A follow-up study should be conducted to more precisely explore the reasons behind the work conditions identified here and their dynamics. Are these issues a function of a general culture, lack of resources, lack of the public's awareness, inefficient operations, lack of talent, or a host of other possibilities? Many organizations have implemented stress management interventions and wellness programmes as a means of assisting their employees. Moreover, there is evidence that they have had positive effects on employees and the bottom-line of organizations (Muchinsky & Howes, 2019). Likewise, the authors propose several interventions to mitigate the effects of work-family conflict, such as work-family enrichment, which is an effort to help workers transfer the positive experiences of one domain to the other.

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