Management and the Professions: How Cracked is That Glass Ceiling?

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All prestigious or highly-paid occupations in Britain are dominated by men: this is as true of the public sector as it is of industry. This article examines the evidence for discrimination in the public sector. It deals with both the situation at work and the one at home. It looks at various explanations as to why this is the case, as well as the evidence on how men and women deal with the inequality. The author concludes that there are good reasons why men and women do not see or confront the issues discussed in her article. Unless men and women wake up to the fact that we live in an unequal society and wish to see the glass ceiling well and truly broken, little is likely to change.

Every prestigious or high-paid occupation in Britain is dominated by men, both numerically and in terms of who wields power (Gutek, 1993; Kay, 2001). Studies on the relationship between gender, and the likelihood that a candidate will be recommended for hiring, find an advantage in favour of men. Sex stereotyping of women remains evident at work (EOC, 2001). The phenomenon of overrating men and underrating women job candidates appears to be widespread. Women fare worse than men in salary, promotion and ability to reach the top, regardless of the occupation. The gender pay gap emerges very quickly in the working lives of women and men, well before maternity and childcare responsibilities have an impact on women’s lives. For example, the pay gap for graduates emerges very rapidly (Pearson et al., 1999).

There has been some progress towards equality in the last 25 years as more women have entered the professions, and entry-level salaries are closer to parity than they were, but that progress is not uniform (Valian, 1998). In jobs like nursing, teaching and personnel where women predominate, women account for almost all members at the lowest grade, but only around three-quarters at the highest (Kay, 2001). Furthermore, women drop out of male-dominated occupations (like engineering and technology) in higher proportions than men do.

This article examines the evidence about various groups to be found in the public sector. It deals with both the situation at work and the one at home. It looks at the explanations as to why this is the case, as well as the evidence on how men and women deal with the inequality. The evidence presented here does not make an optimistic picture for the prediction of positive change.

Local and National Government

Although women make up the majority of the local authority workforce, they tend to be concentrated in lower grades and are under-represented at senior management level (Breitenbach et al., 1999). In Scotland, for example, currently just three of 32 chief executives in local authorities are female. Less than 10% of women reach senior levels in finance, planning, commercial services, economic development, environmental health, property services, transport or roads. At a national level, about 52% of non-industrial staff in the civil service in Scotland are women but only one-third are at management level (executive officer level) and above (Kay, 2001). The figures for the UK as a whole are no better. Of those appointed to the senior Civil Service in 1999–2000 almost twice as many men as women were successful; currently 29% in the senior Civil Service grades are female (Civil Service Commissioners, 1999–2000). A similar picture is to be found in education.

Education

Women account for the vast majority of teachers in primary schools (92%), presumably because the work has traditionally been associated with shorter hours of work and longer holidays. Teaching appears an attractive job to qualified women intending to combine teaching and a mothering career. However, they remain under-represented in the higher levels of the teaching profession, both at primary and secondary levels (Kay, 2000). For example, in England, seven out of ten secondary school heads are male. In Scotland, men hold 88% of secondary school and 24% of primary school head posts (EOC, 2001).

In higher education, research evidence shows that women have been increasing their numbers at the lowest levels in academia since early in the 20th century, but have been excluded from the senior levels in Britain (Halsey, 1992). While the number of women in the academic profession has increased, it is still as far behind that of women in the undergraduate population as in the 1930s.
Further, the proportion of women in senior posts has remained stubbornly resistant to change at around 10% of those in the profession compared with the 30% of men who are promoted. In fact, there was a higher proportion of women in senior posts in 1930 in 1990 (Heward, 1996). Despite the fact that women make up more than half of the undergraduates, they hold just 12% of professorships and 24% of senior lectureships (Times Higher, 26 October 2001, p. 18). Despite solutions to the problems faced by female academics being offered by DiNitto et al. as long ago as 1982, no progress has been made.

Health Service
Women account for just over one-third (38%) of medical staff in the National Health Service (NHS) in Britain (ONS, 2000). Men considerably outnumber women in hospital medicine; women predominate in community care. In the hospital sector, there is a higher proportion of women doctors in the lower grades. The proportion of consultants who are women has risen by 4% since 1990, whereas the proportion of registrars and senior registrars has risen from 27% and 29% to 39% and 40% respectively. Progress towards equality for women in these higher level jobs is, then, very slow or even static (see Miller et al. in this issue). While women medical professionals may see it as important to ensure the needs of women and children are met by female medical staff, and may have come closer to being able to exert an influence on how medical services are delivered, they increasingly find that such power has moved from professionals to managers (see Wyatt and Langridge, 1996). Dependent children have been largely male and the occupation is neither prestigious nor well paid (Valien, 1998, p. 115).

The situation of nurses is no better. While women account for around 90% of all qualified nurses, men hold disproportionately more higher-grade posts relative to their overall numbers. Furthermore, men achieve these senior posts in a comparatively short space of time compared to women. Research in the 1990s found that it takes 11.4 years for a woman, compared to 6.9 years for a man, to reach their first nurse officer post (Wyatt and Langridge, 1996). Dependent children are detrimental to women’s careers in nursing. Studies have found that senior nurse managers are reluctant to employ young married women who may start a family. They give preference to older married women whose child-rearing responsibilities are completed. Successful female nurses are those who dedicate themselves exclusively to nursing (Halford et al., 1997).

Recently, Lane (2000) has documented how women with dependent children were concentrated in lower nursing grades, irrespective of their qualifications or experience.

Social Work
In England and Wales, 81% of social work staff working in local authorities are female with as many as 96% of home carers being female (DoH, 2001). The situation in Scotland is very similar. Seventy six per cent of Diploma in Social Work students are female and the roughly the same percentage of women qualified in 2000 as social workers. Yet, there are relatively few female directors of social work: one-third of these directors, and just over half of the area directors, are women (Engender, 1998; DoH 2001). A survey of social work students challenged the assumption that low participation of women at management level in social work was due to lack of interest in achieving promotion (Murray, 1994). Another study has shown that male managers in social work tend to earn more than female managers (Buglass et al., 1998). The profession of social work appears, then, to be similar to the other professions, in terms of women’s lack of equality within it.

Management
Turning our attention to management more generally, women in the UK hold just 18% of all management positions (Cabinet Office, 2000). During the 1990s, there was evidence of a reversal of earlier positive trends. The 1994 National Management Survey (Institute of Management, 1995) found a small fall in the proportion of women managers from 10.2% in 1993 to 9.8% in 1994. In Scottish management, 35% of managers and administrators were women in 1995, but by 1999 this had fallen to 32% (Kay, 2000). The same downward movement was found in the NHS, where the proportion of women chief executives was 28% in 1994 but 22.3% in 1998, despite the Department of Health being the first government department to join Opportunity 2000 (a business-led campaign to increase the number of women at the top of organisations, launched in 1991) and the creation of a high-profile NHS Women’s Unit, which aimed to increase the number of women in management positions.

Numerous studies show a continuing problem for women who aspire to top management positions. In business, women earn less than men, they are promoted more slowly and work in less prestigious firms (Valian, 1998, p. 18). These disparities exist even when men and women hold equivalent qualifications (Valian, 1998, p. 198). Women are not seen to have the same characteristics for leadership as men. Several groups of male managers were asked to rate successful managers on 92 different characteristics (Heilman et al., 1989). The characteristics included, for example, leadership ability and fearfulness. The managers’ ratings of men in
general and successful managers were very similar, much more similar than their ratings of women in general and successful managers. This experiment was a replication of a 1973 study (Schein, 1973); and, tellingly, in 16 years managers’ attitudes had not changed. In addition, the 1989 experiment showed that successful women managers were perceived as having less leadership ability than successful male managers, and that women managers were seen as possessing negative qualities that men managers did not have—for example, bitterness, and being quarrelsome and selfish.

While part-time work is increasing in the public service, paradoxically excessively long working hours for managers have become the norm. This is due, in part, to work intensification and partly because long working hours have come to be an indicator of commitment (Corby, 1997). As a result, women have to make a stark choice between work and families. Further research has shown that, when trying to assume leadership, a woman will have to work overtime to gain people’s attention (Valien, 1998:133). Yet when women reach positions of authority, subordinates evaluate them as positively as they do men (Ragins, 1991). It may be more difficult for a woman to achieve a position of power, but once she has it she attains equal recognition and support as a man would.

**Explanations**

How do we explain why all these inequalities persist within the different jobs? The first explanation is to be found in how commitment is viewed. The professions and management appear to accept the long hours culture as the norm, coupled with the common practice of taking work home. Willingness to do this is seen as a major indicator of ambition and commitment, which is a particular problem for those wishing to balance home and life commitments. Cultures that encourage long hours, it could be argued, are institutionally discriminating against those with family commitments and could be challenged by more family-friendly policies.

A second explanation relates to gender schemas. It would appear that our conceptions of what characteristics different jobs require are shaped by our conceptions of the people who carry them out. If a job is held predominantly by women, it is a feminine job, needs feminine characteristics and will be of less value. If it is a job predominantly held by men, we see it as masculine, emphasize masculine characteristics and value it more highly. The difference between the status of physician in Russia and in Britain is a good example of how this works (see above). Gender schemas are an attempt to justify a pre-existing sexual division of labour. Sex segregation requires a rationalization (Hoffman and Hurst, 1990).

Jobs create gender schemas via the sexual division of labour. Eagly (1987) suggests that the typical social roles played by women and men call for the characteristics that we have come to associate with each sex. As men have tended to occupy positions that require characteristics like agency, independence, instrumentality and task orientation, we transfer the requirements of the roles onto the personalities of the people who occupy them. Women have tended to occupy jobs that require nurturance and expressiveness. It may be that the cognitive and personality traits of men and women are identical, but that we perceive them differently because they hold different jobs. Alternatively, men and women may develop the characteristics needed to fill certain roles at the expense of other characteristics. Both actual sex differences, and perceived sex differences, could arise from the differing roles men and women play. A potential weak spot in the argument is that roles such as professor, therapist, minister and doctor are seen as requiring nurturance, communality and expressiveness (Conway et al., 1996) yet these roles are primarily filled by men and were filled almost solely by men until the 1970s (Valien, 1998).

Jobs change their gender at the employer’s will. For example, in 1917, there was a shortage of male bank workers. Low-level bank jobs were seen as suitable for women, because women were neat, tactful and intuitive. During the Depression, a surplus of males led banks to redefine the same job as unsuitable for women on the grounds that the public would not want women to handle their money. During the Second World War, these jobs were seen as suitable for women again, on the grounds that women were good at dealing with the public (Reskin and Roos, 1990). Similarly, it was found that women could work in munitions factories, and rivet, solder and weld, when men went to war. The jobs, and the women who carried them out, changed again when the men returned.

If jobs occupied by men do not require stereotypically male characteristics, why do we perceive them in masculine and feminine terms? Valien (1998) would say that the answer lies in motherhood. Although motherhood requires both masculine and feminine traits, the trait most often linked with it is nurturance. One set of sexually differentiated activities, giving birth and physically nursing infants, qualitatively separates the sexes, lays the foundation for gender schemas and dominates conceptions of women among men and women. The ‘presumptive primacy’ (Valien, 1998, p. 118) of childbirth and nursing is grist for our cognitive mill. Three processes, then, work together to entrench gender schemas in our minds and social practices:

- The first is that if people consistently look different we conclude that they are different; males should look masculine and females feminine.
- A second mechanism is our tendency to reason from extreme examples. The existence of a few hyper-feminine looking and hyper-masculine...
Looking individuals contributes to our seeing the sexes as more different than they actually are. Further, we generalize from physical differences to differences in general.

The third mechanism is our tendency to see the sexes as dichotomous, and to see gender traits as mutually exclusive. We notice traits that are consistent with male or female schemas; we do not see traits that are inconsistent, for example we tend not to perceive women's instrumentality because it is already 'spoken for' by men.

Another explanation of the persistence of inequalities at work may be found in the home. We have seen above how families are damaging to the careers of women, but not for men, and there is further evidence to support this (Burke, 1997). Despite claims that marriages are becoming more symmetrical, and domestic tasks are being shared more equally, surveys persistently reveal that women still take the major share of housework and childcare—even when both partners work. Women perform far more than their fair share of housework (Biernat and Wortman, 1991; Perkins and DeMeis, 1996), even when they are professional women. Women, on average, do about 70% of the housework (Baxter, 2000).

Most working married women and men see nothing wrong with an unequal division of labour at home; the unequal division of labour is seen as fair (Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994; Sanchez, 1994). Couples do not use 50% as an equity point. Men find the division of labour fair when they contribute 36% of time to household tasks. Women find it fair when they contribute 66% of the total (Coltraine, 2000). When labour is displaced onto paid helpers (cleaners, childminders, nannies), they are inevitably female. In this way the women's responsibility for domestic labour persists. The proportion of men's time devoted to paid labour hardly changes if they have children; in fact, they spend relatively more time in paid labour when their children are under seven years old (Plantenga, 1997).

On housework, there are a number of explanations for why men contribute less work at home. The first would be because they do more work outside; either because they can earn more money than women or because gender schemas portray men as naturally belonging outside the house and women as naturally belonging inside it (Valien, 1998, p. 40). Alternatively, it may be that the partner who makes more money has more power and therefore does less work at home—they buy themselves out of housework. Do men do less housework because they earn more? Apparently not, because men do not do more housework as women make more money (Blair and Lichter, 1991) and the size of the disparity in salary does not affect how much housework men do.

It would appear that women do more housework because it a woman's 'labour of love'. A woman who insists on equity will be seen as heartless, especially when it comes to childcare. Boys and girls have spent years learning that fairness is irrelevant at home. Women have learned to help others directly, or by caring for them, even if that help comes at their expense. Men have learned to help more indirectly by earning money to provide material well-being and educational opportunities. Men and women have learned different roles and identities, which means that a woman is less of a woman if she does not make a house a home and a man is less of a man if he does. Men and women are also following the roles that they saw their parents take and compare themselves to other households and how work is divided there. There is a cost to perceiving the injustice. Women who acknowledge the unfairness of their living situation will be more depressed than those who deny it (Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994).

Finally, despite the potential insights to be gained from the above explanations, there is much that we do not, and maybe cannot, know. Women in Marshall's study of managers (Marshall, 1995) identified masculine work cultures as a barrier to equality, but it is difficult to identify precisely what personal relationships or decision-making processes are contributing to unequal treatment. The most important processes that contribute to greater career success among men than women may be invisible, not just unmeasured but unmeasurable (Hakim, 1996a). The unmeasurable might include the reasons for individuals being promoted, which are unlikely to be public; they are therefore viewed as opaque, overly dependent on personal contacts and on subjective decision-making. Alternatively, the attributes for career success might be personal characteristics like being 'tough' or 'ruthless' and 'not very nice' (Liff and Ward, 2001, p. 26). The ideal manager is saturated with characteristics traditionally seen as male.

How Do Men and Women Deal with Inequality?

From the evidence, it seems that men and women come to terms with the existence of inequalities in many different and often contradictory ways. Men and women want to believe they live in a 'just world'. We would like to believe that formal, rational procedures and objective decision-making characterize our institutions.

The majority of professionals promote the idea that the position of women is improving in the profession they represent (Kay, 2001). However, they neither keep the statistics, nor do they know the statistics to monitor the situation over the years. Alternatively, they will deny that inequality exists. An example of this can be found in Nicolson and Welsh's (1992) study of medical students where students were indignant when potential gender inequalities were suggested to them—they preferred to believe that equality existed. Another example comes from the
profession of architecture where the Chair of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Women Architects’ Committee is quoted as saying ‘there is no real discrimination as far as I’ve encountered. Talented people will always get jobs’ (RIBA, 1994).

Gender inequalities can be covered by a ‘cloak of equality’ (Benschop et al., 2001). While gender is systematically reproduced in hierarchical levels, jobs and tasks, most people do not perceive the manifestation of the sexual division of labour. Individuals talk of equality and neutrality, which prevents manifestations of inequality being interpreted as such. Men and women might have the same job title, have the same skills and qualifications, but be doing the job differently. For example women employees might have a narrower interpretation of their tasks and take less initiative to qualify for higher jobs (as was found by Benschop et al., 2001). They may also believe that it is an historical tradition, or sheer coincidence, that there are more men in senior positions, or that these particular men have special characteristics that make them good at their jobs.

Some women will identify that there are difficulties and inequalities in the profession. They will note that the work culture is masculine. These women do not lack drive or ambition, nor are they unprepared for the requirements of responsible and demanding jobs; but they find that they cannot work within or influence masculine work cultures so they leave (see, for example, the women managers in Marshall’s 1995 study). This masculine culture can be characterized by working long hours, having to cancel holidays due to job commitments, and bullying. Women who leave work at 5 p.m. were seen as scoring ‘own goals’ (see Liff and Ward, 2001). There are no signs of progression towards a more family-friendly environment, which might include flexible working arrangements such as job sharing, so individuals do not even broach the issue because of fear that raising the possibility might lead to them being seen as less committed.

Some women believe they should put their families before their careers. Others choose to be career centred, with domestic activities as a secondary activity. Randle (2000) has argued that one reason why there are fewer women academics in top positions is that women actively choose not to aspire towards them, investing instead in a balanced approach to all areas of their life. This fact is often ignored, and the glass ceiling is blamed. Whatever the choice, few women expect to combine a career with parenthood. Women see very few senior managers with children who can act as role models, so may feel that motherhood spells an end to their career (Liff and Ward, 2001). They ‘volunteer’ for parenthood and the penalties are the consequence of the choice. Hakim (1996b) would say that more than half of adult women accept the sexual division of labour and treat work as an additional secondary activity to be fitted in with the demands of domestic life. Women do not want to be seen as victims or ‘mindless zombies’ (Hakim, 1996a, p. 186). They want to be seen as responsible adults who make choices about their own lives.

Choices are made within a delimited set of parameters. Men feel that they have a choice of combining children with a career, but this will mean a limited involvement with their family. In contrast, women do not feel the same extent of control over their choices. The decision to have children would be likely to have enormous consequences for their work prospects (Liff and Ward, 2001). Men and women who wish to build careers need to have ‘domestic servicing.’ However, even when such services are bought in, as we have seen, these tend to be managed by women (Gregson and Lowe, 1994).

Conclusion
From the evidence presented here, it is difficult to produce a positive conclusion about increased equality of opportunity for women in the professions and in management. Egalitarian slogans, views and beliefs will keep pushing women further back if there is a backlash from women or men. There are good reasons why men and women either do not see or confront the issues discussed here. Recognizing inequality is not easy and it is difficult to live with. Making inequality visible draws brisk retorts. Unless men and women wake up to the fact that we live in an unequal society and wish to see that glass ceiling well and truly broken, little is likely to change.

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