Working Paper No. 6
Barriers to Women’s Career Progression: A Review of the Literature
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Derek Gill, Branch Manager
Strategic Development Branch
State Services Commission
Email: derek.gill@ssc.govt.nz
Facsimile: +64 4 495 6699

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Working Paper No. 6
Barriers to Women's Career Progression: A Review of the Literature

Sue Loughlin
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Summary

This paper reviews some of the vast amount of available literature on barriers to women's career progression. It identifies three key themes, Human Resource Management (HRM); organisational culture and family issues, that affect women's and men's careers differently. Together, these issues provide a launching point that will inform future work in identifying factors salient to the New Zealand situation and the direction this work will take.

Publication of the Working Papers Series recognises the value of developmental work in generating policy options. The papers in the series were prepared for the purpose of informing policy development. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be taken to be the views of the State Services Commission. The SSC view may differ in substance or extent from that contained in this paper.
## Contents

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**............................................................................................................................................. 3

**INTRODUCTION**................................................................................................................................................................ 4

- **PROJECT AIMS** .................................................................................................................................................................. 4
- **AIMS OF THIS PAPER** ..................................................................................................................................................... 4
- **SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE PAPER** ................................................................................................................... 4
- **STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER** ............................................................................................................................................ 5

**PART 1: HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**.................................................................................................................. 6

- **General Principles** ............................................................................................................................................................ 6
- **Recruitment and Selection** ............................................................................................................................................... 8
- **Training and Development** ............................................................................................................................................. 11
- **Promotion** ......................................................................................................................................................................... 14

**PART 2: ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE**............................................................................................................................. 17

- **IDENTIFYING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE** .................................................................................................................. 17
- **CONFLICT OF ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND WOMEN’S VALUES** ...................................................................... 18
- **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION** ................................................................................. 19
- **STEREOTYPING** ............................................................................................................................................................... 20

**PART 3: WORK AND FAMILY**............................................................................................................................................. 22

- **FAMILY AND WORK ASSUMED TO BE EXCLUSIVE** ........................................................................................................ 22
- ‘FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES’ AND WORK COMMITMENT................................................................................................... 23

**CONCLUSION**...................................................................................................................................................................... 24

**APPENDIX 1**......................................................................................................................................................................... 26

- **WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET** ................................................................................................................................ 26
  - **Participation** .................................................................................................................................................................... 26
  - **Segregation** .................................................................................................................................................................... 27
  - **Explanations for Differences** .......................................................................................................................................... 29

**REFERENCES**....................................................................................................................................................................... 34
Executive Summary

Few women currently hold senior management positions in the New Zealand Public Service. This situation is particularly marked at the Chief Executive level, and is a cause of concern to those considering the future of the Public Service. The development of positive strategies to address this situation, and ultimately to increase the number of women in Public Service chief executive positions, can be informed by the wealth of international literature on barriers to women’s career advancement.

The literature on barriers to women’s advancement is vast and rich with information and ideas. A sweep of this literature, however, reveals three general categories of information that are particularly pertinent to women in the Public Service.

First, is the area of Human Resource Management (HRM) processes and practices, aspects of which are used by all organisations. How HRM is practised is important as the outcome of some practices can be less favourable for women than men. Central to this are issues such as the formality of HRM processes, the attention that is given to the merit principle and the validity of the HRM practices used. Achieving a balance is tricky, as, for example, formality underpins fair practice, but does not ensure it, and informality can result in unequal treatment of employees. More specifically, the literature indicates that commonly used practices such as interviews and employment tests can disadvantage some candidates, often women candidates, if used without due care.

Second, the culture of any organisation (public service or otherwise) impacts on those who work in it. This culture is underpinned by values, which can negatively affect women. It can force employees to change their behaviour, to put aside personal values, or to change the time they spend with their family or in leisure activities. The literature asserts that stereotyping and discrimination are perceived differently by men and women, and can affect people’s work in various ways.

Third, the family commitments of employees can have an influence on the way in which they are perceived by their co-workers, including managers. Commitment is often characterised by particular attributes, which can be more closely aligned with men’s than women’s work patterns. Again, addressing these issues is difficult. Even when organisations address family commitments with specific policies, some employees (particularly women) perceive personal disadvantage or possible career penalties if they use them.

Some women have developed strategies for overcoming workplace barriers to career advancement and achieved senior positions. While these barriers do not restrict the careers of all women, that they impact on a significant number is evident from the poor representation of women at senior levels. The limited number of women reaching the highest positions in the New Zealand Public Service indicates that further attention to overcoming these barriers in the future is necessary.
Introduction

Project Aims

Few women hold senior management positions in the NZ Public Service. The State Services Commissioner has expressed concern about the low number of women who both apply for and who hold chief executive positions. Although almost 30% of all second and third tier managers are women, women currently hold only 20% of chief executive positions in the New Zealand Public Service.

The Women in Senior Management project aims to address these concerns. It aims to identify the range and nature of barriers to women’s career advancement with a view to identifying strategies to address them. The overarching goal of the project is to develop strategies for overcoming barriers to women. These strategies will increase the number of high quality female applicants for Public Service chief executive positions, and, in the long term, the number of female chief executives.

Aims of this Paper

This paper represents the first stage of this project. It reviews some of the vast amount of available literature on barriers to women’s career progression. The key themes from this literature will be used to inform future work in identifying those factors salient to the New Zealand Public Service. Specifically, the paper will inform future decisions about the nature and depth of information that is needed in order to address these factors. The paper will also provide chief executives and staff of government departments with information on the range and type of factors that influence women’s careers.

Scope and Limitations of the Paper

The paper provides a wide sweep of the available literature on barriers to women’s career progression. It covers research into barriers to women in both the public and private sectors, due to the limited amount of data available specifically on the Public Service.

The research literature indicates not only that women as a group face barriers to career progression but that women from ethnic and other minority groups face additional barriers (see Shaw et al, 1993; Gardiner and Parata, 1998). We have not attempted to review the research findings relating to specific groups of women in this paper and acknowledge this limitation. We aim to overcome this deficiency by collecting information on barriers salient to Maori women and women from ethnic and other minority groups in New Zealand in future work.

That the review is primarily concerned with research into barriers to women’s career progression is a reflection of the available literature. It is hoped that such an approach will provide an appropriate basis for developing strategies to overcome barriers.
Structure of the Paper

The causes of the different labour market status of men and women are manifold...

The literature offers many explanations for the different labour market status of men and women. These explanations range from those that relate to human capital, to ‘glass ceilings’, and prejudice and discrimination. From this basis (which is detailed in Appendix 1, p.26), this paper focuses on the research which identifies factors that influence the different labour market outcomes of men and women. The paper has three parts.

HRM is important...

Part 1 of the paper examines human resource management systems and practices and analyses research into how these processes can affect men and women differently.

as is the culture of the organisation ...

Part 2 of the paper discusses the role of organisational culture and examines the differences in how different people perceive and experience the organisations in which they work. It analyses perceptions of the abilities of men and women, and the ‘sex-typing’ of jobs. The paper looks at how all of these factors can combine to maintain existing occupational segregation and inequitable labour market outcomes. The paper concludes that based on this research, an understanding of the differences is crucial to identifying strategies for removing barriers to women’s career progression. It asserts that attempting to address barriers in a workplace in which some people fail to acknowledge their existence is unlikely to succeed.

and the impact of family commitments

Finally, Part 3 examines research into balancing work and family commitments. In particular it focuses on how this impacts on women’s lives. Research indicates that balancing work and family responsibility impacts on women’s working lives in different ways than for men, although this is changing as more men share family responsibilities.

The paper concludes that several (often complex and intangible) barriers prevent women from progressing in their careers in the same way as men. However, women who reach senior levels often recognise these barriers, and develop strategies to overcome them. The paper ends with a discussion of these strategies, and identifies the key issues to inform future work in this area.

**HRM processes can affect men and women differently**

This part of the paper examines human resource management (HRM). It has four parts. It begins with an analysis of the general principles that relate to the HRM process, and in particular the ways in which these processes affect women and men. The paper then discusses the component parts of HRM, recruitment, training and promotion in turn.

**General Principles**

Human resource management (HRM) is the process of recruiting and selecting people to positions, managing their performance, rewarding them for their contribution, and providing appropriate development opportunities (Storey, 1989).

First, HR can be structured in different ways, ranging from formal processes and practices to informal ones. Formal, structured HRM processes and practices have been shown to be more valid and reliable than informal processes in predicting future job performance. Unstructured informal processes that have comparatively low validity, such as the unstructured selection interview, are still used by the majority of organisations (Burton, 1998b; Powell, 1988; Wernick 1994; Woody & Weiss, 1994; McDonnell, 1996; University of Auckland/New Zealand Institute of Management, 1999). Lack of formal policies means that it is difficult for organisations to assess practice, and, therefore, outcomes.

The formality of HRM policies and practices does not necessarily indicate that they are merit-based and so bias-free. There is a substantial body of work that challenges the notion that objective decision-making and recognition of merit is relatively easy (Hyman, 1996; Burton, 1988, 1998a; Martin, 1987). As Hyman (1996) notes, the way in which merit is interpreted depends on individual and organisational values. It is often tied to historical and cultural factors unrelated to effectiveness and efficiency, or to fair treatment of all groups. Its content must be unpacked in any context and the assumptions and biases revealed.

**For instance**, in a university setting merit supposedly underpins appointments, promotion and research and leave evaluations. In the case of research it is based upon peer review and number, type and quality of publications (Hyman, 1994 and 1996). This might appear to be a straightforward example of how the merit concept is applied in practice. However Hyman notes that there is a growing body of work which shows

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1. Formal systems are procedures that have been institutionalised in organisations to deal with employee relations. Such systems would include written regulations on recruitment, hiring, promotion, compensation, appraisal and the like (Thomas et al, 1994:unpaged).

2. The concept of merit, in the employment context, refers to a relationship between a person’s job-related qualities and those genuinely required for performance in particular positions. The focus of a merit selection process is on what the job applicants possess by way of skills, experience, qualifications and abilities, and what is required to achieve the outcomes expected from effective job performance. Job requirements are identified through an analysis of the job and are translated into selection criteria.
that there is a lack of value-freedom and objectivity in the construction of research and writing. She also asserts that gate-keeping can operate to perpetuate the status quo regarding what counts as appropriate subject matter for publication in the prestigious journals. She concludes that ‘what counts as important and valued knowledge is socially constructed’ (Hyman, 1994:50).

Second, instigating formal HRM policies alone does not ensure that the associated processes and practices are merit-based (Burton, 1998b; Townley, 1989). Decision-makers require clear guidelines and an understanding of the concepts being applied. Otherwise, there is a danger that they may express and act on their personal biases. Even with formal merit-based HRM systems and processes in place, there are many opportunities for errors to occur and for people to be unfairly disadvantaged at any stage of the HRM cycle (Thomas et al, 1994; Powell, 1988; Burton, 1998b). There is a substantial body of research that examines the ways in which HRM systems and processes can result in indirect discrimination, but this bias is often not recognised. In addition, recent research findings show that men and women have different experiences and perceptions of organisational practices. It seems that, on the whole, men believe that equal employment opportunity (EEO) has been achieved, whereas women do not (Burton, 1998a:66).

Third, the literature suggests that it is important to ensure that HRM processes are sound. For example, Burton (1998b:133) argues that validity is the crucial issue in personnel-related systems, tests and decisions. The more valid the job-related test, the more efficient selection and placement will be. The different dimensions of validity include:

- **content validity** (ie skills, knowledge etc required to perform the job; job analysis is a critical element for determining content validity);

- **construct validity**, which exists when there is a positive correlation between a selection process or test (a measure of the construct) and the attribute (construct) it seeks to measure; and

- **criterion related validity**, which is a measure of how well a test predicts criteria such as job performance (Schuler and Youngblood, 1986, cited in Burton, 1998b:161).

Reliability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for validity and is an important factor in the use of predictors. If a test is repeated under identical conditions, the results should be the same - if not, it is unreliable. (See also Gatewood and Field, 1998 for discussion of validity and reliability of measures used in selection searches.)

Townley (1989:95) notes that the literature stresses that the value of such techniques can only be assured where there is validation of methods against future performance and only when methods devised are organisation-specific rather than off-the-peg measures. However, she concludes that studies of recruitment and selection procedures generally...
indicate a limited validation of selection methods. McDonnell (1996) notes that many recruiters not only used low validity selection techniques but, in addition, were often unaware of the published literature on the predictive validity of different selection approaches.

These themes, which relate to formal versus informal processes and attention to merit and validity, must be considered in any of the following parts of the recruitment process.

Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment and selection are key aspects in the management of human resources. These are also processes that, according to research, men and women can experience differently.

Recruitment

In their review of the research literature and consideration of cultural audit results of organisations, Thomas et al. (1994) found that the majority of organisations favour the use of informal recruitment and selection processes, such as small social networks and employee referrals. Many organisations rely on informal, rather than merit-based\(^3\), processes in order to be able to select the best candidates and to screen out large numbers of unsuitable applicants. Such processes also minimise the cost of the recruitment process.

Informal recruitment processes are common

and can lead to bias

Informal recruitment processes can also lead to bias because recruiters tend to determine job requirements according to the current job-holder’s gender (Powell 1988:92). If the current job-holder is male (or female) and displays certain characteristics and abilities, then these characteristics and abilities are determined as being necessary to the job. Applicants are then assessed according to these requirements and, where these are perceived as being held more often by one particular sex than the other, applicants of that sex are preferred. This sort of process tends to limit the number of women applicants for ‘men’s’ jobs and men applicants for ‘women’s’ jobs. It reinforces occupational segregation and contributes to building stereotypical views of men and women’s roles and abilities.

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\(^3\) Merit-based selection processes involve a range of steps, not only to ensure that the position is offered to the most qualified applicant, but that the pool of applicants is wide and goes beyond the apparently suitable pool. The selection processes should be such that the opportunity exists for applicants to demonstrate to the selectors their relative merit in relation to the requirements of the position for which they have applied (Burton, 1998:81).
Selection of Candidates

Bias can also arise in the recruitment and selection process when the range and type of information to be collected on each applicant, and the effort given to collection of information (such as CVs, referee reports), varies (Thomas et al., 1994). This includes effort given to recruitment. Casting a wide net to attract applicants from outside mainstream groups for instance requires more effort, as does putting together a panel of interviewers representative of a diverse candidate pool. Powell (1988) also found that when decisions about individuals based on incomplete information they tended to be less influenced by stereotypes.

Moreover, research has shown that standardised job requirements can be used to legitimise the selectors preferred choice of applicant (Collinson, 1988, cited in Webb, 1991:23). Webb cites a study of managers in sixty-four private sector work-places which showed how job related criteria of stability, flexibility and compatibility were used to justify a preference either for a man or a woman, depending on which sex typically occupied the job. This was achieved by applying what might be described as a job model to men and a sex-role model to women. For instance, domestic responsibility was taken as an indicator of stability in a man but unreliability in a woman who was applying for a ‘man’s’ job. A requirement for mobility in banking and insurance jobs was applied inflexibly to women, who were deemed non-mobile on the basis of gender, but was considered inessential and negotiable in the case of men.

Webb (1991:22-23) argues that jobs are often not available to both men and women equally. It is likely that more men than women will appear suitable for jobs conventionally held by men and vice versa. Webb supports this contention with evidence of a widespread belief amongst senior managers that women are, by nature, unsuitable for work that is ‘difficult’ or which requires strong leadership. Rather, women are seen to be more ‘suitable’ for supportive or nurturing work. Accordingly, the conventional requirements for many managerial jobs are more likely to be found among men than women, thus making men appear more suitable than women. (See also Powell, 1988; and Eveline, 1998.)

Interviews

Interviews are a central part of the selection process that are used by the majority of employers. According to Thomas et al. (1994) the interview process can be biased in favour of individuals whose behaviour and appearance conform to society’s dominant cultural norms. They argue that often the primary intent of the interview is to assess the candidate’s personal qualities as opposed to focusing the interview on the job requirements, as would be expected in a sound interview process. While a typical interview might centre around the candidate’s past work experience and indicators of dependability and willingness to work, as well as verification of the information provided, employers were found to have developed their own subjective tests of productivity and character. For example, they focused attention on how expressive or open a
candidate was and the candidate’s personal philosophy about work. Even though some employers recognise that some differences might be based on culture or gender, they can feel that such differences are not appropriate in the work environment, and as a result candidates are excluded from particular occupations.

Gatewood and Field (1998) conclude that many factors that only marginally relate to job activities can influence an interviewer’s evaluation, even if the interviewer is experienced. They disagree with the argument that because most jobs require some social interaction, these cues are important for at least some aspects of job performance. They argue that behaviours and characteristics can be learned by interviewees specifically for the interview and might not be representative of their behaviour in other situations. Lack of agreement about what characteristics such as appearance and liking actually mean in terms of job performance, limit the usefulness of these factors.

Many employers also utilise employment tests as part of the recruitment process. McDonnell (1996) examined research findings on the validity and reliability of employment tests, such as cognitive ability and personality tests. Cognitive ability tests were found to have moderate predictive ability for managerial jobs but to have an adverse impact on minorities, as they are not fair predictors of future job performance. In contrast to employment tests, the selection interview, when conducted in a structured manner, has been found to have moderate to high predictive validity and to be fairer to women and minorities because the focus of the interview is on critical job requirements.

Employment testing continues to be used by employers in spite of evidence that such testing can contain gender and ethnic biases and that such tests are often weak indicators of job performance and successful employment (Thomas et al., 1994). Townley (1989:92) argues that employers continue to use employment testing because it gives the semblance of being objective and scientific, and, concomitantly, efficient. She concludes that ‘selection, by definition, involves a process of discrimination, and that the opportunity for management to emphasize employee ‘acceptability’, or the ‘good bloke syndrome’, rather than ‘suitability’ residing in task-based criteria, has been well documented in the discussion of recruitment and selection decisions’. However, she also notes that other studies have questioned the extent to which these factors have been elevated over task-based activities.

Recruitment and selection related decisions made by individuals and organisations cumulatively affect the representation of women and men in particular areas of work and at different levels within organisations. Assumptions about women’s role and abilities have led to women being over-represented in particular occupations and positions, thus constraining women’s work opportunities. These initial limitations are compounded by the level and nature of training and development opportunities offered to women.
Training and Development

Access to high-profile development opportunities (such as to inquiries and working groups) is often gained through informal networks and mentors. Research shows that women tend to lack access to informal networks that provide information about such opportunities. They are also less likely to have a mentor who will signal their potential and provide them with the support needed to ensure success (Townley, 1989).

In spite of the consistent association of on-the-job development and promotion, research indicates that women are offered fewer developmental experiences than men (Wernick, 1994; Tharenou, 1995; Tharenou et al, 1994). Women are also more likely to be found in staff (personnel, HR, communications etc) rather than line (service delivery/production) functions. Thus, they can lack the kind of work experience that leads to promotion (Economist, 1998). Movement between the two areas is not common and tends to be reserved for those who are seen to have potential. Women are less likely to be identified as having potential because they are restricted to particular kinds of work and have limited access to the high-profile development opportunities.

An individual’s prospects for advancement can be affected by the number of opportunities they have to accumulate and demonstrate their merit (Burton, 1998a: 64; see also Wernick, 1994). Although increasing numbers of women have appropriate educational qualifications, Wernick (1994) found that there is still a perception that there is lack of suitably qualified women for senior management positions. She attributes this to the fact that women have limited access to the wide range of developmental experiences and activities that build the credibility needed to advance.

Wernick also found that, as is the case for initial selection, methods for selecting people for development tends to be ‘haphazard and inefficient’ and leads to inequitable access. Again, the procedures tend to be informal and so bound by stereotypes, biases and questionable ‘qualifications’. This, in turn, means that companies can pass over individuals with education, interest and potential, especially for managerial and executive responsibility. Moreover, she found that few companies have formal succession or executive development plans, relying instead on informal practices and procedures that often use limited information to make decisions.

The most valuable training for managers is provided through a variety of credential building exercises, especially on-the-job opportunities, and opportunities to work on high-profile projects which enhance visibility and build credibility (Wernick, 1994; Rusaw, 1994; Burton, 1998a). In addition, time in certain functional areas such as line management is seen to provide the kind of development which prepares people for more senior appointments and on-the-job experience is also seen to be of greater benefit than formal education and training.
Performance Assessment

Performance assessment is one of the elements of performance management systems implemented in recent years as organisations move away from a narrow concept of training and skills development to a broader vision of personal development (White, 1999). The opportunities and demands made in the workplace itself are seen to provide the best opportunities for personal development. Access to these opportunities and the way staff are managed in their work are both seen as crucial to the development process.

However, performance assessment is also seen to be one of the most complex activities in HRM and there are numerous ‘veto-points’ that derail even the best designed systems (Roberts, 1998:302). These include rater bias, inadequate documentation, absence of training, unclear performance standards, and heuristical and attributional errors, all of which reduce performance appraisal validity and reliability. Roberts (1998:315) examines the enduring issues relative to performance appraisal and concludes that even though ‘no amount of research can completely rationalise an inherently subjective performance appraisal process prone to the vagaries of human cognition, emotion, and decision making’ it is a useful tool and users will welcome any improvement.

White (1999) found that differences persisted systematically between men and women through most elements of the performance management system. Of particular interest are the results concerning appraisals, the foundation of all performance management. Whereas overall, the gender difference in access to appraisal was quite small, the difference became more marked the more intensive the type of appraisal. For example, the gender gap for assessing promotions is 10%.

White also concluded that the systematically lower exposure of women to the developmental systems of performance management meant that women tended to be in workplaces or work groups where there was less emphasis on individual performance and on rewarding performance.

In their examination of equity and performance pay systems, Bryson et al. (1998) found evidence of indirect discrimination in the operation of performance pay systems. For instance, in one case study organisation men received higher performance payments than women in the same grades, despite having received similar performance rankings. The authors argue that the discretion allowed to managers where human resource decisions are devolved increases the potential for subjective assessments to result in discrimination.
Mentoring

Mentors are people either inside or outside an individual’s organisation with whom there is a formal or informal working relationship. Mentors and proteges can talk openly about job and career advancement issues.

Mentors can build confidence...

Mentors help to build self-confidence and professional identity in their proteges (Kram, 1985 cited in Raggins, Townsend and Mattis, 1998). They can provide access to developmental opportunities that allow people to demonstrate ability and become trusted. Moreover, because they have a vested interest in the success of their proteges’ projects, mentors keep open information channels and provide feedback on performance at crucial times. By ensuring success they confirm belief in their initial assessment. The visibility, success and trust that result from this process are then reflected in promotion rates.

and open opportunities

Mentors can play a significant role in providing access to high-profile development opportunities which in turn allow mentoring relationships, which are so important to career progression, to develop and flourish. Raggins et al. (1998) found that almost all (91%) successful women CEOs they interviewed said they had had mentors at some time, and almost as many (81%) said that mentors were critical or fairly important. These findings are in alignment with other evidence that individuals who are mentored are more frequently promoted, have more career mobility, and advance faster.

However, there are fewer opportunities for women to build mentoring relationships than there are for men. In part this is because there are fewer senior women to act as mentors and in part because of the difficulties associated with male-female mentoring relationships.

Particular attention to mentors for women is required

Only a few of the women interviewed by Raggins et al. had had both male and female mentors, but the different strengths of each were noted. Whereas male mentors provided access to inner circles of power, female mentors were able to identify and empathise with barriers faced by women. It appears that mentoring relationships between men and women are harder to establish and less likely to attain the level of intimacy required for their effectiveness, for example, because of fears that the relationship will be perceived as a sexual one (Sinclair 1994:21, cited in Burton, 1997:24).

Research has also shown that potential male mentors are less likely to assume that women are competent and that they often defer establishing mentoring relationships with women until those women have proved themselves (Ibarra, 1993).
Promotion

Gender Differences in Promotion

Men tend to be promoted faster than women

There is a substantial amount of research that indicates that men tend to be promoted faster than women, even in organisations in which women dominate numerically and in which men are relative newcomers. For example, Corby’s (1995) review of studies of rates of promotion for male and female National Health Service (NHS) staff shows that:

- although only 10% of nurses are male, they fill 40% of senior nurse posts;
- women progress more quickly than men to senior house officer level but this trend is reversed at registrar level and above; and
- men are promoted to nursing officer much faster than women; 8.4 years as opposed to 17.9.

Rusaw (1994) also found that the U. S. federal government promoted women more slowly and less often than male counterparts. Federal agencies responded by implementing training for women to close grade and pay gaps, under the assumption that skill acquisition would make women more promotable. However, the findings indicated that training to acquire skills was only of marginal value because of the way in which structural factors, such as low-ceiling jobs, unfavourable personnel management decisions, and organisational cultural values that emphasised hands-on versus classroom-produced competencies, constricted women’s mobility.

This may be due to better use of networks...

Reasons for these differences are varied. For example, Cannings and Montmarquette (cited in Thomas et al, 1994) explain men’s greater success in achieving promotion in part to their greater use of informal networks as opposed to women’s greater reliance on formal promotion processes alone.

Differing development of skills...

Other explanations for women’s slower rates of promotion focus on women’s lack of access to the range and depth of development opportunities that provide the experience necessary to fill more senior positions. Paulin and Mellor (1996) argue that while acquisition of skills and knowledge play a part in promotion, other factors, such as the number of openings and competition for positions also have an impact. All three factors are affected by the structure of the internal labour market. They concluded that different systems of rules governed the promotion of white females, minorities, and white males.

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Paulin and Mellor (1996:278) define this as ‘the formal and informal system of rules governing the ways in which jobs are classified, defined, and related to one another; rules determining the length and width of job ladders; and rules governing the hiring, firing, layoff, transfer, and promotion of workers’.
Similarly, Tharenou and colleagues (1994) found that training was of greater advantage to men than women in terms of managerial advancement and that work experience and education increased training opportunities more for men than women.

**Promotion Reflects the Status Quo**

As is the case with other HRM systems and processes, formal procedures are thought to help filter out perceptions based on stereotypical views of women’s roles and abilities and to encourage actual assessment on the basis of individual skills and abilities. This is supported by research by Powell and Butterfield (1994) who, contrary to their expectations, found a lack of bias in the promotions they examined. They attributed this to the existence of formal processes and the fact that decision-makers were accountable for their decisions.

**Attention to promotion practices is required…**

Promotion is affected by initial selection decisions made within an overarching structure; when not guided by formal policies and procedures, these decisions are apt to replicate the status quo. Women tend to be employed in staff areas which makes them less suitable for high-profile projects. These projects both require and build breadth of work experience, which Tharenou (1995:202) found is consistently correlated with achieving CEO status. Because women have less opportunity to demonstrate ability, they are not seen to have potential and so are not promoted.

**including attention to those making assessments**

There is some disagreement in the literature about the influence of gender on performance evaluation. Thomas and colleagues (1994) found that, in general, research indicated that rater gender did not affect evaluations. However, Tsui and O’Reilly (cited in Milliken and Martins, 1996) found supervisors reported greater positive effect for subordinates of the same gender and tended to rate their performance more highly. Milliken and Martins (1996) found some studies that concluded that female raters tend to be more lenient than male raters. However, they also found some evidence that shows that women are rated more highly in female-oriented positions than are males in the same jobs. Similarly, male ratees are evaluated more positively in male-oriented job positions. Moreover, they found some evidence that indicates that the proportion of women in an organisation affected performance ratings. When women formed less than 20% of the group they received lower performance ratings than the men did, but when their proportion was greater than 50% they were rated higher than were men. Interestingly, there was no parallel effect of the proportion of representation on the performance ratings of men.

Following their review of psychological research literature on the linkages between gender and performance assessment and pay, Bryson et al. (1998) conclude that there is only limited evidence of direct discrimination against women when performance ratings or pay are decided. However, they also found other qualitative research that suggests that broader factors may result in indirect discrimination. Areas which can work to women’s disadvantage include performance criteria used, the negotiation
or appraisal processes that are put in place, and the levels of reward available at different levels of the organisation.

This part of the paper has outlined the stages of the human resource management process and general principles underpinning fair human resource practice. Formality underpins fair practice, but does not ensure it. Application tends to rest on accountability for action. Informal processes, which are practised by the majority of organisations, result in different treatment for men and women, and hence, in different perceptions of fairness. These differences are also apparent in perceptions of organisational culture. This issue is discussed in Part 2 of the paper.
Part 2: Organisational Culture

The culture of an organisation has an important impact on those who work within it. This part of the paper first discusses the significance of organisational culture. Second, it analyses how organisational culture can affect women specifically. It then discusses perceptions of discrimination and stereotyping within work environments.

Identifying Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is defined as the realities, values, symbols and rituals held in common by members of an organisation and which contribute to the creation of norms and expectations of behaviour (Phillips, Little and Goodine, 1997). It defines conduct within an organisation, determines what is and is not valued, and how authority is asserted (James and Saville-Smith, 1992).

The values which underpin the great majority of organisations, and thus define success, often include money, power and status. The corresponding behaviours include working long hours and putting in ‘face time’ (as proxies for productivity), competitiveness and a willingness to put work above all else (McKenna, 1997; Cornelius, 1998; Raggins et al, 1998). These values and behaviours, which some authors define as being masculine, have come to dominate organisations for historical and socio-economic reasons but are increasingly being challenged by women, and many men, who want to ‘work to live’ rather than ‘live to work’.

Burton (1998b) suggests that the masculine values underpinning organisational culture have a systemic influence which creates an environment in which men are more ‘at home’ than women. In some instances, this influence extends to systemic discrimination – defined as a complex of directly and/or indirectly discriminatory practices that operate to produce general employment disadvantage for a particular group. The organisational and managerial values in these organisations tend to be characterised by stereotypical views of women’s roles, attributes, preferences and commitments. These in turn influence decisions about who is suitable for particular positions, who is seen to have potential and so forth. When women find themselves selected or assessed on the basis of group membership rather than on their experience and abilities, they experience gender discrimination.

McKenna (1997) and Cornelius (1998) argue that it is these values and behaviours that create the kind of organisational culture which many women find so inhospitable. Women, and many men, not only find the environment inhospitable but the patterns of interaction potentially ineffective (Marshall, 1995:S59). Women say that an inhospitable culture is one of the most significant barriers to their advancement and a major factor in diminishing their satisfaction with work in large organisations (Phillips, Little and Goodine, 1997:571).
Conflict of Organisational Culture and Women’s Values

To succeed in these kinds of organisations, many women, and increasing numbers of men, consider that they have to put aside the values and behaviours they believe are important in defining who they are. This includes having to down-play the importance of family and children in order to be seen as being serious about their career. An organisation that asks employees to deny the importance of their personal life in favour of work life creates conflict, and women deal with this in a number of ways. Some women choose not to apply for more senior positions because they believe that the balance between work and life that they have managed to achieve in their current position cannot be maintained in a higher level one (Hyman, 1996). In a number of Western countries, many women have left organisations and started their own organisations. Businesses headed by women are one of the fastest growing groups. Women interviewed by McKenna (1997) maintained that by running their own organisations they could focus on the quality of what they did over how it was done, and provide the means for their staff and themselves to maintain a balance between work and life.

Many organisations explain the high turnover of female staff in terms of women’s desire to spend more time with their family. Women, on the other hand, maintain that they love the work they do but not the environment within which they are asked to do it. McKenna (1997) found that women are not able to separate their personal and professional lives as easily as men and so are less willing or able to define themselves in terms of work alone. When women are forced to deny important aspects of their lives in their work environment they can encounter problems building a secure and integrated self-identity. This adds to the conflict experienced by women who try to combine work and family life.

Organisations are often not built to accommodate women’s values and experience of the world. In part, this is because women entered many organisations relatively late, and work in a narrow range of occupations. However, McKenna argues that a change in organisational values and behaviours needs to precede structural change, because until men and women both value the personal and professional sides to themselves any structural change will be superficial. This is already evident in some organisations which have family friendly policies in place but whose staff are unwilling to exercise options. They believe the organisation will interpret their use of flexi-time or family leave as suggesting that they are not committed to work and therefore they will not be considered for promotion or the more challenging work assignments (see Schwartz, 1994).
Gender Differences in Perceptions of Discrimination

Given women’s relatively late entry to organisations, and to a relatively narrow range of occupations, men and women can experience organisational cultures very differently, and can have different views as to whether or not gender discrimination is an issue (Phillips, et al, 1997:577; Raggins et al, 1998:35). Still’s (1997:5) attitude survey of 3,900 employees in Australian banks concluded that women felt ‘disadvantaged’ compared with men in the areas of recruitment, selection, promotion and transfer, conditions of service, and personal qualities (perceived as relevant to promotion decisions). Men, on the other hand, felt that women were given equal opportunities to progress, and that the organisational culture was supportive of their career aspirations.

Whereas men tend to look to women’s personal characteristics, lack of skills and experience, and family responsibilities, to explain women’s different labour market status, women tend towards the view that the problem is one of systemic discrimination (Burton, 1997:10). This in turn influences men’s and women’s perceptions of what the problems are and of how they should be addressed.

Raggins et al. (1998) found that the perceptions of male chief executive officers (CEO) of Fortune 1000 companies regarding organisational and environmental barriers to women in the organisations were vastly different to those described by women in these organisations. Eighty-two percent of male CEOs thought that lack of general management/line experience with profit and loss responsibility was a key deterrent to women’s advancement, and almost two-thirds thought that women hadn’t been in the pipeline long enough. Some CEOs attributed this lack to women self-selecting out or their lack of understanding about the importance of these experiences while others recognised more subtle discrimination at work:

“In the case of women, we use the lack of specific training for a job as a reason not to open jobs to them, when we are more ready to bring men into jobs for which they are not specifically trained. That kind of discrimination or stereotyping is much subtler and more difficult to get at” (Raggins, Townsend and Mattis, 1998:34).

In contrast to the views of male CEOs, only 47% of women executives thought that lack of general/line management was a key barrier to advancement and only 29% thought that women had not been in the pipeline long enough. Fifty-two percent of women executives cited ‘male stereotyping and preconceptions of women’ as the main factor holding women back, compared with only 25% of male CEOs; almost half the women, compared to 15% of male CEOs, identified ‘exclusion from informal networks’ as a factor. Thirty-five percent of women CEOs, compared to only 18% of men CEOs, identified inhospitable corporate culture as a barrier.
Stereotyping can have an influence on the way in which men and women are perceived in the workplace. Stereotyping is a process of categorisation that is effective and efficient in most instances, but is often inaccurate when used to group people according to attributes such as attitude or abilities (Heilman, 1997). The use of stereotypes as the basis for assessment of individuals can result in advantage or disadvantage, not because of individual ability or lack of it but because of group membership. Gender stereotypes are still pervasive and widely shared, according to Cornelius (1998: viii).

However, despite all the evidence, beliefs persist about differences between men and women and how these differences impact on labour market outcomes. Even though men and women are both parents, research indicates that the presence of a partner and children continues to affect the participation of men and women in paid work quite differently.

Men and women share descriptions of ‘typical’ men and women, and both tend to describe men and women in terms of opposites, men typically being described as strong and active and women as weak and passive. Moreover, male traits tend to be valued more highly than female traits. Achievement orientation of men, for instance, tends to be valued more highly than the nurturing and affiliation typically ascribed to women.

Contrary to commonly held stereotypes, research has indicated that there are few gender differences in terms of abilities, attitudes or commitment, or in management styles and leadership attributes (Phillips Little and Goodine 1997:573). Heilman (1997:3) found that differences between the abilities, attitudes and behaviour of men and women managers were more apparent than real, and most studies of practicing managers have shown that there is no systematic difference between them. She concludes that ‘the argument that women are less equipped in skills or temperament to handle the arduous role of a senior manager, and consequently that the current under-representation of women at the upper echelons is fair and equitable, seems highly questionable’ (Heilman, 1997:3).

The provision of job-relevant information can ameliorate stereotyping (Powell, 1988; Thomas et al, 1994). However, even where this was found to be the case, male managers were still characterised more favourably than female managers. Heilman (1997:4) argues that this is because of stereotypical views of men and women and also because jobs can be sex typed. As noted earlier, male jobs are seen to require male attributes and female jobs, female attributes. Expectations of success or failure are then built upon a ‘good fit’ between attributes required for the job and the incumbent. These expectations help to explain why women are often assessed less positively in some positions.
In terms of management, a number of researchers (Eveline, 1998; Marshall, 1995; Powell, 1988) have shown that a good manager is described predominantly in masculine terms so that not only are most managers men but good management is thought to be a ‘manly business’.
Part 3: Work and Family

Family commitments can affect perceptions of commitment to work...

This final part of the paper examines the difficulties women, and many men, can have in combining paid work with family responsibilities. In particular, it focuses on perceptions by others in the workforce on how this affects women’s commitment to their work. It provides some explanations for this situation, and offers an analysis of the effectiveness of some currently adopted solutions.

Family and Work Assumed to be Exclusive

The difficulty women have combining paid work with primary responsibility for dependant care is interpreted by some as a lack of women’s commitment to paid work, rather than a problem with the way work is structured. Commitment is generally perceived in those who are willing to work long hours, to undertake extended travel, and to put the needs of the organisation first. Staff who demonstrate commitment in this way are also seen to be highly productive. Given women’s primary care giving responsibilities, the use of these criteria can lead to perceptions that women lack commitment and that they don’t have the same potential as their male counterparts.

Family and work assumed to be exclusive is characterised by particular attributes...

The presence of a partner and children impact differently on women and men’s careers. Whereas 90% of male chief nursing officers in the U.K. National Health Service have children, only 14% of women in this position do (Phillips, Little and Goodine, 1997). Similarly, Tharenou (1995:21) found that women were more likely to become chief executive officers or top managers when they had fewer home demands in terms of spouse or children, whereas marriage and children were consistent correlates of men’s chief executive officer status. Raggins and Sundstrom (1989, cited in Raggins, Townsend, and Mattis, 1998) suggest that inequitable distribution of household labour may make homes with families a source of support for men but a source of demands for women.

In contrast to male managers, who tend to attribute women’s lack of career progression to women’s overriding commitment to family, women seldom identify family issues as a reason for lack of advancement. Burton (1997:13) reviews research findings which indicate that men continue to believe that family-work balance can adversely affect women. These findings are:

- only 3% of women managers surveyed regarded family responsibilities as the most serious obstacle in their business careers, while 50% named reasons related to their gender;

- only 7% of female managers surveyed reported leaving organisations for family reasons, whereas 73% report leaving because they saw limited opportunities for women in the organisation;

- being a spouse and parent has been shown to reduce women’s work...
experience, subsequent training and development, and advancement, whereas the opposite is true for men; and

• women are more likely to be found in staff and support positions because overriding commitment and continuity are seen to be less important to these roles than to core management functions.

‘Family-Friendly Policies’ and Work Commitment

Women often accommodate work and family responsibilities by working in part-time of flexible roles. However, such work can be seen by others in the workplace as being less important and less difficult than work that is carried out on a full-time basis, usually by men. This work also tends to be characterised by lower rates of pay and less favourable conditions and because it is of less value it is also seen to require less commitment. The fact that it requires less commitment is seen as a benefit for women because they may be required at any time to drop it to meet family responsibilities. This supports stereotypical views of women which perceive women as lacking the ability to do the ‘hard’ work that men characteristically undertake and part-time, flexible ‘women’s’ work is equated with women’s lack of ability and personal characteristics, rather than a result of the fact that they fill socially constructed roles.

Many organisations have family-friendly policies to alleviate the pressures of combining work and family life. However, employees can be reluctant to access such policies because of the possible impact on their career. Schwartz (1994) indicates that women perceive career penalties from using family-friendly policies, but she also concludes that actual use is career enhancing in that it provides a means for women to remain attached to the workforce. She adds that using family-friendly policies will be mediated by both individual attitudes and by corporate culture.

However, it seems that beliefs about career commitment and what it takes to make a valuable contribution have not evolved in tandem with family-friendly policies. In spite of espoused changes that value team work and co-operation over command and control management style, traditional beliefs about the nature of work persists and include notions such as:

• commitment to career and organisation is demonstrated by ‘face time’;
• presence (long hours) is the best indicator of productivity;
• ‘real’ work can only be accomplished full-time; and
• those who are ‘serious’ will be available at all times.

The persistence of such beliefs in organisations can create a sense of dissonance for those who use family-friendly policies. The presence of such policies indicates a commitment to values and beliefs that are not those actually espoused by the organisation (Schwartz, 1994:37; McKenna, 1997).
There is, however, some evidence that suggests that the implementation of family-friendly policies influence and foster workplace change in that they ‘create a culture of mutual commitment [that makes it] easier to change organisations with employee commitment’ (Schwartz, 1994:38).

**Conclusion**

This paper has outlined the key issues that arise from the literature concerning barriers to women’s career progression. It concludes that many women who reach senior levels recognize the barriers created by attitudes and stereotypes and thus they develop strategies to overcome them (Ragins et al, 1998:29). Key career strategies of successful women include identifying influential mentors to support their seeking difficult or challenging assignment and ensuring that they consistently exceed performance expectations, while at the same time developing a management style with which they are comfortable and that is non-threatening to male colleagues. While women do work their way to the top by adapting to organisations and, once there, become valuable role models for other women, success can be at some personal cost. However, placing the onus on individual women to overcome barriers means that the more entrenched issues of inappropriate organisational culture and practices that result in indirect discrimination are not addressed.

Labour market outcomes indicate that, generally, men receive greater rewards for paid work than women. While different explanations are offered for the gender pay gap, there is general agreement that part of the gap is attributable to gender discrimination in the workplace. Rather than being assessed on individual merit, women are assumed not to have particular skills and abilities. Consequently, they can miss opportunities to gain the kind and range of experience they need to advance. Assessing people on the basis of stereotypes rather than on individual merit can easily happen when there is a lack of job-related information that can lead to inappropriate decisions. This can be overcome in part by organisations ensuring that HRM policies and processes are formalised, that staff are trained to ensure that practices are bias free, and that staff are held accountable for performance management decisions.

There is now a substantial amount of evidence, which shows that, in general, men and women experience organisations differently and, therefore, they have different views as to what the problems are and the best means of addressing them. This difference arises not only because women are relative latecomers to organisations which may have been designed by and for men, but because their life experience is shaped by the fact that they give birth and tend to have primary responsibility for the care of dependants.

The number of women with children participating in the paid workforce has increased markedly over recent decades, but many workplaces have not altered their expectations of employees or provided work policies to
allow women, and men who choose to share dependant care, to balance work and family responsibilities. Understanding the way in which organisational culture impacts on different people’s ability to contribute in the work place in different ways is important if barriers to women are to be overcome and organisations are to attract and retain quality staff.
Appendix 1

Women in the Labour Market

This appendix considers the labour market context in which women undertake their careers. It outlines the current labour market position of women in New Zealand, and the explanations which have been put forward to account for this.

The labour market position of women is characterised by labour market participation rates that differ from those of men, and by continued vertical and horizontal segregation. These are outlined below.

**Participation**

Women’s participation in the workforce fluctuated prior to World War II, after which it increased to about 25% between 1945 and 1961, and then increased significantly (Hyman, 1994:220). Historically, labour market activity for women was most common among women aged 15-24 and was limited to unmarried women (Davies and Jackson, 1993:69). From the 1960s onwards, this pattern changed as large numbers of women continued to work after marriage, in the face of increasing demand for labour and technological developments in household technology. In 1951, less than 10% of married women worked, whereas 1996 census figures indicate that 65.3% of partnered women are employed (Statistics New Zealand, 1998). Even in the last decade, the largest increase in participation rates were among married and partnered women, and women who were previously married (Dixon, 1996).

Labour market participation patterns continue to be closely associated with women’s greater propensity to be responsible for domestic work. Of women who do not participate in the labour market, 55.4% are in two-parent families, while a further 29.5% are sole parents. Of male non-participants, only 19.7% are parents in two-parent families and 8.7% are sole parents (Dixon, 1996).

From the 1960s onwards women’s participation in the labour market has followed what has been described as an ‘M-shaped curve’ (Davies and Jackson, 1993). This term refers to the fact that participation rates for women vary by age, as women opt out of the labour force during prime child-bearing years. From the late 1970s, a return to the workforce after child rearing became more common for women of all ages, and women began to return to work after shorter periods of time than in previous years. Demographic analyses have found that over that in the post-war period, there has been a widening gap between the age at which women enter the labour market and when they bear their first child (Dharmalingam et al, 1996).

Women’s decisions to work and when to have their first child are intimately linked as a result of technological developments in contraception which have allowed increased control over when to have children. Economic factors may also have played a part in the decision to work, with 31% of women with children under one year old in paid work in 1996, up from 21% in 1986 (Burns, 1998). In addition, of all families with a child under the age of five, 35.8% have both parents in paid work. The combination of these changes has meant that patterns of labour market participation for women are significantly different in the 1990s than earlier this century, and that the increase in women’s labour market participation is forecast to continue to increase.
Currently, 57% of working age women (in contrast to 73.6% of men) participate in the labour force (Household Labour Force Survey, September 1998 quarter). During the 1980s and 1990s, the participation rates of women have continued to increase, while those of men have been falling. This is a result both of an increase in the number of jobs in those parts of the economy in which women have traditionally been employed and a large increase in the number of part-time jobs. While 88.5% of men work full-time, only 61.7% of women do so. A further feature of women’s increased propensity to work part-time is that the majority of those employed in two or more jobs are women.

Labour market participation rates vary by ethnicity as well as gender. Women of Asian descent have a lower participation rate than women of other ethnic minority groups. Despite having traditionally higher rates of labour market participation, rates for Maori and Pacific Islands women have dropped since the 1980s, and are now roughly equal to participation rates of Pakeha women.

**Segregation**

The term ‘labour market segregation’ refers to the fact that the labour market tends to be structured according to gender and ethnicity. The expectation that an increase in labour market participation by women would lead automatically to their increased participation across all sectors and in all areas of work has not eventuated. Internationally, women are concentrated in particular occupations, industries and at lower positions in the organisational hierarchy.

As illustrated in **Table 1**, within New Zealand 64% of women work in only two of the nine major Divisions of the New Zealand Standard Industrial Classifications (Community, Social and Personal Services and Wholesale and Retail Trades, Restaurants and Hotels). In comparison, men are more evenly distributed across all industry sectors. Women make up 65% of workers in the Community, Social and Personal Services sector, but are rarely employed in the Mining and Quarrying, Electricity, Gas and Water and Building and Construction industries.
Barriers to Women's Career Progression: A Review of the Literature

Table 1: Persons Employed by Sex and Industrial Activity of Place of Employment, September 1998 quarter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NZSIC Major Division</th>
<th>Number of males</th>
<th>Number of females</th>
<th>% female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Hunting Forestry and Fishing</td>
<td>97 900</td>
<td>42 500</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining and Quarrying</td>
<td>3 400</td>
<td>..</td>
<td>..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>198 300</td>
<td>85 400</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity Gas and Water</td>
<td>7 900</td>
<td>1 900</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and Construction</td>
<td>95 700</td>
<td>13 100</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale and Retail Trade, Restaurants and Hotels</td>
<td>180 600</td>
<td>188 300</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport Storage and Communication</td>
<td>71 600</td>
<td>29 800</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and Financial Services</td>
<td>113 400</td>
<td>107 600</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community, Social and Personal Services</td>
<td>166 300</td>
<td>309 500</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Similar patterns of segregation by occupation are evident from Table 2, which shows that 44.5% of women are employed in the occupational groupings of Clerks or Service and Sales Workers. In contrast, men are more evenly distributed over a range of occupations, although some occupations (eg, trades) are overwhelmingly male. It is notable, also, that the extent of occupational segregation has declined only slightly despite attempts to encourage women into traditionally male-dominated jobs. While in 1991, 8.1% of women were employed as Legislators, Administrators and Managers, by 1998 this had increased by only 1.6 percentage points to 9.7%. A recent report has concluded that occupational segregation has decreased most for full-time workers, Maori workers and those in the 15-24 year age group (NZIER, 1998).

Table 2: Persons Employed by Sex and Occupational Classification, September 1998 quarter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NZSCO Major Division</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% male</td>
<td>% female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislators, Administrators and Managers</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technicians and Associate Professionals</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>77.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service and Sales Workers</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>67.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and Fisheries Workers</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade Workers</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant and Machine Operators</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Occupations</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An additional aspect of segregation is that women tend to be concentrated in the lower levels of organisational hierarchies, even in professions in which women predominate. For example, while 30% of doctors are women, only 13% of specialists are women. Similarly, women make up only 13% of principals in law firms, despite their being 30% of lawyers with practicing certificates (Burns, 1998). Survey data collected by the EEO Trust indicates that in 1998, only 24.6% of women make up the top three levels of management in New Zealand organisations, despite constituting 44.9% of the workforce (Burns, 1998). This obviously has a significant impact on women’s earning potential, with women in New Zealand earning on average 80% of male earnings.

Even within the Public Service, where EEO programmes and policies are legislatively required, women make up only 29% of the top three tiers of management, and 17% of chief executives. The small numbers involved mean that some departments appear on the face of it to have reasonably high proportions of women within particular tiers, but few departments (with the notable exceptions of Crown Law and the National Library) have an even balance of men and women managers, even sometimes in departments in which a high overall proportion of women are employed. This situation is mirrored in the wider public sector. An analysis of the demographic characteristics of chief executives compiled by the SSC shows that only 13.4% of public sector organisations have women chief executives. While hospitals and colleges of education are more likely to have a woman chief executive than agencies in other sectors, it is notable that women are considerably more likely to be heading agencies that are smaller than average.

**Explanations for Differences**

The previous section provided background evidence of differences between men and women in labour market outcomes. Since the 1970s, a considerable amount of research attention has been paid to the providing a rationale for these differences, and has been based on both the supply of and demand for labour. Key findings and the strengths and weaknesses of these debates are summarised below.

**Supply-Side Explanations - Human Capital Theory**

Supply-side explanations are based on the belief that differences in labour market outcomes are the result of skills, abilities and choices of workers themselves. The most common supply-side explanation is based on human capital theory, but socialisation into gendered occupational roles has also been important as an explanation.

Human capital theory is based on the assumption of classical economics that wages and labour market position reflect relative productivity. However, unlike the classical belief that wages are determined solely by productivity, human capital theory suggests that workers ensure increased future earnings as a return on their investment in human capital. ‘Human capital’ refers to the knowledge that workers acquire through education and training, both on and off the job. Human capital theory is based on the assumption that better-educated, better-trained workers are more productive, and improve their work capacity (McConnell and Brue, 1989; Cohn 1996). The fact that women occupy less advantageous positions in the labour market, and with lower wages levels is therefore a reflection of their lower investment in skill formation.
Barriers to Women's Career Progression: A Review of the Literature

There are two features of human capital theory which have relevance for gender based differences in labour market outcomes. The first is based on the notion that other things being equal, the more years that workers spend in the labour force, the greater their level of investment in skill formation. The fact that women often have discontinuous patterns of labour market participation, as they take time out to bear and raise children is argued to provide less of an incentive for them to invest in human capital. Thus, as women anticipate interruptions in their careers, they chose low-status occupations in which wages do not improve with training and years of experience.

Secondly, human capital theory suggests that the greater likelihood of interrupted labour force participation means that employers may be less willing to invest in on-the-job training for women. Firm-specific training requires a significant investment by the employer and so groups with higher than average turnover rates represent a greater investment risk. Because managerial and professional occupations often involve firm-specific knowledge, women may be excluded from these positions as a means of ensuring a firm’s return on its investment.

Some econometric analyses suggest that the human capital model provides high explanatory power, and the model remains the most influential in explaining the concentration of women in low-status and low-paying jobs. One early study estimated that as much as half the difference between male and female hourly earnings can be explained by male-female differences in education and training (Polachek, 1975). However, other economists have challenged human capital theory on both normative and empirical grounds. For a start, many theorists have noted that returns on investment in education vary widely. This includes variations over time, as the supply and demand for particular skills changes from time to time, and also by gender and ethnicity (King, 1990). McConnell and Brue (1989) argue that rates of return vary significantly between individuals on the basis of their relative natural abilities, the possibility of discrimination, and differential access to borrowed funds to invest in human capital.

The assumed link between education and productivity has proved to be contentious. The ‘screening hypothesis’ (Spence, 1973) suggests instead that education does not increase productivity, but rather acts as a ‘signal’ which determines future job prospects, and therefore earnings. A review of studies examining whether more highly educated workers are more productive has suggested that there is no direct link, and that instead, employers may use educational attainment as a proxy in job recruitment (King 1990). Thus the fact that better educated or more experienced employees have higher levels of earnings is more likely to be related to perceptions about what they indicate (even when the qualification is irrelevant to the work being performed) than to higher levels of productivity per se.

A further challenge to human capital theory arises from an empirical examination of whether, in fact, women have lower rates of job tenure than men. A large number of studies have tested the explicit assumption of human capital theory that wages and occupational segregation is based on women’s greater propensity for interrupted careers. Although these studies have come up with conflicting results, there are indications that gender differences disappear when age in controlled for (Cohn, 1996), and that both younger and older women have quit rates that are lower than men of the same age. In addition, although average quit rates between men and women are similar, women have greater variability around the average. Furthermore, variability in quit rates for women has been found to be more significantly lowered by organisational measures such as improved training and promotion opportunities (Cohn 1996).
In summary, it is suggested that human capital theory is only a starting point and does not go far enough because it conveys the erroneous message that some workers possess a greater degree of choice over their work situation than is the case (Paulin and Mellor, 1996:277). As noted above, the segregation of occupations by gender and ethnicity that occurred following World War II economic expansion continues to be firmly entrenched. In addition, in spite of evidence that women and minorities have expanded both their level and range of qualifications (Maslen, 1998) and gained increasing experience at the lower levels of management, they generally fail to make it through to the most senior positions where power and decision-making are located in almost all developed economies.

In addition to explanations of gender-based differences based on human capital theory, explanations have also focussed on the role of socialisation and the gendered nature of domestic labour as an important influence on career choice. There is some evidence to suggest that women and men select appropriate work on the basis of life-style choices and dominant social values. Because of the traditional expectation that men act as breadwinner and women perform domestic roles, this may result in men selecting jobs on the basis of income maximisation while women select jobs that give them the flexibility they need to cope with potential conflicts between job and family responsibilities. This is supported by evidence which finds considerable differences in labour market patterns for women based on their marital and family status, and their age at the birth of their first child (Polachek, 1995). This has given rise to suggestions that the gender gap in wages and occupations might more appropriately be called the ‘family gap’ (Waldfogel, 1997). Until such time as domestic work is performed more equally by women and men, this gap is likely to continue.

Demand-Based Explanations

In contrast to supply-side explanations, demand-based explanations consider the importance of labour market demand as a source of explanation of labour market differences. They are based largely on studies which have attempted to dis-aggregate the effects of such factors as differences in educational attainment, and interrupted work histories. While research has found that these factors undoubtedly explain some of the differences between men and women, the proportion of the gap that can be explained varies. However, the remainder of a persistent and unexplained gap has resulted in the argument that discrimination against women also plays an important role.

The suggestion that employer discrimination in hiring practices resulted in less favourable outcomes for women was first made on the basis of work done in the US (Bergmann, 1974). This showed how discriminatory practices resulted in women being excluded from ‘good’ jobs, and resulted in the ‘crowding hypothesis’ suggesting overcrowding in lower-paid and lower-skilled occupations, and consequent depression of wages. Growing awareness of the individual and societal impacts of direct discrimination resulted in legislative and regulatory measures to make this form of discrimination unlawful right around the developed world. Over the next two decades direct discrimination decreased but persistent gender differences in labour market outcomes have resulted in increasing awareness that indirect discrimination still plays a major role. This refers to the fact that employers and organisations make decisions on the basis of criteria which, on the face of it, appear to be gender-neutral, but which has an adverse impact on women. Because decision-making is sometimes informed by assumptions based on generalisations, the effect is to allow the continuation of discrimination, even though this may be inadvertent and unintentional. Discrimination may also occur as a result of the preferences of co-workers or customers, who may be resistant to dealing with an employee working in a gendered occupation.
A reduction in direct discrimination has resulted in a small reduction in occupation segregation over the past two decades. However, this has largely been the result of women moving into traditionally male jobs, rather than men moving into traditionally female jobs (Blau et al, 1998). A recent study shows that there are marked differences in the extent to which different occupations contribute to a reduction in occupational segregation. For example male-dominated professions (such as labouring) have become less segregated, while some female-dominated occupations (such as teaching) have become even more dominated by women since 1991 (NZIER, 1998).

In addition, the extent of vertical segregation also remains persistent. There is considerable and increasing agreement that what in fact keeps women back are invisible and artificial barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing within their organisations and reaching their full potential - the ‘glass ceiling’ phenomenon. The ‘glass ceiling’ is a catchall phrase for the impediments to women's progression within work organisations, which consist of:

> artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organisational biases that prevent qualified women and minorities from advancing upward into management-level positions. The glass ceiling is comprised of day-to-day practices, management and employee attitudes and internal systems that operate to the career disadvantage of women and minorities (Chicago Area Partnerships, 1994 cited in Burton 1997:3).

A number of ‘glass ceiling’ inquiries and commissions have been set over the past decade and each has reached similar conclusions. In Australia, the Report of the Inquiry into Equal Opportunity and Equal Status for Women, Half Way to Equal (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1992) and the Report on the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills (Karpin, 1995) both found evidence of prejudiced attitudes towards women at the workplace, that indirect discrimination is rife in the both the public and private sector, and that Australian organisations have yet to adopt best practice approaches to progressing women into more senior positions. The U. K. Hansard Society Report (1990) and the U. S. Federal Glass Ceiling Commission Report (1995) both documented pervasive barriers to the appointment of women to senior professional positions, outmoded attitudes about women, and direct and indirect discrimination (Rosener 1995:173 cited in Burton 1997:3).

The issue of whether and why discrimination occurs in the labour market has been subject to some debate, and several theories have been put forward in explanation. Economist Gary Becker (1957) has argued that some employers may exercise a ‘taste’ for discrimination, and are willing to forgo profits and increased efficiency in order to cater to their prejudices.

The term ‘statistical discrimination’ has also been developed (Phelps, 1972). This suggests that individuals are judged on the basis of group characteristics, rather than on their own ability. As noted earlier, average turnover rates for men and women do not vary significantly, but amongst women there is a greater level of variance. As employers can not predict whether a particular employee has a greater propensity to have high rates of turnover, they act conservatively by employing men rather than women (Cohn, 1996).

An alternative explanation of discrimination adopts a more classical stance that discrimination occurs simply because it is profitable for employers to discriminate (McConnell and Brue, 1989). In sectors or regions where labour supply is relatively inelastic, an employer may simply be able to reduce wages and still recruit and retain sufficient labour.
Given occupational overcrowding in low-skill occupations in which large numbers of women are employed, discrimination may result from supply and demand factors.

Some economists have argued that discrimination arising from market power is best tackled by creating a more competitive labour market. This is on the basis that it is in the best interests of businesses and firms to recruit and retain the most meritorious employees. If firms engage in discrimination, then they are likely to miss out on the best available worker (who may, for example, be a woman) and will therefore not be as competitive as they might otherwise be. As the Business Roundtable (1988:14) has argued:

Employers who make employment, promotion or remuneration decisions according to their own preferences rather than the merit of workers will, in a relatively competitive market, lose good workers to employers more purely according to merit. Because employers’ ability to enhance productivity and restrain costs depends on the quality of their workforce at all levels, discrimination will result in increased costs and reduced profitability, including where it results in under-paying workers. In other words, where employers face competition both for workers and markets, they are unlikely to be able to afford to discriminate against workers on the basis of factors that are not relevant to productivity.

This argument has been subject to criticism both from neo-classical and feminist economists. Polachek (1990), for example, argues that large sectors of the economy (including some private sector companies) are likely to continue to be dominated by firms or organisations with monopoly and monopsony power in the labour market, and therefore that competition is not a reality. In addition, limitations on information about worker ability results in employment decisions being made on the basis of assumptions and stereotypes. The net result is unequal outcomes, but the causes of these must be tackled on a number of fronts.

It is notable also that demand-side explanations of differences in labour market outcomes between men and women are not necessarily inconsistent with those based on supply-side factors. Given the dynamic nature of the labour market, there in inevitably some relationship between supply and demand decisions, and as Blau et al (1998:32) point out, the feedback effects may be considerable. They note that ‘... women’s incentives to invest in job-oriented human capital would be enhanced by their perception that labour market discrimination against them had diminished, and the reluctance of employers to hire women in traditionally male jobs would decline in response to their perception that women’s labour force attachment and job skills had increased.’
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Barriers to Women's Career Progression: A Review of the Literature


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