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THE HISTORY OF WOMEN IN CORPORATE EXECUTIVE POSITIONS IN THE U.S.: BARRIERS TO FULL REPRESENTATIONS

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Female participation in U.S. industry was originally limited to employment prior to marriage at low-skill, low-wage, sometimes back breaking jobs in, for example, the garment and textile industries (Sylvia, 1989). Other opportunities available to women were found in low-paying service occupations such as food preparations and domestic and industrial cleaning. It was not uncommon during the nineteenth century for working class women to remain in the work force after marriage because of the financial demands of maintaining a household and family. There were some exceptions to career limitations on women; two of them were teaching and nursing. Both were, and continue to be today, very rigorous jobs paying lower wages than male dominated occupations that require comparable skills and training (Sylvia, 1989). As the economy expanded and more paper work was required in management and industry, clerical careers became available to women.

Given this brief history of women at work, it should come as no surprise that women are not significantly represented in the leadership of the majority of large corporations in the U.S. In fact, most large U.S. corporations are run by men. Female employees are usually in clerical positions where they have little formal authority (Freeman, 191).

It is only within the past 15 years that women have entered the corporate world in other than clerical positions. Changing beliefs about "a woman's place", legislative rulings for affirmative actions in employment and the fact that large numbers of women have entered and stayed in the work force are some of the forms of social change accounting for the increase in women in the corporate world. Although more women are in middle-management positions, there are very few at higher administrative levels, and they hold very little accumulated power within corporations as a whole. Many Fortune 500 companies may have no more than ten women in high ranking offices out of an average of 800 positions (Freeman, 192).

Not only are women a minority at high corporate levels, but their distribution is not equally spread across the various professional levels of corporate ranks. Even when women achieve professional positions, they seem to be denied access to higher ranks. The "critical mass" concept of analysis explains the lack of women in high corporate positions on the basis of their short history in corporate leadership. If it takes 25 years of middle management rank to gain a top corporate position, men have a ten year head start over women (Freeman, 192).

The difficulty with the "critical mass" analysis is that it requires a long period of time to determine the accuracy of male-female differences in obtaining high corporate positions. It also does not deal with the issue of differential treatment of men and women in similar positions. It is doubtful that male managers' experience is similar to that of the female minority (Rizzo and Mendez, 9).

Historically women have held jobs mostly held by women and their jobs have been at lower ranks and pay than jobs held by men. For the most part, these jobs have been supportive and an extension, outside of the home, of the woman's nurturing role. These hiring practices were based on two premises. First was the belief that men and women had innately differing abilities, and consequently nature had provided a gender based division of labor (Rizzo & Mendez, 9). Second, the disparity in wage levels was in part due to society's belief that men had families to support and women's earnings were secondary incomes. It is this line of thinking that probably prompted Congress to pass legislation in the 1870's permitting differential pay levels for men and women doing the same work in government (Sylvia).

Many of these positions open to women had standardized decision-making and required limited individual evaluation or review. To a large extent this simplistic use of stereotypes not only enforced personal prejudice into accepted corporate behavior, but also limited the corporate perspective when personnel decisions were made. These assumptions have continued to dominate personnel decisions because most people in management displayed these stereotypical behaviors (Rizzo & Mendez, 10).

These folklore-based personnel decisions grew out of a belief that men are better suited than women for decision making. Men have been seen as rational, decisive, and in control, while women have been viewed as too emotional to make rational decisions under pressure (Rizzo & Mendez, 10).

McGregor (1967), an organizational researcher, gave the following definition of a successful manager:

> The model of the successful manager in our culture is a masculine one. The good manager is aggressive, competitive, firm, just. He is not feminine; he is not soft or yielding or dependent or intuitive in the womanly sense. The very expression of emotion is widely viewed as a feminine weakness that would interfere with effective business processes. Yet the fact is that all emotions are part of the human nature of men and women alike. Cultural forces have shaped not their existence but their acceptability; they are repressed, but this does not render them inactive. They continue to influence attitudes, opinions, and decision (23).

The existence of this model probably stems from an investment in it by male managers as well as a belief that the corporation will not get an adequate return from encouraging women to be managers because they leave the work force prior to men.

Another reason McGregor's model has flourished is that it corresponds to military and sports models of desired managerial behaviors. The historical exclusion of women

from both the military and competitive sports has resulted in unequal access to male-dominated activities that have demonstrated effectiveness in the development of skills and abilities that result in promotions, salary increase, and most important, the responsibility for making decisions (McGregor, 11).

Needless to say, not all men with military and/or sports experience are or desire to be successful managers. However, men, simply because of their gender and the assumption that they would exhibit the traits McGregor outlines, have been perceived as capable and responsible managers. Consequently, the McGregor male model of traits needed in a manager, described in 1967, remains a potent influence in shaping unconscious attitudes toward men, management and women in management.

Research conducted by Hennig and Jardim (1977) concluded that men have been more aggressive in competing for promotions than women have. This research substantiates findings that teachers call upon and reinforce responses from boys in elementary school more than they do from girls (Rizzo & Mendex, 11).

There has been a lack both of reinforcement and acceptability for aggressive behavior in women, which has hindered women in gaining access to management positions (Rizzo & Mendez, 12). As a result, women have continued to work in the jobs available to them and developed a reputation for being useful in supportive positions. One of the authors recalls a doctor in recent years who told the hospital nurses working with him, "You do the work. I'll do the thinking."

Not only have women been hampered in their advancement to higher management positions, but they have also been limited in their access to and participation in the informal networks that require acceptance by and a camaraderie with colleagues at equal or higher ranks, both formally and informally. These networks provide support, inside information and access to management decision makers, all of which are necessary for advancement in the corporation. Historically, women have not been part of the informal network because of the lack of a perceived reason or need to include them.

Societal views of gender roles vary, of course, with time and context. Those born after 1960 received different messages about gender-appropriate identities and directions than those born twenty years earlier (Freeman, 126 & 133).

Not only have legislation and social beliefs influenced roles seen as appropriate for each gender, but so has the family. As Freeman reminds us, dominance and independence are linked with the masculine role whereas submissiveness, passivity and nurturance are linked with the feminine role. These sex-linked role concepts are seen as learned through the process of socialization, mainly within the nuclear family (Freeman, 248).

A participant in a study conducted by Freeman (1990) highlights the role of family upon gender appropriate career choices. The participant, who began as a secretary in her corporation, comments:

> ...in fact, I get aggravated with my parents because my mother and father
> were very traditional. My father made the decisions. My mother was a full-

time housewife. They talked a lot about girls do this and boys do that, though they always encouraged me. I did very well in school, and my father was very helpful to me [in] school work. There was a feeling that I should go to college, but it was for the wrong reason. It was because you'll meet a nice boy and get married. And, unfortunately, no one ever gave me any other options. Had I to do it over again I certainly would have had a different view of things (133).

Women whose families reinforced their achievements are more likely to see themselves as able to do whatever they choose. Women from families with less rigid divisions of appropriate roles for women and men, are also more likely to feel able to make choices about the direction of their lives.

Megatrends author, John Naisbitt, has predicted that a woman will be president of the United States before there is a female CEO at IBM (Matzer). According to several authors, women drop out of the corporate world to have children, to change careers, or to start their own businesses. By going into business for themselves, women sacrifice the rewards and challenges of the corporation.

Both men and women experience a "dangerous period" in their mid-career years, usually between ages 36 and 43 (Matzer). During this period employees on the fast track are in danger of derailing or reaching a plateau. However, this slow down in the climb up the corporate hierarchy happens to women for different reasons than it happens to men.

During this period men learn to be more flexible in order to survive in the corporation by fitting in with senior management. The very characteristics that put men on the corporate fast track (assertiveness, high energy, initiative) are the characteristics that they must relinquish. Women, on the other hand, are generally already flexible. Women are more likely to drop out and become disillusioned as they encounter the "glass ceiling." Women opt out about this time because they want to spend time with small children, or they want to start their own business.

Why should corporations be concerned with problems of advancement faced by women managers? According to former CEO Evans of Monet Jewelers, women bring a tremendous amount of balance to the workplace. Evans was recruited by Montgomery Securities to review companies as candidates for leveraged buy outs. She states that, "women tend to view things differently and are more sensitive and approachable by employees on a personal level" (Sylvia, 70). Several authors suggest that women look at marketing issues differently and may be more likely than men to get and generate more enthusiasm for their ideas or concepts.

It seems to be in management's best interest to provide and publicize equal opportunities for women. Corporations, executives, and high level managers may otherwise alienate very talented and reactive females. Several authors point out that women add diversity to predominantly male institutions as well as help foster more creative people-oriented working environments. Corporations have a further incentive, which is economically based, for hiring and promoting females. The 1990's will face a

dwindling supply of male college graduates from which to recruit. Furthermore, by the late 1990's only 15% of the network force will be white men born in the United States. (Johnston).

Women outnumber men at 52% of the nation's colleges and universities, and enter business, engineering, and law schools in greater numbers (Matzer). It is clear that women are a growing percentage of the work force, and companies will need to offer an attractive working environment to compete for top management trainees and entry-level people.

A further barrier to women's full and equal participation in the corporate world is sexism and sexual harassment. Women are being driven out of the business world by male co-workers and bosses who snub, insult or pass them over for promotion. However, the courts have ruled that sexual harassment constitutes sexual discrimination. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Guidelines define sexual harassment as, "any unwelcome sexual conduct that 1) is made a term or condition of employment, 2) has the purpose of effect of interfering with work performance, 3) creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment."

"Historical accounts and current documentation of incidence levels suggest that sexual harassment has been and continues to be a persistent problem for working women" (Schneider, 76). A study conducted by Martin in 1984 found that at least half of all working women experienced some form of sexual harassment. Women occupying male-dominated occupations report experiencing sexual harassment more frequently than those women in traditional female or mixed occupations (Schneider, 67). In 1986, Lafontaine and Tredeau conducted a survey of 160 alumnae of a private college in upstate New York whose graduates were employed in engineering, science and management (male-dominated occupations). Over 75% of the 160 respondents in the study reported that they had experienced one or more types of harassment.

The researchers offer three explanations for the higher incidence of harassment encountered by women in traditional male occupations. First, women hold a minority status which highlights the incongruity between their gender role and work role. This incongruity may lead men to treat women in stereotypical way. Second, men may perceive their power and privileges to be threatened by women occupying traditional male jobs. Because of men's perceived threat to their power and privilege, women may experience more severe and frequent forms of harassment. Third, women in these positions may be more likely to report and identify harassment than their counterparts in more traditional female occupations.

Business and industry are beginning to address formally the issue of sexual harassment of women in the workplace. Executives, administrators and supervisors are learning to deal with the various ramifications of sexual harassment. They are beginning to understand that this issue affects not only women as the victims but the organization as well. Employers are being hit with staggering direct and indirect costs.

To facilitate any meaningful decline in discrimination against women in hiring and career advancement, companies must make attitudinal as well as structural adjustments. Managers from the top down should carefully examine harmful

organizational practices and problems, such as performance double standards and sex-related discriminatory practices, and take swift steps to eliminate them.

To further facilitate women's equal participation in the corporate world, Matzer offers the following suggestions.

1. Organizations must establish a working climate in which women and men see and accept one another as colleagues. For this to occur top-level managers must act to minimize the effects of sex stereotypes and prejudice about women by making a concerted effort to promote employees by the same criteria.
2. Corporations must provide women equal training and educational opportunities for advancement to corporate leadership positions.
3. Corporations must organize programs that allow flexible working hours and provide child care facilities.
4. Women should be encouraged to act as role models, mentors, and confidants for other women.
5. Corporations must work to break down the informal, and unstructured barriers to women that exist both inside and outside the organization, such as the "old boy's network." (71-72)

Strong support systems both at home and on the job are crucial for women to reach the pinnacles of corporate management. It takes an extensive support system at home to be able to progress through the managerial ranks (Matzer). Although more men are taking responsibility for domestic chores, women continue to put in more than full-time work. Women in business are pulled in so many different directions by family and job obligations that it is very difficult for them to stay in one piece. Corporations offering day-care programs, flexible work schedules, and non-sexist management training and development programs will engender a more confident group of women.

To become major players in corporations, women must be able to picture themselves in corporate board rooms and executive suites. But, for that to happen, management must also initiate and implement strategies to break down the informal, formal, unstructured and structured barriers to women's full participation. As mentioned previously, in the next ten years U.S. corporations will be in need of well trained and qualified employees. If women believe they have a fair chance to move up the ranks with the same opportunities as their male colleagues, they are more likely to stay in corporations long enough to reach the highest levels.

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