

Workplace gender discrimination: do women over-attribute slow advancement in management to gender discrimination?

Isabel Metz and Simon Moss



Women continue to assert that discrimination impedes their advancement in organisations. Based on a recent survey of 1043 employees in one large multinational, we demonstrate that such allegations of gender discrimination against women are likely to be accurate rather than fallacious or exaggerated. We offer four suggestions for organisations to reduce the occurrence of discrimination in the workplace.

A decade and a half ago, Northcraft and Gutek (1993) predicted that discrimination against women at work would persist. Recent research vindicates this prediction, demonstrating that women at all levels of management still report gender discrimination as a barrier to their advancement in Australia (e.g. Metz and Tharenou 2001) and elsewhere (Wirth 2001). Recent statistics verify these reports, showing that women constitute

almost half of the workforce but fewer than 15 per cent of the executives in developed countries (Catalyst 2007; Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency 2006). Gender discrimination is the differential

victims or targets of stereotypes to be unduly sensitive to discrimination (Pinel 2002). For example, an inclination of women to report more discrimination than men, while also demonstrating many substantive

workplace procedures are perceived as unjust (see Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter and Ng 2001).

Are women likely to unduly ascribe their limited advancement to gender discrimination?

In the past decade, studies more frequently reported gender discrimination against women than gender discrimination against men or negligible discrimination. Although stigma consciousness theory suggests that women are more likely than men to ascribe limited advancement to gender discrimination, research does not corroborate this hypothesis: men and women are equally likely to impute negative outcomes to discrimination (Major, Gramzow, McCoy, Levin, Schmader and Sidanius 2002). Indeed, several factors might inhibit any unfounded attributions to discrimination, such as a reduction in self esteem that is likely to ensue (Kaiser and Miller 2001).



treatment of men and women on the basis of their gender, irrespective of their merits or the requirements of a job (International Labour Office 2003).

Because EEO legislation has been operating since 1986, some sections of the workforce regard gender discrimination as obsolete — no longer a pressing concern. It is possible that many assume that women tend to exaggerate the role of gender discrimination in the under-representation of female managers. It is conceivable that women might be ascribing limitations in managerial advancement to factors external to themselves, such as gender discrimination, and not to personal shortcomings (see Hewstone 1983), possibly as a consequence of ‘stigma-consciousness’ — the tendency of individuals who have been the

deficiencies that curb advancement, might reflect stigma-consciousness.

If women do indeed overestimate the effect of gender discrimination, they might fail to address the impediments to their promotion. Nevertheless, if women are discriminated against — and do not receive promotions despite demonstrating the characteristics that would facilitate advancement — organisations must recognise that this problem persists and redress the bias. If organisations fail to redress this bias, they risk facing the deterioration in commitment, satisfaction, and productivity of employees that transpires when

Do the determinants of advancement differ between genders?

A variety of factors, in addition to discrimination, can affect managerial advancement. For example, family responsibilities seem to impede the advancement of women in management (e.g. Greenhaus and Parasuraman 1999; Griffith and MacBride-King 1998), partly because time must be distributed between work and family. Mothers are more likely than fathers to assume the primary responsibility for the



care and nurturing of dependants (Greenhaus and Parasuraman 1999), even at the executive level (Griffith and MacBride-King 1998).

Furthermore, because mothers are more likely than fathers to assume the primary responsibility for the care and nurturing of dependants, women are also more likely than men to take career breaks to support their family (e.g. Judiesch and Lyness 1999), which also stymies promotions. In short, responsibility for dependants and career breaks, not discrimination, could explain the limited advancement of women in organisations.

In contrast to these family constraints, work hours, level of education, career aspirations, and other individual factors are becoming increasingly similar in men and women (e.g. Howard and Bray 1988; Metz and Simon 2008), and these factors also significantly affect advancement (Howard and Bray 1988; Metz and Tharenou 2001). Nevertheless, recent studies have generated some contradictory results. A recent cross-sectional study found that women, at all levels, exhibited diminished managerial ambitions relative to men (van Vianen and Fischer 2002), perhaps to accommodate their dual responsibilities of family and work or perhaps to align with the social norms that characterise the role of females in society (e.g. Hite and MacDonald 2003). Accordingly, some individual factors, such as career aspirations, might contribute to the diminished advancement of women.

To clarify the role of gender discrimination in the advancement



of women in management, we present the findings of a study that explores this issue. In particular, our study examines whether or not family commitment, career aspirations, education, and career breaks — as well as the effect of these factors on advancement — differ between males and females. Furthermore, our study examines whether or not women are more likely than men to report gender discrimination.

Key findings of our study

We surveyed 537 women and 506 men from non-management to senior manager levels in one large multinational organisation operating in the Banking and Finance industry. We conducted logistic and hierarchical multiple regression analyses to determine the extent to which various factors, such as advancement, perception of gender discrimination, family characteristics, work history, and aspirations,

differed between males and females, after controlling for other factors. In this sample, males did advance more rapidly than females.

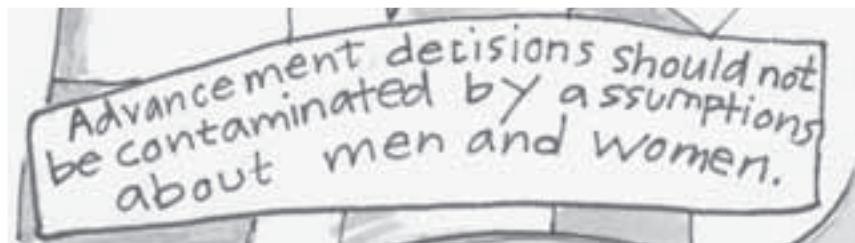
Females reported more gender discrimination than did males. Interestingly, women who assumed senior management positions, and thus had advanced appreciably during their careers, were more likely to report discrimination than women who did not assume senior positions.

Although female employees were less likely than male employees to have children, women were still more likely than their male counterparts to have suspended their careers temporarily, often referred to as career breaks. This is because mothers were more likely than fathers to have assumed the primary responsibility for the care and nurturing of dependants.

Importantly, the relationship between dependant care and managerial advancement differed between males and females. Females whose spouse assumed responsibility for dependant care advanced less rapidly than females without dependants. Conversely, males whose spouse assumed responsibility for dependant care advanced no less rapidly than males without dependants. Furthermore, females who assumed equal responsibility with their spouse did not advance more rapidly than females without dependants. In contrast, males who assumed equal responsibility with their spouse advanced more rapidly than males without dependants. From the perspective of social role theory (Eagly 1987), these results indicate that perceptions of women

might be contaminated by the stereotype of primary care givers — that is, the stereotype that women have less time to dedicate to their careers than do men — even if their family commitments are negligible or similar to their male counterparts.

The association between career breaks and advancement also varied between males and females. Career breaks hindered the promotion of males, but facilitated the promotion of females. Again, from the perspective of social role theory, this finding implies that only men violate the expectations of their social role when they interrupt their career transiently. Women who interrupt their career are conforming to their social role as primary caregivers and, thus, career breaks do not directly hinder their advancement.



level, and work hours were positively related to advancement. However, work hours seemed to facilitate managerial advancement for males but not for females.

The women in our study experienced higher levels of short-term, but lower levels of long-term, career aspirations than males. Both short-term and long-term career aspirations were positively related to advancement and the effects of these predictors did not differ significantly between males and females.

have acquired a postgraduate degree and to report higher short-term career aspirations.

Nevertheless, relative to the men, women did report lower long-term career aspirations. This finding, however, is potentially a manifestation of gender discrimination. That is, because women are less likely to advance in these organisations, they recognise they are unlikely to ever reach the lofty levels of senior management. Their long-term career aspirations, which are partly shaped by these expectations (cf. Bandura 1982), will tend to be modest. Accordingly, these long-term career aspirations might represent a response to gender discrimination not a cause of limited advancement.

Consistent with this premise, the women in this sample who advanced were more likely than women who had not advanced to experience gender discrimination. Accordingly, after women experience some level of advancement, they seem to endure adverse events — events they conceptualise as gender discrimination. Indeed, when female employees engage in roles that are usually assumed by males, such as managerial positions, they are more likely to be the victims of harassment and discrimination (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand and Magley 1997). As a consequence

... these results indicate that perceptions of women might be contaminated by the stereotype of primary care givers — that is, the stereotype that women have less time to dedicate to their careers than do men — even if their family commitments are negligible or similar to their male counterparts.

Nevertheless, these career breaks, like family responsibilities, might reinforce the social norm that women are less inclined to value work than are men, perhaps amplifying any unfavourable stereotypes and ultimately limiting the advancement of female employees.

Furthermore, in our study, female employees were younger, more educated, but worked fewer hours than male employees. The results also confirmed that age, education

Discussion

Overall, the limited advancement of women cannot be readily ascribed to their family or dependant responsibilities, because more than 50 per cent of the women in this sample had never reared children. Further, the findings of the current study do not indicate that differences in age, education and aspirations explain the underrepresentation of women in management. Indeed, women were more likely than men to

of this discrimination, and the concomitant adversities that they experience, these women might temper their future aspirations. Taken together, these findings imply a regrettable cycle in which women who advance in the organisation violate social norms, which provokes

discrimination are ineffective. Indeed, employees who report discrimination are often perceived by colleagues to be unfriendly and irresponsible, regardless of whether or not their complaint was legitimate (Kaiser and Miller 2001). Several avenues need to be pursued to redress this issue.

rewarded (Monin and Miller 2001). After they receive a reward, these managers assume their reputation as an unbiased judge has been established and will remain intact, regardless of their subsequent behaviour. As a consequence, they become less reticent to engage in discriminatory practices.

Taken together, these findings imply a regrettable cycle in which women who advance in the organisation violate social norms, which provokes discriminatory practices, moderates their aspirations, and ultimately stifles further promotions.

discriminatory practices, moderates their aspirations, and ultimately stifles further promotions.

In sum, according to the results of this study, the underrepresentation of women in management does not seem to reflect family commitments, limited education, or modest career aspirations. Hence, women's reports of gender discrimination cannot be readily dismissed. These results align with the finding that females are less likely to be selected for senior positions than are males even if they are perceived as equally assertive, resilient, decisive, intelligent, insightful and experienced (Jackson, Esses and Burris 2001).

Necessary changes

Overall, employers need to address the issue of gender discrimination in their organisations to prevent procedural injustices, ultimately ensuring that individuals are attracted and committed to the organisation (Colquitt et al. 2001). Many policies and procedures that are intended to redress

First, employers need to investigate, and then communicate, the barriers to advancement of women in their organisations. Awareness of the potential for gender discrimination can offset prejudices and biases in decisions that relate to promotion, training, or selection, provided that managers consider their judgments carefully (Sczesny and Kuhnen 2004).

Second, studies show that recruiters who need to justify their decisions are less susceptible to stereotypes (Brtek and Motowidlo 2002). Therefore, organisations can ensure that managers at all levels are accountable for their human resource selection decisions in relation to training and development, promotion, or special work opportunities, such as international appointments. Nevertheless, rewarding managers for identifying, nurturing, and retaining a diverse range of talent can provoke some unexpected challenges. Studies have shown that managers might become more inclined to demonstrate sexism after their sense of equity has been

Third, advancement decisions should not be contaminated by assumptions about the career aspirations, education, roles and characteristics of men and women. Organisations need to encourage managers and executives to conduct formal and informal career planning sessions with all employees on a regular basis. Career planning may minimise subjectivity in decision making, enhance communication and understanding between decision makers and their team members, ultimately reducing claims of unfair selection processes.

Lastly, organisations need to monitor and scrutinise the selection





and promotion decisions of specific managers to identify decision makers who apply unfavourable stereotypes and to uncover processes that promote underrepresentation of females in senior positions. Only through monitoring can organisations assess current practices and further improve their processes to reduce the occurrence of discrimination in the workplace. ■

REFERENCES

Bandura, A. 1982, 'Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency', *American Psychologist*, vol. 37, pp. 122–147.

Brtek, M.D. & Motowidlo, S.J. 2002, 'Effects of procedure and outcome accountability on interview validity', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 87, pp. 185–191.

Catalyst 2007, *Women in corporate leadership*, New York, Catalyst.

... organisations need to monitor and scrutinise the selection and promotion decisions of specific managers to identify decision makers who apply unfavourable stereotypes and to uncover processes that promote underrepresentation of females in senior positions. Only through monitoring can organisations assess current practices and further improve their processes to reduce the occurrence of discrimination in the workplace.

Colquitt, J.A., Conlon, D.E., Wesson, M. J., Porter, C.O.L.H. & Ng, K.Y. 2001, 'Justice at the Millennium: a meta-analytic review of 25 years of organizational justice research', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 86, pp. 386–400.

Eagly, A. 1987, *Sex differences in social behaviour: a social-role interpretation*, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency [EOWA] 2006, *2006 Australian census of women executive managers*, Sydney, Australia: EOWA.

Fitzgerald, L.F., Drasgow, F., Hulin, C.L., Gelfand, M.J. & Magley, V.J. (1997), 'Antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment in organizations: a test of an integrated model', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 82, pp. 578–589.

Greenhaus, J. H. & Parasuraman, S. 1999, 'Research on work, family, and gender: current status and future directions in G. Powell (ed.), *Handbook of gender and work*, California, Sage Publications, pp. 391–412.

Griffith, P.G. & MacBride-King, J.L. 1998, *Closing the gap*, New

York, Catalyst.

Hewstone, M. 1983, *Attribution theory*, Oxford, England, Basil Blackwell.

Hite, L.M. & McDonald, K.S. 2003, 'Career aspirations of non-managerial women: adjustment and adaptation', *Journal of Career Development*, vol. 9, p. 221–235.

Howard, A. & Bray, D.W. 1988, *Managerial lives in transition*, New York, The Guilford Press.

International Labour Office 2003, *Time for equality at work*, Switzerland, ILO Publications.

Jackson, L.M., Esses, V.M. & Burris, C.T. 2001, 'Contemporary sexism and discrimination: the importance of respect for men and women', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 27, pp. 48–61.

Judiesch, M.K. & Lyness, K.S. 1999, 'Left behind? The impact of leaves of absence on managers' career success', *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 42, pp. 641–651.

Kaiser, C.R. & Miller, C.T. 2001, 'Stop complaining! The social

costs of making attributions to discrimination', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 27, pp. 254–263.

Major, B., Gramzow, R.H., McCoy, S.K., Levin, S., Schmader, T. & Sidanius, J. 2002, 'Perceiving personal discrimination: the role of group status and legitimizing ideology', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 82, pp. 269–282.

Metz, I. & Simon, A. 2008, 'A focus on gender similarities in work experiences at senior management levels: a study of an Australian bank builds the case', *Equal Opportunities International*, vol. 27, pp. 433–454.

Metz, I. & Tharenou, P. 2001, 'Women's career advancement', *Gender & Organisation Management*, vol. 26, pp. 312–342.

Monin, B. & Miller, D.T. 2001, 'Moral credentials and the expression of prejudice', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 81, pp. 33–43.

Northcraft, G.B. & Gutek, B.A. 1993, 'Point-counterpoint: discrimination against women in management', in E.A. Fagenson (ed.) *Women in management: trends, issues and challenges in managerial diversity*, Newbury Park, Sage Publications, pp. 219–245.

Pinel, E.C. 2002, 'Stigma consciousness in intergroup contexts: the power of conviction', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 38, 178–185.

Sczesny, S. & Kuhnen, U. 2004, 'Meta-cognition about biological sex and gender-stereotypic physical appearance: consequences for the assessment of leadership

competence', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 30, 13–21.

Van Vianen, A.E.M. & Fischer, A.H. 2002, 'Illuminating the glass ceiling', *Journal of Occupational and Organisational Psychology*, vol. 75, 315–337.

Wirth, L. 2001, *Breaking through the glass ceiling*, Geneva, ILO.

Isabel Metz

Isabel Metz is a senior lecturer at the Melbourne Business School, University of Melbourne.
Email: i.metz@mbs.edu

Simon Moss

Simon Moss is a senior lecturer at Monash University. Email: Simon.moss@med.monash.edu.au