Breaking through the glass ceiling
women in management
Breaking through the glass ceiling:

Women in management
Why close the gender gap?
“Because not only is it the right thing to do, it’s also good for business.”*

* Royal Bank of Canada
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There is no doubt that significant progress has been achieved in furthering the cause of gender equality in the labour market over recent decades. Women have been moving steadily into occupations, professions and managerial jobs previously reserved for men. Their access to education and training continues to improve, providing many with the necessary qualifications to aspire to jobs in senior management. Governments, businesses, trade unions and women’s organizations have devoted much thought and energy to overcoming the attitudinal and institutional discrimination that bars women from certain jobs and hinders their career development, while the commitment to fight gender discrimination is renewed periodically at international conferences. Yet, many of the results fall short of expectations. Real obstacles remain, and these are often rooted in the way work itself is organized or in the challenges that face women who try to reconcile work and family commitments. Women are still concentrated in the most precarious forms of work throughout the world and breaking through the “glass ceiling” still appears elusive for all but a select few. Women hold a mere 1 to 3 per cent of top executive jobs in the largest corporations around the world. Some progress has been made in the United States recently with women in 1999 obtaining 5.1 per cent of executive management positions in the 500 largest companies compared to 2.4 per cent in 1996. For women who also experience race discrimination, the barrier to top jobs seems to be made of unbreakable plexiglas.

The hurdles facing women aspiring to management jobs can be so formidable that they sometimes abandon efforts to make it to the top of large firms. They often take their energy and know-how to smaller and more flexible companies or set up their own businesses. By 1996 in Sweden, approximately 20 per cent of start-up companies were being run by women and by 1999 in the United States, 38 per cent of all firms were run by women.1 In Australia, women make up 35 per cent of the country’s 1.3 million small business operators, and the growth rate of female small business operators from 1995 to 1997 was three times that for men.2

While women have captured an ever-increasing share of the labour market, improvements in the quality of women’s jobs have not kept pace. This is reflected in the smaller representation of women in management positions, particularly in the private sector, and their virtual absence from the most senior jobs. Wage differences in male and female managerial jobs stem from the reality that even when women hold management jobs, they are often in less strategic lower-paying areas of a company’s operations. They are also linked to the fact that women managers tend to be younger on average, as most senior jobs tend to be dominated by older men. Despite the persistent inequalities at managerial level, the continuous entry of women into higher-level jobs has been noted, although they remain under-represented in senior management. With few exceptions, the main challenge appears to be the sheer slowness in the progress of women into senior leadership positions in organizations, which suggests that discrimination is greatest where the most power is exercised. The importance of gender equality for economic growth and the welfare of families is, however, being increasingly recognized. The effective management of organizations and firms today depends on ensuring a balanced mix of so-called “masculine” and “feminine” attributes, and an increasing number of organizations are adopting measures to attract and retain women so as to benefit from their qualifications and talent in a competitive environment. And the growth in entrepreneurship and increasing numbers of women running their own businesses, both large and small, herald a different future for societies. The economic power gained by women will play a key role in the struggle to sweep aside gender inequalities in all walks of life.

An ILO study, to be published shortly, provides an overview of the factors affecting women’s participation in management and decision-making. Using the most recent avail-
able data desagregated by sex, it examines the progress of women into management jobs and the obstacles they face to break through the glass ceiling to reach top positions. Topics covered include:
• current gender inequalities confronting women in the labour market and in political and social life, with a focus on women's participation in the workforce, occupational segregation, pay differentials and gender time division;
• progress made by women in professional and managerial jobs, with recent statistics on women at the top in the public service, in finance and banking, and in politics;
• male and female participation in education and training, and strategies to help women qualify for careers in management;
• obstacles in the workplace that hinder women's career development, how and why men's and women's career paths differ, and strategies to overcome barriers to women at higher organizational levels;
• policies, programmes and initiatives taken at the national level to promote women in management;
• international action, in particular on the part of the ILO, that has been taken to promote equal employment opportunities.

Gender inequalities in the labour market and in society

“Glass ceiling” is a term coined in the 1970s in the United States to describe the invisible artificial barriers, created by attitudinal and organizational prejudices, which block women from senior executive positions. Whether this glass ceiling occurs in the workplace or in politics it is essentially a reflection of social and economic gender inequality. With the achievement of educational parity and changes in social attitudes towards men's and women's roles, it had been somehow assumed that women would quickly move up the career ladder. This has proved hard to achieve and no more so than at the top, where the prevalence of male executives tends to perpetuate the glass ceiling and where women often find themselves without the right mix of corporate experience required for senior executive positions.

A major source of discrimination stems from strongly held attitudes towards women's and men's social roles and behaviour. If one compares the effective roles played by women and men rather than looking at women as an isolated group, it becomes apparent that each has different access to resources, work opportunities and status. The consequences of gender inequalities include women being “crowded” into a narrow range of occupations where there is less responsibility and/or lower pay, or having to work part time, where there are fewer opportunities for advancement. While this situation can be explained to some extent by men's and women's perceptions of their respective social roles, these roles have in fact been undergoing substantial changes in recent decades. Labour force participation patterns of men and women, and social attitudes, have been gradually evolving to reflect these.

Since the advent of the women's movement, changes in social acceptance of gender equality have been primarily due to changing perceptions among women and men themselves. The promulgation and enforcement of equal opportunity laws have not only lessened institutional discrimination; they have also had a considerable impact on the awareness of populations. In recent years, women's working lives have become characterized by more continuous labour force participation. Women have entered many of the professions previously reserved for men, and their earnings have become an essential part of household income.

These changes have led to shifts in societal views about the role of women in the economy. A survey in the United States revealed a growth in awareness between 1978 and 1995 of the existence of discrimination against working women in that country. A large percentage of those surveyed thought women have to perform better than men to get ahead. On the other hand, the proportion of those who believed women received their positions because they were women decreased from 46 per cent in 1978 to 25 per cent in 1995. A survey in Japan in the early 1990s showed increasing disagreement by both men and women with the traditional belief that men should hold jobs and women should stay at home and do housework. In 1987, 50 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women thought that women should stay at home. By 1990, these figures were 36 per cent and 24 per cent respectively.
Labour force feminization continues unabated. At the global level in 1990, 67 per cent of all women aged 20-54 were economically active. By the year 2010, this figure is expected to reach almost 70 per cent. However, data by country and by region vary considerably. Regional figures produced by the ILO\(^4\) revealed that in 2000, nearly 58 per cent of women were economically active in Africa, 64 per cent in Asia, 46 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 69 per cent in Europe and 73 per cent in North America. For the year 2010, these proportions are expected to remain the same for Asia, rise by 1 per cent for Africa, Europe and North America while in Latin America and the Caribbean women’s participation rates will increase by 4 per cent to 50 per cent.

Higher educational levels attained by women coupled with falling fertility rates, particularly in industrialized countries, are contributing to such increases in women’s economic activity rates. Another marked trend is that of women spending more of their productive years in the workforce. Periods away from the labour force to give birth and care for children are becoming shorter. In the United States, for example, the proportion of working mothers with children under the age of 3 grew from 34 per cent in 1975 to 57 per cent in 1994,\(^5\) while the percentage of working mothers with children less than a year old was 53.6 in 1998.\(^6\)

Women’s share of the labour force is also increasing worldwide, but at a slower pace than their participation rates. By the year 2010, their share will be just over 41 per cent, up from 38 per cent in 1970. In some regions, the increase should be more significant (figure 1). By the year 2010 in Latin America, women are expected to account for almost 37 per cent of the labour force compared with 24 per cent in 1970. Over the same period, women’s share of the job market in North America will grow from 36 per cent to 47 per cent, while in Oceania it is estimated to increase from 33 per cent to almost 45 per cent. In other regions increases should be less striking.\(^7\)

### Women’s jobs in flexible labour markets

While the quantitative nature of women’s participation in paid employment is ever-increasing, manifest gender inequalities exist in employment status and the quality of jobs held by men and women. Women often have part-time and temporary jobs, while men hold more of the well-paid and secure ones. Women make up the majority of part-time workers (between 60 and 90 per cent), and a large proportion of women who work do so on a part-time basis. In developing countries, significant proportions of these women work in the informal sector or at home.

Differences in unemployment rates for men and women can also be an indicator of gender disparities in the labour market. Unemployment data for men and women point to a mixed pattern depending on the countries involved, and regional differences can be quite pronounced. There are significant gender differences in Africa and Latin America, with women having considerably higher unemployment rates than men. In Asia, unemployment rates tend to be higher for men or similar to those of women in those countries for which data were available. In Central and Eastern Europe, many of the countries have similar rates of unemployment for men and women, or women have lower rates than men.

### Men’s jobs, women’s jobs: Occupational segregation

In addition to gender differences in working-time patterns, another factor that contributes to gender inequality is that men and women perform different jobs and so-called “women’s jobs” are often assigned a lower value in terms of skill requirements and remuneration. Developments in job evaluation methodologies have often demonstrated that many jobs occupied by women in fact require levels of skills, responsibilities, task variation
and complexity similar to the higher-paid jobs held by men.

A combination of social attitudes and gender inequality in education and training has largely contributed to occupational segregation, resulting in men and women being streamed into different trades, professions and jobs. This is often referred to as horizontal segregation.

Not only do men and women have different jobs, but there are also differences in the extent to which they are represented in the hierarchy of positions within jobs. Even in occupations dominated by women, men usually occupy the “more skilled”, “responsible” and better-paid positions. For example, in the teaching profession, the majority of teachers are often women but the top administrators are men. Similarly in the health field, doctors and hospital heads are very often men, while most of the nurses and support staff are women. This is commonly referred to as “vertical gender segregation”. The movement of women upward through occupational categories to take up more responsible and managerial jobs is hampered by institutional barriers and social attitudes. The “glass ceiling” usually refers to this type of vertical segregation, where recognition of factors such as skill levels, responsibility, pay, status and power is crucial to accessing management positions.

**Closing the pay gap between men and women**

One outcome of occupational segregation is significant pay differences between men and women workers. Although the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), has one of the highest rates of ratification of any international labour standard (149 as of 31 December 2000) and the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value has been incorporated into the labour legislation of many countries, pay differentials continue to be one of the most persistent forms of gender inequal-

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1. Share as a percentage of economically active population.

ity. The gap is slowly closing but is likely to remain while occupations are still highly segregated by sex.

**Reconciling work and family**

The gender division of time between work and family is probably the most significant gender issue of all and explains many of the differences between the work patterns and job types of men and women. Time use studies show that women work longer hours than men in nearly every country.

Labour market inequalities between men and women explain many of the difficulties women face in pushing against the glass ceiling. Wage disparities arising out of occupational segregation, which in turn are linked to the disproportionate gender division between paid employment and unpaid care work, perpetuate the image of women as “secondary” workers. Gradual movements towards diversification in occupations for women and the closing of the wage gap have been noted. However, to quicken the pace on the road to gender equality, diversification in occupations for men will be required. In addition, there will have to be a greater sharing of family responsibilities between women and men. To support such developments, the world community will need to find a greater balance between achieving economic and social objectives so that men and women everywhere can enjoy “human development” on an equal footing.

**Women in professional and managerial jobs**

Over the last few decades, women have attained educational levels comparable to those of men in many countries and have been increasingly hired in jobs previously reserved for men. They have responded to expanding opportunities and invested themselves particularly in business, administration and finance. Women today represent over 40 per cent of the global workforce and have been gradually moving up the hierarchical ladder of organizations. Yet typically, their share of management positions does not exceed 20 per cent, and the more senior the position involved, the more glaring is the gender gap. National surveys reveal that in the largest and most powerful companies worldwide, women’s share in top positions is limited to a mere 2-3 per cent.

The term “glass ceiling” illustrates well the point that when there is no objective reason for women not rising to the very top as men do, there exists inherent discrimination in the structures and processes of both organizations and society in general. Qualified and competent women look up through the glass ceiling and can see what they are capable of achieving, but invisible barriers prevent them from breaking through. The glass ceiling may exist at different levels depending on the extent to which women progress in organizational structures, and this is commonly represented by a pyramidal shape as in figure 2. In some countries or companies, the glass ceiling may be closer to the corporate head, while in others it may be at junior management level or even lower.

The nature of women’s career paths is a major factor blocking women from top positions. At junior management levels, women are usually placed in functions which are regarded as “non-strategic”, for example human resources and administration, rather than in line and management jobs that lead to the top. Often, this is compounded by women being cut off from both the formal and informal networks that are necessary for advancement within organizations. For women with family responsibilities, upward movement may be further hampered as they struggle to satisfy the needs of both career and family.

In the last two decades, improvements in the educational qualifications of women, and the fact that many women have increasingly been delaying marriage and childbearing, have created a pool of women worldwide both qualified and ready for professional and managerial jobs. At the same time, growth in the public sector and the services sector and the introduction of equality laws and policies in many countries have provided opportunities for qualified women to occupy lower- and middle-level management posts. These changes have paved the way for their taking up and aspiring to more senior management positions. While employment in the public sector has recently declined in many countries, this to some extent has been offset by growth in the services sector.

Women’s interest in professional and managerial work and the predicted shortages of highly qualified managers have not, however, resulted in women obtaining senior executive positions in significant numbers. The glass ceiling continues to limit women’s access to senior management and to management positions in those sectors and areas which involve more responsibilities and higher pay.

ILO data clearly show a pattern of women holding a smaller proportion of management positions compared with men in most countries. Figure 3 shows that in nearly half the 41 countries for which statistics were available,
women typically held between 20 to 30 per cent of legislative, senior official and managerial positions. In 16 out of the 41 countries women held between 31 and 39 per cent of such jobs. It is notable that countries of Central and Eastern Europe feature prominently amongst those countries where women’s share of the labour market and of managerial jobs is the highest. Statistics based on an earlier ILO classification system (ISCO-68) of administrative and managerial jobs show greater variation, ranging from under 10 per cent to over 40 per cent. These figures often contrast sharply with the high and increasing levels of labour force participation by women worldwide. That women’s share of managerial work is universally considerably lower than their labour market share points to gender inequalities in the quality of women’s jobs compared to men’s.

Surveys of businesses often report lower figures for women’s share of management positions at around 10 per cent or less. According to a 1995 survey of over 300 companies in the United Kingdom, just over 10 per cent of managerial jobs were held by women, while a 1999 survey of 1,738 major companies in Argentina found that 9.7 per cent of executives were women. In 1998, the Swiss statistical office reported that 12.3 per cent of women employees held managerial positions compared with 24.5 per cent of men.

**Uneven and slow progress for women in management**

Even though the figures just presented do not match women’s overall share of the labour force, it has to be recognized that women worldwide are gradually increasing their share of managerial work. However, the pace of change is slow and progress has generally been uneven, as is illustrated in figure 4.

Over the past five years or so, there have been increases in the share of managerial positions held by women in 13 out of the 24 countries for which data were available. The percentage rise has mostly been only between 1 and 3 per cent, but in a few countries it has been more significant: in El Salvador, from 26 to 35 per cent; in Ireland, from 19 to 27 per cent; in New Zealand, from 31 to 37 per cent; in Slovakia, from 23 to 30 per cent. It is notable that in some countries, such as Denmark, Spain and the United Kingdom, there has been no change, while in others there has even been a decline (Belgium, Czech Republic, Greece, Republic of Korea, Poland, Romania and Slovenia). The evident lack of significant progress in women obtaining managerial positions reflects the complexity of issues to be addressed in order to overcome labour market discrimination and dismantle the glass ceiling. Social and cultural attitudes, coupled with dramatic economic changes that
exist in transition countries or which emerged during the financial crisis that affected Asia, explain to some extent the problems women may face in competing for managerial positions.

In some countries, twofold or threefold increases in the number of administrative and managerial jobs seem to have given women more opportunities. The number of these kinds of jobs doubled in Turkey between 1989 and 1998, and women’s share increased from 6 per cent to 12 per cent during the same period. During the same period in Malaysia, a threefold increase in such jobs was accompanied by a near doubling of the share for women (from 11 per cent to 20 per cent).11
Women at the top

Few women gain access to the highest positions as executive heads of organizations and, despite some improvements, many would claim that the pace of change is still far too slow given the large number of qualified women in the labour market today. Where figures are available, they show women holding from 1 per cent to 5 per cent of executive positions. In the United States, where women are as equally qualified as men and constitute around 46 per cent of the workforce, they were shown by a 1996 survey (Fortune 500) to hold only 2.4 per cent of executive positions and form a mere 1.9 per cent of top earners among the largest companies. By 1999, these figures had improved, with 5.1 per cent of executive management positions being held by women, while only 3.3 per cent of the highest-paid officers and directors were women. In contrast, a survey in Australia revealed no change over
recent years in the 1.3 per cent figure of executive directors who were women.\textsuperscript{13}

While it must be acknowledged that time is still needed for women at junior and middle management levels (those in the “pipeline”, so to speak) to move into executive positions, the fact remains that women are not moving quickly enough nor in sufficient numbers into line or strategic positions. Yet this factor is crucial for enlarging the pool of women aspiring to senior positions and for building a critical mass of senior women for networking and providing role models for those down the line. Speeding up women’s movement towards the top requires that recruitment and promotion methods be objective and fair. Above all, there has to be awareness and commitment from directors of companies as to the benefits for their organizations from promoting women to high-level managerial positions.

"Glass walls"

In what is a mirror of occupational segregation patterns, women managers tend to be concentrated in certain sectors. For example, most women managers in the United Kingdom are to be found in retail distribution, followed in descending order by the hotel and catering sectors, banking and finance, medicine and health services, and the food, drink and tobacco industries. But women are increasingly entering management in non-traditional sectors such as manufacturing, insurance and banking.\textsuperscript{14} In terms of functions, a 1998 survey in the United Kingdom found that women constituted 50 per cent of all personnel managers, 44 per cent of actuarial, insurance and pensions managers and 37.6 per cent of marketing managers. At the other end of the scale, they constituted only 3.4 per cent of research and development managers and 3.5 per cent of manufacturing and production managers. At director level, 18 per cent of personnel directors and 13 per cent of marketing directors were women. However, despite the size of the sample of this survey, no female directors were identified in areas such as marketing and production, or purchasing and contracting.\textsuperscript{15}

In those large organizations where women have managed to reach high-level managerial positions, they are often restricted to areas less central or strategic to the organization, such as human resources and administration. It is still extremely difficult for women to move laterally into strategic areas such as product development or finance, and then upwards through the central pathways to key executive positions in the pyramidal structure that is characteristic of large organizations. Sometimes these barriers are called “glass walls”; this concept is illustrated by figure 5.

There is a marked trend towards women starting up their own businesses. A recent survey in Ireland by a large multinational computer company showed that women clearly felt that the glass ceiling was still intact. As a consequence, many women have been starting their own companies, with between 35 and 40 per cent of all new businesses being owned by women. According to the survey, 64 per cent of
Irish women in business earn half or more of the family income and 24 per cent are sole providers for their families. Figure 6 shows increases over the last decade in the percentage of women employers in 18 countries for which data were available. In countries such as Australia, Canada, Finland, Thailand and the United States, over 30 per cent of all businesses are now owned or operated by women.

There is also a trend towards a growth in women-owned businesses in Africa, Asia and South America. In Western Asia, for example, the number of self-employed women rose from 22 per cent in 1970 to 30 per cent in 1990. The figures for Latin America over the same period are very similar (from 22 per cent to 34 per cent), while those for North Africa are lower (from 8 per cent to 21 per cent). According to the National Foundation for Women Business Owners (NFWBO) in the United States, firms owned by women around the world can account for between one-quarter and one-third of businesses in the formal sector and probably have an even stronger presence in the informal sector. In Brazil, for example, it is thought that women run over 30 per cent of small businesses.

### Figure 6  Percentage of women employers, 1 1989-91 and 1997-98 (selected countries)

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<th>Country</th>
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<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
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<td>United States</td>
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Note: Based on labour force sample surveys for all countries except for the Dominican Republic where it is based on official estimates.

1 International Classification of Status in Employment 1993 (ISCE-93), Group 2 (Employers). Canada and the United States includes Group 3 (own-account workers). The ILO defines self-employment jobs as those jobs where the remuneration is directly dependent on the profits from the goods and services produced. The incumbents make the operational decisions affecting the organization or delegate such decisions while retaining responsibility for the welfare of the organization. Employers are defined as those workers who, working on their own account or with one or more partners, hold the type of job defined as a “self-employment job” and, in this capacity, on a continuous basis have engaged one or more people to work for them in their business as employees. Own-account workers are those workers who, working on their own account or with one or more partners, hold the type of job defined as a “self-employment job” and have not engaged any employees on a continuous basis.

A United Nations study covering the Latin American region notes that micro-businesses and self-employment are a major source of employment and income for women and that between 30 to 60 per cent of all micro-businesses in the region are operated by women. The fragility of women’s advancement to management positions, however, is reflected in the fact that gains can be somewhat dampened by economic recession and restructuring, or by reductions in societal supports for women. For example, the recent bursting of the “economic bubble” in Japan resulted in companies hiring far more men than women. A survey of companies revealed that the proportion hiring male-only graduates increased from 50 per cent in 1992 to 62 per cent in 1996, while at the same time companies hiring both men and women graduates fell from 45 per cent to 37 per cent. In addition, policies such as affirmative or positive action are being strongly challenged through the courts in Europe and the United States.

Despite indications that women’s labour is increasingly in demand, only a relatively small number of companies are investing in women’s career development. Such companies believe that promoting women produces more talent and therefore more long-term profitability. As competent and qualified women become harder to attract and retain, companies promoting women today expect to gain advantages over the longer term. Moreover, making women visible at the top can provide a competitive edge in selling services and products to the growing number of female customers.

Indications that more such developments can be expected are to be found in a study from the United States, which examined the positive performance impact of women’s presence on the boards of companies making initial public offerings (IPOs). The study notes that when such companies go public, the initial stock price is based on factors not related to their current financial performance. Instead, one of the criteria used to determine the initial value is the composition of the senior management team, and its gender balance in particular is becoming an increasingly significant element. In 1988, there were no women on the boards of 134 companies going public. In 1993, 27 per cent of 535 IPO companies surveyed had women in their senior management teams. Of companies that went public in 1996, 41 per cent had women on their boards. The study found that, “having women on the top management team results in higher earnings and greater shareholder wealth”, and that it is the mix of women and men on the board that results in higher long-term performance. The study also points to the trend for women to leave large corporations for smaller entrepreneurial firms.

A principal constraint on the level and type of women’s labour force participation is the responsibility they carry for raising children and performing household tasks. An important feature of professional and especially managerial work is the extended working hours that seem to be required to gain recognition and eventual promotion. It can be practically impossible to reconcile the long hours often required of management staff with the amount of time needed to care for a home and children, not to mention care of the elderly. Yet, the availability of part-time managerial work is rare. In this context, time is very much a gender issue. Women who desire both a family and a career often juggle heavy responsibilities in both domains. Those who opt for part-time work early in their careers may find their advancement hampered, even after a return to full-time employment, since their male counterparts will have invested heavily in career building during the same period.
Just how well prepared are women for management jobs? Undoubtedly women’s education, training and life experience are increasingly equipping them with the necessary qualifications and skills to aspire to and be selected for top positions. Despite persistent differences in educational levels, the gender gap is closing in many areas. Figure 7 shows that the overall enrolment figures worldwide indicate that the percentage of women reaching higher levels of education is approaching or even exceeding 50 per cent, and has been rising over time. This should theoretically allow women more access to management jobs in years to come.

The pursuit of universal education over the last decades has contributed to the rising educational levels of women worldwide. At the same time, increases in women’s labour force participation have led to a higher value being placed on women’s contribution to family income. Together with changing social attitudes, this has created a more enabling family and social environment for young women to achieve better education. Furthermore, the expansion of the service sector, in which there has traditionally been a high concentration of women, has opened new horizons, motivating women to seek qualifications for the kind of jobs to which they have easier access. Job growth, generated by new information technologies such as the Internet, is creating new opportunities and women are increasingly taking advantage of such developments to create and run businesses.

It has to be recognized, however, that significant gender differences continue to exist in the nature and quality of education and training. These can represent real obstacles for many women, both at the recruitment stage and later in their careers. Improving the quality of women’s education largely depends on support from the family and community in encouraging young women and providing them with the same educational and training opportunities as young men. Indeed, young women have increasingly been encouraged to undertake further education to increase their chances of finding employment later, though the focus of this education tends to be at lower educational levels. In contrast, young men are often

![Figure 7. Women’s percentage share of enrolments at third-level educational institutions, 1985 and 1996 (worldwide and by region)](image)

Note: Data cover ISCED levels 5, 6 and 7 provided at universities, teacher training colleges and higher professional schools.
opportunity programmes is to remove the invisibly, one of the main objectives of equal success and competitiveness of firms. Accord-

retention of qualified women are increasingly in practice

At the workplace: Career development in practice

The recruitment, full development and retention of qualified women are increasingly recognized as being essential to the economic success and competitiveness of firms. Accord-

ible cloak that often shrouds women and their contributions.

Many women enter the workforce at the same level as men, only to see their careers progress more slowly. They are often more qualified than their male counterparts and must work harder and perform better to obtain top jobs. A Chilean study estimated that women earning the equivalent of men had an additional four years of formal education. A German survey published in 1997 found that 34 per cent of female managers had masters’ degrees compared with 25 per cent of male managers, and 46 per cent held doctoral degrees compared with 36 per cent of men. A large-scale study of bank employees in Canada found that women equalled or surpassed male colleagues on all important human resources measurements such as education, length of service, dedication and job performance. Therefore, “educational segregation” only partially explains the braking effect on women’s careers. Even women with similar qualifications and experience to men encounter greater difficulty than men in reaching top jobs.

A detailed analysis of the various steps and requirements involved in the recruitment and promotion processes of organizations is necessary to identify and rectify the mechanisms contributing to differential treatment. For instance, perceptions of the social and occupational roles of men and women often overly influence appointment decisions. Selection criteria and procedures may also be insufficiently developed to ensure an objective and fair assessment of candidates. Above all, many decision-making structures are wholly or mostly composed of men, contributing to a general condition of gender blindness and an incapacity to recognize the presence of qualified women. However, women with family responsibilities can face very real constraints in meeting the seniority or mobility criteria often required for promotion.

Measures adopted by organizations to recruit, retain and promote women in professional and managerial jobs not only involve specific action to advance women’s careers, but also increasingly imply creating workplaces that are more flexible, that value diversity and that are more people oriented and family friendly.

The persistent stereotype associating managers with being male is a key obstacle in introducing more gender equality into career paths. Characteristics considered to be “masculine” rather than “feminine” are generally regarded as traits required for management. As a result, women often try to adapt themselves
to work environments and expectations created by men. However, management styles are evolving towards valuing a certain mix of so-called “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics. A study of women managers in the United Kingdom reported that the characteristics most highly valued by their organizations were being competitive, cooperative and decisive, while the least valued were being emotional, manipulative and forceful.28

Gender-sensitive, human-resource strategies developed by enterprises in recent decades provide the best ways through the glass ceiling including networking, career tracking, mentoring and succession planning that pay particular attention to the situation of women. Objective and unbiased recruitment and promotion procedures are vital in attracting and retaining skilled professional women. In the light of the increasing skill levels of women in the workforce, such strategies are necessary: women are increasingly a key resource in the race to create new products and services, and they are entrepreneurs as well. Competitive companies cannot afford to lose out on women’s talent. Although policies are more advanced in industrialized countries, promoting women in management should not be viewed as a “luxury”. Rather, in the era of globalization, it is indispensable to enable firms worldwide to use and develop women’s talents and potential to the fullest.
Empowering women to break through the glass ceiling requires action on many fronts. The right qualifications and training are central, as are policies and practices in the workplace to eradicate discrimination at all levels. Governments also play a fundamental role in regulating the social, political and economic environments and, ultimately, in making these receptive to gender equality and the guarantee of equal rights.

National policies and programmes promoting equality between men and women are usually broadly based and cover all walks of life. While these do not always directly address the issue of women in decision-making, they do provide an important framework and a basis for specific action in that area. Employers’ and workers’ organizations, together with a range of women’s organizations, are also key actors in raising awareness, implementing national policies and developing innovative measures that enable women to attain and perform well in management positions.

Almost every country in the world has adopted legislation prohibiting discrimination or guaranteeing equal rights for men and women. The ILO’s Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), and Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), are amongst the most highly ratified of all international labour Conventions, with 145 and 149 ratifications respectively as of December 2000. Equality clauses are also increasingly included in collective agreements. Nonetheless, efforts are still necessary to achieve gender equality in the labour market.

Women are undoubtedly making significant inroads into management. Changing social attitudes towards women’s roles in the labour market and at home have been central to this process and anti-discrimination legislation has encouraged women to obtain qualifications and seek jobs in new fields. However, the job market remains highly segregated both horizontally (in terms of occupations) and vertically (in terms of hierarchical levels). Despite improvements, there is often frustration with the slow pace of change, especially considering how much women have caught up with men in terms of education.

Strategies to speed up the advancement of women have generally focused on the following areas:

- enacting equality laws and rendering complaint procedures more effective;
- providing family care assistance;
- revaluing “feminine” occupations;
- moving women into more scientific areas;
- insisting on objective criteria in recruitment and promotion;
- questioning organizational structures in terms of their efficiency and treatment of both men and women;
- building networks; and
- raising awareness and changing social attitudes.

Progress in these areas is, however, dependent on labour market trends and available economic opportunities. A negative employment outlook tends to dampen efforts to improve women’s situation. Predicted labour shortages may benefit women if companies use the right strategies. Nonetheless, even when economic opportunities are poor because of recessions, economic downturns and the like, it is certain that women’s presence in the labour force will continue to grow, both numerically and qualitatively. As the proportion of professional women reaches a critical mass, the contribution of qualified women will increasingly be perceived as a bottom-line requirement, and thus the position of women will be less subject to the vagaries of the market-place.

Increased competition and economic globalization, which are promoting new forms of flexible organization and new management styles, can further boost women’s labour market position, as these new forms put more emphasis on organizations and attitudes that are flexible, non-hierarchical, cooperative and holistic. Such environments de-emphasize the old rigidities which have restricted women and allow a more positive appreciation of so-called “feminine” management qualities and styles: being less combative, being more consensus and solution oriented, being more practical and supportive of other staff, and so forth.

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**National policies for promoting women in management**

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As women catch up with men in many areas, one key issue that emerges is the gap between the small proportion of women with
secure, well-paid jobs and the bulk of women remaining in low-skilled positions, often on a part-time, temporary or other precarious basis, not to mention the vast majority of the world’s women who work in the informal economy. Thus, it should be kept in perspective that, for the majority of women to improve their occupational and employment status, broad-based measures have to be pursued in tandem with specific strategies to promote women in management. The latter could perhaps aspire to junior or middle management, if not the very top, and could indeed serve as role models for future generations.

**International action to promote equal employment opportunities**

*We take a decisive step towards globalizing social progress each time we champion gender equality as a matter of human rights, social justice, economic efficiency and sustainable development.*

(Message by the Director-General of the ILO to the President of the Beijing+5 Conference, 2000)

The coming together of countries within the United Nations and the pooling of their concerns, resources, strategies and activities have produced over the decades a formidable array of legal instruments and programmes to further the cause of gender equality and equality of opportunity. The number of clear mandates and commitments has been multiplying in an attempt to address the myriad forms of discrimination in social, political, cultural and economic life, which ultimately hamper women’s employment and career prospects. International action is a powerful stimulus in promoting professional and managerial women, and is all the more necessary since increasing women’s participation in decision-making remains one of the areas most resistant to change.

International labour standards on gender issues are key to attaining equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and enabling women to realize their potential in management and decision making. Moreover, ILO programmes and projects developed and implemented since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, approach gender equality in the world of work as a matter of human rights, but also as critical for sustainable development, the effective use of human resources, and family and child welfare. Both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of employment are addressed, as is women’s empowerment. Current targeted assistance focuses on employment creation and poverty alleviation, and covers the promotion of job equality and the provision of social protection to specific groups of women workers. Activities related to women workers’ rights are given importance, as is the fight against the trafficking of women and children.

Increasingly, a gender perspective is being systematically incorporated or mainstreamed into all ILO programmes and projects, and many interventions take an integrated approach and relate simultaneously to the various critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Reflecting recent global initiatives, ILO activities on gender issues have been stepped up. The focus has been placed on various key issues for women’s work and careers, including:

- the ratification and implementation of international labour standards of special relevance to women;
- gender-based policies and programmes for employers’ organizations;
- gender equality in trade unions, including the increased incorporation of women workers’ concerns in collective bargaining;
- women’s presence in private-sector activities, including small businesses;
- women in management;
- increased equal opportunity for women in vocational training and technical education;
- greater harmony between work and family responsibilities; and
- social protection, especially for vulnerable groups of women.

These concerns are reflected in ILO programmes and projects. Some examples are:

- an interregional project, launched in nine countries, disseminating information and offering training in women workers’ rights;
- “More and Better Jobs for Women”, a global ILO programme to enhance national capacities and strengthen legal and institutional frameworks for improving the quality and quantity of women’s employment;
- developing training materials for management development institutions to use in training women managers in Africa, to be adapted for other regions;
- improving the incomes, employment conditions and prospects of women engaged in small-scale enterprises, especially in least-developed countries;
- developing business knowledge and skills, setting up information exchanges, and
promoting networking and a “voice” for women entrepreneurs;

- encouraging the participation of employers’ organizations in raising awareness of gender issues and promoting equality, including activities to integrate women into the mainstream of business;

- providing training and advisory services to trade unions and strengthening women’s participation in workers’ organizations in Africa and Asia; and

- launching a programme in the four MERCOSUR countries to promote and strengthen social dialogue on gender issues in the labour market, with tripartite committees playing an advocacy and advisory role.

The primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. All those who work have rights at work. This applies not only to wage workers in registered companies, but also to self-employed and casual workers in the informal economy and to the hidden, predominately female workers of the “care” economy.

Decent work means meeting or exceeding core labour standards, in other words, setting a threshold for work and employment that embodies universal rights and that, for a given society, is consistent with its values and goals. Achieving decent work involves ensuring respect for fundamental principles and rights at work, promoting employment creation, providing social protection, and engaging in social dialogue. At the heart of the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda are the issues of gender equality and development. Enhancing women’s role in decision making and management is key to successfully addressing inequalities in the labour market.

Notes


7 ILO: Economically Active Population 1950-2010, op. cit.


10 ibid.


15 IBM: The Celtic tigress grows and proposes an agenda for change (Dublin, May 1998).


22 “Affirmative action” and “positive action” are used interchangeably. The first term tends to be used in the United States, South Africa and Australia, whereas the second is more commonly used in Europe.


25 Führungskräfte in Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, results of a survey by the Union die Leitenden Angestellten (Managerial Union of Employees in Germany), Mar. 1997, p. 45.


Women around the world have achieved higher levels of education than ever before and today represent more than 40 per cent of the global workforce. Yet their share of management positions remains unacceptably low, with just a tiny proportion succeeding in breaking through the glass ceiling. This book will review the changing position of women in the labour market, in professional and managerial jobs, and in politics. It will examine obstacles to women’s career development, and action taken to improve their opportunities and promote gender equality.

The book will discuss the earnings gap between men and women, and the occupational segregation that exists in management. It will examine the situation of women managers in the public service, as well as the financial, business and banking sectors, while providing valuable figures and statistical information.

In the same vein, the book will identify specific practices and strategies for improving women’s qualifications, thereby helping them break through the glass ceiling. The pivotal roles of education and training will be covered in depth and the book will address the various hurdles women encounter in the recruitment and promotion processes. Useful career-building strategies will be offered, including mentoring, networking and career-tracking approaches.

This important study will provide a vivid photograph of national and international efforts to improve equal opportunities and promote gender equality in management. By exploring such issues as discrimination, equal remuneration and gender mainstreaming, it will present a concise overview of the glass ceiling and its effects on women around the world.

Further information on the book can be obtained from the ILO Bureau of Publications, International Labour Office 4, route des Morillons CH-1211 Geneva 22 - Switzerland Fax: +4122/799-6938 or E-mail: pubvente@ilo.org

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