

Cracking the glass ceiling

This book makes a valiant attempt to explain why women still struggle to reach the top. But, says Val Gooding, it's long on theory and short on practical guidance

They'd have wanted to appoint you to the board even if you weren't a woman... This remark, intended perhaps as a compliment, was made by a headhunter after I'd met the chairman and senior independent director of a large FTSE-100 company. Although a little patronising or even sexist, it made me laugh because it so neatly encapsulated the irony of my career: a career of two halves.

Throughout the first 'half', I struggled to gain promotion, and was frequently at a disadvantage because of my sex. I began work in an era when it was still considered perfectly OK to ask in a job interview: 'And what does your husband do?' or 'Will you be having any more children?'

However, in the years since becoming a CEO, I have found that, to my surprise, being female is now an advantage because of the strong demand for women as executives and non-executive directors at private and public-sector organisations.

If the demand for more women on boards is there, why is the progress so glacially slow? This is just one of the questions that *A Woman's Place* tries to answer. The book comprehensively argues the case for more women on boards; it includes a multitude of quotes from chairmen, CEOs and women, and it suggests various courses of action to break the glass ceiling – a noble aim.

Much of the book is devoted to the views of those on the 'demand' side of the glass ceiling (chairmen and CEOs), views from the 'supply' side (aspiring women), as well as opinions from headhunters and women who have made it to the board. The authors describe a cross-mentoring programme, which they initiated, where a few lucky women have been mentored by FTSE-100 chairmen.

But who will take the trouble to



Even the best female managers can fail to step into the boss's shoes



A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom Peninah Thomson and Jacey Graham with Tom Lloyd

Palgrave Macmillan £25.00

read all these quotes? I fear 'those in power and authority' among the authors' intended audience will not – they need the five-minute synopsis – unless, of course, they look to see if their own quote has been included.

The book may be more useful

High-level commitment from CEOs is particularly valuable

for academics, students, researchers and HR practitioners. In places, it reads a bit like a doctoral thesis – erudite, but somewhat theoretical. But for those who can really change things on either side of the glass ceiling, it's a bit long on quotes and a bit short on first-hand practical advice and guidance.

Among the ideas are women's networks, executive coaching and mentoring, explicit campaigns,

all-female career development programmes and flexible working. High-level commitment from chief executives is suggested as particularly valuable.

I was asked to review this book based on my experience 'at the top of British business'. But it's my

(much longer) experience at the bottom and in the middle, on my way up, that is more relevant. What would be my advice for aspiring women?

Do work that you enjoy and that is satisfying; get general management, p&l experience as early as possible; get qualified (eg, IoD Diploma in Company Direction); be financially literate; read widely on business; and make sure your

bosses know about your achievements and your aspirations.

As for the 'demand' side, what can chairmen, CEOs and HR directors do? Make it known that women are welcome at the top; make selective use of mentoring and coaching, as suggested by the authors; embrace meritocracy – advertise all job vacancies; above all, be encouraging.

Informal encouragement can be very powerful and is better than more mechanistic mentoring schemes. It's no coincidence, I'm sure, that the three chairmen I've worked with in my executive career – Lord Marshall, Sir Bryan Nicholson and Bryan Sanderson – are all outspoken advocates for more women at the top. If Colin Marshall hadn't suggested that I could be a CEO, I might never have thought I was capable of it. And if Steve Shirley and Prue Leith had not suggested being an NED, I probably wouldn't have aspired to board level.

I'm afraid the authors' suggested target of a 50/50 gender split for boards is unrealistic. If we're determined to pick the best people from the available pool, we're not going to get there: child-bearing and rearing, and women's own choices, will see to that. Women need to want to get to the top if we're to make a breakthrough.

So what can we do, I and other women? Lots, of course, including much of the above. But more than anything, we need to inspire others by being successful and showing that we enjoy our work.

While writing this review at the kitchen table, I cooked dinner for my husband and two sons. Their contribution was: 'Why do women have small feet?' 'I don't know. Why?' 'So they can get closer to the kitchen sink.'

Still a long way to go then.

Val Gooding is CEO of BUPA