

Boardroom barriers for women professionals

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By Jane Carruthers

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Jane Carruthers gives voice to the banking rank and file on workplace issues and responds to your questions. This week: **Breaking through the glass ceiling.**

Female professionals might be sharply dressed, experienced and armed to the teeth with qualifications, but they aren't reaching the icing layer of the business cake in any great numbers. They're stuck in the 'marzipan layer' so aptly described by Laura Tyson, Dean of London Business School.

When it comes to scoring senior or board positions, the suits hold sway. Men in suits, that is.

Marzipan layers, glass ceilings, pink collar workers, diversity initiatives, affirmative action, gender-blindness, equal opportunities, focus groups, women's networks. It's enough to glaze over the most open-minded bloke. But these are issues which won't go away until there's real equality for women and minorities throughout all business strata.

The phrase 'glass ceiling' might make men groan, but it is not yet obsolete, according to a book published today: "*A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom*", by Peninah Thomson and Jacey Graham (£25, Palgrave Macmillan).

Women are still not reaching the upper echelons of management and cracking that place on the board often enough to tilt the gender balance at most companies. Cranfield University's Female FTSE Report of 2004 shows that only one in ten of the FTSE 100 board members is female. And those few who make it to board level are often non-executive directors, rather than those who have risen through the ranks and wielded operational power.

Aliens ahoy!

In the male-dominated worlds of business and finance, it's hardly surprising that women struggle to elbow their way onto the board. If I was a bloke (which mercifully I'm not), I wouldn't be particularly keen on having an alien muscling onto my team, and if you believe Dr. John Gray's book 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus' then alien is just what the female of the species represents to those suits.

Finance is still mainly male terrain. "Investment banking is dominated by men for some of the same reasons the Mafia and other gangs are dominated by men." says Frank Partnoy, professor of Law at the University of San Diego, and a former derivatives trader, "(it) attracts and rewards people with certain skills and predispositions – appetite for risk, willingness to bend the law, knack of cultivating clients while fleecing them – that are, or at least are perceived to be, more prevalent among men."

Women do things differently. Well, some do – some adopt masculine techniques to get and stay ahead. Margaret Thatcher was a good example of a leader who could out-testosterone the boys, even while immaculately coiffed and toting a handbag.

Thomson and Graham cite some male attitudes to women: "They assume women 'lack impact' and 'are too emotional' and they look for those two traits in women. Men start out with these assumptions."

"Women know exactly where they want to get to, but they're less ruthless and take more time to get there. Their elbows are less sharp and they don't project their thoughts, desires and aspirations as early on in their careers or at critical career stages."

Men who are uncomfortable with a woman's different style and business approach will sometimes use subconscious ploys to establish dominance. Talking over female colleagues, presenting their ideas as their own, even organising social or sporting events designed to appeal to men only are part of the subversive armoury of men unhappy at having their turf invaded.

Micro-inequities and male chauvinism

"*A Woman's Place*" describes the micro-inequities often suffered by businesswomen in the course of their working day. None of it is churlish or obvious enough to merit complaint, but the cumulative effect is discouraging for women eager to prove themselves and suffering subtle put-downs on a regular basis.

Was it a micro-inequity when Stephanie Vilalba was made to sit in the stewardess's seat on a company jet in the course of her work at Merrill Lynch? It sounds very much like one to me. But it didn't cut any ice with the courts, and her sex discrimination claim against the firm failed. But can you imagine a senior male being asked to do the same? And to serve drinks? No, me neither.

But male-oriented cultures and old boy networks are perhaps not the biggest hurdle facing professional women - even the most egalitarian men are suspicious of some businesswomen's shocking habit of having babies.

Men complain that women workers of childbearing age are unreliable and likely to disappear on maternity leave, never to return. While it's true that some high-powered women prefer to remain with their offspring rather than returning to the cut-throat world of commerce, it isn't true of all of them.

A huge red herring is the issue of childcare. Women who want to make it to the top organise their lives. Wanting to be 'in the club' means something very different for those aspiring to board positions.

Superwoman is a myth

These aren't superwomen (Nicola Horlick says Superwoman doesn't exist – and if she did, she'd have bags under her eyes, greasy hair and broken nails). Successful women outsource their domestic duties, to secretaries, to nannies and/or au pairs, to schools, to cleaners, and, if they're lucky, to partners. A woman aspiring to a board position isn't likely to have left any domestic loose ends lying around to trip her up.

'A Woman's Place' details the advantages of women reaching the icing layer of the business cake. Quoting chairmen and chief executives from companies on both sides of the Atlantic: "Valuable qualities are brought into the boardroom (by women) – a better feel for social dynamics, relationships and the 'soft', people issues; more intuition; sensitivity and objectivity; less ego; a greater willingness to listen."

There's more: "A 'certain female doggedness'; the ability to think more laterally than men; and a tendency to be more idealistic and more determined to reach the right decision." All very positive. Plus there's the benefit of having your board reflect your workforce and marketplace.

Sorry suits. The aliens are on their way - to a boardroom near you...