# Women in senior management:
# is the glass ceiling still intact?

*An international comparative study*

**Andrea Broughton**
Principal Research Fellow, Institute for Employment Studies:
*andrea.broughton@employment-studies.co.uk*

**Dr Linda Miller**
Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Employment Studies
*linda.miller@employment-studies.co.uk*

# Women in senior management:
# is the glass ceiling still intact?

*An international comparative study*

**Andrea Broughton**
Principal Research Fellow
Institute for Employment Studies

**Dr Linda Miller**
Senior Research Fellow
Institute for Employment Studies

## Abstract:

*This paper examines the barriers that hinder women's progress to senior and board-level positions in organisations. It is based on qualitative data from interviews with individual senior women collected in five countries: Germany, Greece, Sweden, the UK and the USA. After considering the literature on issues such as gender stereotyping, perceptions of female management style, personal style, tokenism, networking, and childcare, the paper examines whether the situation has changed and whether there are any differences between countries. While barriers remain, particularly in areas such as tokenism, difficulties in networking, perceptions of senior women, and overall confidence of women in senior positions, improvements were identified in areas such as organisational culture, women's ability to gain the right type of experience and issues around combining work and childcare. Some national differences emerged, although, overall, the experiences of the women in the countries studied were similar in terms of the barriers they had encountered and how they had tried to overcome them.*

***Key Words:** Tokenism, Glass Ceiling, Women*

**10** **"İŞ, GÜÇ" Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi**
*"IS, GUC" Industrial Relations and Human Resources Journal*

Ekim/October 2009 - Cilt/Vol: 11 - Sayı/Num: 05

## Introduction

Legislation enacted in the USA in 1963 and in the UK in 1975 rendered sex discrimination in the workplace illegal and across Europe, the EEC Equal Treatment Directive 1976 established the principle of equal treatment in employment and training. However, despite such long-standing legislation, women still remain under-represented in many occupations, most noticeably in high-level positions in organisations. This phenomenon is seen at its most extreme when the composition of company boards is considered. In the USA, women constitute on average 14.7 per cent of board members on Fortune 500 companies; in the UK 11.4 per cent of board members were women (O'Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2007). The latest figures on female executives in the UK from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, published in 2008, suggest that this figure is not changing much over time; one year after the O'Neil et al. report, the EHRC noted that women held just 11% of FTSE 100 directorships.

These figures go some way towards explaining why work aimed at encouraging women to move into senior positions and, in particular board and directorial positions is viewed as a crucial part of the global drive to improve equality between men and women. This constituted the background to our research, which was funded by the US Foundation of Coaching, and which aimed to identify the factors that contribute to women's continuing low representation on boards and determine in which ways coaching could be extended and/or improved to support the progression of senior women into board positions. The work was conducted in five countries: the USA, Sweden, Germany, Greece and the UK.

A range of reasons have been identified in the literature over the past two decades to explain why women in senior jobs fail to progress up to Board level. Issues connected with discrimination and the glass ceiling have been well-characterised. However, in some cases there may be an element of choice: some women may simply decide not to progress to board level despite being coached for and offered such positions. An understanding of the full range of factors that underlie women's decisions to accept promotion to board level or not, as well as of the factors already known to hold some aspiring women back, may provide valuable insights into the dynamics at play within the workplace.

We therefore reviewed the available literature in order to inform development of the interviewing strategy, then conducted face-to-face and/or telephone interviews with women in three categories: those who had received coaching and had considered a Board position (and either accepted or declined the offer); women who could comment at a national level on the factors affecting the progress of women within their country; and women who were involved in the provision of coaching for senior/executive level women and men.

## Selecting the focal countries

Work to 'map' the position of women on company boards provides an overview of the progress that individual countries have made in encouraging the progression of women in organisational structures. For example, research published by the European Professional Women's Network in 2006 grouped European countries into those who were considered "trailblazers", "middle of the roaders" and "slow going" with regard to attaining female board representation. The leading country at that time (in terms of the percentage of board-level seats accounted for by women) was Norway (28.8%), followed by Sweden (22.8%) and Finland (20.0%). The UK was the head of the middle group, with 11.4% of board seats accounted for by women. In Germany, 7.2% of seats were accounted for by women, and in Greece, which is in the "slow going" group, the figure was 4.4%. The average for this third group, which encompasses Switzer-

land, Greece, Spain, Belgium, Italy and Portugal, was 3.8%.

Sweden, Germany, the UK and Greece were selected as the focal countries for this work because they provide a range of examples of national contexts, cultures and systems, that are currently performing well, averagely and not so well in comparison with other European countries. Sweden was chosen in preference to Norway because Norwegian legislation on the gender composition of company boards meant that the situation in Norway could not realistically be compared with elsewhere because of these anomalous circumstances. Research was also undertaken in the USA in order to provide up-to-date information that could then be compared with the European countries.

## Obstacles and barriers to women's progression

Given that women remain a minority of board members even in those countries considered to be 'trailblazers', it is perhaps unsurprising that much of the literature has focussed on factors that constitute obstacles and barriers to women's progression. The main issues are summarised below but it should be noted that there are many overlaps between the various factors identified.

### Glass ceiling

The first of these is the 'glass ceiling', which refers to the idea that there is an invisible barrier to progression for some groups within an organisation. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 1997) has suggested that a range of psychological factors can contribute to this, including cultural biases, gender stereotypes and attitudes against women; in addition the ILO has suggested a range of further difficulties can arise from the lone position of women in high-level posts. First, it suggests that, while men who choose not to accept promotion to a high-level post are likely to have this decision attributed to them as an individual, a woman who chooses not to accept a high-level post

is often assumed to be making that decision because she is a woman; that is, the decision is viewed as emblematic of all women's potential choice. In addition, the ILO has suggested that higher performance standards are often expected of women, while the absence of clear job descriptions for higher echelon jobs and, in some instances, the lack of formal systems for recruitment also tend to create obstacles. Moreover, the existence of informal male networks, sometimes referred to as "old boys' networks", also tends to exclude women from top jobs (ILO, 1997).

While such processes may explain how the operation of some organisations can serve to exclude women from top positions, the 'glass ceiling' can have a further impact by influencing women's perceptions of the organisation and the desirability (or otherwise) of further progression. Cooper Jackson (2001) found that many of the perceived barriers focused on the working environment for senior managers and for women in particular and that, as a consequence, the view of the organisation 'through the glass ceiling' may not always be an attractive proposition: "the need to work long and hard hours, often without equitable pay, and in an atmosphere that is not always friendly towards them".

### International experience – the 'glass border'

Alongside the notion of the glass ceiling is that of the 'glass border', which suggests that women do not get promoted to senior positions due to their lack of international experience. In the past, mixture of paternalism and fear lead companies to restrict the opportunities of their women employees to gain the types of experience necessary for managers who sought progression into senior posts (Alder and Izraeli, 1994). Research by Linehan et al. (2001) found that senior management often assumes that married women do not want international careers, and, in such cases, they consequently fail to invest in the development of their female managers by providing assignments with power and opportunity. Van der Boon

**12** **"İŞ, GÜÇ" Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi**
*"IS, GUC" Industrial Relations and Human Resources Journal*

Ekim/October 2009 - Cilt/Vol: 11 - Sayı/Num: 05

(2003) has noted that women's skills can make them well-equipped to succeed in international assignments, but report that the biggest barriers coming from within the corporation, rather than from situations actually encountered during foreign assignments (Van der Boon, 2003; see also Tung (2004).

Work by Vinnicombe and Singh (2003) has explored the obstacles facing women who wish to progress to the top of organisations in the UK. They interviewed six male and six female directors, to ascertain the nature of the career facilitators and barriers to the top of organisations. Their work revealed that a range of barriers can hold back male managers as much as they do women. However, while for men such barriers tended to be transitory, for women they were more likely to be permanent.

### Personal style and gender stereotyping

One potentially problematic factor identified by women was the issue of personal style. Women thought that if they were perceived as too aggressive this would impact on their own prospects, whereas it would not necessarily impede a man's progress. Finding the right style could be more difficult and assertiveness could be seen by males as aggressiveness. This can be something of a 'lose-lose' situation: if women behave in a similar way to male colleagues, they can be perceived negatively ( 'aggressive'), but if they behaved in a way deemed more appropriate to a woman ('feminine'), then this too could be deemed inappropriate in a manager. This double bind puts women in an invidious position.

Closely related to the issue of perceptions is the impact of gender stereotyping on expectations and perceptions. Male characteristics are often viewed as more important for managerial success (Burke and Collins, 2001). This can be most extreme where organisations have a strongly male culture.

Gender differences in leadership styles have been reported by Rosener (1990) who argued that male managers had more "transactional" leadership styles, (where rewards or punishments are given to employees in return for their performance) while female managers had a more "transformational" leadership style (where the leader takes a visionary position and inspires people to follow). Transformational style is also described as interactive, valuing diversity and encouraging participation and involvement. Despite, or perhaps because of, such work identifying gender differences in leadership styles, Höpfl and Matilal (2007) have noted that there are frequent calls for (male) managers to display a range and balance of skills, including those deemed to be "feminine" managerial skills, although these do not seem to help women to gain advancement. Höpfl and Matilal observe that, whatever the intention of such calls for a more diverse range of skills amongst managers, the fact remains that "traditional masculine values are routinely privileged in assessments of what makes an effective leader."

It is clear that invidious stereotypes of the nature of male and female traits and management styles act to inhibit women's progress not just through their impact on senior managers who recruit and promote managers. Vinnicombe and Singh (2002) examined the congruence between individuals' views of their own attributes and preferred management style and those of the top management team. Their survey found that a perceived lack of congruence could lead to women not putting themselves forward for promotion. They also found that women managers were not taken seriously by some males, and that line managers in particular were a particular stumbling block. They concluded that "women managers in this study do not see themselves as similar to the successful manager who makes it to the top . . . this is likely to have an impact on the women's career aspirations as they seek progression." (Vinnicombe and Singh, 2002, p.129). In other words, stereotypes can have a secondary impact through women's own incorporation of stereotypes of successful managers and their subsequent weighing-up of their own attributes against the prevailing stereotype.

More recent work supports this idea. Although gendered role expectations have diminished, Powell and Butterfield (2003) found that women still report incongruity between their managerial role and their gender identity. Litzky and Greenhaus (2007) attempted to assess the extent to which incongruity between self and senior management (SM) characteristics impacted on women's career decisions. They surveyed employed students and found that women perceived lower congruence between their self identity and the senior manager role than men, and in addition saw themselves as having lower career advancement prospects than did men. The authors concluded that women hold lower desire or aspiration for senior manager positions than do men in part because they are less likely than men to see themselves as fitting into such positions and also in part because they perceive less favourable career advancement prospects than men. The implication is that individuals are less likely to strive for a goal which is perceived as unattainable.

### Contacts and networks

Contacts can be key to gaining a place on the board. For this reason, the operation of networks has been a topic for study. In Australia, Sheridan (2001) explored the way in which the "old boy network" has impacted on women's representation on public boards and continues to constrain women senior managers in their career progress. Her work confirmed that in the majority of cases it had been contacts rather than knowledge or qualifications that had won individuals their post, in line with earlier work by Simpson (1995), who had found that over half of women MBA graduates she surveyed had reported having experienced a "men's club" as a barrier, with some 28% identified this as the largest single barrier to their progression.

While the most immediate issue is the barrier to entry to networks, there is a second factor at play here too. Women 'at the top' can feel quite lonely, with few other women for company and isolated from organisational networks; little appears to have changed since Seth et al (1981) talked of the loneliness of being the only woman on a board.

## Reasons for leaving senior jobs

The foregoing section examines some of the reasons that have been proposed to explain why women do not progress as well as might be expected within organisations. The reasons why women choose to leave senior jobs are considered next.

### Family unfriendly work

As might be expected, a lack of family-friendly working arrangements is one reason identified as contributing to women's decision to leave senior jobs (Sekaran and Hall, 1989). However, some of the reasons for leaving are closely related to the barriers to progress identified in the previous section. Marshall (1995) interviewed women who had reached middle and senior level management positions and then had either left, or contemplated leaving, employment. Isolation was a major theme for these women, who reported "considerable evidence of men banding together in reacting to individual women" and a general male-dominated environment. There appeared to be little inclination to develop a culture in which women could be included more equally. Most of the women in Marshall's interviewees had been appointed as change agents and while most had been successful, some had reported difficulties, such as receiving limited support from their chief executives or colleagues.

Some of Marshall's interviewees also reported tensions with the other women at their organisational level, each of whom had developed individual ways of managing themselves in male-dominated cultures. The stresses and strains of operating in what was perceived as a hostile environment were difficult to manage for many of the survey participants.

### Tokenism

More recently, Singh and Vinnicombe (2006)

**14** **"İŞ, GÜÇ" Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi**
*"IS, GUC" Industrial Relations and Human Resources Journal*

Ekim/October 2009 - Cilt/Vol: 11 - Sayı/Num: 05

have commented that women senior managers in the UK are moving from token to minority representation as directors. Looking at the 2006 FTSE 100 survey, the "female FTSE index", they note that the stagnation seen over the previous two years in the position of female directorships in the UK's FTSE 100 companies appeared to be changing, albeit very slowly.

However, they also believe that women may be "on trial", certainly at the beginning. There is also a suggestion that women have to be better than males – or at the very least, more qualified – in order to be selected for board positions. The fact that so many more women on boards than men have titles suggests continuing senior male doubts about whether women can do these jobs without clear evidence that they are qualified.

### *Behaviours and characteristics of senior managers*

Hillman et al. (2002) examined how the experience and background of female and racial minority directors differed from those of white males. Using a sample of white male, white female, African-American female and African-American male directors on Fortune 1000 boards, the researchers found a range of differences in occupational background, education, and patterns of board affiliation. Female and African-American directors were more likely to come from non-business backgrounds. In keeping with the findings from Singh and Vinnicombe above, Hillman et al found that female and African-American directors were more likely to hold advanced degrees than white male directors. Their research suggests that developing specialist expertise – and in particular, higher qualifications - relevant to the board is a way of compensating for lack of relevant business background and hence help women and people from ethnic minorities progress into director roles .

### Overview of literature

There are some overlaps in the issues identified by the women as barriers to progression and as reasons for leaving senior jobs. This is perhaps not surprising – those who have decided to leave very senior positions are unlikely to have been troubled excessively by the glass ceiling. Conversely, those in senior positions are more able to comment on the loneliness of such positions that those who can only observe from afar. We now go on to explore how the information our interviewees provided mapped against the issues identified in the literature review.

### The research findings

Using the issues and obstacles identified above to guide the discussions with women, we set out to investigate the current experiences of women in senior positions in Germany, Greece, Sweden, the UK and the USA. Specifically, the research was designed to explore the factors which hinder women in their attempts to rise to board-level positions and the factors or actions that are helpful in furthering women's careers, eventually contributing towards their progression to the boards of companies. We also examined the factors affecting women's decisions regarding whether or not to accept board positions. The aim was to identify information that could be used to design coaching that would better help women to progress into senior and board level positions. In addition to examining the responses of women to the various barriers and challenges, the work sought evidence of any differences or similarities between the countries examined; and, if there were differences, whether any lessons or best practice could be learned and transferred across national boundaries.

### *Management style*

A recurring theme in the literature is the differences – real or claimed – in the management styles of women and men. This issue preoccupied commentators and individual women in all the countries in this study. In keeping with previous research, these current interviews indicated that the perception remains that there are differences in both the expectations of the ways in which men and

women were supposed to behave and in the actual styles of men and women, with this sometimes leading to double standards for male and female managers. For example, in the USA, one interviewee believed that more leniency was shown to men – women were expected to be tougher, whereas men were commended if they showed an amount of emotion, while in the UK, an interviewee commented on how assertiveness in women was sometimes negatively perceived.

> *There are some differences where women tend to be more intuitive and sometimes that's just not accepted at all. If a woman brings emotion, not sobbing uncontrollably, emotional or family stuff in it it's not nearly as acceptable as a man's. I worked for a boss who occasionally brought his kids into work when his wife was someplace else and he didn't have childcare. He was a fairly senior guy and everyone thought that was great. A senior woman who did that would be considered unorganised and breaking the rules. I think there is a double standard.*
>
> *It is unfortunate when women are described as being the witch from hell when they are just trying to be assertive. It can be difficult to tread that middle line and it can be depressing when women are attacked for being assertive as you sometimes need to get your point across.*

The majority of women felt that there were some differences in style, but that these could lead women to be better, rather than worse, managers. However, men were allowed more behavioural latitude than were women, while women can sometimes find themselves in a double-bind situation: there can be pressure to adopt a more masculine management style at board level, but those women who do so can find this is judged as inappropriate for a woman and counts against them.

## Organisational culture

Organisational culture is deemed by literature in this area to be of great importance in shaping attitudes towards women. Contrary to previous studies, most of the women interviewed for this research mostly felt that the organisation and the environment in which they worked was supportive to women and had helped them personally. Some felt that their organisation reflected their values, and that this was important. One interviewee in the UK said that she had been careful to choose an organisation with values that fit with her own. While there may have been opportunities in many other organisations that could have been more financially attractive, she did not wish to pursue such opportunities because those organisations did not fit with her own value set.

However, some women had found that assertive behaviour from women was viewed increasingly unfavourably at higher organisational levels, which places them in something of a 'double bind': if they are unassertive they do not gain development or progression, but if they are assertive then they are perceived negatively (and less likely to progress). One US interviewee said she had worked in middle management for some time without encountering any difficulties and it was only when she moved into a more senior role that she began to encounter differences and difficulties:

> *'As I myself moved from the mid level to the higher levels, I truly noticed the difference. I noticed that women at senior levels would come and not stay as long. Also myself I noticed the difference … my own personal style is a more direct, assertive style and as I started to move up the pipe and work a lot with male counterparts I noticed that that is not necessarily well received, not by all but by some, and I would actually have my bosses getting feedback from an executive saying, "She came in and told me what to do." Well no, I didn't tell him what to do but, you know, I also didn't just mess around either.'*

In different organisations macho posturing could increase or decrease in the higher echelons; dependent upon this change, women could find that their position was made ea-

**16** **"İŞ, GÜÇ" Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi**
*"IS, GUC" Industrial Relations and Human Resources Journal*

Ekim/October 2009 - Cilt/Vol: 11 - Sayı/Num: 05

sier or more difficult as they rose through the ranks.

### *Gaining international experience – the 'glass border'*

International experience was deemed to be vital to people who wish to progress in larger organisations, in all the countries in which women were interviewed for this study. However, compared to men, it can often be difficult for women to gain overseas experience. Many of the women interviewed, in all countries in this study, said that they had not waited around to be offered opportunities – they had taken them or created them themselves.

While the great majority of working women have working husbands or partners, a far greater proportion of men have non-working spouses. Where both partners in a marriage are mobile and have high-flying careers the sacrifices can be significant.

> *'The year 2000 was the last year where we actually both physically both got up and went to work in the same city. It's very difficult. Most people aren't willing to do that on a protracted basis. That flexibility and willingness to move around – I moved to marry him and he's moved the last three times to accommodate my job.'*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the difficulties identified above for women in gaining development experience, some women reported that they had experienced difficulties when they were suddenly required to 'step up' to a role. There can be particular challenges where the woman has not been on a 'management track' and so has not been groomed for the role in the same way as many men might have been. Being thrust suddenly into the limelight can be a challenge. One interviewee from the UK said that this had happened to her, as a result of a perception in the organisation that she was a 'safe pair of hands'. This individual had found herself suddenly in a role that she had not been expecting, which was stressful for her even though she was entirely capable, and was perceived as such.

### *Tokens or pioneers?*

In each of the study countries except Greece, the women interviewed for this study confirmed that tokenism remains an issue. Some women talked about the experience of being the only woman in senior organisational structures, and how lonely this can be. In Germany one woman described how she was one of the few senior women at her university, believing she was there only as a 'token', which weighed heavily on her.

As well as the sense of isolation and loneliness, the interviewees gave accounts of

their employers being quite blatant about choosing specific individuals to be a token 'presence' to improve the company's image. One of the UK interviewees described how she had been invited to an event as a token woman, and was then dropped unceremoniously because another, 'better', token woman had been found.

Being a token can place a significant burden on a woman, as there is a tendency for such women to be scrutinised and viewed as representing the whole of womankind in that role, in a way that men are not. Any errors made are not attributed to them as an individual, but attributed to the fact that it is a woman performing an activity they are unsuited to: in other words, their actions and behaviours are seen as typifying women as a whole, rather than reflecting the failure of just one individual. This can add significantly to the pressure that a woman is under as the only woman in a particular role or at a particular level.

> *'You have got not only everyone in the organisation, everyone in the world looking at you as that token and you are 24/7 in the spotlight and everyone is looking at how you do, what you do. You have not only got the pressure of being in that job you have got all that additional pressure of being a token.'*

There was a general consensus among interviewees that things often improved with age. It can be very intimidating for a young woman to find herself in a room full of men,

but this can abate with time, experience and increasing confidence.

> *'It was harder in my twenties to walk into a smoke-filled room of guys in Chicago who were all 25 years older than I am and had no time for me. By now if I'm not used to being the only woman in the room I don't think about it, except when I sit back and reflect on it. At the senior woman level you're kind of used to it. When you change companies or cultures it's more glaring, otherwise you probably comment more on the obverse. If you walked into a room and there were eight women and two men, that would be a surprise.'*

The women interviewed were, to some extent, pioneers. In many cases, however, they also felt that they were tokens, used by their companies to present a more positive public image than might in reality be justified. In some cases employers were 'insultingly blatant' about choosing specific individuals to be a token 'presence'. Whatever the rights or wrongs of such tokenism, women did concede that such appointments did allow them to gain experience that might otherwise not have been offered. Whether women arrive at senior positions through their own pioneering spirit or by being a token appointee, it is typically a lonely experience, and the fact that such women are very much in the spotlight means that the position can be particularly stressful.

### Contacts and networks

The study revealed that women were coming up against similar issues to those identified in the literature – difficulties in entering existing networks and in building up new networks. One interesting finding is that many women felt that they were not good at networking, but some then went on to say what they had achieved through networks. The general perception, both of and by women, that they lack confidence in forming and using networks, is clearly not true of all women.

Time was another factor cited as inhibiting women from building effective networks.

Whereas men, if they have a partner at home, can spend extra hours socialising and building networks, women either cannot or do not want to put in the extra hours that this might entail, particularly if they have family responsibilities.

> *'I am gone five days a week; do you think I am going to go play golf all day Saturday, all day Sunday when I have these little kids at home? Definitely not.'*

Formal and informal networks can help men gain influence and access to high ranking positions. However, women appear to continue to find it difficult to break into male networks and there are few women's networks. Interviewees questioned whether it was worth trying to build up networks of women given that the majority of decision-makers are male. The scarcity of women in senior positions means that any networks of women which do form are unlikely to be as effective as male networks. It was suggested that it would be more useful to help women develop the skills that would allow them to break into male networks.

### Childcare issues

Childcare issues are identified in the literature as a significant barrier to the advancement of women, both in terms of practicalities and perceptions of capabilities. A range of experiences regarding domestic and family commitments was recounted by the interviewees in this study. These ranged from disbelief from colleagues that a senior woman could be contemplating having a child, to the approaches they had taken to combining early years child-rearing with a continuing and advancing career, and trying to combat perceptions that a woman with children was not fully committed to her work.

Here, there were notable differences between the countries in this study, with traditional attitudes more apparent in Germany and Greece, while there was more flexibility for women in the UK. There was general acknowledgement that it is more difficult for women in Germany than in some other parts

**18** **"İŞ, GÜÇ" Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi**
*"IS, GUC" Industrial Relations and Human Resources Journal*

Ekim/October 2009 - Cilt/Vol: 11 - Sayı/Num: 05

of Europe to pursue a career if they have children.

> *'The idea of women and careers is not loaded positively in Germany. In general, the phrase "career woman" is usually seen as an insult. So, rather than, "Wow, a career woman!" it would be, "Hmm, a career woman" - hard, unfeminine etc. Whereas the phrase "career man" is more positively loaded. I think that it's quite complicated and not just to do with childcare, but more a kind of confusion about the role of women in the economic hierarchy in general.'*

One of the things hindering women from combining work and family in Germany is the lack of whole-day school, although this may change in the near future. Interviewees said that the lack of good, affordable childcare was a real problem for working women in Germany, particularly those with children aged between three and 11. This, combined with the general assumption that women will take on the bulk of childcare responsibilities, means that women with children in Germany find it extremely difficult to balance work and homelife. The women interviewed in Germany had successfully managed to combine work with having children, but had needed to be extremely organised in order to do so.

Women in the UK are not, by and large, wrestling with these issues to the same extent as women in Germany. The UK labour market is more flexible than the German labour market, and it would seem that women find it easier to go back to work after having had a child, and can more easily combine a career with a family. However, that is not to say that the same types of issues do not arise. In the USA, many of the women interviewed for this research had had children, but recognised that it was problematic to hold down a senior job and focus on a career, while having a family. One woman spoke of how differences in the treatment of women can begin as soon as a female executive is pregnant – attitudes towards the woman change and she starts to feel insecure at

work.

> *'I see women who become pregnant and are excited about their new family and I watch what happens to them as I coach them, I watch their workload double, I watch them become insecure about their jobs, I watch people move into their arena and I see what happens as the corporations protect themselves but still try to hold the legal line.'*

In Greece, all interviewees believed that one of the greatest barriers to female career progression was the deeply ingrained cultural norms and social attitudes that projected particular roles and expectations onto women. The interviewees believed that, in Greece women are regarded primarily as home-makers and childrearers, something that is reinforced in both sexes from the early years of education.

Childcare remains a major barrier to women's ability to participate fully at work. However, in Sweden the statutory and societal background is quite different to that in Germany and Greece, with generous maternity leave and childcare provision. Although availability of childcare is an issue in many countries, attitudes can constitute a barrier too: while statutory provision in Sweden is generous, social attitudes lag behind the legislative environment and individuals' opinions are still often negative towards women who return to work soon after having a child. In the other countries the social attitudes and cultural norms regarding childcare were even more deeply ingrained. Women in the five countries studied here spoke of the sacrifices they had been forced to make, either in terms of their career or their family life. Many women with children were faced with the option of returning to work on a part-time basis only or not at all, and those who move to part-time working may find they are subsequently overlooked for promotion.

### Self confidence

While lack of self confidence is an issue that

can compromise individuals' general ability to function, it can be a particular issue when women need to negotiate over pay. Women appear to have less confidence in their self-worth than men have. The result of this can be lower pay for female managers, and even, on occasions, to bring down the pay levels for all managers in an organisation or sector. This would appear to be the case in all countries in the study.

One UK interviewee believed that women needed to be taught more self confidence, but recognised that this was extremely difficult and that it probably needed tackling at a very early age.

> '*I think a woman will always look at a job description and she'll say, "Well you know I can only do maybe, 75/80 per cent of this job. I'm not sure if I should apply for it". A man will look at a job description and he'll say "Oh I can do 50 per cent of this. I'll put my application in". It's having much more courage to apply and put yourself forward. Making sure you are known to people in the organisation.'*

The issue of whether women are doing the right things to get themselves noticed by the right people in organisations seemed to be one that resonated with some of the interviewees. In the UK, one interviewee described not wanting to push herself forward, in meetings and elsewhere in her organisation. She knew that this was something that she needed to work on, although she did also believe that it was something that was common to many women.

One issue that contributes to self-confidence is appearance. It was generally acknowledged by those interviewed that women are judged to a greater extent on their appearance than men; many of the women interviewed had developed strategies for dealing with this. Experiences seemed to be common across countries in this regard, although appearance seemed to be a particularly significant issue in the USA – all interviewees in the US had a view on appearance, either from personal experience, or from what they had seen over the years. This was the solu-

tion that one USA interviewee had adopted:

> '*I'm actually a blonde. I started dying my hair red 20 years ago because with my body style, as a blonde, I got treated very differently, like I was stupid. The minute I dyed my hair red my credibility factor went up exponentially. It's like a costume I'm wearing every day.'*

Overall, interviewees believed that more women suffer from a lack of self confidence than do men. Low self confidence can hamper women's career progression in several ways. Women are less likely than men to make speculative job applications for posts for which they do not consider themselves fully qualified; self confidence is also a factor in the significantly lower salaries negotiated (on average) by women compared to men. Women are more likely than men to be averse to self-promotion, which also impacts negatively on progression and rewards.

**Conclusions**

The research has highlighted a number of perceived barriers that are hindering women from advancing in their careers. These are broadly similar across countries, and encompass issues such as gender stereotyping, and the perception of how women should behave in terms of management style. They reinforce the findings that have emerged from many, much earlier studies, and indicate that for many women the situation nowadays does not differ much from that prevailing some two or three decades ago.

Many of the women in this study had experienced various types of discriminatory behaviour although most had, by the stage in their careers in which they now found themselves, learnt to deal with it effectively. Being the only women in a roomful of men can be a challenging experience and was one that many of the women interviewed for this research had had to deal with, particularly at earlier stages of their careers. Coupled with the challenge of trying to find their way in organisational structures created for the most part by and for men, this proved difficult in many cases.

**20** **"İŞ, GÜÇ" Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi**
*"IS, GUC" Industrial Relations and Human Resources Journal*

Ekim/October 2009 - Cilt/Vol: 11 - Sayı/Num: 05

Although the majority of the women in this study could be considered pioneers, many recounted instances where they believed that they had been used as tokens and spoke of the continuing difficulties associated with this.

Confidence issues came out strongly during the research and can therefore be seen as an issue that women continue to struggle with – many of the women interviewed talked about how important it was for women to have the confidence and belief in their own abilities to seek out and take advantage of the development opportunities they needed in order to advance their careers. Confidence also played a more general role in how women behaved in an organisation and how they dealt with the difficulty of negotiating issues to do with appearance and being, essentially, a woman in a man's world. Linked to this was the fact that some women had experienced non-linear careers and therefore felt unsure as to whether they had the right background or experience. Some recounted having to step up to a role suddenly, which they experienced as difficult, although all performed well.

Childcare issues and the problems of how to balance work and family life were highlighted as a continuing major factor in women's career progression. Practical arrangements linked to childcare can hamper women in the early or mid-parts of their career, which then has an impact on whether and how soon they can reach more senior levels in their organisations.

Networking was also experienced as a continuing difficulty by many of the women interviewed. Although formal and informal networks were perceived as vital to career development, the women interviewed found that there was a lack of other senior women with whom to network, it was difficult to penetrate all-male networks, and often it was difficult to attend networking events, both formal and informal, as they were usually held during out of office hours and at weekends.

What was less in evidence in the reports we received were issues around organisational culture. The women interviewed in this study did not highlight the overall culture of their organisation as a particular problem or barrier. However, it is difficult to know whether this is because organisations have become more female-friendly, or whether it is more linked to the fact that the women interviewed have chosen to work for organisations that share their values, or that they have been successful in finding ways to make their way through the organisation.

Gaining international experience, which is seen as a crucial step to advancement in multinational and global organisations, can still be a challenge for women, although the women in this study had been successful in seeking it out for themselves. Nevertheless, some had had to make sacrifices in terms of the arrangement of their private lives.

Although childcare issues can still constitute a barrier to women's advancement, as seen above, the situation has arguably changed in some countries, such as the UK, where there is now more flexibility for women to combine career and family.

Finally, one of the aims of this research was to find out whether there were significant differences in the experiences of women in the different countries studied. There are differences between the countries in terms of the cultural context, the employment relations system and general attitudes towards women, and these factors do have some impact on the experiences of the women in those countries. National culture can play a significant role in shaping the experiences of women managers; in countries such as Germany and Greece, there remains a far more traditional view about the role of women than in the other study countries, and this can hamper the progress of women in organisational life. Views on the role of women in Sweden, the UK and the USA are less traditional in some respects, although the USA does not give women the legislative support in terms of childcare that is found in the UK and, in particular, in Sweden.

Nevertheless, despite these different national contexts, we found that, overall, the experiences recounted by the women in the five countries studied were remarkably similar in terms of the barriers they had come up against in their careers and the ways in which they had tried to deal with them. The interviewees all had experiences to relate in terms of barriers, such as perceptions of management style, difficulties with organisational culture, fighting to gain the right experience to progress, the problems associated with being a token or a pioneer in their particular field, issues around how to combine work and family life, how to network effectively, and how to plan their career overall. This leads us to the conclusion that although national cultures and contexts play a role in the experiences of female managers, the issues they face in their careers tend to transcend these national contexts.

## Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone with experts  and with senior women in the following countries:

- Germany
- Greece
- Sweden
- the USA
- the United Kingdom.

Fieldwork on the project was carried out between May 2008 and October 2008. The expert interviews were conducted with representatives from a range of organisations in each country, including research bodies, lobby organisations, employer representative bodies, employee representative bodies, academics and independent researchers, in order to gain an overview of the issues that relevant to the situation in each country.

In total, 32 interviews were carried out, as follows:

- in Germany, ten interviews were carried out in total, of which five were with experts and researchers, including a researcher from a trade union, and academic researchers, and five were with individual senior women, including a senior trade union official, a senior academic and a senior manager in a communications company.

- in Greece four women were interviewed. The sample comprised an employment researcher (working mainly on behalf of trade unions); the Director of Operations and Technology in a multinational financial services organisation; the Head of HR for an international communications company; and a divisional manager at a leading bank.

- in Sweden, seven interviews were carried out in total, of which one was a board member; two were in senior positions and who had received coaching; one was a trainer/researcher and one was a lecturer/researcher; one was a legal expert; and one was a representative of JämO, the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman for Sweden.

- in the USA, eight interviews were carried out in total, of which six were with individual senior women and two were with members of an expert research organisation. The senior women interviewed worked for organisations in a range of sectors, including energy, public administration, consultancy, and the airline sector.

- in the UK, three interviews of senior women were carried out. In the initial proposal the UK was not included as a study country, but it was subsequently decided to include a selection of UK senior women as comparators. Of these senior women, one worked in the energy sector, one was a senior trade union official and one worked in a non-departmental public body.

**22** **"İŞ, GÜÇ" Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi**
*"IS, GUC" Industrial Relations and Human Resources Journal*

Ekim/October 2009 - Cilt/Vol: 11 - Sayı/Num: 05

## References

Adler N J, Izraeli D N (1994), Competitive Frontiers: Women managers in a global economy, Blackwell, Oxford

Burke S, Collins K (2001), Gender differences in leadership styles and management skills, Women in Management Review, Vol. 16, No. 5

Cooper Jackson J (2001), Women middle managers' perception of the glass ceiling, Women in Management Review, Vol. 16, No. 1

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2008), Sex and Power 2008, EHRC, Manchester

European PWN Board Women Monitor 2006, Internet posting www.europeanpwn.net/index.php?article_id=8

Hillman A J, Cannella A, Harris I C (2002), Women and racial minorities in the boardroom: how do directors differ? Journal of Management, 28

Höpfl H, Matilal S (2007), 'The lady vanishes': some thoughts on women and leadership, Journal of Organizational Change Management, Vol. 20, No. 2

International Labour Organisation (ILO), Conclusions on breaking through the glass ceiling: Women in Management, December 1997

Linehan M, Scullion H, Walsh J S (2001), Barriers to women's participation in international management, European Business Review, Vol. 13, No. 1

Litzky B, Greenhaus, J (2007), The relationship between gender and aspirations to senior management, Career Development International, Vol. 12, Issue 7.

Marshall J (1995), Working at senior management and board levels: some of the issues for women, Women in Management Review, Vol. 10, Issue 3

O'Neil D A, Hopkins M M, Bilimoria D (2007), Women's Careers at the Start of the 21st Century: Patterns and Paradoxes, Journal of Business Ethics, July 2007

Powell G N, Butterfield, A (2003), Gender, gender identity, and aspirations to top management, Women in Management Review, Vol. 18, Issue 1/2.

Rosener J B (1990), Ways women lead, Harvard Business Review, November-December 1990

Sekaran U, Hall D T (1989), Asynchronism in dual-career and family linkages, in Arthur, M.B., Hall, D.T, Lawrence, B.S. (Eds),Handbook of Career Theory, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 159-80

Seth S P, Swanson C L, Harrigan K R (1981), Women directors on corporate boards, Center for Research in Business and Social Policy, University of Texas at Dallas

Sheridan A (2001), A view from the top: women on the boards of public companies, Corporate Governance, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 8-15

Simpson R (1995), Is management education on the right track for women? Women in Management Review, Vol. 10, No. 6

Singh V, Vinnicombe S (2006), The Female FTSE Report 2006. Identifying the New Generation of Women Directors, International Centre for Women Business

Leaders, Cranfield School of Management, UK. www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/ research/centres/cdwbl/downloads/FTSE2006full.pdf

Tung R L (2004), Female Expatriates: The Model Global Manager? Organizational Dynamics, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2004

Van der Boon M (2003), Women in International Management: an international perspective on women's ways of leadership, Women in Management Review, Vol. 18, Issue 3, 2003

Vinnicombe S, Singh V (2002), Sex role stereotyping and requisites of successful top managers, Women in Management Review, Vol. 17, No. 3/4, 2002

Vinnicombe S, Singh V (2003), Locks and keys to the boardroom, Women in Management Review, Vol. 18, No. 6, 2003

**24** **"İŞ, GÜÇ" Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi**
*"IS, GUC" Industrial Relations and Human Resources Journal*

Ekim/October 2009 - Cilt/Vol: 11 - Sayı/Num: 05