

*Breaking the Glass Ceiling*

## Through the Glass Ceiling: Prospects for the Advancement of Women in the Federal Civil Service

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*What barriers lie between women and equitable consideration for their promotion within the federal government? Katherine C. Naff contends that although discrimination against women has been illegal in the federal government since 1964, women are still severely underrepresented in managerial ranks. Using a unique dataset compiled by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, the author examines factors accounting for the successful advancement of women and what those factors may indicate about why women have not made more progress. She concludes that differences in experience and education only partially account for the discrepancy and that assumptions about women's potential and career commitment remain in conflict with traditional criteria for evaluating employees' promotion potential. The author also probes various perceptions and finds that many women believe they face stereotypes that question their competence. The author concludes by suggesting concrete steps agencies and managers can and should take to dismantle the glass ceiling.*

It is difficult to comprehend that a century ago, the public service was almost exclusively a male domain. When a member of the Civil Service Commission in 1894 asked the Secretary of the Interior whether a woman who had successfully passed the examination could be appointed to the high-paid position of pension examiner, the answer was a curt "No" (Aron, 1987).

Of course, overt discrimination in the federal government has been illegal since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The progress made by women in terms of representation has been impressive: women now hold nearly half of the white-collar jobs in the executive branch. Meanwhile, the focus of those opposed to gender discrimination has shifted to jobs in the upper levels of government, since only about one in four supervisors and one in ten executives in the federal bureaucracy are women (Office of Personnel Management, 1991). Such statistics suggest that while employment may no longer be denied to women based on sex alone, some form of discrimination continues to prevent women from moving into supervisory and management positions. During the 1980s, the term "glass ceiling" was coined to describe the subtle barriers that block the advancement of women (and minorities). Two dimensions of the glass ceiling in the federal government have come to light: the nature of barriers that limit women's advancement, and women's own perception of their treatment in the workplace. The former must be understood before steps can be taken to achieve the full representation of women in senior level jobs. The latter must also be understood because even perceptions of disparate treatment can have an adverse impact on women and the organizations for which they work.

My analysis will be based on a unique data set compiled during 1991 and 1992 by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB). Under its statutory authority to oversee merit systems and ensure that federal employees, among other things, are being promoted based on merit alone, MSPB undertook a study to determine whether a glass ceiling does exist in the federal government. The analysis was based on three sources of information: "hard data" collected on federal employees and maintained in a Central Personnel Data File (CPDF) by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM); focus groups of mid- and senior-level federal employees; and a written governmentwide survey of federal employees (Merit Systems Protection Board, 1992).

The MSPB study was sensitive to the complexities of the issues inherent in identifying barriers to the advancement of women. Any single statistic may be interpreted in more than one way. For example, is the poor representation of women in senior level jobs a result of fewer qualified women, less ambition on the part of women, or have women indeed faced discriminatory treatment? The creation of a large data set that included both quantitative and qualitative data about men's and women's career advancement in the federal civil service was designed to create as comprehensive a research base as possible to assess the glass ceiling at the federal level. The use of multiple sources of data had also proven successful for a Canadian task force that was charged by the Canadian Public Service Commission with identifying barriers to the advancement of women in that country's civil service (Beneath the Veneer, 1990).

## Previous Research

Most of the previous academic research related to career advancement in the federal sector has focused on either "human capital" factors such as age, education, and length of service or on the differences in the attitudes and experiences of men and women. The former analyses have generally relied on data from the Central Personnel Data File (CPDF) on federal employees in order to determine the extent to which salary or promotion rate differences between women and men can be explained by differences in the human capital. Generally, these studies have not ruled out the existence of discrimination, because they did not find that the differences in human capital fully explained the variance in men's and women's advancement (Long, 1976; Borjas,

1978; Taylor, 1979; Lewis, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1987). This research, then, supports the suggestion that women face barriers to advancement unrelated to their qualifications but not what those barriers may be.

A second body of academic research has used surveys of, or interviews with, federal employees to assess similarities and differences in the attitudes and experiences of successful men and women (Markham *et al.*, 1983; Vertz, 1985; Fine, Johnson, and Ryan, 1990; Bayes, 1991). Most of this research has focused on specific career advancement factors, like mentoring or mobility, and has usually been limited to particular agencies or small samples of federal employees.

Federal policy makers have also been concerned about the imbalance in the representation of women and minorities in senior-level jobs. For example, in response to requests from members of Congress, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) has issued several agency-specific and governmentwide reports concerning the effectiveness of affirmative employment programs. Most of GAO's governmentwide evaluations have relied on comparisons between the percentages of women and minorities in specific occupations and at specific grade levels with the percentages of women and minorities in comparable jobs in the civilian labor force. In a 1991 summary of its research, GAO agreed with a statement by then OPM Director Constance Newman who said, "the percentages of women and minorities in the (Senior Executive Service [SES]) and the pipeline to the SES are unacceptable" (General Accounting Office, 1991).

Meanwhile, research outside of the federal sector has also supported the suggestion that a glass ceiling exists. In 1990, the Department of Labor (DOL) undertook a pilot study to examine whether a glass ceiling was inhibiting the advancement of women and minorities in Fortune 500 companies and other companies that contract with the federal government. The department's first report, issued in August of 1991, concluded that a glass ceiling does exist in the form of informal policies and practices that have unintentionally prevented women and minorities from receiving equal consideration for top level jobs (Department of Labor, 1991). Since 1991, DOL has included an examination of possible barriers to the advancement of women and minorities in its regular cycle of reviews of government contractors.

In addition to actual barriers, a related question has to do with women's perceptions of their treatment at work. In a 1980 article in

## Data and Methods

The first component of the research involved conducting focus groups of mid- and senior-level employees (GS/GM 13-15 and senior executives). In total, 14 focus groups were conducted at nine agencies during the summer of 1991. During these sessions, employees were asked broad, open-ended questions about their career advancement, and whether there were differences in the treatment of men and women in the workplace. Responses were used to develop the second component, a questionnaire that was administered to a stratified, random sample of 13,000 white-collar, executive branch employees (grades GS 9-15 and senior executives) during the following fall and winter. The survey included items asking about employees' qualifications, work habits, and experiences and how they perceived the treatment of women and men in the workplace. Eighty four hundred surveys were returned for a response rate of 66 percent.

Career advancement was measured by counting the number of promotions an employee received during his or her career, controlling for grade at entry. Analysis of covariance allowed for the examination of the relative impact of each factor on advancement, by sex, when other factors were controlled. In addition, a review of the transcripts from the focus groups helped to complete the picture which emerged from the survey analysis.

The third component of the analysis made use of data requested from OPM's Central Personnel Data File (CPDF). These data show how the distribution of men and women by occupational (PATCO) category and grade level changed between 1974 (when these data were first available in their present form) and 1990. In addition, MSPB made use of data on rates of accession, promotion, transfer among occupational categories, separation, and retirement to develop a work force planning model to project how the distribution might change over the following 25 years.

*Public Administration Review*, Anne Hopkins defined “subjective discrimination” as the *perception* by an individual or group that their own situation is discriminatory, whether or not such discrimination actually exists. She argued that the subjective component must also be understood if remedies for discrimination are to be adequate. Research has not only supported her proposition that women continue to perceive discrimination at work (Bayes, 1991; Merit Systems Protection Board, 1989; Rosen, 1982; Hopkins, 1980), but also that women perceive more subtle forms of disparate treatment, such as a glass ceiling (Catalyst, 1992; Fine, Johnson and Ryan, 1990).

In summary, prior research has indicated that differences in qualifications between men and women probably account for some, but not all, of the low proportion of women in senior levels in the federal government. It has also suggested that other factors, such as mentoring and mobility are important, and that there may be informal policies or practices that hamper women’s advancement.

In order to examine what might constitute the glass ceiling, one needs to assess what factors account for the success of those men and women who have advanced in the federal government, and what these factors might reveal about the glass ceiling. In addition, the extent to which federal employees experienced subjective discrimination is also important. Four questions need to be answered:

- ◆ What are the formal and informal requirements for advancement in the federal government?
- ◆ Do any of these requirements place women at a disadvantage with respect to career advancement?
- ◆ What kinds of stereotypes or assumptions about women may act to limit their advancement potential?
- ◆ To what extent do women believe they have been treated differently than their male colleagues?

## Findings and Discussion

### CPDF Data

The CPDF data confirmed that the distribution of men and women by PATCO category and grade level changed from 1974 to 1990 (Table 1). On the positive side, women’s share of senior executive jobs quintupled during that time period. However, on the negative side, in 1990, women still held only 11 percent of the top jobs. The representation of women in professional and administrative jobs; that is, those in the pipeline to management levels, doubled, although women still held over 80 percent of clerical jobs in 1990.

Data on promotion rates (averaged over the period 1988-1990) show that women and men were promoted at nearly the same rate at every grade level, but with two important exceptions (Table 2). In GS-9 professional jobs, men were promoted at a rate 33 percent higher than women, and in GS-11 jobs, at a rate 40 percent higher than women.

This is a significant finding. First, it means that the glass ceiling is probably not where conventional wisdom places it—at the level where people break into management jobs. It is, in fact, in the very early stages of a career. Three-quarters of employees in professional positions start at or below GS-11 and generally all of them must pass through those grades before they can even apply for a supervisory position. So, while the promotion rate for men and women at higher grades is about the same, there is a smaller numerical base of women eligible for promotion. This partly accounts for the relatively slow

**Table 1**  
Representation of Women by Grade Grouping and PATCO Category, 1974 and 1990 (In Percent)

Grade Level Group	1974	1990
SES & equivalent	2	11
GS/GM 13-15	5	18
GS 9-12	19	38
GS 5-8	58	71
GS 1-4	78	76
<b>PATCO Category</b>		
Professional	18	31
Administrative	17	38
Technical	35	54
Clerical	84	86
Other	2	12

Source: Central Personnel Data File.

progress of women in increasing their numbers in senior executive jobs.

Another contributing reason is that overall advancement is slow in the government for both men and women at all grade levels above the entry level. CPDF data show that on average between 1988 and 1990 only 1 in 100 employees was promoted from GS/GM 15 jobs into the senior executive service per year (Table 2). Little wonder that the work force planning model used in the MSPB study estimated that, if rates at which men and women move in and out of government jobs and are promoted from one grade to the next remain as they did during 1988-1990, by the year 2017, women will still represent less than one-third of senior executives.

Thus CPDF data support the proposition that women face a glass ceiling during their careers, but do not explain what the nature of the ceiling is. For that, it is necessary to review data provided by focus group participants and by the completed written survey.

### Factors Affecting Career Advancement

The survey was designed to address the questions: What is required to get ahead in the federal government, and what do those requirements, formal or informal, reveal about the glass ceiling? Prior research has suggested that education (Lewis, 1986c), seniority (Grandjean, 1981), mobility (Markham *et al.*, 1983), and having a mentor (Vertz, 1985; Kelly *et al.*, 1991; Hale, 1992; Dreher and Ash, 1990) are important factors in career advancement. Research has also suggested that marriage and children adversely affect women’s (but not men’s) career advancement (Kelly *et al.*, 1991; Johnson and Duerst-Lahti, 1992). In addition, comments made by federal employees who participated in the focus groups indicated that the

**Table 2**  
Average Promotion Rates for Women and Men in Professional Occupations, 1988-1990 (In Percent)

Grade	Women	Men
GS 9	33	44
GS 11	15	21
GS 12	13	10
GS/GM 13	11	8
GS/GM 14	9	7
GS/GM 15	1	1

Source: Central Personnel Data File.

amount of time devoted to the job each week, travel, leaves of absence from work, and work location (headquarters, regional, or field offices) are important factors.

Survey analysis and focus group discussions pointed to five factors that are significant in career advancement in the government and that also have an impact on the representation of women in senior positions. These five factors—experience, education, (i.e., human capital), relocations, time devoted to the job, and children—are discussed in depth in the sections that follow.

### Human Capital

Two human capital variables—seniority (length of federal service) and education—are important predictors of advancement. Those who have achieved the greatest number of promotions have, on average, worked the longest for the government. This is a primary reason that women have not advanced as rapidly as men. According to CPDF data, on average women have 10.3 years of service and men have 13.6 years.

The same difference is true with regard to education. The average grade for employees (in grades 9 and above) with varying amounts of education is shown in Table 3. Those employees at higher grade levels generally also have more education than those at lower grade levels.

Again, the difference in the average amount of education that women and men have explains part of the reason women have not made greater progress. Although men and women who have worked for the government for 10 years or less have about the same amount of education, a significantly lower percentage of women than men with more than 10 years of experience have college degrees. Thus, on average, those women with the experience necessary to be competitive for a high-level job often do not have the requisite education.

However, differences in experience and education do not fully explain slower advancement by women. The average number of promotions received by men and women survey respondents with about the same amount of experience are shown in Table 4. After controlling for education and grade at entry, women still have received fewer promotions than men. These differences are statistically significant. These data support the proposition that equally qualified men and women have probably not received the same consideration for promotions.

### Relocations

The third factor which focus group and survey data suggest is an important predictor of career advancement is the number of geographic relocations an employee has made during his or her career. Several of the employees participating in the focus groups linked career advancement to geographic relocation. The following comment is illustrative: "I think the question of geographical mobility is still a factor and I think when you [become a senior executive] you have to indicate that you're willing to consider some mobility."

Table 5 demonstrates that employees that have reached senior levels have relocated more than those who have not. It also shows that women, on average, have relocated less often than men.

Women have apparently also limited their advancement by being less willing to relocate than men. No more women (4 percent) than men (7 percent) responded affirmatively to a survey question which asked if they had ever refused a geographic relocation while employed with the government. However, many relocations occur not because an employee has been asked to relocate, but because he or she takes the initiative to apply for a career enhancing position in another local-

**Table 3**  
Average Grade by Highest Degree Earned

Degree	Average Grade		
	Overall	For Women	For Men
Without 4-year college degree	11.08	10.86	11.27
Bachelor's	11.94	11.46	12.10
Master's	12.45	11.79	12.65
Doctorate	13.40	13.20	13.43
Professional	13.62	13.44	13.67

Source: Merit Systems Protection Board survey of GS 9-15 and SES federal employees administered during the fall and winter, 1991-92.

**Table 4**  
Average Number of Promotions by Years of Service, Controlling for Education and Grade at Entry

Years of Service	Women	Men
0-5 years**	2.32	2.77
5 to 10 years**	3.00	3.40
10 to 20 years*	3.48	3.69
20 or more years**	3.66	4.36

Note: For all promotion rates, respondents are equated by grade at entry into government. The range of possible promotions is 1 to 8.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

Source: Merit Systems Protection Board survey of GS 9-15 and SES federal employees administered during the fall and winter, 1991-92.

**Table 5**  
Average Number of Relocations for Women and Men by Grade Range

Grade Range	Women	Men
GS 9-12	0.60	1.01
GS/GM 13-15	0.65	1.26
SES	0.97	1.58

$p < .001$ .

Source: Merit Systems Protection Board survey of GS 9-15 and SES federal employees administered during the fall and winter, 1991-92.

ity. Survey responses suggest that women may be less likely to apply for such positions than men. When asked to indicate the extent to which the statement: "I am willing to relocate to advance my career" applied to them, 58 percent of men and 48 percent of women responded that the statement applied to them to some or a great extent. However, it is certainly possible that women's supervisors and mentors in general have been more reluctant to steer them into career paths that would require relocation or make such job announcements available to them. Comments by focus group participants such as the following lend some support to this proposition:

Relocations have always been a problem in many agencies; the concept of career advancement being associated with taking different geographical relocations.... And there's been an assumption that wives will follow husbands, but husbands will not follow wives.

More important, analysis of covariance shows that even if the number of relocations are controlled along with education and experience, women have been promoted at a lower rate than men. Men have been promoted an average of 3.79 times during their career, and

women only 3.40 times, controlling for relocations, education and experience ( $p < .001$ ).

### Time Devoted to the Job

The fourth factor that is highly related to career advancement is the amount of time devoted to the job each week. In this case, the issue is not whether an employee works part time as opposed to full time, but rather how many hours, over and above 40, are spent on the job each week. Again, the following comment from a focus group participant illustrates the point:

In my division, [the boss] would come through and he would say, "I expect to see all your faces when I come here in the morning, and I expect to see you here when I leave at night. And only the people who do that will be promoted."

Survey responses indicate that there is a difference between men and women in the average amount of time spent on the job each week, although the difference is not marked. Both work, on average, between 41 and 45 hours per week. A slightly greater percentage of men (24 percent) than women (17.5 percent) work 46 or more hours per week. But focus group comments suggest that there is often an assumption that women, especially those with children, are not able to meet that requirement. One woman spoke of a "paternalism" that discourages women with children from applying for certain jobs in her agency. She described the message she received as:

I'm only thinking of you. I know you have young children and this involves late meetings.... There will be something that comes along that will be right for you, but this isn't right for you.

This point is further supported by a comparison between the average number of promotions received by survey respondents with and without children (Table 6). Women with children have been promoted significantly less often than women without children (and men with and without children), even controlling for education, experience, relocations, and any leaves of absence of more than 6 weeks taken from work.

### The Impact of Children

These findings suggest that the glass ceiling is comprised, at least in part, of organizational requirements, often informal, that work against women in two ways. Women, who continue to bear primary responsibility for child rearing often do not have the flexibility to work into the evening, and thus cannot meet what in many federal agencies amounts to an informal job requirement. However, even if they do have the flexibility, it is often assumed that they are not able to work overtime. As a result, women are often bypassed for impor-

tant career-enhancing assignments, developmental opportunities, and promotions. Again, this point was made very well by a focus group participant who said:

There is this business that as a successful senior executive you come in at 7:00 and you stay longer and work harder than anybody else and you really don't start your rumination about really important things until 10:00 or so at night. And the effect of this was that the only people who [they] wanted to discuss the job [vacancy with] were men of any age, single women and older women with no kids. I mean, there were 2 or 3 names in the hat and they said "I don't want to talk to her because she has children who are still home in these hours." Now they don't pose that thing about men on the list, many of whom also have children in that age group.

Another woman who participated in a focus group acknowledged the almost unconscious way in which assumptions about women with children enter in to decisions about promotions and work assignments.

I've seen that [kind of thinking] added to how [assignments/promotion decisions are made] in the workplace with some frequency and I would even have to admit to being guilty of thinking it myself. I mean, we're sitting around this table and saying, "I don't know how that woman can travel and raise a family, too." And it's hard to not let it factor into your thinking.

The underlying issue may be that women are often assumed to be less committed to their careers than men. In fact, this issue was raised in a *Wall Street Journal* article which said that "No matter how individual women approach their jobs, research shows women as a group are still widely seen as lacking in career commitment" (Shellenberger, 1992). The article went on to quote the Work and Family Institute as saying that "work and family programs may allow women to work fewer hours, perhaps inadvertently creating a 'mommy track' where women are seen as less committed and less worthy of promotion."

It is extremely important for organizations to recognize the impact of these assumptions. Federal agencies, like their private sector counterparts, are making efforts to accommodate working families by providing day care, flexible schedules, flexible work sites, and other such programs. However, if women are still denied equal opportunity for promotion based on assumptions about their commitment to their careers, these programs alone will not ensure that women have equal access to jobs at all levels. In fact, private sector research suggests that an "unspoken code" limits the advancement of women who choose to take advantage of programs designed to balance work and family needs (Lewis, 1993).

Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that the impact of these assumptions about women's commitment to their careers

**Table 6**  
Average Number of Promotions for Women and Men with and without Children

	Women	Men
With children	3.37	3.88
Without children	3.51	3.57

Note: Data controlled for amount of experience, education, number of relocations, and absences of more than 6 weeks.

$p < .001$ .

Source: Merit Systems Protection Board survey of GS 9-15 and SES federal employees administered during the Fall and Winter, 1991-92.

**Table 7**  
Average Number of Promotions for Men and Women with and without Children by Amount of Federal Experience

Years in Work Force	Women		Men	
	With Kids	Without	With Kids	Without
less than 5*	2.35	2.33	2.59	2.76
5-10***	2.84	3.20	3.47	3.30
10-20***	3.19	3.55	3.87	3.53
more than 20***	3.15	3.65	4.60	4.33

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Source: Merit Systems Protection Board survey of GS 9-15 and SES federal employees administered during the Fall and Winter, 1991-92.

extends beyond women with children. The data in Table 7 compare the average number of promotions for men and women with and without children who have been in the work force for varying amounts of time. During the first five years of their careers, women with and without children advance at nearly the same rate, while both groups of women advance more slowly than all men. The difference between childless women and men narrows as these women remain in the work force for more than five years, while women with children continue to lag behind. This suggests that even women without children are assumed to be less committed to their careers until they have demonstrated their commitment by remaining in the work force for several years without having children!

Data in Tables 6 and 7 suggest another interesting point. Men not only are not disadvantaged by having children, after the first five years of their careers, they seem to actually benefit from having children. Again, many of the focus group comments concerning a double standard apparently applied to women and men may shed light on this finding. One participant said:

Even after child bearing age when it comes to [promotion to the Senior Executive Service] they say, "well she really doesn't need the money. She just works because she wants to. But the men need the SES because...they have kids to put through college."

Thus, there is evidence that women who have children or who are early in their careers are held back by assumptions that their family responsibilities will detract from their career commitment. Conversely, men with children may receive preferential treatment because it is assumed that family responsibilities make their careers all the more important to them.

#### Relocations and Time Commitment as Criteria for Advancement

Few people would dispute that assuming women are not committed to their jobs because they have children, or may have children soon, is not a valid criteria for advancement. But is it fair to refuse to consider someone for promotion who is unable to relocate or to work long hours?

For some jobs, the better candidate is one who has relocated or the one who has the flexibility to work long hours. For example, an employee with field experience may be a superior director of field operations, or an employee available at all hours may be needed as a congressional liaison as Congress works late into the evening during the final days of the legislative session. However, for most jobs these are not prerequisites.

Data compiled for this study suggest at least four reasons why supervisors should not assume women are less committed to their jobs or less competent than men. First, women receive, on average, performance appraisals that are as good as or better than men receive. The most recent performance rating reported by women survey respondents (mean of 4.14 on a 5-point scale) was higher than that of men survey respondents (4.04;  $p < .001$ ). These data show no difference between the average rating of women with children and women without children. That women in general receive higher performance appraisals than men is further supported by a profile of federal employees, based on 1990 OPM data, which reported that women received 40 percent more "outstanding" ratings than men (*Profile*, 1992, p. 12).

Second, survey responses indicate that women are just as committed to their jobs as men and equally ambitious. Table 8 shows the percent of survey respondents that answered various statements about

**Table 8**  
Commitment to Job and Career, Percent Responding "Some" or "to a Great Extent" (in Percent)

Statement	Women	Men
I am very committed to my job.	95	93
I am always enthusiastic about my job.	89	88
I am willing to devote whatever time is necessary to my job to advance my career.	78	74
I am planning to apply for promotion in the next 3 to 5 years.	64	57

Source: Merit Systems Protection Board survey of GS 9-15 and SES federal employees.

job commitment as applying to themselves to some or a great extent. More than 90 percent of women and men indicated a high level of job commitment. Survey respondents were also asked about their plans for the next five years (Table 8). Three-quarters of women and men indicated that they were planning to apply for a promotion. These responses dispute the myth that women are less committed to their careers and less ambitious than men.

Third, time availability should not carry the weight that it does in evaluating employees' promotion potential is that time does not always equate with productivity. Women in focus groups talked about how they concentrated their efforts to a greater degree during the times when childcare would prevent them from staying late to finish a project. One woman, reflecting on her career when she was raising her child, said:

I tended to work much harder during the working day, and my attention was more focused on what I was doing than some of my male colleagues was. This was in part because they would stay later than I did, or they tended to have much more in the way of informal interactions that I didn't have the time to do in anything other than a focused way.

Finally, it is interesting to note that many private sector companies have also concluded that "corporate rituals" such as relocations and overtime should not be weighted heavily in promotion decisions. At Corning, for example, a task force recommended that managers focus on matching an employee's skills, interests, and abilities to the job rather than routinely promoting people who follow a traditional career path ("Averting Career Damage," 1992).

In summary, women have not advanced as rapidly as men in part because, on average, they have less experience and education. But women have also bumped into a glass ceiling consisting of a tradition of evaluating employees according to visible, easily quantifiable criteria such as how many times they have relocated, or how much time they spend at work. As long as these criteria remain in effect, organizations may well overlook the best employee for the job, and the evidence suggests that in most cases those overlooked will be women. Moreover, those overlooked will not just be women who cannot meet these criteria, but women who are merely *perceived* to be unable to meet them.

Women face disparate treatment in the federal workplace. But do they also perceive their situation to be discriminatory; that is, do they experience subjective discrimination?

#### Subjective Discrimination

Subjective discrimination, defined as the perception that one's situation is discriminatory, can be a source of high stress for women (Davidson and Cooper, 1983) and cause low self-esteem, withdrawal,

resignation, or poor work (Rowe, 1990). This section will discuss survey data and focus group comments which suggest that such perceptions of disparate treatment of women do exist in the federal work force. The survey was designed, in part, to assess the extent to which the views expressed by focus group participants were held more generally by women in the federal work force.

During the focus groups, several women commented, for example, that they faced an uphill battle in proving their competence to their colleagues that men did not face. One woman noted, for example:

I still think that women have to prove through their dealing with people that they are competent and reliable. With men, I think it is assumed [they are competent] and they have to prove they are not.

To gauge how widespread this perception is in the government, survey respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they believe that managers in their organizations believe women are incompetent until they proved themselves competent. About one-third of women responded that this statement is true at least to some extent. Respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with the following statement, "A woman must perform better than a man to be promoted." Fifty-five percent of women agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

Some focus group participants also expressed concern that their colleagues believed they had been promoted only because of their gender, and not their qualifications. One woman commented, "When I was hired, I was the first woman. They were looking for a woman and they hired me. So when you get to that situation, you are perceived differently because you're immediately discounted that the only reason you got there is because you're a woman."

In this case, an item was included on the survey to assess the extent to which federal employees actually do see women in the way this focus group participant suggested. Survey respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement, "In general, in my organization, women have been placed in positions beyond their level of competence because of affirmative employment programs." Sadly, 41 percent of men and 20 percent of women agreed with this statement. This indicates some basis to women's perception that their competence is in question.

The responses of survey respondents to several items asking about how women are viewed and treated in federal agencies are given in Table 9. Two points are worth noting. First, a substantial percentage of women in grades 9 and above in the federal government experience subjective discrimination as measured by these items. Second, men have a very different perception of how women are treated.

**Table 9**  
**Perceptions of Women and Men to the Treatment of Women**

Statement	Percent Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing	
	Women	Men
In general, in my organization ...		
Women and men are respected equally.	29.6	50.6
A woman must perform better than a man to be promoted.	55.4	9.1
Standards are higher for women than men.	45.4	4.8
The viewpoint of a woman is not heard at a meeting until it is repeated by a man.	41.1	6.0
Once a woman assumes a top management position, that position often loses much of its power and prestige.	28.2	5.6

Source: Merit Systems Protection Board survey of GS 9-15 and SES federal employees.

Is there any reason to believe that women's perceptions of disparate treatment in the workplace has any basis in actual discrimination? Considerable research has shown that the kind of stereotyping of women as less competent than men does occur. Jobs are often "sex typed" and when women do not match the characteristics associated with the job, it is assumed they will fail. This can be particularly true when women are in the minority, as they are in management positions in the government (Kanter, 1977; Crocker and McGraw, 1984; Heilman, 1983; Yoder, 1991; Heilman, Martell, and Simon, 1989; Dubno, 1985). Moreover, as discussed earlier in this article, MSPB data demonstrate that women have been treated differently than men; they have been promoted at a lower rate.

## Conclusion

Substantial evidence exists that there is a glass ceiling in the federal government. In part, women have been limited by less education and experience. Additional factors unrelated to the human capital they bring to the job hold them back. Traditional criteria for evaluating employees for advancement have run headlong into stereotypes and assumptions about women's job commitment and potential. Assumptions are often made that the most committed employee is most deserving of promotion, and that is the employee who has relocated and who puts in the longest work day. Assumptions are also made that women are less willing to relocate and, particularly if they have children, are unwilling to work late. The interaction of these two assumptions has meant that women have often been overlooked unjustly for promotions and career enhancing assignments. In addition, there is evidence of stereotypes that cast doubt on women's abilities; at least a significant percentage of women believe they are working in an environment hostile to their success.

What can be done about this? First, it is important that individual agencies examine their own employment data to see whether there are particular levels where women are being promoted at a lower rate than men. The data presented in this article are governmentwide, and patterns may vary considerably by agency, and by organizations within agencies. Agencies should also assess the criteria, formal or informal, that are being used in selecting employees for advancement. Are these criteria really job related, and are they having an adverse impact on women and minorities?

Second, managers should examine the ways in which they are evaluating employees and look at what assumptions they may be making about whether one employee seems to have more advancement potential than another. They should look for stereotypes and seek to curtail them. Managers should think about whom they are selecting for a career-enhancing assignment, and who they are asking to coordinate the office Christmas party!

Finally, women should take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate their abilities. MSPB survey data also show that more women than men have found such experiences as developmental assignments, the opportunity to "act" in a position prior to appointment to it, and formal developmental programs or managerial training to have been very helpful in their careers. These activities can help to break down stereotypes by showing that women have broader capabilities and commitment than they are often given credit for.

Future research should examine whether men and women of color face a comparable glass ceiling in the federal government (MSPB is in the process of assembling such a data set, and expects to publish a report in late 1994). Are there assumptions and stereotypes operating which similarly inhibit the advancement of minorities into senior



positions in the government? Are there informal criteria for promotion that have an adverse impact on other groups in the government? What impact do perceptions of disparate treatment (i.e., subjective discrimination) have on women? Are they more likely to resign from their jobs, and are they less likely to apply for promotion than those who do not experience subjective discrimination?

Advancement is a slow process in the federal government. If women beginning government careers today are to see parity and to believe they have equal opportunity for advancement by the time they retire, federal agencies must take proactive steps to understand and dismantle the glass ceiling.



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### Note

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