

The plight of WORKING WOMEN ...

Although reams of research are regularly churned out to support the plight of women in the workplace, women are – as PENNY HAW discovers – moving ahead regardless.

what plight?

Writing about workplace issues, as I do, means receiving a perpetual flow of information on the plight of women in the workplace. Among the recent releases to ping into my in-box were data issued by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency in Australia, which found that the number of women in executive roles in that country had fallen from 12% in 2006 to 10,7% in 2008.

This was followed closely by information about a study by Bupa UK Health Insurance, which claims that half of all women surveyed said that they were stressed at work, while only one in three men declared that they were stressed.

Another recent report, this time from the United States, expounds upon the manner in which women handle situations when they need to alter hours, schedules or compensation. Women, it says, have difficulty de-personalising negotiation. While a man is more likely to go to his boss and say what he wants, the average woman is more likely to yell at her dog about it than talk to her boss.

Then there is the World Economic Forum's 2008 Global Gender Gap report, which says that, while females around the world have generally reached near-parity with their male peers in literacy, access to education and health, and survival, the gap between the sexes remains large in terms of economics and politics.

Indeed, the plight of women in the workplace is a recurring theme in academic and professional research – and has been for decades. One of my favourite studies – conducted in 2007 by Catalyst, an American organisation dedicated to studying women in the workplace – is entitled *Damned If You Do, Doomed If You Don't*.

After surveying 1 231 senior executives from Europe and the United States, the review found that women who behave in ways that are consistent with gender stereotypes – explained as focusing “on work relationships” and expressing “concern for other people’s perspectives” – are seen as less competent. If however, they act in ways that are perceived to be more masculine – described as “acting assertively, focusing on work and displaying ambition” – they are considered “too tough” and “unfeminine.”

Women, it seems, cannot win – or perhaps it is time to change tack. For sure, every time another report on research on women in the

workplace finds its way onto my computer, I am bemused anew. What are we supposed to do with this information? What difference does it make? Are organisations making use of it? After all, the amassing of data will only be worthwhile when it is acted upon. Perhaps, though, change is already upon us? Or maybe women are beginning to ignore the research – and the rhetoric that generally accompanies it – and are moving ahead regardless?

An increasing number of experts on workplace issues are, in fact, proposing that the glass ceiling debate – coined in the late 1970s to describe those not-so-invisible-anymore barriers that block the upward mobility of women in the workforce – is passé.

Dr Babita Mathur-Helm, senior lecturer in organisational development, diversity management and gender studies at USB, explains the shift in plain terms: “Nobody invited women into the workplace. They choose to participate for whatever reason and, given that women are not stupid, they have to accept that they need to work harder to compete. Today men and women’s roles are parallel.”

While she concedes that some progressive international organisations have, in recent years, rolled out ‘family-friendly’ programmes that integrate things like child care, breastfeeding and educational facilities, flexible work hours, and time off and special child-related leave into their workplaces and policies, the prevailing reality is that most workplaces do not widely support parenthood.

Mathur-Helm’s evaluations are based upon the extensive work that has gone into developing USB training programmes on women in management, organisational change and renewal, and gender sensitivity. Her position supports a growing international belief that future social and family policies should be gender-blind – this, despite statistics that corroborate the fact that women are still the primary caregivers in families. The premise is that, while minimum maternity leave is necessary for the health and wellbeing of mother and infant, all other parental leave should be available to whichever parent chooses to take it. The notion is that this allows role-reversal couples, as well as women, to be full-time parents if they so choose.

The days that women hoped for special treatment because of their traditional sex-based roles have, it seems, passed. Nowadays, women



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need to focus on their strengths, and understand that merit, and merit alone, will move them ahead.

Not everyone, however, is yet convinced that this is enough.

Moderating our discussion thus far, USB alumna and managing director of a Cape Town advertising agency, Mareletta van Zyl-Wolfharter, says: “Marketing guru, Tom Peters argues passionately that women’s leadership skills and market power are the most important forces reshaping the economy. I agree with this, but I also know how little space is made for women in the workplace, particularly in large companies.”

With this in mind, she established her own business with a firm but flexible female bias and corresponding policies. Employees are welcome to bring their children – even their pets – to work when required. They have access to special leave for things like wedding



**GENDER-BLIND: Dr Babita Mathur-Helm (left)
FEMALE BIAS: Mareletta van Zyl-Wolfharter**

planning, school visits and visits to maintenance courts.

But, while the policies were initially introduced for women, Van Zyl-Wolfharter is quick to point out that the rules apply to everyone at the company, including the handful of men employed there.

So, despite what research in progress is soon sure to claim, the world is not quite yet woman’s oyster. a

The case for gender-blind family policies

Traditional policies assume that men work. Work-centred lives are imposed upon them. When parental leave is available to whichever parent chooses to take it, men or women can elect to be primary parental care-givers. In other words, both men and women can choose to focus on family work or paid jobs. The gender-blind approach addresses a previous unfairness and gives men the opportunity to take on the role of primary caregiver if they so choose.