**Why Women Aren’t Getting to the Top**

*By Susan Fraker*

1 Ten years have passed since U.S. corporations began hiring more than token numbers of women for jobs at the bottom rung of the management ladder.1 A decade into their ca- reers2, how far up have these women climbed? The answer: not as far as their male counterparts. Despite impressive progress at the entry level and in middle management, women are having trouble breaking into senior management. “There is an invisible ceiling for women at that level, ” says Janet Jones-Parker, executive director of the Association of Ex- excusive Search Consultants Inc. “After eight or ten years, they hit a barrier3”

2 The trouble begins at about the $75,000 to $100,000 salary level, and seems to get worse the higher one looks. Only one company on Fortune’s list of the 500 largest U.S. industrial corporations has a woman chief executive. That woman, Katharine Graham of the Washington Post Co., readily admits she got the job because her family owns a controlling share of the corporation.

3 More surprising, given that women have been on the ladder for ten years, is that none currently seems to have a shot at the top rung.4 Executive recruiters, asked to identify women who might become president or chief executives of Fortune 500 companies, draw a blank.5 Even companies that have women in senior management privately concede that these women aren’t going to occupy the chairman’s office.

4 Women have only four of the 154 spots this year at the Harvard Business School’s Advanced Management Program— a prestigious 13-week conclave to which companies send executives they are grooming for the corridors of power.6 The numbers aren’t much better at comparable programs at Stanford and at Dartmouth’s Tuck School. But perhaps the most telling admission of trouble comes from men at the top.7 “The women aren’t making it”, confessed the chief executive of a Fortune 500 company to a consultant. “Can you help us find out why?”

5 All explanations are controversial to one faction or another in this highly charged de- bate8. At one extreme, many women —and some men —maintain that women are the vic- tims of blatant sexism. At the other extreme, many men — and a few women — believe women are unsuitable for the highest managerial jobs: they lack the necessary assertiveness, they don’t know how to get along in this rarefied world, or they have chil- dren and lose interest in — or time for — their careers. Somewhere n between is a sur- prisingly large group of men and women who see “ discrimination” as the major problem, but who often can’t define precisely what they mean by the term.

6 The discrimination they talk about is not the simple-minded sexism of dirty jokes and references to “girls”.9 It is not born of hatred, or indeed of any ill will that the bearer may be conscious of. 10 What they call discrimination consists simply of treating women different- ly from men. The notion dumbfounds some male managers.

7 The experience of an executive at a large Northeastern bank illustrates how many managerial women see the problem. Promoted to senior vice president several years ago, she was the first woman named to that position. But she now believes it will be many years before the bank appoints a woman executive vice president. “The men just don’t feel com- fortable,” she says. “They make all sorts of excuses — that I’m not a banker [she worked as a consultant originally], that I don’t know the culture.11 There’s a smoke screen12 four miles thick. I attribute it to being a woman.” Similarly, 117 to 300 women executives polled recently by UCLA’s13 Graduate School of Management and Korn/Ferry International, an executive Research firm, felt that being a woman was the greatest obstacle to their success.

8 A common concern among women, particularly in law and investment banking, is that the best assignments go to men. “Some departments — like sales and trading or mergers and acquisitions14— are considered more macho, hence more prestigious,” says a woman at a New York investment bank. “It’s nothing explicit. But if women can’t get the assign- ments that allow them to shine, how can they advance?”15

9 Women also worry that they don’t receive the same kind of constructive criticism that men do. While these women probably overestimate the amount of feedback their male col- leagues receive, even some men acknowledge widespread male reluctance to criticize a woman. “There are vast numbers of men who can’t do it,” says Eugene Jennings, professor of business administration at Michigan State University and a consultant to a dozen large companies. A male banking executive agrees: “A male boss will haul a guy aside and just kick ass16 if the subordinate performs badly in front of a client. But I heard about a woman here who gets nervous and tends to giggle in front of customers. She’s unaware of it and her boss hasn’t told her. But behind her back he downgrades her for not being smooth17 with customers.”

10 Research by Ann Harlan, a human resource manager at the Federal Aviation Admin- istration18, and Carol Weiss, a managing associate of Charles Hamilton Associates19, a Boston consulting firm, suggests that the situation doesn’t necessarily improve as the num- ber of women in an organization increases. Their study, conducted at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women in and completed in 1982,challenges the theory advanced by some experts that when a corporation attained a “critical mass” of executive women — de- fined as somewhere between 30% ad 35% — job discrimination would vanish naturally as men and women began to take each other for granted.

11 Consultants and executives who think discrimination is the problem tend to believe it persists in part because the government has relaxed its commitment to affirmative action20, which they define more narrowly than some advocates do. “We’re not talking about quotas or preferential treatment,” says Margaret Henning who, along with Anne Jardim, heads the Simmons College Graduate school of Management. “That’s stupid management. We just mean the chance to compete equally.” Again, a semantic chasm separates women and men. Women like Hennig and Jardim think of affirmative action as a vigorous effort on the part of companies to ensure that women are treated equally and that sexist prejudices aren’t per- mitted to operate. Men think the term means reverse discrimination, giving women prefer- entail treatment.
12 What about the belief that women fall behind not because of discrimination, but be- cause they are cautious, unaggressive, and differently motivated than men — or less moti- vated? Even some female executives believe that women derail their careers by choosing staff jobs over high-risk, high-reward line positions. One woman, formerly with a large consumer goods company and now president of market research firm, urges women to worry less about sexism and more about whether the jobs they take are the right route to the top. “I spent five years thinking the only reason I didn’t become a corporate officer at my former company was because of my sex,” she says. “I finally had to come to grips with the fact that I overemphasized being a woman and underemphasized what I did for a living. I was in a staff function — the company didn’t live and die by what I did.” (1,205words)