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Modern barriers to professional women's career advancement

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Unequal pay and sexual harassment are two examples of the persistence of gender inequities, over 40 years since the emergence of second wave feminism and the passing of Equal Pay legislation. Although many formal and structural impediments have been removed, informal, subtle and sometimes covert barriers to women's advancement still exist. For instance in the public sector, women report less favourably on experiences of cooperation, communication and recognition at work (Bryson et al., 2014).

This study looks at barriers to women's career advancement in banking organisations. These organisations depend strongly on their reputations and brands, have ethical and practical reasons to value gender equity, and often promote their apparent equity and diversity. They also usually have sophisticated pro-equity human resource management practices. Social factors and informal networks, however, limit their effectiveness and are arguably the primary barriers to career advancement (Tharenou, 2001).

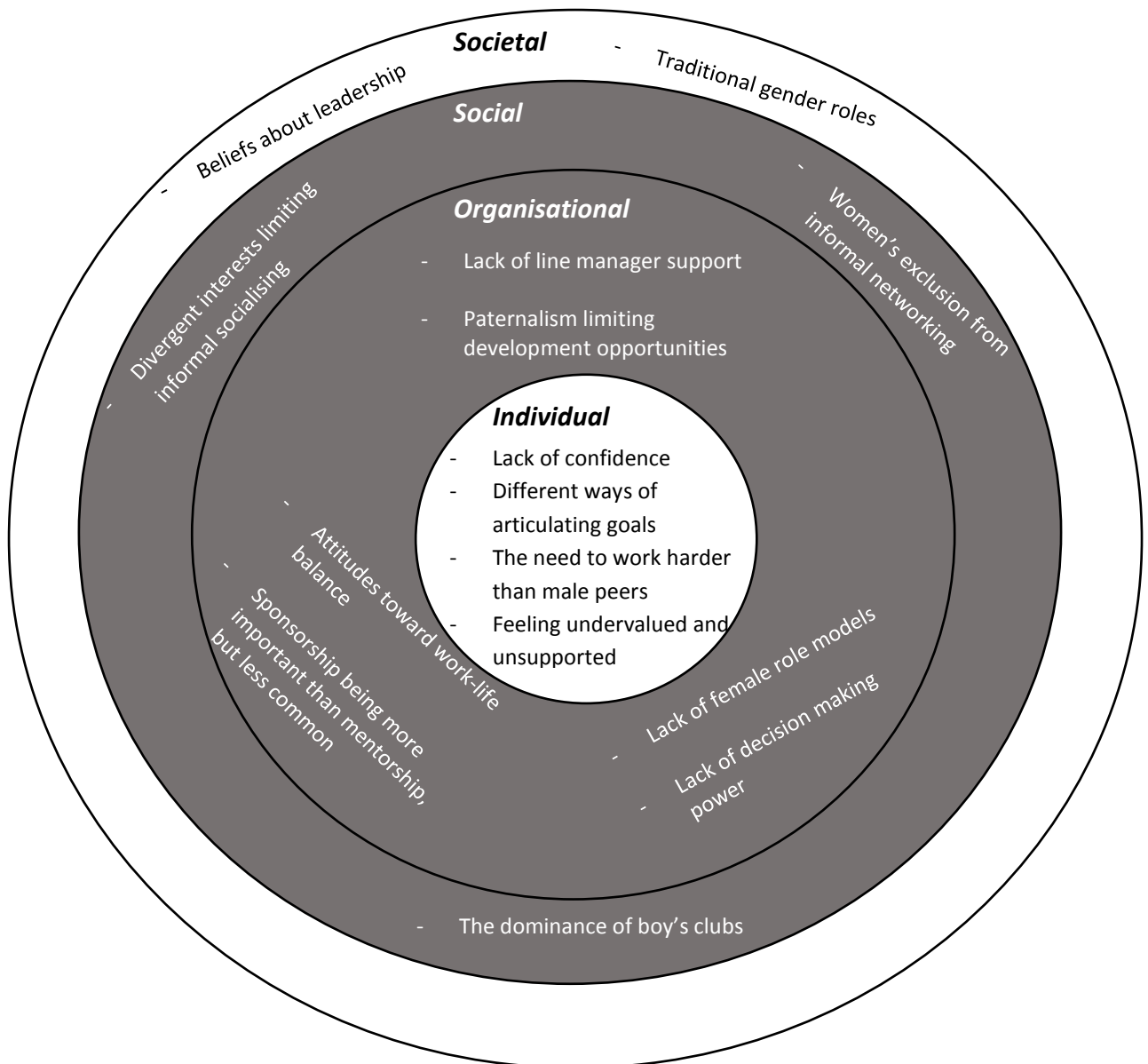
In this article, based on interviews with thirteen senior women in the New Zealand banking sector, we report on perceived barriers, and explain the durability of these barriers despite progressive organisational actions and initiatives. These results are a summary – participants' experiences varied. The co-operation of the banking sector and the women in this study is greatly appreciated. Hopefully it will encourage other sectors to be so reflective.

Key findings

Our findings show that barriers to career advancement aren't just organisational or managerial; they are societal, social, and individual too, and a barrier at one level reinforces a barrier at another level – but for career advancement, they become most concrete at the organisational and social levels.

For instance, traditional male-oriented constructions of leadership may, for example, limit decision rights that in turn lower senior manager advocacy and heighten exclusion from informal networks. These in turn could lower confidence – but it is decision rights, senior manager advocacy and exclusion from social networks where organisations can most make a difference.

The identified barriers are in the figure below, followed by a brief summary of the key findings.



Four key examples of barriers, extending from societal norms to individual behaviours, are described below:

Organisational

Lack of line manager support

Women seemed more dependent on a good boss than were men, as there were fewer alternative pathways to recognition, such as through informal networks, to compensate. Managers play a key role in career advancement, and weak, unaccountable managers are harmful to both their staff and the organisation (Plimmer, Gill, & Norman, 2011). Weak managers that don't support and develop their staff mean women get overlooked for opportunities. There was also evidence of discriminatory treatment by line managers after returning from maternity leave:

"When I came back to work my line manager at the time who I really liked... said to me that I'd never be as smart as I was before I had children."

Paternalistic managers do not help either. Some line manager assume that they know what is in their staff member's best interests:

"If I think of some of the managers a lot of it is about... them trying to help you manage your [career], rather than actually letting you... know the parameters and letting you make the decisions yourself."

The need for sponsors over mentors

While mentors can help with development, sponsors counted more for advancement. They are also less available to women. Sponsors advocate, often behind closed doors, for progression from middle to senior management, and then to senior leadership positions. While mentors can be a 'sounding board' for job challenges, a high level sponsor can directly create real career progression. In this study, sponsors were often not available to women, although some women had been fortunate:

"[Sponsors] give an extra bit of confidence to say, 'yep you're capable of doing whatever it is that we're talking about', and then being advocates within the business, so other people can talk to them about my capability. So it's having sponsors for me that have been higher up the chain than me, so that at the same level of someone who might be hiring me, they can have good peer to peer conversations."

Social

The exclusionary nature of informal networks

Socialising and informal events are gateways to career-related networking and sponsors, but they can exclude women. In this study, networking opportunities were often seen as exclusionary, with *"other industries do[ing] a better job"* in terms of ensuring inclusiveness. Strong informal networks that were based around sports such as rugby or golf, or around 'grabbing a drink' were not always appealing or comfortable, and so were also a barrier. Sexist humour was another problem.

Cross-gender networking is still difficult to tackle for women. The mutual interests are not necessarily there to provide a base for networking: *"as long as there are more men than women and you have separate interests, there are more opportunities for men to be, you know, in the 'old boys' networks' or talking to each other in those environments"*. One participant elaborated:

"Two to three hours at a rugby game, is good quality networking time, but only if you are interested in the sport and if you are not, then its two to three hours that could have been better spent with family."

Women can be pressured to be more 'deliberate' about networking, but if there are less opportunities for cross-gender networking it isn't easy.

Societal

Limited audience for challenging traditional gender roles

One participant highlighted that many young females are being delivered the message that it is possible, and more importantly, normal, to have a successful career, climb the corporate ladder and have a family while doing so, whilst young males are not necessarily receiving the same progressive message: *"You can't deliver a message to half of society and expect society to change or accept the change desired by half of society"*.

Individual

Differences in goal articulation

Women's advancement can be limited by gender differences in how goals are articulated, or how personal identities and 'personal brands' are managed. A number of participants noted that while women identified desired capabilities and areas for development, men identified specific job titles and positions they wanted. The latter was more effective in getting ahead.

It was explained that women need to be more informally invited or encouraged into roles, and this is where sponsors are effective in advocating or pushing women into roles. Participants said they knew they could do the roles, but were not sure whether they were 'ready for it'. Although confidence and clarity about career job goals seems most effective, a competency learning or growth orientation can still work, albeit in a different way. One participant explains this idea:

"I think traditionally we probably want to wait for someone to tap us on the shoulder, and that... may not happen, in which case we'll just be sitting there wasting capability which is a shame. So I think by doing everything you can to take feedback on and grow every day, by setting goals so that you know you can be as excellent as you possibly can be... letting people know that you want to progress and that you're keen to think about the next step... I think that's the thing."

What can be done?

Worldwide women continue to be underrepresented in higher levels of management (Braun *et al.* 2017) – and these barriers can be subtle, informal, hard to define, and mutually reinforcing (Reilly, Jones, Rey Vasquez & Krisjanous, 2016).

Last year, the vice-chair of Credit Suisse, Noreen Doyle, told the Financial Times; "We'll be considered equal when equally incompetent women get the same opportunity as incompetent men" (Noonan *et al.*, 2017). In the meantime, here are a few suggestions from this research:

- Measure line managers on their support for equity and development. A 'good' manager asks the right questions around what their staff member does next. They encourage staff to put their hand up for other roles and act as an advocate where appropriate, knowing that they need this kind of support to move forward.
- Develop gender neutral or pro – women networks.
- Active encouragement by organisations to push women into both development and job positions
- Flexible working to support diverse household structures upon re-entry into the workforce
- Develop awareness of personal identities and 'brands' to remove 'self-barriers' around confidence and readiness for instance. Help promote their capabilities and achievements, by pushing themselves to the front and speaking up around their desire to progress, re-enforcing their personal brand.

References

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