




Identity

Men Get Top Jobs in Traditionally Female Fields Because of Course They Do

By Sasha Borissenko

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Stacey*, a high school teacher, has worked in four different schools. At each, she has noticed a trend: men rising up the ranks, despite the fact the vast majority of her colleagues have been women. “I didn’t notice bias too much in the base-level of classroom teaching,” she says, “but it does become obvious the more you get into the hierarchy of a school, even if the principal is female.”

Ministry of Education figures **back** Stacey’s claim. While 28 percent of management in education are men, they make up only 26 percent of the teaching workforce as a whole. And although there is an even gender-split among principals, this in itself is disproportionate as it doesn’t account for the fact 74 percent of teachers are women.

One example stands out in Stacey’s mind: a male colleague who wasn’t liked among staff, but who was given a promotion over her on the basis of his years of experience. Neither Stacey not her female colleagues had amassed the same length of service because they had taken time off to have children.

“So many of my female colleagues juggled family responsibilities and work responsibilities, and wouldn’t get promoted because they were perceived to be lacking commitment,” she says. “I’m not saying men don’t have responsibilities, but I think more should be done to acknowledge women’s varying roles.”

While the “glass ceiling” describes the patriarchal structures blocking women’s rise to senior positions in the workplace, the “glass escalator” phenomenon describes the rapid—and disproportionate—promotion of men in female-dominated occupations.

The term was coined by University of Texas sociologist Christine Williams, who in 1995 examined men’s experiences in four female-dominated professions: nursing, elementary school teaching, librarianship, and social work. Men, **she found**, rose in disproportionate numbers to administrative jobs at the top of their professions. In essence, their underrepresentation worked in their favor.

I am extremely marketable because I am a man.

“Many of the men perceived their token status as males in predominantly female occupations as an advantage in hiring and promotions,” **writes** Williams. “I asked an Arizona teacher whether his specialty (elementary special education) was an unusual area for men compared to other areas within education. He said:

‘Much more so. I am extremely marketable in special education. That’s not why I got into the field. But I am extremely marketable because I am a man.’”

Beyond the ‘token male’ factor, Williams put this phenomenon down to a variety of reasons, including the stereotypical belief that men are naturally more intelligent and make for better leaders. This leads in turn to higher pay for men, even in occupations where they are the minority.

Rachel Mackintosh, vice president of the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, says that at the heart of the issue is pay equity: Female-dominated occupations are paid less than their male counterparts because “women’s” work is less valued than “men’s” work.

“Think of a rest home situation,” Mackintosh says. “Someone, generally a woman, might deal with aging people with dementia. Perhaps that aging person is violent—you have to carry them to the bathroom, clean them. The level of responsibility is not dissimilar to a prison guard, for example, yet the pay difference is huge.”

Women-dominated professions are paid poorly because women are deemed by society to be less valuable, says Mackintosh. Men therefore progress faster if they choose to enter these industries; they are advantaged by the structural discrimination that’s already at play.

Alistair Duncan, spokesperson for E tū union, which represents over 10,000 people working in female-dominated industries such as community support, says poor labor laws and a lack of union representation exacerbate the issue.

“If you don’t know what everyone is earning, you’re more or less in the dark about what you should be paid,” he says. “Couple this with the perception that if a man [demands his worth] he’s assertive, but if a woman does the same she is pushy.”

Community Law Centre CEO Elizabeth Tennet says the glass escalator phenomenon could be solved by promoting policies that promote equal opportunities for women. Currently, the whole system puts women at a disadvantage, whether it’s a lack of transparency around wages, zero childcare allowances, limited or zero parental leave, or the fact people can’t take leave if they need to care for sick relatives—a task more often than not left to women.

Taking leave as a caregiver is seen as an interruption or an inconvenience to the workplace, Tennet says. It often results in fewer career advancement opportunities, or puts pressure on women to resign altogether. “If you take leave, you essentially have to re-start from scratch once you re-enter the workplace.”

The perception that women “bow out” means men more readily rise to the top in most contexts, Tennet adds. Yet this makes little sense for a functioning society, because “women bring a different perspective regarding decision making. Because diversity better represents society, decisions tend to be more profitable.”

The answer is simple, she says. “Those in decision-making roles need to be proactive in promoting discussions about equality and equality of opportunity. “We need to talk about these issues, and the more we recognize there is a problem, the more chance we have in changing these constructs.”

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