

A Most Important Development

Last March the *Wall Street Journal* published a 32-page supplement on "the corporate woman," in which I hoped to learn that women have cracked the so-called "glass ceiling" beyond which they do not seem to be able to move in great numbers into executive positions.

But no, the statistics are as sluggish as ever. Though women fill nearly a third of all management positions, very few make it beyond the first level. Even in industries such as financial services and retailing, which are heavy employers of women, the percentages of female top executives are still small. And in big technology companies, the situation is even worse. At AT&T, where women make up 48 percent of the employees, fewer than 3 percent of the top 880 executives are women.

Women are still wrestling with stereotypes about their drive and commitment, and with Neanderthal attitudes about their temperaments. A *Harvard Business Review* survey last year discovered that "one in five men believes that women are temperamentally unfit for management." And it is still all too easy to find statements such as this one from an executive in a stock brokerage. "I can't make serious decisions if a woman is in the room."

For the woman who doesn't want to be one of the boys at the top, there are other options being pursued with great success. Women now hold the majority of professional jobs in the United States, according to the most recent Labor Department reports. By professionals it means those who "develop, produce and apply knowledge." Not a bad category to dominate in the upcoming age of information.

Another area into which women have moved with alacrity is entrepreneurship. Self-employed women are

increasing about five times faster than self-employed men. This is clearly one way to escape the low visibility and lack of profit center responsibility that is the lot of most women working in large companies. And it is a popular career alternative for women who have tried fruitlessly to enter the inhospitable ranks of management.

These are trends at which economists do not sneeze. Harvard labor economist David E. Bloom says, "The growing number of women is probably the most important development in the American labor market that has ever taken place. The most important development in the next twenty years is going to be changes in the types of jobs that women do."

It is likely that there will also be changes in the conditions under which women work. Economist and author Sylvia Ann Hewlett writes that the United States is the only advanced democratic nation that does not have maternity leave guaranteed through national legislation, putting it behind 117 other nations that do.

Maternity leave, reasonably subsidized day care, and release time to attend to family needs such as a conference with a child's teacher, are among the demands from women that make men wonder about their commitment to the job and make feminists fear that women will never gain equality. But perhaps the rise of women in the professions and as owners of their own businesses means that many aren't all that interested in equality based on a male model. Perhaps the glass ceiling will prove to be irrelevant.



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