

‘Structure, culture and passivity: a case study of women in a semi-state organisation’ *Public Administration and Development* , 20: 265-275

by Pat O’Connor

Abstract

Much of the Irish semi-state sector is still characterised by permanent employment within male dominated hierarchical structures. This case study focuses on a rural semi-state organisation with a statutory obligation as regards the economic, social and cultural development of a particular geographical area. Documentary material showed that the organisation was highly skewed in gender terms, with men holding the overwhelming majority of the higher positions; and women the overwhelming majority of the lower positions. Such patterns are by no means atypical as regards state and semi-state structures. Drawing on qualitative material from taped focus group sessions with roughly 80% of the women employed in this organisation, the article illustrates the multifaceted ways (structural, cultural and individual) in which women’s position at the lower levels of that organisation was maintained.

Structure, culture and passivity: a case study of women in a semi- state organisation

Introduction

In Ireland, as elsewhere, although there is considerable discussion about changing forms of employment; organisational de-layering and downsizing, the 'flexible firm' has 'not actually eclipsed more established bureaucratic models' (Halford et al, 1997, p.17). Thus much of the Irish semi-state sector is still characterised by permanent employment within male dominated hierarchical structures. This case study focuses on a rural semi-state organisation (established in 1980) with a statutory obligation as regards the economic, social and cultural development of a particular geographical area, under the aegis of a central Government Department.

This article is concerned with illustrating the multifaceted ways in which women's position at the lower levels of that organisation is maintained. It draws on documentary analysis of data provided by personnel, as well as qualitative material derived from focus groups with women who are permanent employees of the organisation. This data was collected as part of the diagnostic phase of an EU funded Programme (ADAPT) specifically concerned with organisational change. The project objectives were to facilitate the career enhancement of women employed in that organisation, and to study the implications of the project for its future role in the community. The project as a whole involved a number of activities including general staff briefing sessions; the formation of in-house working groups to explore some of the areas that emerged from the diagnostic report (such as the organisational culture and training initiatives); theatre workshops to facilitate the women's personal and professional development; a tailor made professional skills development course targeting the

predominantly female staff at the lower end of the hierarchy; equal opportunity workshops with managers; public lectures; employee profile analysis; a work placement scheme and a mentorship programme. Obviously it is not possible to discuss all of these within this article. Thus the context will first be adverted to, and then the methodology used and the kinds of barriers identified in the diagnostic phase of the project will be described.

Context

The approach adopted in this paper focuses on gender as an embedded feature of organisations (Acker, 1990; Halford et al, 1997). It is concerned with this gendered reality at three different, albeit not distinct levels: firstly it is concerned with the structural reality of the organisation as reflected in its division of labour and procedures; secondly it is concerned with organisational culture and its implications and thirdly it is concerned with individual barriers including passivity, low levels of confidence etc.

Since the late '80s increasing attention has been paid to the 'gendered process internal to the bureaucratic process of the State' (Witz and Savage:1992, p.6). The implicit assumption is that state and semi-state organisations constitute sites where power is contested and gender embedded; sites which reflect 'a masculine vision of the world and that call on masculinity for their legitimation and affirmation' (Davies, 1995, p.44). In such organisations women's 'proper' place is subordinate to men, with passive and subordinate attitudes being seen as appropriate; the organisational culture reflecting and reinforcing the idea that women and their work are less valuable than men and theirs, such patterns being reflected in and reinforced by structural arrangements.

In the 1990s this perspective was given an increasing impetus by the suggestion that gender was 'a fundamental feature of the capitalist system....arguably as fundamental as class divisions' (Connell, 1995, p.104). There are still considerable difficulties theorising the relationship between gender, class and indeed also race (Pollert, 1996; Bottero, 1998) both in the wider society and within organisations. In this context Gottfried (1998, p.451) has suggested that it is particularly useful to look at practices '*as a means for excavating gender ...from lived experiences,*' exploring what she called '*the mess of everyday life.*' This study of the situation and perceptions of women within a small Irish rural semi-state organisation can be located in this context.

Ireland is a small country of 3.6 million people, of which roughly 1.6 million are in paid employment. Right up to the '70s and early '80s various semi-state structures were established to act as engines of economic and social development, although in fact their particular concern was with generating/maintaining male employment in industry and agriculture (O'Connor, 1998). By the late 1980s it was clear that such policies were not working and that the economic situation was one of 'crisis'- 'the most manifest indications of which were: mass unemployment, resurgent emigration, a massive public debt and sluggish economic growth' (O'Connell, 1999 p.216). Under pressure from Europe, attention was focused on the service sector as a source of employment and economic growth (a sector which is the main source of paid employment for women). By the mid 1990s the economic situation was transformed and Ireland had been dubbed the 'Celtic Tiger'. There has been a great deal of speculation about the source of this remarkable economic growth. What is clear however, is that 90% of the growth in employment was in women's employment, prompting O'Connell (1999, p.217) to remark that 'the sudden transformation -from sick man of Europe to European tiger - appears to have misconstrued the gender of the animal'.

There is a widespread perception that the position of women in Irish society has changed dramatically over the past thirty years. Until 1973, a Marriage Bar persisted which obliged women in a variety of occupations to withdraw from various kinds of employment on marriage (including the Civil Service). At this time only 7.5% of married women were in paid employment, as compared with 41% in 1996 (O'Connor, 1998). However despite the increase in married women's employment, women are still under-represented at senior levels in the Civil Service and in a variety of state and semi-state organisations. Thus, in the Irish Civil Service, women make up less than 7% of those at Senior Management level (i.e. at Secretary/Assistant Secretary Level: Mahon,1991). In local administration, women make up less than 3% of those at Senior Management level (Mahon and Dillon,1996). These trends are not peculiar to Ireland (Walters,1989; Hansard Society, 1990: U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1992; Canadian Government, 1990; Bulletin on Women and Employment, 1994).

In the organisation to be discussed in this article although women made up almost two fifths (38%: 44/117) of the (permanent) employees, they were virtually invisible at the higher levels. They made up 7% (4/58) of those in the top six Grades (Grade 2 and above), while constituting 89% (31/35) of those in the bottom three grades (Grade 4 and below)[INSERT Table 1]. Grade 4 is the highest Grade where the majority of those employed are women. Their position within that structure has clear financial implications [See Table 1].

Funding for an EU project, under the ADAPT Programme, was sought by a (male) senior member of the organisation who was concerned with initiating organisational change and so utilizing more effectively the skills and talents of the women within the organization. He

invited a number of women from outside the organisation who were known to be concerned about equality, to participate in a Consortium or Advisory Group and to identify the tasks to be undertaken. An internal Steering Group was the main vehicle for the development of the project. It consisted of the project manager, the chief executive of the organisation, the personnel manager and the European projects manager (three of these four being men). It was agreed that the first objective was to document the position of women within the organisation, and to establish women's own perception of their situation through the use of focus groups. One member of the Consortium (the author) had previously undertaken a similar task within another semi-state organisation. Unusually, she was also willing and able to do them through Irish (the native language of most of the women employees). Possible role conflicts and other ambiguities potentially following from her position as a member of the Consortium and facilitator of the focus groups were discussed but were thought to be surmountable.

This focus group material and the documentary analysis of the data provided by personnel was part of the diagnostic phase of the project. Preliminary meetings and discussions with management suggested that the current position of women in the organisation reflected government embargoes on the creation of posts; very little staff turnover and the inadvertent perpetuation of a pattern of male authority. However, the documentary evidence, provided by the personnel manager to the Consortium, challenged such explanations. It showed that this was far from being a static organisation. Thirty five appointments had been made since 1990 (constituting just under 30% of the total number of staff in the organisation as of mid 1996). Furthermore 16 new functions had emerged in the previous five years and 14 of these were at Grade 3 or above. Such developments were most likely to benefit men since 69 of the 73 men employed in the organisation, as compared with 13 out of the 44 women were at

Grade 3 or above[See Table 1]. The numbers are small and the evidence necessarily inconclusive but there were some suggestions in the documentary data that current attitudes may continue to favour men's promotion (these being reflected in, for example, the higher proportions of men relative to women who reached second interviews). There was also a suggestion in the data that men had been more successful than women in using Grade 3 as a stepping up point to higher positions. However, the main focus of the diagnostic phase was on women's career enhancement and specifically on their perceptions of the barriers to their promotion within the organisation. It is to this that we now turn.

Methodology

Focus groups are recognised as an important source of data and have been used in various studies of the barriers to women's promotion (in US Civil Service; in Irish Health Boards etc.). In this organisation invitations to participate in focus groups were issued to all of the 44 women who were permanent employees of the organisation and (on the advice of the project manager) to four others who had been on contracts for an extended period of time. Of these 48 women, one was on Maternity Leave, so that a total of 47 women were potentially available to participate in the focus groups. Four fifths (81%: 38/47) of these women took part in eleven focus groups in an off-site location over three days. The women who did not participate were scattered across all grades. The legitimacy of participating in the focus groups was underlined by a letter from the chief executive to all members of staff. The nature and purpose of these groups was outlined in formal and informal contacts between the project manager and the women employees, and permission was obtained for them to attend such groups in work time. An invitation to the women to participate was also issued formally by the (external) facilitator who was a member of the Consortium and who was known to have an interest in women's position within organisations. She thus was perceived as someone

who not a token figure and yet who had the backing of management to explore what the women saw as the barriers to their promotion within the organisation. As the majority of the women were native Irish speakers, this was the language used. This further underlined her concern with the wider mission of the organisation within an Irish speaking area, and the desire that women's contribution to this should be maximized.

Based on previous experience with focus group methodology, an attempt was made to put women at similar Grades in the same group. In all but one group there was a difference of only one grade between the women. The groups were kept small (average size was 3.5). An hour was allocated to each group. At the end of the hour, coffee/tea was supplied, and if necessary, the conversation continued during this for a further half an hour. In only one of the eleven groups was there a strong feeling that additional time was necessary. In the focus groups there was typically some initial anxiety, followed by surprise at the informality of the style and a very positive tone. A report was subsequently drafted, drawing together material from the documentary evidence and the focus groups. The picture that emerged was not challenged by anyone during the subsequent life of the project. In fact very similar themes emerged from other activities undertaken as part of the project. The main difficulty for management, union and individual male staff was in taking the implications of the study on board and facilitating/tolerating the necessary organisational change.

Sixteen 'triggers' were used to stimulate the group to discuss the issue of the barriers to women's promotion in the organisation. Some of these were entirely open-ended (e.g. asking what increased women's chances of being promoted; what reduced them and what the organisation could do to change things). In addition, a number of specific topics were explored, such as women's interest in promotion; the recruitment process and ways of

reconciling work and family life. The material was taped. The tapes were transcribed and thematically analysed. This process, which was used in a previous study (O Connor, 1996) is quite time consuming. It involves the identification of themes within each transcript, and the distillation of these into themes transcending the individual transcripts. Each of these themes was then explored and illustrated in the report, drawing on quotations from within the transcripts. The quotations that were used in the text were ticked; as were the themes that had been dealt with within each individual transcript. This process was continued until all the individual themes which had been initially identified had been explored. Finally the transcripts were re-read to check that key themes or quotations had not been omitted.

In order to ensure that even the quietest women had an opportunity to contribute at some level, all the women were asked to do a 'single word exercise' at the end of the session i.e. to write down, anonymously, on a slip of paper what they saw as the most important barrier to women's promotion within the organisation. These slips were collected and analysed separately. The trends that emerged from this exercise will also be referred to in this article.

The existence of barriers

Overwhelmingly the women in this study thought that there were barriers to women's promotion (from the point of view of someone at their Grade and in their Department). They referred to a wide variety of different kinds of barriers. These were broadly classified into three types: structural, cultural and individual, although it was clear, as noted by Halford et al (1997) that it was difficult to make hard and fast distinctions between these aspects. Thus, for example, the lack of an undergraduate Degree was seen by some as an individual barrier and by others as a cultural barrier, in the sense that it was seen as being used by management as a way of keeping women out.

Structural barriers

The structural barriers which were referred to included the grading structure, with its implicitly low evaluation of women's work; use of young women on various kinds of temporary contracts; the procedures used as regards interview boards etc.

As the women saw it, at the time the organisation was established, women's work was routinely seen as of less value than men's: *'a lot of the men had a head start when they came in .. They came in at management level, while a lot of women came in as secretaries'*. Thus they felt that it was necessary: *'to look at the whole structure'*; *'to change the whole way in which work was graded'*. There was a good deal of cynicism about management's claim that they were constrained as regards the creation or re-grading of posts: *'the grades come out of nowhere'* [when they want them to]. The women recognised that a few women had come in at the higher grades in the past couple of years *'A very few of them'* and this was a source of surprised pleasure: *'We were not begrudging her or anything, but the fact that it happened, that she went by all the men [and was promoted to Grade 2] it was incredible.'*

There was concern about the number of women who were working on various kinds of contracts or work experience schemes. As the women saw it, these people affected their promotion prospects, since they were typically recruited to predominantly female grades and their responsibilities were not clearly spelt out: *'As long as they are there, there will be no attention paid to the problems of the permanent staff'*. Such people were typically younger, single, childless and had higher educational levels and more confidence than the permanent staff. Furthermore in so far as opportunities arose to 'fill in' for a colleague (due to holidays

etc.), such opportunities were particularly likely to be given to them. Thus the permanent staff had a narrow range of work experiences (with negative consequences):

'If you are in the same job for years, you get frustrated ; you loose interest as well, I am in the same job so long, I am just sick of it. You are trying to change.....You are trying to do something different..... You are trying to move forward and to take on more responsibility....that does your brain good- as well as the pay, but there is more than the pay in question.'

The women noted that the interview system had improved, in the sense that it was now more formal, and that there was at least one woman typically on the Board. However, they thought that it would be very useful to have more of an external presence on the Interview Board, and to have a marking framework for assessing the applicants. Situations were spontaneously mentioned where they felt threatened that if, for example, they pursued re-grading issues they would loose any possibility they had of continuing arrangements such as job sharing. This seemed possible to them since no procedures were written down as regards accessing them. A number of women spontaneously mentioned that they were almost afraid to go out on Maternity Leave. Their reaction to the idea of working from home was that it would encourage the men to say that they should stay at home altogether

For the most part, the concept of equality with which the women were familiar was very narrow viz. equality at the level of access, rather than in terms of outcome (NESF, 1996).

They thought that being an equal opportunities employer meant :

'that men and women have the same chance of getting a job, depending I suppose on their qualifications and personality;' *'that there would be no difference between men and women and that everyone would have the same chances;'*

Even in these very limited terms, as most of the women saw it: *'That is not the way it happens'; 'It does not;'* *'We don't see that is the way it is when we are applying for jobs'*.

It has been widely recognised that action based on such a concept of equality offers an equal chance to remain unequal since it ignores the effect of past discrimination. It thus seems particularly inappropriate in an organisation such as this, where, because of historical factors, women are concentrated at the lower grades, reflecting the fact that their work was seen as of lesser value. In this context identifying an organisation as an Equal Opportunity Employer is only seen as a beginning:

'A practical programme of positive action is necessary to put mechanisms in place to ensure that this becomes a reality. Targets have been recognised as an important component in this situation'. (Department of Equality and Law Reform, 1994:24)

Such action makes sense in view of the conclusion of a U.N. Report (1995, p. 29) that : *'In no society today do women enjoy the same opportunities as men.'* There was support for the use of targets although one or two of the women at the higher levels were ambivalent about them:

'I heard someone saying about the [organisation] that they have to take in so many women, and one person said, I don't have a skirt, and because of that I'm not in the running Truly, you can't want that kind of situation to happen'.

In any case in the single word exercise when the respondents were asked to write down in one word what they saw as the most important barrier to women's promotion in the organisation, only 16% identified structural barriers as the most important ones [See Table 2].

Organisational Culture

There was a strong perception that the organisational culture of the organisation at various levels was not conducive to women's promotion and that the style of management was not helpful since it was not sufficiently focused on human resource development.

Organisational culture has been used to refer to 'subtle assumptions, attitudes and stereotypes which affect how managers sometimes view women's potential for advancement' (Levinson 1992, p.60). It was perceived as a very important element in affecting the position of women within this organisation: '*one of the biggest barriers to women is the climate within the organisation*'; '*if a woman and a man in our place are in for promotion, the man has a lot better chance. You can be sure of that.*' It was felt that a 'glass ceiling' existed within the organisation i.e. that there was a part of the organisation that women could see but could not reach. This was described as '*double glaze*', '*a concrete ceiling*'. That ceiling was perceived as being at Grade 3 or Grade 4 : '*that is the place where they [the women] stop*'. They saw this as reflecting:

'The mind set that comes with the middle age profile of those in the organisation; out of the culture that we are coming from... it wasn't expected of a woman to be like that, and I suppose the organisation took that idea,..... because I suppose it suited people up to a point.'

Attitudes to women's participation in paid employment have been shown to be more traditional amongst Irish men than women, with 60% of the men, in the Irish part of the European values study, seeing pre-school children as likely to suffer if their mother worked (Whelan and Fahey, 1994). As the women saw it, there were men in management who

thought that it was not right for a woman with children to be in paid employment at all (not to mention being in the higher grades).

'a lot of them ... are at the age now, that they think, if you marry, and you have a family, that is it;' 'If you are married and have young children that reduces your chances'; 'The way it is, it is not that the women are not appreciated but that management has no confidence in them.'

When the women were asked what the organisation could do to change that situation where men make up 93% of those at Grade 2 or above, they said things like:

'nothing'; 'wait'; 'nothing until they go out on pension'; 'leave them as they are'; 'We need to break the glass ceiling. We need to get a hammer. To change them now....they are getting grey and it is hard to change them;'

Some said that it was necessary for the women to have the education and training so as to be ready for the time when posts came up. However, they noted that if the women were ready *'It would not please the men'*. From the point of view of the women who were at the bottom of the organisation, it was very difficult to be seen as a 'next level person' and to project themselves at an interview, as it was assumed that if they were at the bottom that was where they were suited to: *'If you are Grade 5 or Grade 6 or even Grade 4, nobody has any time for you... They don't think there is any good in you. Now that lowers a person's self confidence.'*

There was a stress on the importance of being 'well in' as a way of increasing one's chances of being promoted; and, in particular, getting on well with your own Manager because they *'would put in a good word for you'*. Where he did not even have a positive attitude to women being in paid employment, the difficulties of getting his support were seen as intractable.

The women felt that there should be a lot more stress in the organisation on human resource development. They felt that a Manager's most important responsibilities were as regards people and their well being but that this was not the way things were:

'I suppose they think, they think well, I don't know, that they themselves are too busy'
'I think that they [i.e. the Managers] think that they have more important work to do than to be kind.' *'Those who are around 40 or 50 do not know how to use women's skills. They have no experience of doing it'*

The small number of women who were fairly high in the hierarchy felt that management had :

'a responsibility to ensure that the women got chances, and got advice, to say look, if there is a course that it is worthwhile for you to do, to point the way to those people at Grade 6, 5 and 4'

The most important thing they felt was to foster women's confidence by giving them projects for which they would be responsible: *'If you can do that, they will go to the stars'*. They noted that this was not the approach adopted by the (predominantly male) managers.

As the women saw it, no-one had a responsibility to provide information to new staff about the aims of the organisation and the way in which their own job fitted into that: *'Even to show a woman where the toilet is, to take her down to the canteen. These are small things but they create confidence in people and they create an atmosphere'*. As they saw it, the absence of these 'small things' showed that there was no 'cop-on' in the organisation and that management did not value them: *'If the small things are right, no big deal, the atmosphere would be a lot better in the place.'* This lack of attention to the human side of management was reflected too in the fact that in most of the Departments women did not get feedback on their performance.

When women raised issues about promotion or re-grading it was said *'Don't ye have it good as it is'* reflecting what Halford et al (1997, p 262) has called a kind of 'authoritarian paternalism'. As the women saw it, there was little communication or team spirit in the organisation. They saw senior management as being *'kind of afraid of women'*, and wanted *'to break the wall'* by team meetings and opportunities to meet in a work based social context. The difference in linguistic and cultural traditions was also reflected in the fact that the majority of the women at the lower Grades (4-6) came from a cultural milieu where it was important to accept their life and not to try to project forward: a perspective which is directly opposed to 'typical' management thinking with its stress on self actualisation etc. It was noted that at interview questions were asked about where they saw themselves in five years time, or questions which had no connection with the work they were doing, and they saw this as being done to put them *'in a corner.'*

Despite the emergence of new technology and personal computers, there seemed to be little freeing up of women's time at the lower grades to enable them to extend their roles: *'Management think that you should be always sitting at your desk and that is the end of it.'* Furthermore, despite the increasing importance of the social and cultural development of the area in the re-envisioning of the organisation (as outlined in the Strategic Plan) there seemed to be little utilisation of women's linguistic skills within the changing context of the organisation: *'We are only qualified as secretaries: that is what they say to us'.*

There was some suspicion about the stress on the importance of undergraduate Degrees and some suggestion that they were a mechanism for ensuring that the permanent women in the organisation remained at the bottom. They noted that: *'It seems very important for women to have Third Level Education, and maybe if you were a man it would not be that important.'*

So, it is a barrier that we have skirts on us.’ Thus quite clearly, the implication was that the stress on women’s educational deficiencies reflected cultural factors.

In the single word exercise, when the respondents were asked to write down in one word what they saw as the most important barrier to women’s promotion in the organisation, 42% of them identified barriers which were classified as cultural [See Table 2].

Individual factors- including passivity

Individual barriers included a kind of passivity which was reflected in a heightened dependence on management for advice, direction, opportunities etc.; as well as the perceived importance of not having a Degree and having low self confidence. As the women saw it, management was not interested in helping them to develop by, for example, giving them opportunities to undertake new responsibilities, providing them with feedback on why they did not get jobs, or giving them advice or direction as regards their careers: *"They never ask you do you want to change, do you want promotion, do you want to do anything'* They did not think that they were able to: *'speak up and fight on their own behalf'*. Many of the women were waiting for someone to say *'you should do that '* To a striking degree, most of the women expected to be *'given permission'*; *'to be asked'*.

'It is not right that it should be up to a girl [to push herself in] ... We should not have to be begging' 'Management should notice that we are doing a good job, and should push us on;' *'no-one reminds you[no one thinks] we planned at the beginning of the year that Mary would do an assertiveness course or whatever.... It is not right that I should have to go back to the Personnel Manager, or to my own Manager. By right, they should come down to me'*

'It is right that he [the Personnel Manager] should be looking out for me or other people, saying she is at that Grade now, what can I do to help her develop'

These women's wider social and cultural situation reflected and reinforced a dependence on men. Nevertheless, their explicit expectation as regards the provision of personal direction and support was striking. Some even felt a sense of entitlement to such advice and guidance (Lewis, 1997). In this respect they are very different from more urban, ostensibly less passive women who have so accepted the individualistic meritocratic male model that they have no such sense of entitlement. However it is worth reflecting that the existence of such ties, described as mentoring or networking, are widely accepted as crucially important in facilitating men's access to senior positions. For the women in this case study however, their passivity, their dependence and their expectations were equally poignant, since as they themselves recognized, management was not interested in meeting these needs.

As the women saw it most of the men who were now at Grade 1 and 2 did not have Degrees (*'They slid into them..'* [i.e. the top posts]). According to the Personnel Manager, Degrees were seen as desirable even for Grade 3 posts, although it was possible to waive this requirement in the case of internal staff. The women appeared to be unaware of this caveat. As they saw it, even referring to the desirability of a Degree in an advertisement was off-putting: *'It puts you off putting in for a job. You don't have the same confidence when they are looking for things.'* Other Irish studies have also documented women's lack of confidence and organisational naivete (Mahon, 1991; Dorgan et al 1994; O'Connor, 1996). In this study they saw women simply as *'unable to put themselves across.'* Some were dubious about the value of this anyway- seeing it as *'Putting yourself across to people as wonderful even if you aren't.'* Others felt that lack of confidence was important, although they also reflected that: *'Maybe we are making life hard for ourselves-thinking that it [Grade 3]*

is harder than it is; saying that it would be too hard for us.' Women who were fairly high up were more likely to think that the most important barrier was that women did not have enough 'push' in themselves: *'If you are a go-ahead person, you will be promoted if you want that.'* As these women saw it *'there are not that many obstacles;'* that there was no *'differentiation between men and women in the organisation from the point of view of young people coming in.'* However even they reflected *'that it is harder if you are starting at the bottom'* [where the majority of the women started].

The women in this study did not think it was true to say that the women were not interested in promotion (*'Not true, not true'*). They said that this was a personal thing; that not every man had this desire either; that there were women who were happy to stay where they were, and that there were women who wanted promotion.

'Maybe there are a few people in there that are satisfied with the level they are at, and they do not want promotion but [others] want it, and they have no chance.'

Women here and there said that *'we have reached a certain position'*; that they *'had lost a lot of hope'*. Because the career ladder was so very long for women (most of them being at Grades 4-6) they typically thought of only going up to Grade 3: *'That is a sort of dream....Grade 1 or 2.'* Nevertheless, management positions were seen as attractive:

'If you are interested, if you are interested in the area, it is as well for you to put yourself forward. And there is the pay;''and there is the car.'

Other women thought that such positions were attractive but that *'they needed direction to obtain them.'* They said women were not shrewd enough to make opportunities for themselves or to see the next step up in the career ladder. As the women saw it, the more they did, the more they were asked to do, but still it made no difference as regards promotion. There was some suggestion of the lack of self protectiveness which has been shown to be

characteristic of women in other organisations (Davies, 1995; O'Connor, 1996). Thus quite simply they undertake too much work, and so have neither the time nor the space to think strategically and/or to achieve the kind of visibility which might lead to their promotion.

The importance of recognition and thanks for the work women were doing emerged very clearly in the focus groups as being very important. They said that it would mean a lot to them if they got a note in with their tax statement every year thanking them for their work. If it was hand-written by the Manager in the Department it would be even better again: *'It gives you hope that you have the capacity to go on and take another step;'* *'It is a small thing but it is important- say you want a career break, or you want to job share...[if you have that kind of personal relationship] you will be able to come to some kind of an arrangement.'* As the women understood it if Management were indebted to them, there was a much better chance that they would be able to negotiate such arrangements. Such views can be seen as reflecting assumptions about the perceived irrelevance of impersonal meritocratic factors: an idea which has become increasingly accepted as we become aware of the emotional reality of bureaucracies and the kinds of ties which affect the distribution of resources within them. Paradoxically then these women's embeddedness in a highly personal social and cultural context was reflected in their being very explicit about the importance of indebtedness in facilitating access to resources.

In the single word exercise, when the respondents were asked to write down in one word what they saw as the most important barrier to women's promotion in the organisation, 42% of them identified barriers which were classified as individual [See Table 2]. An exploration of the impact of the project lies beyond the scope of this paper. However there were several

indications of changes in women's attitudes and behaviour: while change in the gendered structure and organisational culture were much slower and more fiercely resisted.

Summary

Documentary material provided by personnel showed that the organisation was highly skewed in gender terms, with men holding the overwhelming majority (93%: 54/58) of the higher positions (i.e. Grade 2 and above); and women holding the overwhelming majority (89%:31/35) of the lower positions (Grade 4 and below). Drawing on qualitative material from taped focus group sessions with roughly 80% of the women employed in this semi-state organisation, a wide variety of barriers to women's promotion were identified. This article illustrates the multifaceted ways in which women's position at the lower levels of that organisation was maintained. Specifically, various kinds of structural factors; organisational culture and individual factors were seen by the women as affecting their position within that organisation. Structural barriers included the value of women's work embedded in the grading scales used; the procedures used as regards promotion etc. There was a strong perception that a 'glass ceiling' existed within the organisation i.e. that there was a part of the top of the organisation that women could see but could not reach. That ceiling was, at best, at Grade 3. Barriers deriving from organisational culture were seen more important than the structural factors. Thus although changes in the organisational vision and the introduction of new technology had created possibilities as regards the changing deployment of women, such changes were resisted: *'We are only qualified as secretaries: that is what they say to us'*. Barriers at an individual level were identified by a sizeable minority as important. At this level there appeared to be a striking level of individual passivity. Most did not know what to do to increase their chances as regards promotion; they did not see a clear career path. Their need for recognition and gratitude seemed part of an attempt to deal with a situation where

their entitlements were not clearly laid out and where they felt they needed to have a personal relationship if they were to have any chance of getting promoted , or even getting what were depicted as privileges (job sharing, career breaks etc). Such expectations of management at first glance seemed to reflect the extension of a highly familial world view; a social and cultural setting which fostered female dependency and/or a stereotypical female style of relating (O'Connor,1992).However it is worth reflecting that similar sorts of arrangements are accepted amongst men- albeit being described as mentoring, networking etc. For the women in this case study however, their passivity, their dependence and their expectations were equally poignant, They depended on management to effectively look after their best interests - an expectation which sat uneasily with their perception of Management as *'too busy to be kind'*.

TABLE 1: Proportion and number of women at various levels in organisation

POSITION	% (n)	BOTTOM SALARY	TOP SALARY
Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executives	0% (0/1)	£50,050	£57,558(excl CEO)
Senior Manager/Manager	14% (1/7)	£46,529/£41,966	£53,630/£46,066
Grade 1	4% (1/27)	£23,983	£43,097
Grade 2	9% (2/23)	£17,537	£32,117
Grade 3	38% (9/24)	£14,334	£21,342
Grade 4	89% (17/19)	£12,085	£18,739
Grade 5	80 % (8/10)	£9,701	£14,943
Grade 6	100% (6/6)	£8,390	£13,399
Total	38% (44/117)		

¹Personnel Data

TABLE 2 Percentage distribution of respondents in terms of their perception of the most important barrier to women's promotion in the organisation

Type	% (N)
Structural : Total	16% (6/38)
Posts	3% (1)
Regrading/Upgrading	8% (3)
Finance Dept.	3% (1)
Other	3% (1)
Cultural : Total	42% (16/38)
Recognition/Outlook/ Woman/Demotivation	13% (5)
Mind Set/Interest	13% (5)
Discussion/ Understanding	5% (2)
Management	10% (4)
Individual :Total	42% (16/38)
Training/Lack of	10% (4)
Education/Lack of Qualifications	26% (6)
Confidence	8% (3)
Family Responsibilities/Marriage	8% (3)

References

- Acker, J. (1990) 'Hierarchies, jobs bodies: a theory of gendered organisations' *Gender and Society* 4, 139-158
- Bottero, W. (1998) 'Clinging to the wreckage? Gender and the legacy of class' *Sociology*, 32, 3:469-490
- Canadian Government (1990) *Beneath the veneer: the report of the task force on Barriers to women in the Public Service*. Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Ottawa.
- Connell, R.W., (1995A/1987) *Gender and Power*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Davies, C.(1995) 'The sociology of the professions and the profession of gender' *Sociology*, 30, No 4: 661-678
- Department of Equality and Law Reform (1994) *Report on a Survey of Equal Opportunities in the Public Sector* Stationery Office, Dublin.
- Dorgan, J., Drew, E. and Murphy, C. (1994) 'Consultants Report to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Women's Rights' in *Women and Rural Development* Gov Publications, Dublin.

- Gottfried, H. (1998) 'Beyond Patriarchy? Theorizing gender and class' in *Sociology*, 13: 451-468
- Hansard Society (1990) *Report of the Commission on women at the top*, HMSO, London.
- Halford, S., (1992) 'Feminist change in a patriarchal organisation' in A. Witz and M. Savage, (eds) *Gender and Bureaucracy*, Blackwell/Sociological Review, Oxford.
- Halford, S., et al (1997) *Gender, Careers and organisations*, Macmillan, London
- Lewis, S. (1997) 'Family Friendly' Employment policies: a route to changing organisational culture or playing about at the margins?' *Gender, Work and Organisation* 4,1: 13-23
- Mahon, E. (1991) *Motherhood, Work and Equal Opportunity*, First Report of the Third Joint Oireachtas Committee on Women's Rights, Stationery Office, Dublin.
- Mahon, E. and Dillon, L., (1996) *Women in management in local administration*, Second Report of the Fourth Joint Oireachtas Committee on Women's Rights, Government Publications, Dublin.
- National Economic and Social Forum (1996) *Equality Proofing Issues : Forum Report No 10*, Government Publications, Dublin
- O'Connell, P., (1999) 'Sick man or tigress? The Labour Market in the Republic of Ireland'. In A.F. Heath R. Breen and C.T. Whelan (eds.) *Ireland: North and South: Perspectives from Social Science* Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- O'Connor, P. (1992) *Friendships Between Women*. Harvester/Wheatsheaf, Brighton
- O'Connor, P., (1996) 'Organisational culture as a barrier to women's promotion' *The Economic and Social Review*, 27, 3:187-216
- O'Connor, P. (1998) *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society*, Institute of Public Administration, Dublin.
- Pollert, A., (1996) 'Gender and class revisited: or the poverty of patriarchy' *Sociology*, 30, 4:639-659
- United Nations, (1995) *Human Development Report*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- US Merit Systems Protection Board (1992) *A question of Equality: women and the glass ceiling in the Federal Government*. Report to President and Congress of United States, Washington.
- Walters, P.A. (1989) 'Servants of the crown' in A. Spencer and D. Podmore (eds) *In a man's world*. Tavistock, London.
- Witz, A. and Savage, M., (1992) 'Theoretical introduction' in M. Savage and A. Witz (eds) *Gender and Bureaucracy* Blackwell/Sociological Review, Oxford.

Whelan, C.T. and Fahey, T. (1994) 'Marriage and the Family' in_C.T.Whelan (ed.) *Values and Social Change in Ireland* Gill and McMillan, Dublin.