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# WOMEN'S CAREER PROGRESSION IN U.K. ACADEMIC LIBRARIES – ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE AND MANAGEMENT CHANGE

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## ABSTRACT

*This study investigates women's success in academic libraries, and identifies career paths and potential barriers to career progression. Influenced by a feminist perspective, twelve interviews were conducted with women holding senior management roles to gain personal accounts, experiences and observations. Qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews is supported by some descriptive quantitative statistics. Results show that good management appears unrelated to gender. A mix of skills is essential, people skills being most important. The glass ceiling should no longer exist. Formal succession planning practices are not evident; however, efforts are made to ensure women develop professionally. Mentors, role models and networking are important to increase confidence and encourage career progression. Women still lack confidence in their ability, and aspirations can be closely linked to family choices. Barriers still exist for women, including children, mobility, and a culture of long hours. Flexible working has increased but not at senior levels. A positive change has occurred in management styles and organisational structures. Women are gaining promotion, with significant numbers holding senior roles. Flexible work, training opportunities, mentoring and support have increased. Improvements are needed with childcare, flexible working at senior levels, confidence, and training opportunities.*

## INTRODUCTION

The research idea originated from a group called *Women in Libraries (WiL)*. *WiL* was a feminist network that emerged in the United Kingdom (U.K.) in 1980, when few women were in senior roles libraries and development opportunities were limited. *WiL* aimed to act as a pressure group for women in the profession, to improve the position of women through career development and working conditions.<sup>1</sup> *WiL* ceased in 1990. Women in the U.K. library profession today appear successful, with many holding senior roles. This research investigates the extent of women's

success, their achievements and any persistent barriers. The study focused on women in academic libraries in the U.K. only, considering their career progression and the impact they have made on the profession in the U.K.

Key areas include:

1. Management traits – to discover if women incorporated masculine traits to gain success or had a different management style emerged;
2. The glass ceiling – has it been broken? If so, what had brought this about?
3. Mentors/role models – were they necessary to women's success;
4. Barriers – to identify any barriers and their affect on career progression;
5. Flexible working – to determine whether this was available.

Interviews were conducted with twelve women in senior management roles in academic libraries to provide a detailed outlook of the current landscape, identifying changes in management, career paths, and potential barriers. The decision to focus on one sector was a practical one due to time constraints.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Management traits*

Trait theories are discussed as a concept whereby there are specific masculine/feminine traits associated with management styles. Stereotypical masculine traits are identified as being decisive, assertive, driven, competitive, objective and logical, whilst feminine traits are supportive, sensitive, caring, cooperative, good communicator and flexible.<sup>2-6</sup> Writers consider how women adopt masculine traits to gain acceptance as a manager and thus exert a more powerful, successful image.<sup>7, 8, 3, 5</sup> Women have been advised to compromise their abilities, using male techniques.<sup>9</sup>

It is argued that women managers can change organisational cultures, increasing equality and gaining respect and admiration for their feminine traits as a more appropriate style of management.<sup>8 4</sup> On the other hand, Moran<sup>10</sup> discusses the problems of linking new styles of leadership with being female, arguing that applying specific traits to one gender is ineffective. Harriman<sup>2</sup> asserts that “in reality there are few, if any, trait differences between women and men managers...labelling [some] traits as masculine may be a misnomer [as] they may simply be the traits of high-level managers”. Tanton<sup>11</sup> emphasises the importance of removing gender stereotypes to ensure women's relationships at work are positive.

### *Mentoring/role models/networking*

Links have been made between mentoring and career progression.<sup>12-13</sup> Simon<sup>8</sup> found mentoring was beneficial for women. Previously mentors have mostly been men due to the lack of women in senior roles.<sup>2 8</sup> The literature promotes the pres-

ence of women in senior roles in order to encourage women at lower levels and enhance opportunities.<sup>3 14</sup>

Networking is important in order to gain information, contacts, professional support, for career planning, and strategy making.<sup>3 14</sup> Limerick and O'Leary<sup>15</sup> stress the importance of networking over mentoring due to networking being more reciprocal and not based on hierarchical relationships.

### ***Flexible working / barriers childcare/long hours/mobility)***

The literature discusses experiences of job sharing, highlighting flexibility, particularly for women with children, and argues that job sharing is possible at senior levels.<sup>16 17</sup> However, "Britain is dragging its feet in relation to the introduction of flexible working arrangements".<sup>18</sup>

Paull<sup>19</sup> highlights that "the prevalence of women in part-time work continues to be a distinguishing feature of female employment," and that the presence of children has a greater impact on women's hours than that of men's. However, the long hours culture creates the need for managers to spend considerable hours in the office.<sup>5 20</sup> The Fawcett Society, the U.K.'s leading campaign for equality, asserts that the U.K. has a culture where the hours you put in prove "your commitment to the job".<sup>21</sup>

Childcare responsibilities still largely rest on women.<sup>2 20</sup> Jones and Oppenheim assert that "only when men take on sharing the task of bringing up children will women be able to shatter the glass ceiling in U.K. libraries."<sup>22</sup> Simon<sup>8</sup> argues that having children has a detrimental affect on women's careers. It is estimated that "45% of women face some kind of workplace discrimination or unfavourable treatment due to pregnancy."<sup>23</sup>

A further barrier is mobility. Jones and Oppenheim<sup>22</sup> assert that "moving to a new location was sometimes more significant to women's careers than taking a career break."

### ***Career development***

White et al.<sup>24</sup> provide a model of stages in women's careers involving ambitions, success, decisions about motherhood and the family/career conflict. Tharenou<sup>25</sup> found that family structures were linked to career advancement of managers. Training is important in helping women advance careers, particularly for women returning to work after a break.<sup>22</sup>

Powell and Butterfield<sup>26</sup> discuss men's aspirations at work, including salary and career progression, whereas women's include personal satisfaction and work-life balance.

Women have underrated their abilities and have been unwilling to apply for promotion; today, however, women are gaining confidence.<sup>7</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

The research is influenced by a feminist perspective, and applies methods that take women's experiences into account and places women's reality at the centre of the study.<sup>9</sup> Feminist methodology is an interactive process, without the artificial object/subject split between researcher and researched, and includes more personal involvement.<sup>2,7</sup>

Interview questions were e-mailed to participants prior to interviews, giving time for reflection, and aiding recollections of past experiences, a method used successfully in previous studies.<sup>9,28</sup> Participants were sent copies of transcripts for verification of content, increasing validity.

Limerick and O'Leary<sup>15</sup> stress the importance of feminist management research, as it goes "beyond masculine models". This study supports this philosophy and the use of feminist methodology in "raising the profile of women's views, achievements and management practices."<sup>15</sup>

### *Interviews*

Participants recruited held senior roles in U.K. academic libraries as this sector had seen noticeable career progression amongst the female workforce.

The sample was purposive. Adler et al.<sup>9</sup> validate this, also resisting a representative sample that generalises women's experiences, thus ensuring their research reflects a subjective approach. Interview contacts were gained through a mailing list posting, internet and literature searches and recommendations.

A thematic analysis of the literature provided recurrent themes that both aided in the formation of interview questions and later data analysis. Questions were mainly open ended to encourage depth. Additional questions were added if further concepts arose. The majority of interviews were conducted in person as the "overwhelming strength of the face-to-face interview is the 'richness' of the communication that is possible."<sup>29</sup>

The research complied with the University of Sheffield ethics procedures and permission was sought from participants to record interviews.

A thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted. The literature review was used to establish themes to aid the coding of the data. Transcripts were coded by drawing out quotes and grouping them together, as relevant to each theme. A spreadsheet was used to organise the data. Breaking the transcripts into "readily analyzable units"<sup>30</sup> ensured data was accessible and could be communicated effectively, aiding data management.

The analysis was an iterative process. Themes were compared and contrasted to those found in the literature and previous interviews. Reviewing the data alongside the literature added further validity.

### ***Statistical evidence***

Statistics of women in senior management roles within U.K. academic libraries over the past 30+ years were consulted. Due to the lack of statistics highlighting the gender split in senior management roles, the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) membership institution and delegate lists were used.<sup>31</sup> These documents provided a break down of the number of women managers at each point in history in academic libraries.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Statistical Evidence***

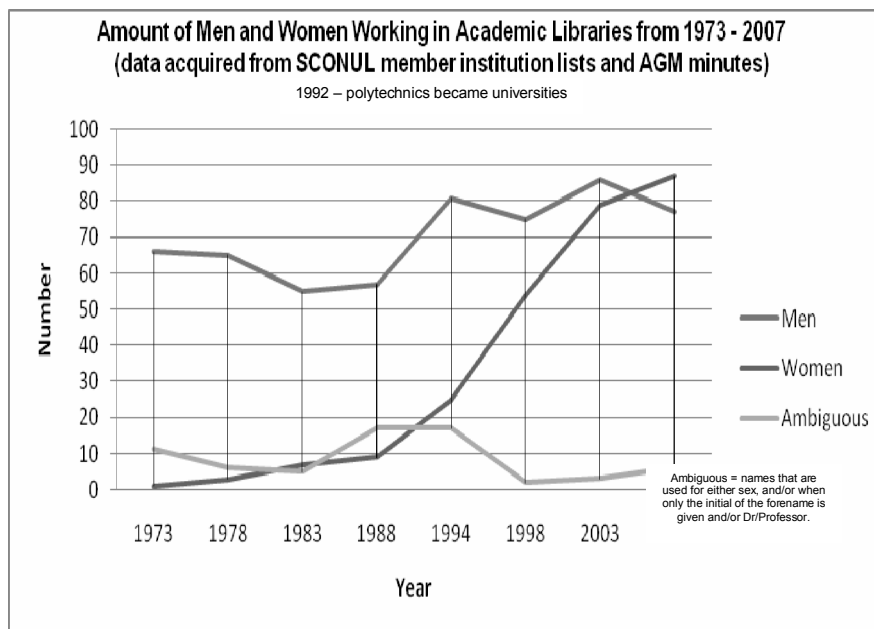
It was important to identify historical changes in the number of women working in senior management roles within academic libraries. SCONUL membership institution and delegate lists<sup>31</sup> were available for the years 1994, 1998, 2003 and 2007. Prior to these dates, annual general meeting minutes that listed member institutions and delegates for the years 1973, 1978, 1983, and 1988, were used. The delegates named on these documents held senior roles.

Determining the sex of some delegates was problematic as names could be held by either sex, or only the delegate's initial was given, or Doctor (Dr) / Professor (Prof) was provided without a forename. This was reduced through internet searches, leaving only a minority ambiguous. The ambiguous names were recorded to ensure awareness of their presence.

A significant change was found over the years in the amount of women holding senior positions in U.K. academic libraries as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

**Table 1:** SCONUL membership 1973-2007

<b>Year</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Ambiguous</b>
1973	66	1	11
1978	65	3	6
1983	55	7	5
1988	57	9	17
1994	81	25	17
1998	75	54	2
2003	86	79	3
2007	77	87	6



**Figure 1:** SCONUL membership 1973-2007

## DISCUSSION OF INTERVIEW FINDINGS

### *Management traits/organisational structures*

Skills associated with a good manager were wide ranging, for example, communication; strategic, organisational and common sense. The majority of participants insisted these skills were not gendered. This concurs with the literature, “women no longer gender-type the role of manager” and that “women generally have a more androgynous view of managers.”<sup>6</sup> The most important skill identified was people skills (75% / 9 responses). In the past people skills, such as communication and listening, have been stereotypically feminine. This highlights a change in the way stereotypically feminine skills were perceived in the past: as opposed to traits being seen as passive, they were seen as strong leadership skills.

Another skill discussed was a willingness to develop people (25% / 3 responses). This topic re-occurred throughout the interviews, with participants asserting the importance of developing staff. *WiL* highlighted this area as lacking in the past and the increased amount of women in senior roles may have contributed to the extent of staff development available today.

In terms of a good manager, all participants placed emphasis on the individual bringing their strengths to a position, regardless of gender. All interviewees

stressed good managers “transcend gender” (Interview 11) and the relevant and appropriate skills associated with management could be found in both men and women.

Participants stressed observations as an important means of acquiring management skills. Seventy-five % (9 responses) of participants’ past mentors/role models were male. This concurs with the idea of a “management prototype,” whereby managers have similar traits, regardless of gender, as suggested in the literature.<sup>2,14</sup> Most interviewees had observed male managers, yet still incorporated stereotypically feminine traits into their management style, showing that a blend of skills is most effective.

Regarding organisational structures, although hierarchies were still in place, many of the participants had found ways of working with the structure and encouraging team work and participation. There was a general consensus that hierarchies were needed as “ultimately you have to have people making decisions, but you can still be very consultative and encourage participation” (Interview 2). A new style has appeared which includes a mixture of hierarchical and flattened team working structures. This removes the concept of structures being gendered as it incorporates a mix of what is deemed both masculine and feminine, possibly due to more women holding senior positions.

When participants were asked “as a woman, what positive changes have you made to management/organisational structures?” the majority of interviewees insisted changes made were as individuals, not as women. There was a strong emphasis throughout interviews of matters being unrelated to gender, therefore refuting stereotypes and gender differences. However, changes identified by interviewees included flexible working, positive role models, and encouraging participation (less hierarchy), all of which could be deemed female orientated. Many of the original aims of *WiL*, including provision of positive role models, job sharing, staff development, changing attitudes, closely mirror the changes women in senior positions today have implemented/achieved. Although *WiL* no longer existed after 1990, those aims still remained in the profession with women still striving to achieve them and many successfully doing so.

*“have deliberately experimented with less hierarchical groups...I think my main thrust has always been trying to get the engagement from all levels of staff “.* (Interview 2)

*“I think as a woman and as a mother as well, particularly to show that you can get there by hard work and determination if you want to...I think it shows that it is possible to juggle home and work life and still be successful”.* (Interview 3)

*“I have thought about issues such as providing structure and opportunities for people in all areas of the organisation...to provide some career progression...because I think that is something in the past that has been lacking”.* (Interview 1)



### **Promotion**

Most interviewees felt the glass ceiling was not an issue. This is reinforced by statistics (Table 1; Figure 1) which highlight more women in senior positions than men today (2007 statistics – 87 women / 77 men). This contrasts starkly to 30 years ago when women in senior roles were in the minority (1978 statistics – 3 women / 65 men). A small number of participants suggested that any glass ceiling was created by women themselves, through family commitments or confidence. However, seven of the twelve participants (58%) had family commitments and still achieved a senior role. It should not be assumed that all women have similar aspirations and those with family commitments who are not managers, may have willingly made that choice.

Interviewees were asked what contributed to this increase. Many suggested the change happened when polytechnics became universities in 1992. Statistics reinforce this, in 1988, 9 women held senior roles, in contrast to 25 women in 1994 (Table 1; Figure 1). The number of women then dramatically rose thereafter. Further suggestions were culture changes, legislation, and the fact that libraries are female dominated. That women were rising in a profession where their numbers were already dominant seemed natural.

*“The fact is that it has always been a female dominated profession [and] if other obstacles were relaxing, which I think they were in the 90s, there was a whole raft of women ready and able to rise”. (Interview 5)*

### **Succession planning**

Succession planning was discussed to discover what plans were in place to ensure the positive changes that have been implemented were maintained and the continuing success of women, particularly at a time when “the age profile of...staff is such that a number of key senior post holders are coming up to retirement age” (Interview 2). No formal procedures were in place, despite some participants stressing they had requested it (Interview 9). Three participants asserted that succession planning was something they were “actively trying to manage” (Interview 12). All participants stressed an integral part of their role was to develop staff and “encourage them to progress” (Interview 11) and there was emphasis placed on future managers needing to see the bigger picture (Interview 9, 10, 11).

Participants discussed the need for management training and highlighted how they “use opportunities when they arise or create opportunities for...women to gain management experience in some way where interest and/or potential is shown” (Interview 10). This area is particularly important as one participant stressed there “seems to be a dichotomy between good librarian skills and good managerial skills...and many librarian jobs don’t provide the necessary opportunities for learning management” (Interview 11). Although all participants were keen to encourage staff to develop, not all placed emphasis on developing staff to suc-

ceed within that particular institution, with one participant stating “we need to ensure that there are enough good ambitious people in the sector to do the senior jobs in the future, but there should be movement between institutions” (Interview 4). Overall, there was a general consensus that many young women in the profession had potential and were ambitious and managers were providing necessary support and encouragement to ensure they gain future senior roles.

### ***Mentors/role models/networking***

Mentors and role models were discussed as important, with the majority of participants having had mentors or role models. Responses to the gender of the mentor/role model were mixed. Drawing on their own experiences, the majority of mentors/role models had been male (75% / 9 responses). Some of the interviewees (41% / 9 responses) did feel that women identify more with women and therefore female mentors/role models were important. Wilson<sup>12</sup> agrees, asserting that “a female mentor can...give a positive incentive through illustrative success.” Interviewees asserted mentoring benefited women by increasing confidence, offering encouragement, and helping careers to progress, with one participant stating “I think I would probably always go out of my way for people trying to make it and I probably do that more for women because I think they sometimes need that boost more” (Interview 9).

Networking was stressed as important, for friendship, support and sharing good practice. This is supported in the literature with Davidson and Burke<sup>14</sup> highlighting information exchange, collaboration, professional support and encouragement as distinct advantages of networking. Some interviewees (3 / 25%) drew attention to the strong network within libraries, asserting “in terms of libraries...there is a very good sort of camaraderie and collegiate feel” (Interview 12).

### ***Aspirations/confidence***

Participants felt there was little difference between men and women’s aspirations, however family commitments were identified as having an affect on women’s aspirations. It was suggested that women’s “primary identity [is] with their family” (Interview 10) and women tend to “put their families first” (Interview 3). This would affect aspirations as women may concentrate on ways of combining work and family life which may not include focussing on promotion, in comparison to men who often don’t have the burden of childcare.

All participants stressed they had progressed in their careers by grasping opportunities and taking on challenging and interesting roles. Career plans were seen as a “boy’s game” (Interview 9). It is possible therefore to aspire to management whilst remaining adaptable, flexible and taking on new challenges.

Participants emphasised women’s low confidence, and how they often “need encouragement to develop and progress their careers” (Interview 1). It was suggested that “women tend to be more reluctant to apply for something unless they

are confident they can do it" (Interview 1) and that "women are less pushy and less able to push themselves forward" (Interview 6). Although there are more women at the top, more networking, mentoring and development opportunities, participants observed many women still lack confidence.

### **Barriers**

Participants highlighted potential barriers for women, such as long working hours and caring responsibilities. Participants emphasised the "burden of the childcare rests with the mother" (Interview 9) and "taking a career break is the biggest barrier" (Interview 3). A number of participants felt they would not have reached senior level had they taken significant breaks, with those that had children only taking a small amount of maternity leave before returning to work.

The benefits of flexible working to parents are evident. Some interviewees (41% / 5 responses) stressed that flexible working was useful for both women and men and felt that "if you give people the flexibility...then they are far more likely to put the effort in" (Interview 2). The Fawcett Society<sup>21</sup> reiterate, stating, "where employers offer flexibility around hours, everyone benefits – female and male employees". Some participants (33% / 4) highlighted that flexible working was not prevalent within senior roles and there was a "prejudice against flexible working in a management position" (Interview 11). This ensures fewer female role models working flexibly in management. "The path to more acceptance of flexible work could...be achieved more seamlessly if there were more managers as role models"<sup>20</sup>

Mobility was highlighted as a barrier (50% / 6 responses). The ability to move increases job prospects. Today both women and men have careers which can result in "families...being torn apart by the fact that they are having to live apart in order to progress their careers" (Interview 3).

### **Future**

A third of participants (33% / 4 responses) felt no further improvements were needed, as women had opportunities and were achieving goals. The remaining participants, however, commented on childcare, flexible working, confidence and training. They stressed that many issues also applied to men. When comparing these future targets with the original aims of *WiL*, there are similarities. Although the achievements of women in the library profession are both noticeable and impressive, some issues remain.

## **CONCLUSION**

Investigating U.K. academic libraries today, we see that opportunities are afforded to women. The glass ceiling, in effect, has been shattered, with approximately 87

women (out of 170) holding senior positions, in contrast to 3 women (out of 74) 30 years ago. It is difficult to identify whether this change was a natural progression or a direct result of women in the profession. In any case, the success of women in U.K. academic libraries constitutes a revolution.

Significant changes have occurred in management and organisational structures. There has been a move away from the stereotypical competitive, aggressive male management style to a blend of skills, with a strong emphasis on the stereotypical female people skills. Good management is not attributed to gender and both male and female managers are ensuring they listen to staff and communicate effectively – the gendering of skills is unnecessary.

Effort is made to develop staff, through mentoring and training opportunities. This is shown through the informal practices in place for succession planning. Women managers ensure staff are provided with encouragement, support, and training to enable them to develop and progress into future senior roles. They see many young female librarians showing potential.

Organisational structures have evolved. Hierarchies still exist, but are more flexible, incorporating team work and collaboration. The changes identified suggest women have made an impact, through introducing development opportunities and a more blended, flexible, collaborative style of working.

Mentoring is recognised as beneficial to all. Increased networking is also apparent, providing opportunities to share good practice and increase knowledge. Aspirations of women and men are not dissimilar, but it is important to recognise that not everyone's goals are the same. Although some women's aspirations are affected by family commitments this is not necessarily a barrier. Participants in this study show that having a family and reaching senior management is possible, but the importance is placed on individual choice.

Despite the opportunities afforded to women in the profession, the issue of confidence is still apparent, with some women doubting their abilities. Wider ingrained social values may need considering. Although many women today are confident, it is difficult for years of societal values to disappear, which may influence confidence.

Although interviewees did not dwell on encountering obstacles, there is evidence that barriers prevail. Many also apply to men. Mobility is an issue. As professional jobs become limited, the ability to move becomes vital. Childcare still poses the greatest issue affecting women's career progression. The women in this study with children show it is possible to successfully combine work and family life. This is, however, dependent on support available, individual drive and determination.

Flexible working has become an established practice and has provided opportunities for women to combine work and family life. This is not prominent within senior management, but a significant change in working patterns is noticeable overall with a reduction of the strict 9-5 regime.

U.K. academic libraries have undergone changes in management and organisational structures, with increased promotions, flexible working and development and mentoring opportunities. Although the successes are apparent, work is still required with respect to women's place in society and the burden of childcare responsibilities, more flexible working at senior levels, women's confidence and opportunities for further training. The intensity and scale of these issues may differ from that in the 1980s, but nonetheless they still prevail.

### ***Recommendations for change***

- The burden of childcare on women would reduce if it were easier and more acceptable for men to take on this responsibility. Different professional bodies need to work together and lobby U.K. government to implement changes.
- Senior managers need to think positively about flexible working by having the imagination, creativity and exercising good practice.
- Increased availability of leadership training that places emphasis on building confidence.

### **Recommendations for further research**

- Research into succession planning, identifying practices in place and their effectiveness.
- Similar research drawing comparisons to men's career progressions along with comparisons with different library sectors.

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