

SUBMISSION FROM SUSAN RICE

Thank you for inviting views on issues affecting women and work. What the Equal Opportunities Committee Inquiry has achieved to date is impressive and I want to begin my comments by stating that I'm pleased that such an extensive inquiry into this subject is taking place. The impact of your findings will potentially be significant and I wish you well as you continue your work.

Your letter requesting views helpfully isolated a number of challenges to women in work which your inquiry has already identified. Rather than respond specifically to those challenges, I would like to describe some cultural issues which pertain especially to women's advancement at work. This is important because the more senior women we have, the easier it becomes for others to see a future for themselves.

My views derive not only from my own work experience, but also from those with whom I engage – with customers in all walks of life, through my extensive activity working with the disadvantaged in terms of financial inclusion, through experience in both the US and the UK, and work experience across the private, not-for-profit and public sectors.

Contrary to some common assumptions, I believe that: (a) All women do not share the same aspirations and the same challenges regarding work; (b) Managing a young family and working are not necessarily mutually exclusive; and (c) 'Family friendly' practices can be helpful, but not always; enhancing such policies doesn't always benefit women in terms of their aspirations for work.

Some women aspire to high levels of success, to rising up in their organisation, to having great influence, while others often reach a stage where they decide those goals are not worth the effort. I think we have to respect both approaches, but we mustn't assume that the latter group would have achieved more simply by a change in policy or workplace practice. Some women, in fact many of the most senior and influential women I know, would say that the extent of *family friendly workplace practices* did not significantly affect their own progress or success.

Having said that, and growing out of some focus groups as part of an RSE consultation into women STEM graduates, I'm struck by what happens when women, who shine as trainees or at entry level, take time out for a family just at the point when their role might expand. They haven't yet tasted that step up in responsibility and colleagues haven't yet seen them there.

Is there perhaps some merit in ensuring that more junior women are given greater exposure within a business, some early leadership experience? When and if they do take time off, they may be more tempted to return to work because they would be more confident. Not only that, but if they do return to work, they may be taken into the next level role right away because they had some experience of that beforehand, they're perceived 'to fit'.

Practices which allow time off for child-bearing are helpful, but perhaps not just on their own. What happens at work before a woman takes that time off may be even more important to her successful re-entry.

In my own organisation, Lloyds Banking Group, we have spent several years now exploring the impact of a psychological phenomenon called '*unconscious bias*'.

Unconscious bias reflects the innate and automatic response of the brain. I don't refer to those biases that we pick up through socialisation. Rather, to the biases which are hard-wired into the way we perceive and therefore the judgements we make. Differences from ourselves tend to stand out, and we all instinctively 'favour' those who are like us.

At Lloyds, we have created an e-learning module for all our staff to help them to understand the effects of unconscious bias. We expect this to have a significant impact on performance management and promotion decisions.

Similarly, a lender makes unconscious assumptions about a new customer. We have therefore trained many of our customer-facing staff to be aware of unconscious bias and how it might influence the way they approach a customer, a customer's problem, or their business as a whole.

I think this is an area which could be better understood in relation to the success of women in the workplace. In particular, such understanding could have a positive impact on the support offered to women interested in starting up or growing their own businesses, where different assumptions may be made about and even by them, than about men.

There has been a lot of focus over the last several years about the lack of *women in the boardroom*, and the lack therefore of a more rounded view about strategy and risks in an organisation. As a result, larger companies have set out to try to increase the number of women in the boardroom.

One area which I think needs more research is the relationship between a woman having a senior executive role in a business and ultimately becoming a non-executive director. If we can encourage and support more women into senior executive roles, there will be a more natural movement for them to join boards, because their experience will 'qualify' them, in their own eyes and in others'. As an aside, filling boardroom seats by quota is not the policy of choice for any female non-executive I know.

Another point I might make relates to how *women in the workplace learn*, and from whom. I'm not sure that women, or indeed men, learn best only within their work unit, their division. In many cases, women learn how to cope with situations, how to address challenges, ways to shape a career, from other women more easily than from men, because there is a tacit assumption that, to some extent, women face common challenges. The same might be said for men as well.

If that is the case, the usefulness of prompting networks in which women can meet and talk about professional matters with each other, within a business if it is a larger one, or across businesses if they work in small ones, can't be underestimated.

Mentoring programmes for able women abound, in the hopes of encouraging their ambitions and bringing them through the system more quickly. Mentoring can be useful for many and is most often done on a one-to-one basis.

At Lloyds Banking Group, though, we have an initiative where a senior executive woman sits down with six or eight up-and-coming women, leading a group conversation about careers and all the challenges they bring. The senior woman therefore has an impact on a greater number of colleagues than through one-to-one sessions. It also gives the attendees a chance to meet others who are in the same position as themselves. This is both a powerful and productive way to approach mentoring.

In addition to mentoring, and here I hold a very strong view, it's important that senior colleagues *champion* able women. It's one thing to mentor, to have a private conversation and give advice – people like to give advice when it's valued, and the person receiving the advice can feel grateful if it comes from an experienced and senior colleague. But that doesn't always lead to advancement in the workplace or to a better work experience.

If someone gets to know an up-and-coming woman and actively champions her, by putting her name forward for committees or taskforces, by mentioning her in conversation as being able, or in other ways, that can be much more powerful than simple mentoring.

I haven't seen much research on *women's ambition* in the workplace and it might be good to see more. If one looks for instance at the chief executives in higher education, very few are women. If one looks again at senior people using their STEM background, very few are women. That statement can be repeated again and again across industries and sectors.

Perhaps this divergence is down to simple choice. But it might also reflect women not seeing how to manage that senior role along with what else is in their lives. The more we have women in senior roles, therefore, the easier it will be for others to follow because they will see and observe how it can be done.

Having said that, the term *glass ceiling* is used to describe external factors which impede a woman's progress in the workplace. Glass ceilings may or may not exist in different companies, in different situations. But I worry greatly that we spend as much time as we do talking about glass ceilings, even if the conversation is about how to shatter them. I worry because, as soon as we recognise that a glass ceiling exists, it is a subtle way of reducing ambition, allowing both women and men an 'out'.

We know that we want to enhance the ability of women, who choose to work, to be successful according to their own lights. We share a view that women should not be excluded because of gender from opportunities. Where I think we need more work, and this underlies the various matters which I have raised here, is in understanding why we want women to succeed in this way – what is added in social terms, in economic terms. And, above all, how to support aspiration and ambition for women.

To sum up, for me, equal opportunities for women is about breaking down barriers, and about creating access. The first, on its own, will only solve the problem in part. And, even beyond that, it's about prompting aspiration and nurturing ambition.

Susan Rice
13 February 2013