

# Making it to the top

**Lisa Cohen, Assistant professor, Desautels Faculty of Management, McGill University, Canada, reveals the difficulty women encounter in being hired for high level roles**

**W**hen Mary Barra became the first female chief executive of General Motors we celebrated a woman reaching the height of her profession. The same happened when Inga Beale became Lloyd's of London's first female Chief executive officer.

These women show that, today, it is still considered newsworthy for women to reach senior managerial positions. Because men continue to hold the majority of seats on the board and it remains unusual for leaders to be female, the rise to the positions of Mary Barra and Inga Beale are, quite simply, exceptional. It is also why so much of the media attention is focussed on their gender and not just on their qualifications and the exceptional challenges they face.

I carried out research that explains just why this is still the norm. One of the key findings across studies is that women are more likely to be hired for high level roles if there are already a high proportion of female managers. If this proportion remains low, women will always struggle to reach executive altitudes.

A female manager I interviewed for a paper, recently published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* with Joseph Broschak at the University of Arizona, told me a story about one of her former bosses. Her manager, a brilliant and capable woman, had worked her way up in the organisation and was poised to move into the top level of the organisation. This promotion would mean that she had a role in setting the strategy of the organisation and would get a share of the organisation's gains.

Just at that moment, a new position was created in her company: between her current position and the top position. She took it, but continued to prove herself worthy of a job at the top; eventually she did make it.

Her interpretation of the situation was that the male managers created this role because they did not want a woman sitting at the top table. It points to yet another reason why the playing field may not be equal for men and women: differing patterns of job creation that exacerbate inequalities in the workplace. In this case, the creation of the new job designed specifically to block a woman from reaching a higher position.

What this particular episode illustrates, however, is that the creation of new jobs may not always be dictated by obvious administrative needs. It was not clear that another layer was needed in the organisation except as a way to offer this woman a promotion while blocking her entrance any higher.

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## ...THE PLAYING FIELD MAY NOT BE EQUAL FOR MEN AND WOMEN...

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This anecdote, and my research, shows that the pattern of managerial job creation varies with the proportion of females already employed in management. More new jobs are created and initially filled by women rather than men only when women make up over half of the company's management – at the top levels of business in general women remain vastly under represented.

And it is not just rising through an organisation's top tiers that the demographic makeup of such jobs affects. Indeed, it affects women across career stages throughout their working lives. For instance, the likelihood of women leaving an organisation varies in accordance with the total proportion of women working there – but there is no parallel effect for men.

Each of these differences may seem minor but take on much more significance

when considered alongside the many other differences – in pay, promotion, turnover – related to the relative number of women in an organisation. There is something of a catch here; it seems that increasing the number of women may reduce some types of inequality but the question remains: how can the number of women be increased so that occurs? Are we stuck in a cycle?

There is no simple answer. Like so many of the biases in the workplace these days, this operates at an unconscious level. Most of the time, people do not intend to or even know that they discriminate – so how do we eliminate the unintentional biases at work?

Research points us in many directions for those solutions – training, regulation, quotas – though the improvements that result from some of these efforts are minimal at best. Some of the most promising findings suggest that the

most consistent ways shown to reduce inequality has to do with increasing the amount of accountability and transparency in organisations. Organisations where managers are held accountable for inequality have less disparity between male and female roles in the workplace. This could be by doing something as simple as making people record their decisions and then showing them any patterns of difference between men and women. It can be enough to eliminate inequalities in pay.

Perhaps then women will take up more seats in the boardroom. The more women in managerial positions, the better the promotion prospects for women throughout entire organisations.

Then women in leadership will not always be such a newsworthy topic – and tomorrow's Mary Barra will not be seeing herself on the front page quite so often. 