

A woman's place is no longer in the home. It seems to be in the communication department, and that trend may not be good news for male and female communicators alike.

In 1978, *Business Week* worried that public relations was becoming "the velvet ghetto of affirmative action," and many communicators are still concerned about the decrease in the salary and status that seem to accompany the "feminization" of a profession, such as teaching or nursing. Certainly there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women working, but business communication shows an increase that is wildly out of proportion - 4456 of the U.S. workforce is female, but the proportion in business communication is over 7056. In student communication groups, women outnumber men more than 8 to 1.

***Communication may
soon be 80% female.***

What will this trend mean? In late 1984, the International Association of Business Communicators Foundation funded a study into the possible implications of this velvet ghetto. This project, conducted in the U.S. and Canada, included surveys, depth interviews with senior communication professionals, and eight focus groups, as well as analyses of data on salaries and trends in the IABC Profile studies from 1979 to 1985.

The research director for the project was Dr. Carolyn Cline of the University of Texas-Austin, and included two past-presidents of IABC/Austin, Hank Smith and Nancy Johnson; Dr. Elizabeth Lance Toth of Southern Methodist University; Dr. Judy Van Slyke Turk, University of Oklahoma and Dr. Lynne Masel Walters, University of Houston.

Salaries: The project found that some professionals are optimistic. They said that the increased number of women simply reflects the increased visibility of women in the workforce. These people cite examples of women moving into management with ease. But even when women do move into management, there are still significant problems - especially financial.

The IABC Velvet Ghetto study supports the findings of researchers in San Diego that women are increasingly filling the role of communication "technicians" rather than managers. This results in a significant bottom-line finding: women are paid less than men, and gender is the strongest predictor of low salary. Studies from San Diego, IABC, and PR reporter all reflect substantial differences in salaries between women and men, even when such factors as experience and education are taken into consideration. The average woman communicator makes between \$6,000 and \$30,000 a year less than a man. To put the figures into perspective, consider the following scenario:

Two communicators, John and Mary, work for a corporation, and have equal educations, similar skills, and perform comparable duties. If they work for 40 years, John will earn a bonus for being a man. The bonus probably will be over a million dollars.

***The male communicator
will receive a bonus -
one million dollars.***

Moreover, ghettos are springing up within the ghetto; those departments, such as marketing, with the largest percentage of women also have the lowest mean salaries, according to the Profile studies.

Attitudes: Numbers don't tell the whole story. While management is not necessarily the career goal of all communicators, many communicators are concerned that the avenues to senior management may become closed for communicators, especially if they are stereotyped as technicians with few management skills. Most of the discussion in the interviews and focus groups was concerned with those women - and men - who want to go on to management, but may find the road blocked if they come through public relations or corporate communication.

The professionals interviewed and those in the focus groups fell into three places on a continuum. At one end there were those who saw no problem. "Here we don't have men and women." one top-level practitioner reported. "We only have people." Others reported that women were welcome into management, since they brought empathy and understanding as nurturers.

Women also surfaced who were "Queen Bees," whose own success convinced them there was no problem. One communicator advised other women not to "waste any time or energy thinking about what's different about women in this field. And don't look under the bed at night to see if anybody discriminated against you today. The field is too demanding and too challenging and you don't have that kind of time to waste. The women's issue just has no role in professional success."

***"The women's issue
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professional success"***

At the other end were those who thought that woman's place was anywhere but management. "I don't hire women managers since they'll take time off when the kids are sick." "They'll only get pregnant and quit." "In the past, my clients wouldn't accept a woman executive, and I don't want to get them angry."

In between were those who worried. One senior-level woman said that the business world still stereotypes. "You still think of nurses as being women. There's still that stigma that if a particular profession or career is primarily women, it's a less desirable type of career."

One woman, a former president of the Public Relations Society of America, worried that this feminization may be seen by men "as an opportunity to put public relations down a notch in the corporate hierarchy. I think it'll go back to being seen as a position that you can get rid of. It might be seen as an area that could be done better by someone at the top level, somebody who isn't in our profession - the legal or the marketing or finance department."

Those interviewed did perceive certain attitudes they saw as threatening to corporation communication in general, and particularly to the women communicators. This study does not suggest that these attitudes are necessarily right or wrong; they are, however, widely reported as being barriers to women who want management positions.

A misunderstanding of the communication role and function.

Management doesn't understand communication. Students don't understand the field. Communicators don't understand management and finance. This was not a gender-related issue, but one reflecting the situation faced by under prepared communicators and managers alike. Some communicators feared that management bias against communication would make the field a dead-end job. The president of a major PR agency advised beginning communicators that "if you want to get into top management, not just PR management, get out of PR altogether and go into some other line, or area - finance or whatever is the route to the top at a particular organization."

***"Want top management?
Get out of PR."***

Bias, both blatant and subtle.

Women recalled numerous examples of bias when they were – or weren't - hired. A woman executive recalled, "I was told one time that I wasn't getting a job because I wasn't married, therefore I was unstable. I didn't get another job because I was married and my husband could move. Another time, I didn't get a job because I didn't have children, and it was likely that I would have children. These are things that people told me they were rejecting me for." Communicators also reported women hired into lower positions and at lower salaries than men. "Employees will have different titles for the same responsibility so men can earn more."

Women aren't part of the gang

Even when they have made it into management, women felt threatened by the "Good Ol' Boy" phenomenon. One woman summarized this often-expressed problem: "I never felt I was taken as seriously as the person who previously had my job. He got promoted as I got promoted and I didn't go out for breakfast with all the guys or go out drinking or anything like that, so I wasn't in that inner circle. And I always felt kind of excluded and I wonder if that's not the way it is for a lot of women." A large number of women did report feeling excluded from the drinking and the golf, and from that inner circle of true members of the management team.

***"I always felt kind
of excluded."***

Men agreed that women have a problem fitting into a male-dominated organization. One said, "I get done what the previous woman couldn't. I can go in and pal around and get what I want. And I do."

Women are not good managers

There was an assumption among many men, and many women as well, that women are not effective managers, either because of inherent traits or as a result of socialization. Women were seen as caring nurturers, well suited for working with clients who need sympathy, but not tough enough for corporate life.

Women were also seen as too emotional, often because they felt insecure in their jobs. In addition, women were often parents. For these women, children were a

serious problem - one woman spoke of "the threat of children" to her corporate career. Another left a large company for a small agency because she saw no way to reconcile her corporate role with that of a mother. A male manager justified paying a female employee less than a man, because "she's out a lot more because the kids are sick or they have to go somewhere." For the men, children were a reason to ask for a raise. For women, they often meant the end of the climb to management.

Women can't play the game

Women have never learned team spirit, the corporate spirit, that men pick up on the football teams OT in the Marines. Breaking into the management team, getting onto the fast track, are secrets most women don't learn in the male-dominated, male-oriented corporations. These corporations are really fraternities, all over again, said one woman, and females can never be accepted into them.

"Women can't join the corporate fraternities."

Testing Assumptions. There were two assumptions that the practitioners expressed that were tested on the next generation of professionals - the students. The first assumption was that women are not aggressive enough so that they do not ask for the salaries they deserve. A second assumption is that work is still something women have to fall back on, a second source of income for the family. Despite the real need for many women to work, and the increase in the number of women who are the sole support of themselves and their families, there is still the feeling that a woman does not need the money as much as a man, and does not take the work as seriously as does a man. Women have jobs; men have careers.

Students at eight universities took a battery of psychological tests to measure assertion comfort, arousal avoidance, planning orientation and serious-mindedness. Male and female students were equally assertive - almost off the high end of the chart. They were similar in arousal avoidance and in planning orientation. However, on the serious-minded scale, the measure of orientation toward a serious career, the men scored significantly higher than the women. The men appear to be more interested in a career, rather than a job. The statistics were supported by interviews with professors teaching business communication and PR across the country. The male students simply appear to be more interested in the management skills, a finding supported by their ranking of interest in certain technician and management skills on the survey.

Male students appear to be more serious-minded about a career.

Conclusions. This study is unique in that it is one of the few to analyze a profession in the middle of a gender-switch; therefore, it is possible to see areas where the negative aspects of the trend might be halted. Clearly, business communication and public relations are becoming a female profession, and if salaries and status continue their apparent decline, it may well become a "Polyester Ghetto." There is little overt bias, but there may be factors such as some institutionalized salary bias based on the perceived value of communication on the part of

management. In addition, a subtle socialization process appears to be working upon women in communication, resulting in their choice of the technician role.

Education and understanding may help stop this trend; some of the suggestions put forward are:

Improve the status of the profession. There needs to be a clearer understanding of the meaning, the role, and the ultimate impact of communication on business. There also needs to be a strong program to increase the knowledge of management on the part of communicators whether by advanced formal education or a series of continuing education programs.

Work with students. Work needs to be done concerning the image of public relations as a major for the better students, male and female alike. The advice given by professionals interviewed for this study needs to be made available to students, and the "career-path" models identified here need to be distributed so beginners could be more aware of methods of career development.

Increase awareness. It appears that the "consciousness-raising" of the 1970s has worn off. Some of the statements made in this study, as well as the salary trends, need to be disseminated and discussion needs to begin in order to assess the problems and discuss possible solutions. Women need to become aware of the earnings of men so they can enter negotiations with a firmer concept of their own worth; workshops on negotiation skills may also prove valuable. Mentoring could become a formal program, so women could receive exposure to management skills. Role models need to be made obvious. There appears to be a strong backlash against "The Superwoman Syndrome" of the past decade, and men and women alike need to examine the various personal and career choices available to them.

Perhaps the most critical need remains to be met: to increase awareness that there is a problem. There has been resistance to the Initial findings of this study. Some communicators have expressed the fear that the findings were either misleading, or would be taken as an unchangeable status quo, or would result in the field's becoming a woman's profession. Too many respondents denigrated the salary difference and explained that it was getting better. It is the authors' contention that there is not a conscious bias or discriminating operating against women, but rather a complex socializing process which has attracted women to a creative, flexible, accessible-but one in which women will probably pay a million dollar penalty.