

# Breaking the glass Ceiling

**T**he surest way for women to become bosses is to start their own companies.

It has been a wonderful century for women. Whether it be reliable contraceptives and safe obstetrics or the dishwasher and the drip-dry shirt, technology has made their domestic lives easier, at any rate in the rich world. Outside the home, lots of closed doors have creaked open. Women now make up between a third and half of the rich world's workforce; and their pay has risen sharply relative to men's. They sit in legislatures and on court benches. A few run governments or opposition parties. But big companies? Unless, Italian-style, you are daddy's heiress and inherit the job along with the family jewels, forget it. Everywhere, women bosses in large companies can be counted on a few manicured fingers.

This seems odd. From a male point of view, it is women who have the edge in today's labour market. "Women's" jobs have boomed, while "men's" have vanished. Unskilled young men now find it much harder than their mothers to get jobs. Yet from the viewpoint of an ambitious young woman, the female job market still looks like a depressingly flat pyramid. There may be plenty of jobs at the till, the bedside or the blackboard: but move into management, and they dis-

appear. Climb the management ladder, and women eventually bang their heads against the so-called glass ceiling.

Prejudice? Family pressures? Self-doubt? Choice? The answer is probably a bit of each. Certainly, women's progress up the ladder is constrained by the assumption that they will be the main child carers. American research has also found that some of the few women who do crack the vitreous barrier feel so unsatisfied and undervalued that they leave early—and in proportionately greater numbers than their male rivals.

Big organisations are surely unwise to draw so little of their top talent from the skirted half of the workforce. But women have an alternative: to set up businesses of their own. In the US, women now own eight million American companies—one-third of all firms—and their number is growing at double the rate of firms owned by men. Women-owned firms also have more staying power than the average; three-quarters of those that existed in 1991 were still alive three years later, compared with two-thirds of all American companies. The number of people employed in women-owned companies that have 100 or more workers is rising more than twice as fast as the average for all such American firms.

Where America leads, other countries follow. In Britain, for

instance, women now start one new business in four. Going-it-alone has been the recourse of previous social groups that have felt excluded: Britain's Quakers bequeathed such blue-chip giants as Rowntree, Sainsbury and Cadbury; America's Jews founded retailers such as Bloomingdales and Macy's; French Protestants started Compagnie de Suez. This does not end discrimination, to be sure; bank managers may still insist in talking to the boss's husband, rather than the boss. But it brings other advantages, notably the flexibility that fits with the conflicting demands on many women's time. As small-business owners like to say: "You work 24 hours a day, but at least you get to choose which 24."

Running your own firm may sound like poor compensation for failing to become CEO of General Motors. But yesterday's giants are nowadays often insecure and unexciting. The fastest growth comes from the small and nimble. So far, women have created few Netscapes or Novells. If that changes, and their energy turns them into tomorrow's main employers, men had better hope that their new bosses will be less discriminatory than today's male-run firms.

*Source: The Economist, 10-16 August, 1996*