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How the 'Snow-Woman Effect' Slows Women's Progress

By Mary Ann Mason

The percentage of college presidents who are women more than doubled in the 20 years between 1986 and 2006, according to the American Council on Education's most recent American College President Study of 2,148 colleges. That is the good news. The bad news is that women's progress has slowed in recent years. The other bad news is that only 63 percent of female presidents surveyed were married, compared with 89 percent of their male counterparts. "Twenty-four percent of women presidents are either divorced or were never married (excluding members of religious orders)," an ACE statement on the study said. "Only 7 percent of male presidents fall into these categories." The report does not mention the percentage who have children.

I applaud the strong women who have reached the top positions in their colleges and universities, sometimes at great personal sacrifice. I know that they face many challenges breaking into the male leadership culture, including walking the tightrope of being assertive while not being perceived as aggressive.

Often subtle discrimination is rooted in gender stereotypes -especially when it comes to the "leadership issue." Female candidates are purportedly passed up for promotions based on a conscious or unconscious belief that women do not have what it takes to lead men. The English reputedly have a test for that kind of leadership-"Who among you would kill the tiger if attacked?"

But if a woman displays the qualities of a tiger killer, she may be dismissed as too masculine. That paradox was the subject of a landmark 1989 Supreme Court case, *Price Waterhouse vs. Hopkins*, which found that kind of evaluation to be discrimination. Ann Hopkins was turned down for a promotion to partnership on a split decision of male

partners who evaluated her performance. A number of their evaluations sharply criticized her interpersonal skills and specifically called her too abrasive. Several of the

evaluations on both sides made comments implying that Hopkins "was or had been acting masculine," and one partner advised her that "she could improve her chances for partnership by walking, talking, and dressing more femininely."

As the only female dean at the University of California at Berkeley for several years, I sat in on countless meetings where men held the floor. One day a female colleague made a presentation to a meeting of the deans and received a cursory, bordering on rude, response. Afterward, she asked me how she could have been more effective.

"Speak low and slowly, but smile frequently," I replied. This advice (which did help her next presentation) was based on my observation that women must adhere to a narrow band of behavior in order to be effective in mostly male settings. Women who speak too fast, or in too shrill a tone, are overlooked. Women who act in a highly assertive manner, which might be acceptable for men, are attended to, but not invited back. Women must be friendly, but they cannot be too friendly or a sexual connotation may be inferred. Mter meetings, women are frequently marginalized when they are left out of job-related social networking.

A survey of women in corporate leadership positions by Catalyst, an organization that works toward the advancement of women, found that 41 percent of respondents cited "exclusion from informal networks" as a barrier to their overall advancement. Navigating that male-dominated world can be disorienting and stressful.

It is not surprising that we still find few women at the top. More than 20 years ago, *The Wall Street Journal* used the phrase "glass ceiling" to describe the apparent barriers that prevent women from reaching the highest leadership positions. In 1995 the government's Glass Ceiling Commission reported that women held 45.7 percent of America's jobs and received more than half of the university master's degrees. Yet 95 percent of senior managers were men, and female managers' earnings were, on average, a scant 68 percent of their male counterparts'. A decade later, in 2005, women accounted for 46.5 percent of America's work force and represented less than 8 percent of its top managers (although at large Fortune 500 companies the figure is slightly higher). Female managers' earnings

now average 72 percent of their male colleagues' wages. Since 1998, the figures have stagnated. Over all, the trajectory is not promising.

Women with children face additional problems in the workplace. They may have an especially difficult time participating in the job-related social networking that is often required to advance. In academe the socializing is not so likely to be sports talk and all-night boozing, but mothers may have to leave meetings that do not end by 5 p.m. in order to pick up children. Or they may be unable to attend job talks, receptions, or search-committee dinners because of child-care commitments.

It is usually an accumulation of small and large incidents that marginalize female administrators. I think of this as the "snow-woman effect." The layers of missed opportunities, family obligations, and small and large slights build up over the years, slowing their career progress compared with men.

Virginia Valian, in her insightful book, *Why So Slow?* suggests that, like interest on capital, disadvantages accrue and accumulate, ultimately resulting in large disparities in salary promotion and prestige for women. Her work describes the psychological and institutional ways in which all women are treated differently from birth.

For mothers, family constraints impede career progress in addition to the gender schemas that slow all women down. In most analyses of women's failure to break the glass ceiling, family issues are sidelined in favor of amorphous explanations of gender discrimination. Some note is given to the fact that women who leave to have children have a difficult time getting back on track, and occasionally a mention is made of elder care, since women, more than men, are sometimes called upon for extended care of failing parents. Indeed, women who make it past the make-or-break years and successfully raise families while excelling in their careers often face a new, equally daunting challenge in their 40s and 50s—caring for aging parents. In their study, "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps," Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce found that 24 percent of highly qualified women reported the demands of caring for elderly parents as a factor that pulled them away from their jobs.

Professional women also are far more likely than men to experience disruption stemming from divorce, which can affect their ability to perform for years. Likewise, growing

families are unpredictable -troubled teens may need more attention than they did at an earlier age, and sick relatives may need extended care.

the lack of awareness about family restraints is perplexing since many studies have found that motherhood is the single most important factor in explaining the wage differential between men and women. Economic studies have found that mothers, over all, make 60 cents to the dollar that men earn, and that women who do not have children have wages similar to men.

In the university world as well as other professions, marriage and children appear to boost the careers of men and slow or stop those of women. Across the disciplines, but particularly in the sciences, the lack of female role models in top leadership positions is problematic. It is not just a problem for young women who aspire to the top but see few women ahead of them, it is a problem for those at the top as well.

A study of women doctors in academe found that "women who do persevere and advance face the extra challenge of 'surplus visibility.' " Because the higher they go, the fewer they are, women become ever more exceptional by their mere presence on the academic scene and visible to the point of inviting critical scrutiny. While that visibility can represent an opportunity, living in a "glass house" with no room for error is more often a problem.

Running a large organization like a college or university may be as perilous as tiger hunting. Doesn't it make sense that a group working cooperatively rather than competitively can more effectively kill the tiger and live to tell about it? And maybe a rethinking of the social networks to be more inclusive of parents with family commitments would encourage those parents to take on more leadership roles.

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