

Where Are the Women?

BY LINDA TISCHLER

By now, plenty were supposed to be in the corner offices. It's not working out that way. In many fields, men still rule, while women often choose more nuanced paths that keep them from reaching the top. But who are the real winners?

Brenda Barnes knows what it takes to hold a top job in a highly competitive company. As president and chief executive of the North American arm of PepsiCo, a place famous for its driven culture, she set a fast pace. Rising at 3:30 a.m., she would blitz through a few hours of work before waking her three children at 7 a.m., then dash off to the office, where she'd grind through an 11- or 12-hour day crammed with meetings, conference calls, and strategy sessions. Then it was home for dinner and bedtime stories before finishing up with phone calls or email before falling into bed. Three nights a week, she was on the road. Seven times, she relocated when the company wanted her in another office. For eight years, she and her husband lived in separate cities, trying valiantly to juggle both job demands and those of marriage and family. And all the effort was paying off: Barnes was widely considered a real contender for the top job at PepsiCo when CEO Roger Enrico retired. But in September 1997, at 43, she suddenly stepped down when the toll of the job began, in her mind, to outstrip its rewards.

Unlike some women executives who have famously dropped out, Barnes did not go home to write her memoirs or devote herself to charity and her children's soccer schedules. She just chose what is, for her, a less demanding path: She serves on the board of six major companies, among them Sears, Avon, and The New York Times; she's taught at the Kellogg School of Management, and stepped in as interim president of Starwood Hotels and Resorts in early 2000. Although she's had many offers for other enticing jobs, she's unwilling to consider another gig at the top. "When you talk about those big jobs, those CEO jobs, you just have to give them your life," she says. "You can't alter them to make them accommodate women any better than men. It's just the way it is."

Six years after the fact, Barnes is still happy with her decision. But she admits that despite her considerable post-PepsiCo accomplishments, she's been forever branded as The Woman Who Walked Away. Small wonder. In a workplace where women CEOs of major companies are so scarce that they can be identified, like rock stars, by first name only--Carly and Martha and Andrea and Oprah and Meg--it's shocking each time a contender to join their august ranks steps down.

It wasn't supposed to turn out this way. By 2004, after three decades of the women's movement, when business schools annually graduate thousands of qualified young women, when the managerial pipeline is stuffed with capable, talented female candidates for senior positions, why are there still so few women at the top?

In part, the answer probably still lies in lingering bias in the system. Most women interviewed for this story say that overt discrimination is rare; still, the executive suites of most major corporations remain largely boys' clubs. Catalyst, the women's business group, blames the gap on the fact that women often choose staff jobs, such as marketing and human resources, while senior executives are disproportionately plucked from the ranks of those with line jobs, where a manager can have critical profit-and-loss responsibility. Others fault the workplace itself, saying corporations don't do enough to accommodate women's often more-significant family responsibilities.

All those things are true. But there may be a simpler--and in many ways more disturbing--reason that women remain so underrepresented in the corner office: For the most part, men just compete harder than women. They put in more hours. They're more willing to relocate. They're more comfortable putting work ahead of personal commitments. And they just want the top job more.

Let's be clear: Many, many individual women work at least as hard as men. Many even harder. But in the aggregate, statistics show, they work less, and as long as that remains true, it means women's chances of reaching parity in the corner office will remain remote. Those top jobs have become all-consuming: In today's markets, being CEO is a global, 24-hour-a-day job. You have to, as Barnes says, give it your life. Since women tend to experience work-life conflicts more viscerally than their male peers, they're less likely to be willing to do that. And at the upper reaches of corporate hierarchy, where the pyramid narrows sharply and the game becomes winner-take-all, a moment's hesitation--one important stint in the Beijing office that a woman doesn't take because of a sick child or an unhappy husband--means the odds get a little worse for her and a little better for the guy down the hall.

And let's be clear, too, that we're not talking about women who simply opt out. They've been getting a lot of press and sparking a lot of controversy lately--those young women investment bankers and lawyers who are quitting to become stay-at-home moms (and, really, they're still using those MBA skills on the board of the PTA). That's still a fringe phenomenon affecting relatively few privileged women with high-earning husbands.

Not only was Cabrera at the top of her game, but she had, by all measures, managed to pull off the career woman's trifecta--a great job, a happy marriage, and two beautiful, healthy little daughters--all by age 43. But in October of that year, as she watched her second-grader blow out the candles on her birthday

cake, Cabrera had an unsettling realization: She didn't know her own child as well as most of the friends and family who had gathered to celebrate the big event. "I realized seven years had gone by, and I had only seen her and my five-year-old on weekends," she says. No first words. No school plays. No class trips. "I asked myself, 'What the hell am I doing?' " Then she thought about her job. To walk away would mean upheaval. Plus, there was a principle at stake: "I had the sense I was letting down my sex by leaving."

It took another seven months, and much soul-searching, to reach her decision, but in May of 2000, Cabrera quit. Like Barnes, she did not opt out. No 180-degree turn to a life of play dates or book groups. No reconnecting with her inner tennis-lady. Instead, she became executive director of EMPower, a microlender in developing countries. Facing a precipitous drop in income, she and her husband rented out their Manhattan place and moved to the country. Now she works from home three days a week, and is in the city the other two, an arrangement that lets her do rewarding work and still spend time with her kids.

And what did her experience at JP Morgan Chase teach her? "There's a different quality of what men give up versus what women give up" when they attempt to reconcile the demands of a senior job with those of family responsibilities. "The sacrifices for women are deeper, and you must weigh them very consciously if you want to continue," she says. "I didn't want to be the biggest, best, greatest. I didn't feel compelled to be number one."

She was doing what women often do: scaling back on work for the sake of family, with a clear-eyed realization that she was, simultaneously, torpedoing her chances for a climb up the ladder. What's more, she didn't care. It's a choice women often make, with no particular social sanctions. For some, it's even an easy and convenient way to escape an increasingly hostile and unfriendly work world, an out that men simply don't have. But it's also the reason women may continue to be stalled at the lower rungs in organizations and men may continue to rule.

Charles A. O'Reilly III, professor of organizational behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business, has been particularly interested in women's career attainment and the problem of why, despite notable gains in education and experience, women are still so woefully underrepresented in the top ranks of American corporations. In 1986, he began following a group of University of California, Berkeley MBAs to see if he could isolate those qualities that led to a corner office. His conclusion is starkly simple: Success in a corporation is less a function of gender discrimination than of how hard a person chooses to compete. And the folks who tend to compete the hardest are generally the stereotypical manly men.

Think of careers as a tournament, he says. In the final rounds, players are usually matched pretty equally for ability. At that point, what differentiates

winners from losers is effort--how many backhands a tennis player hits in practice, how many calls a sales rep is willing to make. "From an organization's perspective," he says, "those most likely to be promoted are those who both have the skills and are willing to put in the effort. Individuals who are more loyal, work longer hours, and are willing to sacrifice for the organization are the ones who will be rewarded."

Today's women, he says, are equal to their male counterparts in education, experience, and skill. But when it's a painful choice between the client crisis and the birthday party, the long road trip and the middle schooler who needs attention, the employee most likely to put company over family is the traditional, work-oriented male. Interestingly, the women in O'Reilly's study reported levels of career satisfaction equal to those of their more-driven male peers, even if they were not as outwardly successful. In other words, women may be happier not gunning for power positions if it means they can work less and have a life.

After seven years with the big computer leasing company Comdisco, Diane Brandt, for example, left to form a small investment banking firm with two male colleagues. She decided to leave that job, too, when the growing business's hours increased and the moment approached when her only son would leave for college. Recently, she launched a small company, Captio Corp., that offers budgeting and scheduling tools for college students. "I've made choices all through my career," she says from her home in Menlo Park, California, days before heading to Germany to visit her son, who's studying abroad. "I've not pursued promotions in the same way I might have had I not been trying to balance other things in my life. It's been important to me to be home and have dinner with my family. You can't do that and move up the ladder."

Beth Johnston, a banker in Chicago, describes herself as "very ambitious," and says she has always loved business: the deal making, the challenge, the money. But she still remembers when her son was a baby, calculating the percentage of his waking hours that she could, if all went well, actually be present. "I doubt that his father was doing the same," she says dryly.

Recently, when the fund she was managing fell victim to the stock market, she decided to take some time off to help her son negotiate his final precollege year. Her brief attempt to be a "golf lady" didn't pan out. "I just couldn't do it," she confesses. She's now mulling various job offers. While she will go back to work, she knows there are sacrifices she and most other women are less willing to make than men. "People may get mad if I describe women as a group," she says, "but we are relational family beings. We do not have a world that's structured to understand that, to know how to account for it, and I don't know that we ever will."

There's a scene near the end of the 1956 movie *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* in which Fredric March, who plays a work-obsessed network president, turns

on Gregory Peck, who plays his conflicted speechwriter. "Big, successful companies just aren't built by men like you, nine-to-five and home and family," March says. "They're built by men like me, who give everything they've got to it, who live it body and soul." March, of course, has sacrificed his own happiness to the company, a choice that Peck is unwilling to make.

Not much has changed in 48 years, says David Nadler, chairman of Mercer Delta Consulting. Nadler, who advises senior managers, says that because top jobs are typically crushing in their demands, they require a certain psychological type. "I've worked closely with 20 CEOs over the past two decades--both men and women," he says. "All of them are characterized by being driven. Something in them says, 'This is important enough for me to make the sacrifices that are inherent with the job.' "

Certainly, there are women willing and able to compete by those draconian rules. A 2003 Catalyst study found that more than half of the women not yet in senior leadership positions within their companies aspired to be there (although 26% also said they weren't interested). And some women want nothing less than a full-throttle engagement with work. "I don't seek balance. I want to work, work, work," Ann Livermore, executive vice president of Hewlett-Packard, told Karin Kauffmann and Peggy Baskin for their book, *Beyond Superwoman* (Carmel, 2003). Or as Kim Perdikou, CIO of Juniper Networks, told the authors, "I'm wired 24 hours a day."

But such decisions continue to have consequences that thoughtful women are all too aware of. Asked what advice she would give to a daughter, M.R.C. Greenwood, chancellor of the University of California at Santa Cruz, warns, "Remember that the assumption that one's marriage will remain intact as she moves up is a false assumption. You really have to know yourself and know it will take a toll."

Conversely, there are plenty of men who would like the option to lead saner lives. A recent study of 101 senior human-resource managers found that men are also starting to leave big companies to try to improve the balance between their home lives and their work lives. Still, many more men than women seem to get an adrenaline rush from work that allows them to log long hours, zoom through time zones, and multitask savagely.

As a nation, we now clock more time on the job than any other worker on earth, some 500 hours a year more than the Germans, and 250 hours per year more than the British. But the true heavy lifters in the productivity parade are American men. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, men work longer hours in every industry, including those traditionally identified with women. In financial fields, for example, men worked an average of 43.8 hours per week compared with women's 38.7; in management, it was men 47.2, women 39.4; in educational services, men 39.2, women 36.0; in health services, men 43.1, women 36.4.

The same pattern holds true in professions whose elaborate hazing rituals are designed to separate potential chiefs from the rest of the tribe. Young associates at prestigious law firms, for example, often put in 60- to 70-hour weeks for long periods of time. "It's almost an intentional hurdle placed by the firms to weed out those who simply don't have the drive and ambition to do it," says Stanford University economist Edward Lazear. "It may be excessive, but you select out a very elite few, and those are the ones who make it to partner and make very high salaries."

Women are as scarce in the upper reaches of the legal profession as they are in top-tier corporate offices. According to the National Directory of Legal Employers and Catalyst, women represented only 15.6% of law partners nationwide and 13.7% of the general counsels of *Fortune* 500 companies in 2000 (even though they have accounted for at least 40% of enrollments at top law schools since 1985 and nearly 50% since 2000). Women in these firms say personal or family responsibilities are the top barrier to advancement, with 71% of women in law firms reporting difficulty juggling work and family, and 66% of women in corporate legal departments citing the same struggle.

Depending on the specialty, medical practices can be similarly pitiless. Among doctors, women work 45 hours per week compared with men's 50. Male physicians also see 117 patients per week, compared with 97 for women. And, as with the law, the top rungs of the medical ladder are populated by men who are willing to put work ahead of family, with women doctors concentrated in lower-paying positions in hospitals, HMOs, and group practices.

Meanwhile, back in the executive suite, researchers at Catalyst say some progress has been made. Women made up 15.7% of corporate officers in the *Fortune* 500 in 2002, up from 8.7% in 1995. In 2003, they held 13.6% of board seats in the same companies, up from 12.4% in 2001. But their actual numbers, compared to the percentage of women in the workforce, are still minuscule. This has occasioned much hand-wringing among business organizations and women's advocacy groups. But maybe all that angst is misplaced.

"When a woman gets near the top, she starts asking herself the most intelligent questions," says Warren Farrell, the San Diego-based author of *The Myth of Male Power* (Simon & Schuster, 1993). The fact that few women make it to the very top is a measure of women's power, not powerlessness, he maintains. "Women haven't learned to get their love by being president of a company," he says. "They've learned they can get respect and love in a variety of different ways--from being a good parent, from being a top executive, or a combination of both." Free of the ego needs driving male colleagues, they're likelier to weigh the trade-offs and opt for saner lives.

Mary Lou Quinlan has seen the view from the top and decided it's not worth the price. In 1998, she stepped down as CEO of the big advertising agency N.W.

Ayer when she realized she was no longer enjoying a life that had no room for weekends, vacations, or, often, sleep. She went on to found Just Ask a Woman, a New York-based consulting firm that helps big companies build business with women. The decision wasn't driven by guilt over giving family responsibilities short shrift (Quinlan has no children); it was about calibrating the value of work in one's life. Quinlan thinks that calculation is different for women. "The reason a lot of women aren't shooting for the corner office is that they've seen it up close, and it's not a pretty scene," she says. "It's not about talent, dedication, experience, or the ability to take the heat. Women simply say, 'I just don't like that kitchen.' "

Catalyst and other groups have suggested that the heat can be turned down in that kitchen--that senior jobs can be changed to allow for more flexibility and balance, which will in turn help more women to the top of the heap. Catherine Hakim thinks that is bunk. Hakim, a sociologist at the London School of Economics, has been investigating the attitudes toward work among European men and women, and says reengineering jobs won't solve two fundamental problems: First, many women have decidedly mixed feelings about working, and second, top jobs by their very nature will remain relentlessly demanding. In surveys of 4,700 workers in Britain and Spain, she found that only 20% of women considered themselves "work-centered"--they made their careers a primary focus of their lives, and said they would work even if they didn't have to. By contrast, 55% of men said they focused primarily on work. Given those numbers, most top jobs will continue to go to men, she says, despite the equal-opportunity movement and the contraceptive revolution.

That's because work-centered employees are most likely to leap to the tasks that are most disruptive to life. "That's the bottom line, and it's not a sexist bottom line," Hakim says. "Of course, you could say jobs shouldn't be so greedy, but in practice, the higher up you go, by and large, jobs get greedier and greedier. The idea that some people have, that if only employers would reshape jobs they would be perfectly easy for women to do, is just nonsense."

Not surprisingly, the suggestion that the fault lies with women and not with the system drives many women nuts. Margaret Heffernan, the outspoken former CEO of the CMGI company iCast, for example, goes apoplectic at what she calls the perennial "little black dress stories"--tales of how various women have stepped down from their big jobs to spend more time with their families. Their implicit message, she says, is that women can't cut it and would prefer to be back in the kitchen. Instead, she says, the conclusion we should be drawing is, "Another company just f****d up big time. Another company just trained somebody and made them incredibly skilled and still couldn't keep them."

Heffernan says the hordes of women refusing to play the career-advancement game aren't doing so because they can't hack it, but because they've lost faith in the institutions they've worked for and are tired of cultures driven by hairy-chested notions of how companies must function. Instead, they are founding

businesses where they can use their experience in an environment they can better control. "They leave to create companies where they don't have to be the change agents, where they can start from scratch without the fights, without the baggage, and without the brawls," she says.

Stanford's Lazear also envisions a different scenario for women, one in which they wouldn't have to leave corporate America to get the jobs they want. Given the coming labor shortage, which the U.S. Department of Labor predicts will hit by 2010, companies may be forced to redesign jobs to attract talented workers. And that, combined with technology that will let people work from a variety of locations, he says, will make it possible for more women to reach the top. He predicts that 20% of CEOs in top organizations will be women in 15 to 20 years. But total parity? "I don't expect it ever to be equal--ever," he says.

Brenda Barnes thinks as today's business-school students gain power in companies, they will force changes that benefit men and women. When she taught at Kellogg, she asked her students to write a paper describing how they saw their careers playing out. "They were far more focused on having a life than my generation was," she says. "And it wasn't just a female thing. They grew up seeing their parents killing themselves and then being downsized despite their loyalty. How much this generation is willing to give to any enterprise is a totally different ballgame."

We can hope so. Unfortunately, her students' desire for more balance could be one more form of youthful idealism. As a 24-hour, global economy makes it ever more difficult to turn off the office, it's hard to imagine a day when the promotions won't go to the worker who makes just a little more effort, who logs on just a little longer. Or to envision a day when there won't be plenty of contenders--maybe most of them men--who will be willing to do just that.

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