

Girlfriends in High Places

How women's networks are changing the workplace

Helen McCarthy

DEMOS

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Helen McCarthy
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Executive summary

This report examines the experience of formal networks among professional women, and assesses their impact on women's occupational mobility and workplace diversity. The research was conducted through case studies of networks in the senior civil service, expert interviews, historical and literature review, and a survey of 235 professional women drawn largely from the public sector.

Formally organised women's networks are a growing phenomenon among professional British women. These member-based organisations exist primarily to provide opportunities for women to share their experience and access work-related opportunities and information. Our survey found that more than 40 per cent of professional women are or have been members of networks, ranging from cross-industry networking forums to internal networks within individual organisations ('corporate' networks). They originated in the activities of businesswomen in the US and the UK in the 1970s who perceived a need to form their own networking groups as a response to women's ongoing exclusion from informal male networks in the public sphere.

Today, women still perceive the 'Old Boy Network' to be a significant barrier to career advancement. Women tend to be excluded from informal male networks due to a combination of gender-related factors, which include:

- socialisation and ‘male bonding’ activities which strengthen reciprocal behaviours among men
- unequal division of childcare and housework in the home, which ensure that women have less time to participate in ‘out-of-hours’ networking activities at work
- the sexual politics of the office, which make it difficult for women to approach men to ask for mentoring or career advice.

These experiences translate into society-wide patterns. After a generation of equality legislation and diversity initiatives in all sectors, women still experience persistent inequality in pay, promotion and representation at all levels of employment.

Developing talent wherever it lies is crucial to high performance and organisational effectiveness and business success. Though many recognise this, employers are struggling to find the right tools with which to achieve it. Fifty per cent of our sample believed women’s professional development needs were inadequately met or not met at all.

Developing women’s networks can be an effective strategy for overcoming some obstacles to diversity because they challenge the invisible structures that hold women back at work. Networks possess a number of key qualities which set them apart from more conventional approaches to tackling gender inequality.

First, networks are highly flexible and do not require heavy infrastructures or long planning processes to set up. Networks can connect women quickly and effectively from across different parts of organisations, industries or sectors, thus enabling cross-silo communication, learning and mobility. In so doing they can create a ‘critical mass’ of visibility and voice for women within organisations and industries.

Second, networks are participatory and self-organising, creating a sense of ownership among their members and a degree of wider legitimacy – ingredients which ‘top-down’ initiatives often lack. For example, networks enable women to lead their own professional

development on their own terms through the design of training courses, mentoring programmes and other gender-related initiatives. Networks can provide a 'council of wise women' through which senior leaders or gender champions can gauge women's views on issues from flexible working and childcare to organisational development and business strategy.

Third, networks are a form of organising among women uniquely suited to the gender politics of our time. Networks do not demand political or ideological consensus of their members, unlike more conventionally feminist or campaigning groups. The women-centred nature of networks is certainly important to their members: 87 per cent of women networkers surveyed reported that the sex-specific nature of the network was a favourable or strongly favourable factor in influencing their decision to join. But networks do not espouse a separatist project; many encourage men to participate in their activities, and all networks seek to empower their members in building the sort of wider relationships that will help them to operate more effectively in mainstream workplace settings. They do this by creating a culture of high aspiration in which women's success is the norm, and by providing opportunities for members to increase their visibility and put themselves forward for new leadership roles. Thirty-five per cent of networkers in our sample reported having gained in confidence through membership of a network, and 71 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that the network was meeting their expectations.

Last, the evolving nature of their architecture allows networks to effect a far-reaching and incremental impact on gendered power relations. Through their ability to connect women with other women, networks disrupt the patterns of social connectivity at work that have for so long privileged men, and in so doing provide a new way to alter the balance of power between the sexes. Networks help women to realise their own personal and professional goals, but networks add a further dimension to the well-trodden 'having it all' debate. Almost uniquely, they are an organisational form which enables women to pursue *both* individual *and* collective strategies for change.

Nonetheless, networks do not represent a panacea to all gender inequality issues, and must work hard to build their legitimacy in the eyes of wider audiences, both internal and external. The most common risks include:

Backlash: women-centred initiatives at work may attract hostility from men who see their female colleagues apparently benefiting from ‘special treatment’.

Insularity: networks provide a safe space for women, invaluable for sharing and reflection, but with the potential risk that making a wider challenge is unintentionally discouraged.

Elitism: some networks select their membership on the basis of seniority, which can lay them open to charges of exclusivity. The case for women with particularly high levels of responsibility needing dedicated space needs to be clearly made, and perhaps combined with manageable opportunities for wider contact, for example, via mentoring projects and open events.

Exit: networks can, where the stress experienced by women is acute, serve to propel women *out* of organisations or sectors by helping them to see that they have options elsewhere.

Nonetheless, with the right leadership, tools and support, networks can meet these challenges and evolve successfully through a number of key stages, from offering women a basic survival lifeline to providing support, friendship and inspiration, and finally towards winning a real voice in how organisations do their business.

Women’s networks demonstrate how the relationships and informal interactions through which working life is conducted need not contribute to the opacity of power relations at work. If they are harnessed in the right way, they can represent a force for diversity and equality.

Recommendations

1. Every large employer should consider the business case for creating a women’s network or supporting existing ones within their organisation or industry.
2. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), National

Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) should investigate the scope for encouraging network membership and availability to women working in smaller organisations.

3. An organisation with the relevant level of expertise, such as Opportunity Now, or the Cranfield Centre for Developing Women Business Leaders, should develop and pilot a benchmarking tool for use with corporate networks.
4. Government, in conjunction with the Economic and Social Research Council, should commission a longitudinal study to track and evaluate women's membership of work-related networks and their relationship to career choices, trajectories and satisfaction.
5. Employers should encourage all corporate diversity networks to share good practice and build strong relations.
6. Networks, wherever possible, should keep records of their activities and make their archives widely available to researchers.
7. A public policy-led agenda for developing networks could include:
 - A cross-sectoral programme of support and best practice development, led jointly by the Cabinet Office, Equal Opportunities Commission and Trades Union Congress (TUC). This could include start-up grants, financial or technical assistance for specific resources, such as websites or publishing facilities, or sponsorship for events.
 - A drive to create a greater range and choice of network membership across the public sector, and to forge 'bridging' links between different women's networks rooted in different departments, regions or agencies. Some public sector career opportunities

could even include an 'entitlement' to network membership, along with a commitment to finding and supporting a range of alternatives through which to provide a diverse range of choices.

- A much stronger focus by trade unions and professional associations on women's networks as vehicles for representation and workplace support.
- Specific investigation of the potential for certain kinds of women's professional networks to provide information, services and mutual support with regard to parenting and return to work.
- A national mentoring strategy, led by the Women and Equality Unit and involving existing women's networks and other relevant organisations, aimed at improving retention and distributing opportunities for progression among women in every sector of the economy.

1. Introduction

Our faith is that business and professional women have something new to contribute. The trained woman as a class is just 30 years old. She comes as an outsider, a stranger, a factor hitherto unknown in the world's history. She represents a new source of power, an unexplored field of thought. She brings what the world has been waiting for, an entirely new perspective on old problems.¹

Those were the words of Beatrice Gordon Holmes, founder and long-serving president of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 1939. Affectionately known as 'G.H.' to her members, Holmes was a genuine pioneer, one of the few women executives working in the City of London before World War Two. Establishing the Federation (now known simply as Business and Professional Women) reflected Holmes' emphatic belief that the professional woman had a unique contribution to make, not just to problems specific to her sex, but to the wider challenges facing British society in that turbulent period of its history.

This idea – that women represent an under-utilised source of talent, insight and experience – has been a persistent theme throughout the many equality campaigns of the twentieth century. It was a view repeated by Lady Howe half a decade later, who

introduced the report of the Hansard Society's high-profile Commission on Women in Public Life thus: 'Women at the top of professional and public life have an important role to play in changing society's attitudes towards women in the workplace as well as in other positions of power and influence, and in shaping decisions of great public importance.'² The Commission of 1990 kick-started a decade of intense equality-related activity, which witnessed the creation of the employer-led Opportunity 2000 campaign³ and a Women's Unit⁴ in central government, and the flowering of a whole industry devoted to developing the new paradigm of equal opportunities known as 'managing diversity.'

Yet the sense that women, as a group, have been permanently waiting in the wings for the past century, never quite making it to the centre-stage of public life has stayed with us into the new millennium. Without question, women are better represented than ever before in Britain's most powerful institutions, and in most (although not all) cases, the trend is upwards. Nonetheless, these gains do not yet represent a system-wide redistribution of power between the sexes, nor, which is the focus of this report, more gender-equal workplaces. Despite the safety net of anti-discrimination legislation and the increasing currency of 'business case' arguments for action, employers continue to struggle to create inclusive workplace cultures in which each individual's contribution is fully valued and his or her potential developed to the fullest. Business leaders routinely refer to the 'war for talent'⁵ in their pursuit of competitive advantage. But women are still too often treated as cannon fodder – expendable employees whose under-utilisation raises little alarm except among the most forward-looking employers. Earlier this year, the Equal Opportunities Commission summed up the state of gender equality in Britain with this sobering verdict:

Almost 30 years since the Sex Discrimination Act was passed, there are still far, far fewer women than men in positions of power and influence. Open the door of any boardroom or council chamber, and the chances are that most people round the

*table will be men. For years there have been plenty of talented women coming up in business, public life and politics, but those who reach the top are still the exception.*⁶

The achievements of those exceptional women who account for the 7 per cent of the senior judiciary, 9 per cent of top business leaders and 23 per cent of civil service top management must not be underplayed. Nor should they be allowed to obscure the entirely *unexceptional* reality for the vast majority of their peers: the daily struggle to combine family and work; to access affordable childcare; to make provision for elderly parents; the impossibility of keeping up a healthy social life or enjoying opportunities for leisure. While some evidence suggests that men are beginning to share some of these challenges, the load inevitably continues to fall on women's shoulders.⁷ And despite the existence of legal protections, women are still not immune from discrimination – both direct and indirect – at work; each year 23,000 of the applications received by employment tribunals are related to sex discrimination or equal pay; in 2003 the EOC supported 27 cases and used its statutory powers for the first time in a decade to launch a formal investigation into institution-wide sexual harassment at the Royal Mail.⁸ The situation can be even worse for women who face the multiple disadvantage of being disabled, gay or bisexual, or a member of a minority ethnic group. For these groups, the ceiling isn't so much made of glass as it is of concrete.

Old boys and new girls

Nonetheless, what has remained a happy constant throughout this story of women's slow advance towards equality is the skill and irrepressible inventiveness of women themselves in devising collective strategies for change. Most famously, the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s deployed imaginative and eye-catching techniques of direct action and created a new political language in which to articulate their demands for a fairer, more gender-equal society. Yet while these activists might have shouted the loudest, they

have been outlived and superseded by an altogether less vocal, yet numerically significant area of organising among women, initiated by Beatrice Gordon Holmes and her ilk and carried forward today by the current generation of resourceful and determined women leaders from across a range of industries and sectors. This is the growing yet little documented phenomenon of professional women's peer-to-peer networks, which forms the subject of this report.

The roots of this phenomenon can be traced back to the last decades of the nineteenth century, in which the legal bars to women entering higher education and the professions began to be lifted. That first pioneering generation of educational reformers, doctors, nurses, scientists and philanthropists soon formed their own professional associations, societies and clubs, often modelled on the metropolitan club-land that provided sustenance to the male governing elites. These membership organisations grew throughout the first half of the twentieth century, becoming a familiar presence within the fabric of Britain's civic life. It wasn't, however, until the 1970s and the advent of second-wave feminist activity that organising among professional women took on a lighter, more dynamic structure, and the 'new girl network' was born. This phenomenon was driven by business and entrepreneurial women in cities in the US and UK as a response to the continuing hold of the 'old boy network' (or OBN for short) in corporate life.⁹ The 1980s witnessed the adoption of the peer-to-peer network model by women in other occupations including science and technology, media and the public sector, and the following decade saw the rise of the 'corporate' network within large companies, deployed by employers as a new kind of diversity tool.

Today, older organisations, such as Business and Professional Women, continue to thrive alongside a range of newcomers – corporate networks at Shell, Lloyds TSB and GE; industry networking groups such as Women in Journalism or the City Women's Club; technology-focused networks created on the crest of the wave of the new media revolution, such as DigitalEve or Hightech-Women; and idiosyncratic, loosely organised networks such as CSR Chicks and Thinkingwomen – all offering a mix of networking events, training

and professional development, career advice, business information, and off and online peer-to-peer communication (see box 1.1; for a longer list, see box 2.1, or Appendix 1).

Box 1.1 Selection of UK Women's Networks

Women in Management 1969
City Women's Network 1978
Women in Publishing 1979
Women in Banking and Finance 1980
Women in Medicine 1980
NETWORK 1981
Women in BP 1982
Women in Dentistry 1985
BT Women's Network 1986
Through the Glass Ceiling 1990
First Forum 1991
Women in Journalism 1995
Berwin Leighton Paisner/The Adelaide Group 1997
Everywoman 1999
CSR Chicks 1999
Lloyds TSB Women's Network 1999
Busygirl 2000 (renamed Aurora Women's Network in 2003)
Hightech-Women 2000
DigitalEve 2000
Financial Mail Women's Forum 2001
Civil Service Senior Women's Network 2002
Citiwomen (Citigroup) 2002
Thinkingwomen 2002
Shell Women's Network UK 2003
Dynamic Asian Women's Network (DAWN) 2003
The City Women's Club, 2004

These networks add value in a variety of ways to women's working lives, from making professional contacts and gaining in self-confidence, to finding new friends, learning new skills and accessing

mentoring opportunities. In our survey of senior women from the public sector, 71 per cent of those with experience of networks either agreed or strongly agreed that the network was meeting their expectations. Once members, women tend to stay; 39 per cent had been members for 10 years or more, 21 per cent for between 5 and 10 years, and 20 per cent for between 3 and 5 years. It's difficult to put a figure on how many women in the UK as a whole might be members of networks; 41 per cent of our sample were or had been members of professional networks. Of those who weren't or hadn't, 64 per cent reported not being aware of any women's networks which they were eligible to join. This suggests that while women's networks are a significant presence in the life of professional women, they are not ubiquitous, although, as we will see, there may be ways of making them more accessible to a larger number of women.

Networked sisterhood

Of course, women from all walks of life have associated and built relationships with each other throughout history. What is distinctive about the phenomenon described in this report is the way in which networks formalise and make visible interactions taking place between professional women in the UK, and repeat and sustain those interactions over time. This sets them apart from the informal, socially embedded OBNs from which 35 per cent of women managers still feel excluded, and which management theorists name as a continuing and serious obstacle to women's career advancement.¹⁰ To this end, the experience of women's networks throws into question currently fashionable theories of 'post-feminism', which claim that women share few interests on the basis of gender and have little appetite for any equality strategy based on collective action. In fact, 87 per cent of the women surveyed for this report rated the sex-specific nature of networks as either a favourable or strongly favourable factor in determining their decision to join.

Networks may fall short of the ideological or polemical drive of second-wave feminism, but they offer a model of mutual support and group affiliation based on a shared identity as professional women –

an identity which has the potential to shape and inform action. In fact, as the following chapters will illustrate, the woman-to-woman connectivity created by networks represents a form of social agency with the potential to give women real voice in how organisations carry out their business.

Networked diversity

Furthermore, corporate networks in particular suggest a way out of the ‘compulsion versus voluntarism’ dichotomy that has threatened to consume the debate around workplace equality in recent years. Employers have steadily extended their repertoire of equality and diversity tools since the dawn of equal opportunities back in the 1970s, from ‘affirmative action’ and diversity monitoring to appointing board-level ‘champions’ and delivering employee mentoring programmes. Much has been written and said about all of these initiatives, and many employers – both public and private – are pioneering genuinely innovative practices.¹¹ But these tools often fail to embed diversity into everyday working practices, blunted by the weathering forces of inertia, weak or unsustainable leadership, and the competing demands of short-term business priorities.

Thus the search for new items to add to this menu, or new ways of combining those we already have, remains an ongoing priority for employers, equality practitioners and campaigners. In this climate of experimentation, women’s networks represent an intriguing addition to the repertoire. They are not exactly a ‘tool’ themselves. Rather, they represent a resource or capacity for rethinking, energising, joining up and delivering a whole range of familiar strategies and approaches to workplace diversity. In *Talking Equality*, a report commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission to explore how concepts of equality are understood in the everyday, authors Sue Tibballs and Melanie Howard argue that engagement of individuals in the design and delivery of equality policies must be central to any future strategy to tackle gender disadvantage. ‘Rather than equality being imposed top down, there needs to be a collaborative, bottom-up approach. . . . At an organisational level, it means creating processes in which

people can share their views, understand others' perspectives, and make the connections between individual experiences and the wider organisational culture.¹² It is the contention of this report that diversity networks represent an effective vehicle for facilitating just such processes and injecting the vital animating factor often lacking from state- or employer-led policies: namely women's ownership and leadership of the gender equality agenda.

This may sound like a grand claim. And certainly, it is not the case that all networks succeed in being vigorous catalysts for greater workplace diversity. As this report will show, creating women's networks is a risky and sometimes thankless task, requiring a carefully judged balance of leadership, external support, and an enabling policy environment. Women's networks suffer routinely from accusations of elitism and exclusivity, insularity and divisiveness – many of the same charges, in fact, levelled by women at the informal networks created and sustained by men. Many of these charges reflect very real tensions – it's not easy to explain in less than twenty words why cocktails at the health club with the girls should be seen as any different from ten rounds on the golf course with the boys. Nonetheless, what is clear is that formal women's networks, unlike their informal male counterparts which serve to preserve the status quo, actively seek to *alter* the relations of power in the workplace. They create a set of visible structures through which new personal connections can be forged among women. In this way, networks demonstrate how the relationships and informal interactions through which most of us conduct our professional lives need not of necessity contribute to the opacity of power relations at work. By embracing a positive change agenda that takes in the whole organisational culture, they can instead become a force for greater transparency, legitimacy, and, ultimately, greater equality between men and women.

This report

Given the increasing presence of networks as a diversity tool within large organisations, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to date on investigating this form of organising among women.¹³

This report aims to address this omission by:

- exploring the extent and nature of women's networking practices in the UK
- exploring how they contribute to both diversity and business objectives within large organisations, and
- developing an understanding of the key qualities and conditions required for networks to meet the needs of both women and organisations.

The research focuses on the UK public sector, and specifically on the civil service, where case study work was carried out. It is hoped, however, that the findings presented here will stimulate thought and prove fruitful to women and their employers from a range of industries and professions. The report is based on a series of 24 in-depth interviews with network leaders and diversity experts from both business and government; three case studies which focused on the civil service, involving the Civil Service Senior Women's Network (CSSWN), the Ministry of Defence Bath/Bristol Women's Network, and the Gender Staff Network Group within the Department for Work and Pensions; and a questionnaire designed to explore the networking experiences of professional women drawn largely from the public sector. In addition, we have drawn on the best in current thinking in the research literature on women in management, gender and leadership, and workplace equality and diversity. As such, this report is by no means the final word on women's networks, but rather represents the overture to a much longer and richer conversation.

Servants of the people

As an employer of literally millions of women, government, its agencies and the wider public sector are rightly preoccupied with the challenge of gender diversity. This is being driven not only by the traditional imperatives of equity and social justice, but by the sorts of 'business case' arguments pioneered in the private sector. These business imperatives – access to talent, attendance to customer

service, high-quality service delivery, brand reputation, recruitment and retention – are highly relevant for government, faced as it is with the mighty task of modernising and reforming Britain’s creaking public services. Furthermore, Minister for Women Patricia Hewitt recently argued that the state should exercise leadership in flying the flag for equality in all its working practices: ‘It is our responsibility as an employer to give a lead to private sector employers by showing in practical terms our commitment to diversity, to equal pay, to flexible working arrangements and to childcare.’¹⁴

On many counts, government as an employer already scores higher than its private sector counterparts, having a longer record of implementing equality and diversity policies at work, and being a leading proponent of flexible working options for its mighty female workforce.¹⁵ Nonetheless, just a third of survey respondents feel that women’s professional development needs in the public sector are being adequately met, compared with 50 per cent who felt they were either inadequately met or not met at all. This is why it is right that government as an employer is keeping the pressure on. In the 1999 *Modernising Government* White Paper, the civil service was charged with the task of meeting a range of diversity targets by 2004/5, including filling 35 per cent of senior civil service posts and 25 per cent of the top 600 posts with women. Since then, these have been joined by targets to improve the gender balance across the police service, to support flexible careers for NHS doctors, and to widen access to childcare for all NHS staff. Further commitments have been made to improve career progression and training for women in education, and to drive forward gender equality in local government.¹⁶

Diversity networks already play some role in supporting this aspiration, and are in rich supply within the public sector, although unevenly distributed. They range from departmental networks in Whitehall, networks within executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies and the NHS, to networks focused around regional offices and locations, and networks for staff at different grades or in different business units. They serve a number of employee groups

besides women, including black and minority ethnic groups, disabled employees, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender staff, and part-timers. They range from large participatory structures with open memberships to smaller working groups focusing on specific diversity themes, such as childcare and work–life balance. Their histories are complex and non-linear; their reach scattered and patchy; their relationship to employers, human resources departments and public sector unions highly varied.

This variation reflects that of the diverse organisations that make up the public sector, each with its own distinctive culture and priorities. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ model for diversity networks, and, as a member-led phenomenon, a degree of organic, self-directed growth is a desirable if not required quality. Nonetheless, there are lessons that can be learned about the sort of network characteristics and qualities that create positive change, and those which burden networks with the same sort of risks attached to more conventional employer-led interventions. Similarly, the wider nexus of organisational relationships, politics and cultures can enable or inhibit the positive functioning of networks, which must be considered in the round. In the case of the civil service networks studied in this report, there is a strong case for employers and women to develop together a tighter alignment between the activities and objectives of networks and the wider modernisation agenda. More generally though, this is a lesson about putting diversity at the very heart of what organisations do, and putting individuals at the very heart of how organisations manage diversity.

We hope, therefore, that this report will stimulate thinking across all sectors and industries, and represents a timely contribution to what remains a challenging and sometimes fractious debate. It is structured as follows: Chapter two analyses the development of women’s networks in the context of women’s persistent exclusion from the informal channels of power and opportunity historically created and sustained by men. Chapter three focuses on the role networks currently play in progressing women up organisational hierarchies, exploring how networks offer effective strategies for

removing some of the strongest barriers to women's career advancement. Chapter four adds colour and perspective to this picture by uncovering the emotional and psychosocial dimensions of women's networking experiences. Chapter five takes up the employer perspective, looking at how networks relate to and can enhance other diversity tools and strategies as well as wider change agendas. Chapter six reviews and summarises the case for women's networks as a career strategy device for women and a tool for diversity and organisational change for employers. The report concludes by setting out an evolutionary model for understanding the different functions of networks and how they develop and grow over time. Finally, it provides a set of recommendations for creating successful women's networks aimed at both women and employers and suggestions for further research.

2. Less clubbable?

in search of professional woman

May it not be that, whereas friendliness among women is more usual and counts for more in their lives than it does among men, the sense of good comradeship, should they chance to be thrown together, which men show one towards the other, which they have learnt at public schools and at college, is in a sense lacking, or at any rate, very undeveloped among women?

Eva Anstruther's reflection in 1899 on the socialisation processes of men versus those of women captures a thread running throughout much of the debate about equality between the sexes: namely the nexus of gender, power and social networks. The pervasive influence of the OBN is a familiar point of reference for those seeking to explain women's marginalisation from social and political power.¹⁷ When first coined in the mid-nineteenth century, the phrase had a fairly narrow sense; it referred to the alumni of an elite educational institution and an informal system of favours and mutual support that would last throughout their lifetime. That shared affiliation to a school, university or club created a commonality of world view, and ensured that power remained concentrated in the hands of the small male elite forming the ruling class of the day.¹⁸

Despite over a century and a half of social change, 'homophily' (same sex relationships) and reciprocity among men still see to it that women remain disadvantaged at work, although these affiliations

tend no longer to require the possession of an Eton or Rugby school tie. As Lily Segerman-Peck in her networking handbook for women describes it, what worked for the graduates of Balliol in the 1890s works equally well for a wider male demographic a century later: 'Men have recognised the importance of the system and have learned to emulate the networking skills of the original members, so any effective male network now tends to be called an old boy network.'¹⁹ Their presence is keenly felt by many women; a survey from 2001 found that 35 per cent of women managers regard the OBN as a significant obstacle to career progression.²⁰ These present-day incarnations have the added advantage of incumbency; their long pedigree, as one author describes it, leaves a legacy of 'unstated practices and policies' lingering in the workplace, which women struggle to learn.²¹ One interviewee described the zone of comfort created by similar backgrounds, experiences and outlooks on life thus:

It's about 'knowing the measure of someone' – feeling comfortable in their presence, feeling that you understand how their mind works. Maybe men look at women and think they're all over the place. Whereas with other men they know where they're coming from and know they can trust them.

Senior civil servant, woman

Breaking into these male networks is difficult for all sorts of reasons. The scarcity of women at senior levels in large organisations is perhaps the most serious for its natural consequence that men get to dictate the terms on which informal networking activities take place. Change management experts Elizabeth Coffey, Clare Huffington and Peninah Thomson interviewed 52 high-flying women from a range of sectors and industries in 1999 and found one common frustration to be workplace cultures in which networking was made to equate to 'male bonding': 'Some of them spoke of their dislike and discomfort with networking in pubs or on golf courses and often felt excluded from the informal influencing systems in their organisations.'²² Almost inevitably, these systems have a habit of reproducing

themselves. In his 2003 study of non-executive directors, Derek Higgs reported the frequent use of personal contacts as a source of candidates for new appointments to boards. Unsurprisingly, Higgs concludes that this practice 'will tend to favour those with similar backgrounds to incumbent directors'.²³

For women with domestic responsibilities, participation in 'out-of-hours' networks is often impossible. As Sheila Wellington, former president of US-based research group Catalyst recently put it: 'Men head for drinks. Women for the dry cleaners.'²⁴ Flexible working hours may help women achieve a better balance between their professional and domestic responsibilities, but such formal policies are less likely to assist them in breaking into informal networks. This is quite simply because working flexibly makes it less likely you'll be around when the trip to the bar is being mooted. One interviewee reflected on the experience of two former female colleagues, both working mothers who had arranged to compress their hours into four days each week:

They worked in an incredibly focused, efficient way and managed their time very tightly, never taking time out for chats or long lunch breaks or drinks after work, because they knew they had to squeeze everything into those four days. They had no down time at all.

Senior civil servant, woman

Finally, there are the conventional sexual politics of the workplace to consider. A younger woman approaching a senior male to ask for mentoring or career advice risks becoming the subject of endless office gossip and speculation.²⁵ These everyday social mores not only inhibit women from coming forward; they also create barriers to senior men seeking out female talent to bring on, a problem of which Dame Rennie Fritchie, with her many years of experience in women's leadership development, is only too aware:

It's the helping hand, the word of advice – a senior man seeing a younger man who reminds him of himself at that age and who

he decides, often quite unconsciously, to help by pushing interesting opportunities his way. If he were to treat a younger woman similarly it would be assumed that there was something of a sexual nature going on. Women may not want to risk that.

Beating them at their own game

For all these reasons, it is unsurprising to find that studies analysing social networks and gender within organisations reveal that men and women do indeed develop different types of workplace relationships, with men's networks tending to have higher levels of both centrality and homophily.²⁶ At the same time, women's response – to create networks of their own – begins to make more sense. The journalist, Tim Heald, describes the attitude of businesswomen toward the OBN in the US in the late 1970s thus: 'they cannot, apparently, join it, and they cannot beat it by taking it on on their own. The solution they decided lay in countering it with networks of their own.'²⁷ Others have urged women to adopt some of those very same tactics used by men to advance their own interests. Women may not be able to join, argues Segerman-Peck, 'but we can learn from the networking system that the OBN uses. Having seen some of the benefits, we can learn in detail how it works and we can adapt it to our own requirements.'²⁸ The result is the creation of networks explicitly designed to enlarge the directory of professional contacts available to their members, and to spur women into using those contacts in an instrumental manner: 'to support our own career, not only to service the needs of others.'²⁹

The following chapters will explore how these networks are being used by their members and deployed by employers. At this point, it is worth asking how this form of organising came to be a significant presence in the lives of professional women in the UK. This requires looking back into the rich history of women's slow and often bumpy passage into professional life.

Separate spheres

When Gordon Holmes referred in 1939 to professional women as a class 'just thirty years old' she meant it quite literally. Finding a

woman in a position of any sort of authority in business and the professions was still something of a novelty at the beginning of the last century. For most of the preceding period women were regarded as adjuncts to their husbands, fathers or brothers – legally invisible extras in the ‘great man’ version of history. Their submissiveness and absorption into domestic tasks became a central constituent of middle-class identity from the late eighteenth century onwards (although working-class women worked hard enough), and women’s relegation to the ‘separate sphere’ of the home was inscribed in the social codes organising gender in mid-Victorian society.³⁰ Nonetheless, the combination of early feminist activism, a surplus of unmarried (or ‘redundant’) women, and the growth of suitable white-collar occupations in the later decades of the century provided opportunities for middle-class women to move into the realm of paid work. This came not a moment too soon. ‘For women, the issue of employment was connected with their claims for independence, for a share in the public domain, and with the demand for an identity defined by self-respect.’³¹

Women’s entry into the professional world was marked by the creation of a spate of associations, clubs, colleges and societies, such as the Royal College of Midwives, the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, and the London Schoolmistresses’ Association. These provided training, and helped women find employment, new friends, and in some cases, a roof over their heads. Barred from the gentlemen’s clubs in which their male peers put the world to rights over a glass of brandy and a cigar, this period also saw the first efforts among women to develop an alternative female form of ‘clubbability’. The University Women’s Club was established in 1886 by a group of upper-middle class educational reformers for the tiny but steadily growing number of women graduates trickling out of Britain’s universities. Described by one historian as ‘an interesting example of an organisation that was in part devised in response to women’s needs and in part as an attempt to emulate the gentleman’s clubs of the day’,³² the UWC was followed by the Pioneer Club in 1892 with its elite feminist following, the Lyceum Club in 1904 for

women writers and artists, and the Sesame Club among others. These all modelled themselves on their richer male relations, with their smoking rooms, libraries, fine dining and subsidised accommodation.³³

So was Anstruther wrong then, in her analysis of women's lesser inclination towards acts of mutual self-interest? Possibly not. These women's clubs never played a central role in the lives of their members, mainly because women remained so marginalised in the workplace (they were still legally barred from the upper ranks of the civil service, law and accountancy) and a fragile professional identity was still only beginning to emerge. In many ways, the activities of these early associations were more attuned to the philanthropic and civic traditions that had characterised the unpaid work of upper- and middle-class women throughout the nineteenth century. This extension of the female domestic role was central to mass women's organisations such as the Soroptimists, the Women's Institutes, the Townswomen's Guilds, Business and Professional Women and Zonta International. Interestingly, these currents also feature in many of today's younger networks, particularly those in the US, where the philanthropic tradition is more established among the professional classes. One example of this is the not-for-profit foundation *Miles To Go* attached to US-based network 85 Broads, which was created in 1999 for current and former employees of Goldman Sachs. Another is the fundraising campaigns of Cosmetic Executive Women (CEW), which, since 1993, has supported women's charities through its philanthropic arm, CEW Foundation.³⁴

The professional is the political

Nonetheless, women's professional associations slowly proliferated into the twentieth century, reflecting the gradual rise in numbers of women making careers for themselves alongside men. The National Association of Women Pharmacists was founded in 1905, followed by the Medical Women's Federation in 1917, the Women's Engineering Society in 1919, and the Association of Women Solicitors in 1923. For the vast majority, however, employment opportunities for educated,

middle-class women before World War Two were still narrow, limited to teaching, social work and, for some, clerical and retail occupations. Many professions operated formal marriage bars which forced women to give up their jobs upon matrimony, such was the grip of traditional gender roles.

The tide of social change sweeping Europe and North America in the post-war decades disrupted all that. Married women and mothers poured into the workforce in greater numbers, greatly aided by the growth in part-time low-skilled jobs, but extending too to professional and managerial career paths.³⁵ By the 1970s, associations of professional women began to take on a more dynamic, purposeful network form, influenced by the demands for women's rights and opportunities being aired by organisations like NOW in the US and the Women's Liberation Movement in the UK. Buoyed by these feminists and growing interest in the new breed of women managers, groups of women working in business and finance in cities on both sides of the Atlantic began meeting secretly for breakfast or lunch. These gatherings were sparked by their dissatisfaction with the mainstream 'women's programmes' provided within companies and the little progress made since the inception of equality legislation in the early 1970s. Women used these opportunities to make new contacts, share tips on survival at work and devise new strategies for getting on in a male-dominated world. One observer called them the 'business wing' of women's lib.³⁶ Another described it as 'getting together to get ahead.'³⁷ Either way, the 'New Girl Networks' demonstrated that professional women were no longer content to leave workplace equality to the slow passage of time. They wanted change, and they wanted it now. Creating networks proved the perfect catalyst.

New girls and the genderquake

The earliest network for women executives in the UK was Women in Management (WiM), created by Unilever director Dr Eleanor MacDonald in 1969 to support women in developing their managerial careers. WiM was followed over the next decade by the

feminist-inspired Women in Media, Women in Libraries, and Women in Publishing, and the more mainstream City Women's Network, and Women in Banking and Finance.³⁸ Most of these are still active 20 or 30 years on, providing training and development opportunities, networking events and newsletters, and providing a voice for professional women within their field. Networks grew steadily in other sectors and occupations throughout the 1980s and exploded in the 1990s, to the point that women in most areas of professional life are now served by one or more national networks, and for many, a myriad of regional branches and local chapters (see box 2.1 for a list of UK-based women's networks). Black and minority ethnic women began to create their own professional networks over this period too, marking the significance of race and ethnicity in constructing gendered professional identities for women in the UK.

Box 2.1 UK Women's Networks (with date of establishment, where known)

Business and finance: City Women's Network (1978); Women in Banking and Finance (1980); City Women's Club (2004)

Entrepreneurs: British Association of Women Entrepreneurs (1954); Women Into Business (1976); Women in Business (1992); Women in Enterprise; Aurora Women's Network (2000); Women in Rural Enterprise; Rural Women's Network; Women Into the Network; Scottish Businesswomen; European Federation of Black Women Business Owners (1996)

Science, Engineering and Technology (SET): Women Chemists Network (1988); Women in Technology; WITEC (1988); Women in Physics Group (1995); DigitalEve (2000); Hightech-Women (2000)

Medicine: Women in Medicine (1981); Women in Surgical Training (1991); Women in Dentistry (1985)

Media and publishing: Women in Media (1970); Women in

Publishing (1979); New Girls Network (1982); Women in Film and Television (1990); Women in Journalism (1995)

Public Sector: Women in Libraries (1973); Women in Housing (1981); British Association of Women Police (1987); Women in Higher Education Network (1989); Association of Women Senior Managers (1989); Women in the Public Sector (1990); Through the Glass Ceiling (1990)

Voluntary Sector: Women in Fundraising Development (1987); Groundbreakers (Leadership Network for Women Charity Chief Executives)

Black and minority ethnic women's networks: European Federation of Black Women Business Owners; Professional Afro-Asian Women's Association (1989); National Black Women's Network

Other professional: British Women Pilots' Association (1955); Association of Women Solicitors (1976); Women in Architecture (1985); CSR Chicks (1999); Cosmetic Executive Women UK (1995); Women in Direct Marketing (1992); Women in Property (1988)

Cross-sectoral: Women in Management (1969); NETWORK (1981); First Forum (1991); Berwin Leighton Paisner/The Adelaide Group (1997); Women's Voices Network (2003); Financial Mail Women's Forum (2001); Women Returners' Network (1984); Thinkingwomen (2002)

Sources: network websites and promotional literature; survey respondents; interviewees; Women's National Commission; Segerman-Peck; Tomlinson; www.everywoman.co.uk

These networks are run as independent organisations, often with not-for-profit status and organised by a committee of volunteers in addition to their day jobs. Many are funded by member subscriptions or by charging for events, and some networks attract industry sponsorship. Some have formal constitutions with elected officers; others still sit within larger organisations (Aurora Women's Network

is delivered by the gender consultancy firm Aurora GCM) or professional bodies (the Association of Women Solicitors is an official group of the Law Society, for example), where they may have access to resources and paid staff.

Networking on the outside was joined by networking on the inside over the same period. The late 1970s witnessed too the rise of the so-called 'corporate network', a term describing an internal network specific to and identified with one organisation or workplace. The first of these appeared in the US in companies such as Equitable Life, Polaroid and WGBH Boston, where women got together to demand more professional development, better working practices and fairer treatment.³⁹ Early adopters of the corporate network model in the UK included BP, Thames TV and BT. However, the corporate network didn't really take off in the UK until the 1990s, when large employers began to move away from traditional 'equal opportunities' towards today's more familiar paradigm in which equality and diversity are conceptualised as a core part of business processes. Multinational corporations have been particularly forward-looking in this area as the 'people management' challenges that arise through operating in global markets become ever more apparent. Corporate networks embrace a variety of models of governance. Some are effectively 'business-owned' with central funding and a formal relationship with human resources departments. Others are semi-autonomous, with budgets pulled together through in-kind resources available to members. Others are entirely unofficial and member-run.

Box 2.2 Corporate Women's Networks in UK (with date of establishment, where known)

Private Sector: Thames TV Women's Committee (1981); Women in BP (1982); Women in Telecom (1983); BT Women's Network (1986); GE Women's Network (1998); Lloyds TSB Women's Network (1999); Citiwomen (2002); Shell Women's Network (2003); BT Executive Women's Network (2003); IBM Women's Network; KPMG Women's

Network; Merrill Lynch Women's Network; Goldman Sachs Women's Network; Proctor & Gamble Women's Network

Public Sector: Customs and Excise Northern Network (1991); Women in the Civil Service; Crown Prosecution Service BME Women's Network; Civil Service Senior Women's Network (2002); MoD Bath/Bristol Women's Network (2004)

Studying women's networks

It is difficult to impose too rigid a historical timeline on to the development of networks, or to seek out a precise typology into which to slot each and every one. The network founders interviewed for this study looked at other existing networks for ideas and pointers, and some referred to the handbook on creating corporate women's networks published by Catalyst in 1999.⁴⁰ Yet in large part, these individuals developed their own strategies and processes through a combination of intuition, experimentation and informal consultation, and without reference to any established model or set of practices.

This explains the sheer variety of network types. For example, one type not yet mentioned might be called the 'diaspora' network, involving women scattered around new workplaces who want to stay in touch with former colleagues. A prime example of this is 85 Broads, which anthropologist Melissa Fisher describes as providing 'a site for the reconstitution of a "diasporic community" for Wall Street female refugees in the new community' and 'a site for identity reconstruction'.⁴¹ We also heard of groups of women who had met at conferences or on courses, or civil servants who had worked in the same department for a spell of time and met regularly ever since, rather in the manner of class reunions or old girl associations. To blur the picture further, we also heard of dining clubs, networks which had folded or re-invented themselves anew, workplace reading groups, babysitting circles, women's sections of unions or trade bodies, and women's environmentalist and feminist groups. All could be

described, to some extent, as providing opportunities for women to network and extend their professional contacts.

The scale of this variety presents a definitional challenge for those wishing to study women's networks. The boundaries between networks and other organisational forms are highly permeable, as reflected by the wide range of social formations cited by our survey respondents and interviewees. There is no commonly used or widely understood terminology for women's networks. Some refer to themselves explicitly in network terms, and the corporate network is arguably the model with the highest level of clarity in terms of structures and purpose. Others tag themselves as forums, groups or associations that promote networking among women. In the light of these methodological difficulties, it is necessary to adopt a working definition and establish a clear picture of the terrain before we go much further into our analysis.

1. Definition of a women's network

For the purposes of this study, a women's network is defined as:

A group or organisation that either:

calls itself a network, and where the unit of measurement is the individual (that is, a network in which the members are individuals, not a network of organisations);

or:

exists primarily to support women's networking practices and to sustain and repeat those practices over time, and where women identify as members of a formal entity.

2. Reach and spread of women's networks in the UK

Forty-one per cent of women surveyed for this study were or had been members of at least one women's network. The average number

of memberships was 1.5. This would suggest that women's networks are a significant presence in the lives of professional women within the public sector. However, the majority of non-networkers (64 per cent) were not aware of any networks that they were eligible to join. Networks also vary in terms of size. Some of the major business networks are very large indeed: WiM has a membership of 14,000 spread over 95 branches, and Aurora claims 15,000 members across Europe; while others, such as City Women's Network, have a few hundred; and many local networks can consist of a dozen or two at most (see table 2.1). 'Membership', however, means different things to different networks. For some, it simply involves being subscribed to a mailing list, or occasional attendance at events; for others, particularly where the group is smaller, membership is more like that of a club, with regular meetings, tight eligibility restrictions and annual membership fees.

3. Trajectory and growth of women's networks

It is impossible to identify and log every network in existence. Nonetheless, on the basis of the picture mapped out in boxes 2.1 and 2.2 (see above), and the anecdotal evidence found in this study, it would appear that women's networks are a growing phenomenon. Building a comprehensive picture of the scale and reach of women's networks, however, is beyond the scope of this research and will require a more extensive study.

Women's networks, gender and power in the new century

Networks are clearly playing a significant role in the lives of professional women in Britain. As the historical trajectory set out above implies, they also tell a story about the changing nature of gender politics and the ways in which women construct their identities, in relation to work, and in relation to each other. It is interesting to reflect on the growth of women's networks over the last ten years, which is a period often identified with the fragmentation of stable gender identities and a trend in diversity practice away from a focus on minority groups, which have been seen as reifying unhelpful

Table 2.1 Women’s networks and memberships levels

Network	Membership
Aurora Women’s Network	15,000 (across Europe)
Women in Management	14,000
Association of Women Solicitors	8,000
Women Into Business	6,000
European Federation of Black Women	
Business Owners	5,000 plus (across Europe)
BPW, Northern Ireland	2,500
DAWN	2,000 plus
CSR Chicks	1,100 (internationally)
Hightech-Women	1,400
Women in Surgical Training	1,075
Women in Film and TV	1,000
British Association of Women Entrepreneurs	800
Women in Banking and Finance	700
Women in Journalism	500
British Women Pilots Association	400 plus
NETWORK	400
Women in Physics Group	399
Thinkingwomen	350 plus
Women in Direct Marketing	350 plus
Women in Publishing	300
Women in Business	290
First Forum	200
City Women’s network	160
Women in Medicine	160
Association of Women Senior Managers	34

Sources: Women’s National Commission directory of Women’s Organisations in the United Kingdom 2003; websites and official literature; interviews

forms of identity politics in the workplace.⁴² During the 1980s, unpopular positive action programmes and a new language of sexual harassment created a climate in which 'playing the gender card' was tantamount to professional suicide. As one questionnaire respondent put it: 'I belong to a generation where membership of women-only organisations was the kiss of death.'

And yet the hostile workplace climate of the 1980s apparently thawed sufficiently throughout the course of the following decade to allow women's internal initiatives to flourish in ways that hadn't been possible before. As Laurel Powers Freeling, Director of Financial Services at Marks and Spencer, argues:

'These days it's ok to recognise differences between men and women. That wasn't the case in the early '90s. But what recognising differences means is that you have to accept that there are different things that you need to develop. I think it's ok for women to feel they share a particular identity as women.'

The majority of women networkers surveyed in this research seem to agree. Eighty-seven per cent of respondents rated the sex-specific nature of women's networks as a positive factor influencing their decision to join, and several described the ways in which they felt all-women groups make a distinctive offering to their members:

Women's networks are more disciplined, less competitive and more supportive

The dynamics of the women's group is different – more often an exchange of feelings and development needs

You get a frank discussion of organisational issues affecting women and how to deal with them, helping others

Women's networks are able to discuss things that you wouldn't discuss with men in the room – regarding assertiveness, work/life balance

And yet, despite the history of networks being intertwined with that of the women's movement, few networks explicitly espouse feminist or equality goals. And although the vast majority of survey respondents value the sex-specific nature of women's networks, as a career strategy, separatism is still highly problematic to a great many women. Indeed, for non-networkers, it was cited as the top reason for *not* joining any women's networks.

Research: findings

- 87% of past or current members rated the sex-specific nature of women's networks as either a strongly favourable factor or favourable factor in influencing their decision to join
- Of those aware of women's networks but not members, the sex-specific factor was rated by 65% as the factor most likely to influence their decision not to join

Of those who expressed reservations about networks, most did so on strongly held principle. Some object to all-women groups because they imply a narrative of victimhood deemed inappropriate at a time when women have more opportunities than ever before. Others object on the basis that networks seek to emulate exclusionary male behaviours, and state their preference for mixed-sex networking. We heard a number of stories of where senior women had declined to support a network-in-making, and our survey elicited a significant number of responses from women who fundamentally disagreed with the premise on which networks are founded, and who reported having encountered few obstacles throughout their career that were related to gender (see box 2.3).

Box 2.3 Objections to women-only networks

The preoccupation with women's issues is self-indulgent, divisive and unnecessary

I am strongly against any sex-specific groups as I feel they detract from equality

The networks I have valued – and still participate in – are all of mixed gender. I don't feel attracted to, or in need of, women-only ones

I am more interested in networking with colleagues who bring similar and different experience to mine, irrespective of gender

As I am suspicious of 'old boys' networks', my motivation to become involved in a women's equivalent is limited

So networks aren't for every woman then? Perhaps not. Most of the reservations expressed came from individuals who had no direct experience of networks – unsurprising, given that network memberships are, by their very nature, self-selecting. Many professional women may indeed neither need nor desire the sort of support systems that networks provide. Certainly if the formal structures of career development appear to be working effectively for both men and women, then networks have little to offer. Yet the evidence is strong enough to suggest that exclusion from informal networks is still a major career handicap for many women. It does not follow, however, that women's networks simply seek to replicate those strategies for hoarding opportunity practised by Old Boys. Rather, they are concerned with developing women's professional capacities and making the most of what makes them different from men. This can be summarised under three headings:

1. Building wider relationships

The objective of many networks is to assist women in 'managing upwards'; that is, in building the sorts of relationships that will help them to access the knowledge and opportunities required for successful advancement. They do this in a number of ways: by building women's confidence and resilience; by strategically engaging senior figures and male peers in the life of the network; and by becoming a respected voice in the wider business environment. By shaping new connections among women, networks begin to alter the relations of

power that exist between women and men, which has a subsequent impact on the wider organisational culture.

2. Valuing differences

Women's networks may resemble 'the OBN' in so far as they support networking practices among individuals of the same sex, but that is largely where the similarities end. Many interviewees believe that women network differently from men, with an emphasis on openness, honesty and mutual support:

Men often see knowledge as power – something that they shouldn't give out because that could be disadvantageous for them. Women are inclined to help each other and are open about their knowledge and will share solutions. Sometimes they don't even think about how this might damage themselves from a career perspective.

Elizabeth Coffey, Head, Leadership Capabilities Practice
Mercer Delta Consulting Ltd

Women network differently from men. They want to give as much as they receive. It's not about prospecting and getting out of it all you can get for yourself, or for showing your face. It's about involvement and support and mutuality.

Dame Rennie Fritchie,
Commissioner for Public Appointments

There are undoubtedly many women who would not identify with this portrait of the inclusive female networker. Yet it does find support in much of the research literature. This describes a distinctly feminine approach towards leadership and uses analytical models that link those gendered behaviours to women's alternative socialisation and role in the home.⁴³

3. Agents for change

Finally, unlike the OBN with its interest in preserving the status quo, women's networks are profoundly engaged in promoting change. This

agenda certainly focuses on promoting the interests of their members, but places woman-centred objectives in the wider context of organisational development. Networks want more women in boardrooms not only because it's fair, but because organisations need the experience and insight of talented women to make better business decisions. As Coffey et al found in their interviews, women are inevitably cast into the role of change agent within organisations: 'they are part of the new by virtue of the fact that they were not part of the old.'⁴⁴ Women's under-representation in public life is a major point of reference for all networks, and one which they seek to change by connecting women with each other. Indeed, as this chapter has set out, women's networks were created as a response to male hegemony in the workplace, and in this sense that very act of connecting became one rich in political significance. It made the unwritten rules of the game played by men explicit to all, and attempted to rewrite those rules by inscribing them in the practices of their own networks.

But this process of codifying the informal has implications for the wider organisation. By growing new relationships between women, networks disrupt the established patterns of social connectivity at work. This creates a space in which change can take place, not only in progressing talented women to the top, but in creating inclusive, dynamic working cultures in which everyone can flourish. Women's networks are directories of possibility. It is to looking at these possibilities in greater depth that the next chapter now turns.

3. Up where we belong

networks as a tool for progressing women

Today, it would appear, Britain is facing the mystery of the missing women. Almost 15 years ago, when the Hansard Society launched its report on women in public life, it looked to the 1990s with optimism; this would be the decade that British women made it. After all, the demographics ruled it so: 'Eighty per cent,' the report predicted, 'of new workers in the next five years will be women, most of whom will have major family responsibilities. This, together with the creation of more high-level jobs, will compel employers to compete more strongly for the best candidates for their companies, irrespective of gender.'⁴⁵

And yet, almost 15 years on, these trends have not delivered as many women to the top as the Commission hoped would be the case. While women's participation in the labour force continues to grow, it remains a truism that as you cast your eyes higher up the corporate organogram, the fewer women you see. According to the 2003 Female FTSE Index, produced annually by Cranfield University, women currently account for just 8.6 per cent of board-level directors (falling to 3.5 per cent if you exclude non-executive directorships), and 32 of FTSE 100 companies have no women in their boardrooms at all.⁴⁶ Of the 100 Best Companies to Work For published by the *Sunday Times* in March 2004, women made up a third of senior managers in just 25 per cent of those making the list, even though they formed the majority of overall employees in 44 per cent.⁴⁷ Turn to the public

sector, and 26 per cent of the senior civil service are women, as are 23 per cent of those in the very top management posts, even though women account for 52 per cent of the civil service overall.⁴⁸ Women account for 75 per cent of local authority employees, but just 13 per cent of chief executives;⁴⁹ they represent 79 per cent of non-medical NHS staff, and 87 per cent of the largest medical group (nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff), but only 29 per cent of NHS chief executives.⁵⁰

These stark statistics support the picture of exclusion from informal networks at work described in the previous chapter. Yet this narrative has an air of incongruity about it when placed next to the endless media riffs since the beginning of the 1990s on how the 'future is female'. Some of the Hansard Commission's forecasts for that decade did indeed come to pass. Women have represented at least 50 per cent of all undergraduates since the mid-1990s, and some of the major graduate employers are recruiting almost equal numbers of women and men: in 2002, for example, 47 per cent of the graduate intake of Ernst & Young and KPMG were women. Women are shaking up the traditional professions too: 46 per cent of those called to the bar in 1999/2000 were female;⁵¹ and women currently represent 60 per cent of students at medical schools.⁵²

Taken together, these trends have led to the construction of a by now familiar narrative of the feminisation of work. Men are the new 'out' group, trailing their female counterparts in formal qualifications, and identified with outmoded 'transactional' management styles at odds with the demands of a fast-moving, unpredictable global marketplace. And if men are the dinosaurs, so this story continues, then women are at the head of the evolutionary curve, favouring a 'transformational' approach to leadership which places greater weight on inspiring and motivating others, building strong teams, being open to new ideas and having a strong sense of personal integrity.⁵³ In one recent survey, both male and female employees rated women managers as more inspirational than their male counterparts and more effective on 11 out of the 14 criteria surveyed.⁵⁴

The only way is up?

So, gender traditionalism versus genderquake: which is the right story? Women's networks help to bridge the disconnection between these competing narratives of continuity and change in women's working lives. On the one hand they recognise and celebrate women's achievements in an era of unprecedented opportunity. On the other, they hold a mirror up to organisational cultures that hold women back from making the most of these newly won freedoms. This makes the corporate network a particularly effective mechanism for making (and keeping) culture change a priority for employers, and for taking actions of various kinds. The upsurge in new corporate networks over the past five years suggests that business leaders are becoming more clued up on the theory of diminishing returns: if there are few women at the top of your organisation or sector *now*, you'll have to work extra hard to get them there in the future. This is because gender diversity displays a 'poor get poorer' effect, with women in organisations dominated by men at senior levels feeling less welcome and more inclined to opt out. On the other hand, success breeds success. A survey carried out by the Institute of Management in 2001 showed that women tend to be much more optimistic about their own prospects where they see women directors above them;⁵⁵ similarly, a recent study of women leaders in local government found that the appointment of women to the chief executive position had a subsequent positive impact on the numbers of women in senior posts in those local authorities.⁵⁶

As Laura Tyson, Dean of the London Business School argues: 'The lack of role models affects perceptions lower down: it discourages other women. It matters. There's all that talent not fulfilling its potential – women not being represented at the make-a-difference level of organisations.' Or in other words, numbers at the top still matter. The mother of management research, Rosabeth Moss Kantor, first advanced the theory of 'tokenism' in her 1977 classic, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, arguing that where women constitute less than 15 per cent of employees, they cannot hope to make an impact

on the dominant working practices and culture, and must simply assimilate to fit in with what they find there.⁵⁷ This is a theme that hasn't gone away. The chief factors for women's success in moving into senior management as uncovered by Catalyst and Opportunity Now in their joint study of 2000 included the ability to develop a working style with which men would feel comfortable.⁵⁸ Women who want to make it too often still have to play a man's game.

This explains why many networks over the past few years have focused on reaching women at the very top levels of organisations, where they tend to be fewest and farthest between. BT established an executive women's network in 2003 to sit alongside its regular women's network, as a response to the discrepancy between the ratio of women to men among its entire 103,000-strong workforce (24:76), and that among its senior executives (18:88).⁵⁹ Similarly the *Financial Mail* newspaper created a cross-industry Women's Forum in 2001 with the hope that 'this initiative will help more talented women reach the very top of British business'.⁶⁰ This trend has touched government too. In January 2002, a cross-departmental Senior Women's Network was formed from a group of 53 high-level women who had participated as senior partners (mentors) in the Cabinet Office 'Elevator Partnership' scheme. The network has since been opened to a wider group of women across the senior grades of the civil service.

Many of those interviewed from the network for this study are true pioneers, among the first women to make it to the highest grades in their departments, and in a few cases, still the only women at that level. Throughout the early stages of their careers, these women reported little opportunity to network – either formally or informally – with other women, and certainly not with men, who, more often than not, had their own established lunch clubs and after-work arrangements in place. There are now many more women filling the ranks further down, but life in the senior grades can still be very isolating for that first generation of trailblazers. The success of that talented cohort should be celebrated, but also tempered by the sobering statistics cited at the beginning of this chapter, which

demonstrate the extent to which this level of female achievement is still the exception rather than the norm. So how exactly can networks help women to break down this historically enduring relationship between seniority and isolation?

Making a stand

In the first place, they can work to keep the issue of women's scarcity at the top of institutions a live priority. In October 2003, Tara Donovan, a director of Women in Film and TV and head of business affairs for Jamie Oliver's group of companies, wrote a comment piece in the *Guardian* pointing the finger at those media companies in the UK without female board representation.⁶¹ Donovan concluded the piece by making an appeal to readers to nominate talented women candidates for these positions, and promised to forward the list of names to the laggards in question. Within a few weeks, WFTV had received 30 nominations, in some cases from the husbands or partners of the women concerned, who were too modest to put themselves forward. This story illustrates the potential of networks for placing issues in the public eye, and for challenging companies' common defence that there simply doesn't exist a large enough female talent pool from which to recruit. As Susan Vinnicombe recently argued, male executives can hold up to six directorships at one time, while few women hold more than one: 'We do have a bigger pool than is made out – companies just have to look more creatively at the talent they have got.'⁶²

Efforts to raise issues *within* organisations can also help to sustain change, and here the power of networks comes into its own. As US law professor Susan Estrich points out, connecting even two or three women in senior positions can make all the difference between action or inaction on gender equality in the workplace:

One woman may not be able to make it happen, unless she's the CEO, or his wife, or a particularly determined director. But three women can. Maybe even two. Twenty years has made a difference. Women have not made it to the top, have not changed

*all the rules, but every company has three women who have made it far enough that together they have power they aren't using.*⁶³

Many of the recent corporate networks testify to this, having started out on the initiative of small groups of senior women. Laurel Powers-Freeling was influential in launching networks in both of her former roles at the Prudential and at Lloyds TSB. In both cases she was the most senior woman in post, which was crucial for enabling her to gain the internal leverage required for the networks to take off.

The first meeting of the network at Lloyds TSB involved me and 15 other senior women sitting in a room. It was clear that something had gone wrong for women since the merger [with TSB]. The numbers of women at senior level was actually reversing. If you looked at the company tree, you had to go down 200 people from me before you hit another woman.

Similarly, the leadership of Alice Perkins, Director General of the Corporate Development Group in the Cabinet Office, has been crucial in securing early support for the CSSWN and attracting a core group of high-level women to the meetings. One interviewee paid tribute to her willingness to take the lead:

It's good that senior women are willing to make a stand and say that this is important. It's great credit to Alice that she took the lead on setting up the network. She really stuck her neck out in doing that.

The low level of awareness among men of women's exclusion from informal workplace networks makes it even more crucial that senior women make a stand of this kind. One recent study found that only 15 per cent of male CEOs thought that exclusion from informal networks constituted a barrier to women's advancement, whereas 49 per cent of senior women did.⁶⁴

Jumping the gaps

Networks can serve as these sort of external and internal pressure groups which keep the issue of women's under-representation a live one. But by building a broad alliance of women in their membership, networks can also work through their loose, distributed structures to tackle some of the deeper and widely embedded barriers facing women in the workplace. A wealth of research over the last 20 years has exposed the invisible architecture of disadvantage that contains women at the bottom and middle levels of organisations. The glass ceiling over her head and the sticky floor under her feet are familiar tropes in the narratives of women's inequality at work. Yet of growing interest to researchers in recent years are the just as impenetrable walls on either side of her.

These are the unspoken conventions that limit opportunities for individuals to make strategic sideways moves that will increase their likelihood of upward progression in the longer term. For example, it is well known that individuals working in non-revenue generating functions are less likely to make their way up to board-level positions than those with experience of direct line responsibility. Higgs found the majority of non-executive directors in the UK to be 'typically white males nearing retirement age with previous PLC director experience'. The tendency to recruit new candidates with similar profiles and professional backgrounds, Higgs suggested, may 'implicitly discriminate against women', who tend to be more strongly represented 'in roles such as human resources, change management and customer care which are not regarded as traditional routes to the board'.⁶⁵

Higgs urged boards in the future to draw more actively from these functions when making appointments. Yet the old ways are difficult to shift. In a study of corporate boards, Ronald Burke found that there was a great deal of uncertainty among senior (that is, male) directors about female executives' ability to perform at this level due to lack of business or corporate experience.⁶⁶ And furthermore, as Burke points out, dedication and commitment in these lesser

functions is no passport to promotion, and may in fact make women's desired destinations even more distant; once you've performed well in these roles, it's difficult to negotiate moves into other functions.⁶⁷ Hence women often end up on the slower track to career development.

This is the problem that the Cabinet Office 'Elevator Partnership' initiative was designed to tackle. Senior women were matched with talented younger women whose careers had diverged from the traditional 'fast stream' route, in many cases taking them to unfamiliar specialisms and remote office locations, where career progression can be less clarified or straightforward.⁶⁸ This too is where networks can help to open doors. One of the aspects of the CSSWN most highly valued by interviewees is the cross-departmental nature of its membership. Busy and time-pressured senior managers rarely have the opportunity through the everyday course of their working day to engage with peers from other parts of the civil service. The network meetings are a welcome time-out for exactly this sort of inter-departmental interaction. In part, the benefits of this contact are broad: network members deepen their knowledge of the workings of Whitehall, and develop their understanding of how their work relates to that of others. Importantly though, it also opens the channels for horizontal mobility. Awareness of forthcoming job vacancies or secondment opportunities in the civil service is often about being 'in the know', and a cross-departmental network of women helps to ensure that this knowledge flows as easily to women as it does to men.

Obviously you'd still have the formal process, but it would be good to know of potential opportunities a few months in advance. It would give you the chance to have a think about it and maybe do some research.

Senior civil servant, woman

This function is true not only of government but of other large organisations with strongly demarcated internal borders between

departments and businesses. Becoming trapped within 'silos' is an ever-present danger in such vertically ordered institutions. Carole Plant, Managing Director of GE Mortgage Insurance in the UK and Ireland, sees GE's women's network as an aid to the flow and mobility of talent across the 11 businesses in 160 countries that make up GE:

As a multi-business company, there can be a tendency for individuals to get stuck within one unit and not move around. We know that we must move high-fliers around if we're to develop a common ground for leadership within the company and keep talent flowing. Bringing women together through the network seemed a good way of making women aware of opportunities in other parts of GE.

Contact sport

Meeting people you would not otherwise meet is the lifeblood of networks and networking. The ability to make contacts and then to cultivate those contacts into business relationships has rapidly become a core competency in the workplace, with employers benefiting in a variety of ways from their employees' social networks. As one corporate newsletter puts it: 'To enjoy lasting success, professionals need not only specialist knowledge, but also connections.'⁶⁹ Women's networks add an extra layer to the unique set of personal connections built up by their members over the course of a working lifetime. Where they particularly add value is in extending and sustaining over time the informal system of support that exists among women, and in making its rules of operation transparent. For example, the women's network at the City of Wakefield Metropolitan District Council (MDC) created a networking directory listing 80 women willing to support others in the organisation.⁷⁰ Even simply by joining or expressing support for the network, a woman can make it explicit that she is willing to be approached by other members and will welcome the opportunity to share her expertise and know-how.

It's the ease of access to people in the network between meetings that's really important. Knowing that you can pick up the phone, and that being on call is a commitment you make when you sign up to the network.

Senior civil servant, woman

These 'rules' help to make the networking game transparent. It also provides a means by which very senior women can manage their relationships with other women. Alongside its cross-departmental focus, the CSSWN is valued by its members for the space it creates to connect with peers – that is, with women who are operating under similar conditions with comparable levels of managerial responsibility. It has this in common with cross-industry networks for women at the top of their respective fields, such as First Forum and the Financial Mail Women's Forum.

This attention to one's place in the pecking order raises an important set of questions around the *quality* as well as the quantity of networking contacts. All networks operate to some extent on the principle of 'give and take', but there is a further distinction that needs to be made between reciprocity and 'patronage'. Some career self-help books will advise the novice networker to network indiscriminately – any contact at this stage could prove useful, and a favour done now could come good at some later point in the future. Yet for many women, especially those at a senior level with multiple demands on their time, extending a helping hand to every junior woman who hovers in view is simply a mathematical impossibility. There is a very real danger that where a network contains women with wildly varying levels of authority, the more senior members will sometimes feel that their experience is all give and little take.

This imbalance should not detract from the very real motivation and desire of many successful women to 'give something back' by helping younger women get on. This was a key theme among interviewees from the CSSWN, who described passing on 'tips' and 'work strategies' to their junior female staff, and suggested that the network could play a role in supporting greater contact between

senior and junior women in the civil service (see box 3.1). Ultimately, as Elizabeth Coffey suggests, the dilemma can be resolved by a pragmatic compromise based on the principle of balance:

Senior women will usually have time to be involved with perhaps two networks max, so some will choose to mix with their peers. But many also want to give something back, so will get involved with another network where they will speak to and mentor younger women.

Box 3.1 Top reasons for joining networks from surveyed sample (ranked in order of importance)

1. To make professional contacts
2. To support the advancement of women in my field
3. To learn new skills
4. To make friends
5. Because my employer suggested it

Making change for all women

This discussion leads us to revisit the tensions inherent in how highly placed women use the power at their disposal. Initiatives or research that focus on high-fliers are often vulnerable to charges of elitism; of being inappropriately concerned with the ambitions of a privileged shoulder-padded elite (who, of all women, are most able to take care of themselves), or, worst of all, of encouraging tokenism. In response, some might argue that simply by *being there*, high-profile women begin to disrupt the traditional identification of masculinity with power, and open the way for more women to follow. It is important, however, at the same time to ask whether women at Tyson's 'make-a-difference' level do indeed make a difference, or whether the 'comfort-fit' factor is simply too strong to resist. Harriet Harman, a regular commentator on women's issues in government, certainly believes the former, arguing that even women in clerical work or on the shop floor can benefit from feminised boardrooms, as women are 'much more

likely to understand the need for family-friendly work patterns and for flexibility and to recognise the importance of their earnings to the family budget'.⁷¹

Harman's assertion is supported by evidence of the activities of many networks, which, despite their ambivalence towards feminist ideology and language, have an established track record of lobbying on a broad range of issues related to the wider status of women. Business and Professional Women was involved in some of the earliest equality campaigns on women's pay and pensions in the 1940s, and today is an active member of the European Women's Lobby. In October 2003, Women in Journalism (WIJ) jointly hosted an event with equality pressure group Fawcett at the Labour Party Conference on the theme of representation of women in the media. WIJ also participated in a meeting convened by Women in Film and TV alongside DigitalEve and Fawcett to discuss shared goals for women in the sector. And finally, the National Black Women's Association co-hosted an event in January 2004 with the Women and Equality Unit in Westminster, which explored the experience of black and minority ethnic women in accessing childcare and childcare business support services. This selection of activities provides a taster of the sort of wider public role that networks can take on. Unlike the traditional pressure-group model, where a small central team sets the agenda and cascades the message down to local activists, networks work bottom up, using the experiences or passions of their members to identify the issues that they take forward.

Leading ladies

Exclusion from male networks doesn't only damage a woman's address book. It has implications for the opportunities she can access for personal and professional development, and hence for taking on leadership roles at the top of organisations. Leaders are not, as it was once thought, born into the world. Nor can effective leadership be understood or learnt by simply observing the behaviour of those deemed to be effective leaders. More recent thinking on the subject describes leadership in terms of a process of influencing followers or

staff by inspiring or ‘pulling’ them towards the ‘vision’ of some future state.⁷²

There is no foolproof method for developing these sorts of leaders. Many of our interviewees referred to a combination of elements: exposure to the right people at the right time; high-quality training and development; being given higher levels of responsibility and new opportunities that stretch and challenge. Accessing the ingredients that make up this potent career advancement cocktail is, however, not always a breeze for women. Laurel Powers-Freeling described the need to ‘set women up for success’ when they hit the point of transition to taking on broader leadership challenges across the whole organisation:

Men are perhaps better at identifying what they need to do, how they need to prepare themselves for making that transition, whereas women are more likely to focus on developing their skills within one part of the business.

Setting women up for success is where networks can help. In the first place, they can do this by changing the curriculum of professional development so as to be more responsive to women’s specific needs. This is by no means a new issue. Women-only Management Training (WOMT) has been provided in various forms within and outside organisations since the 1960s. However, some critics argue that WOMT is at risk of becoming a strategy by employers for papering over cracks in their performance on equality by pushing the problem on to the shoulders of women. Others argue that the very concept of WOMT frames women as ‘deficient’ and in need of ‘skilling up’ so as to perform on the same level as men.⁷³ Our research challenged some of those views. While women do not want employers to shirk their responsibilities, women also want to feel empowered in leading their own development:

I’m attracted to networks for the way in which they enable women to do things for themselves. They aren’t imposed by

management and have to rely on groundswells from the women themselves. They show that there can be a different way for women. It doesn't have to be management giving them the leg up.

Diversity manager, civil service

Research shows that involving women in the development and delivery of WOMT produces better learning outcomes.⁷⁴ Networks can help WOMT to take on a new energy and level of responsiveness, as well as designing development pathways that can be effectively 'mainstreamed' into the wider organisation. This is exactly what the Lloyds TSB Women's Network did when it established a 'Women's Development Week' at the company and devised a series of residential sessions in career development for female staff. The content for the sessions was very much user-led, drawing on ideas voiced by the network members themselves. Yet the modules produced by the network were regarded as so successful that they were adopted and adapted by human resources and mainstreamed into general executive training across the company. Thus the network helped to improve the quality of professional development for all employees.

In the second place, networks support women in playing to their strengths and making them count. If women have a deficiency, it's often found not in the range of skills and qualities they possess, but in their ability to identify and develop that talent in the interests of their careers. This was a frequent theme raised by interviewees, who spoke of talented female colleagues – women with a surplus of ability, but a professional myopia in deploying or marketing their skills and experience for the purpose of career advancement. One senior civil servant described a younger woman she had mentored a year earlier:

My mentee was very bright, very talented, but in a classically woman way, she wasn't really aware of her full abilities and talents. She had, for example, a very high level of project management skills, but saw them as specialist skills not transferable outside her own specialist context. I tried to encourage her to see herself in a different context.

Encouraging their members to see themselves in a different context is one of the ways networks develop leadership skills. Mentoring is a popular activity, offered by almost a third of the networks referred to in our survey. Many of the CSSWN interviewees were actively involved in mentoring both men and women, and some had benefited from having mentors themselves. Nonetheless, others suggested that overly formal mentoring programmes can be less successful than informal, self-organising arrangements, because so much rests on the quality of the personal relationship and the motivations of both mentor and mentee, a view that is supported by the literature.⁷⁵ Networks are well placed to bridge the gap between formal schemes and informal encounters, loosening the rigidity of the former and reducing the randomness of the latter. The MoD Bath/Bristol Women's Network plans to develop a directory of potential mentors as one of its first activities and to experiment with ways of creating opportunities for introductions between prospective mentors and mentees. Developing these sorts of programmes was a top priority among the CSSWN members too, and would appear to be a potential growth area of activity for women's networks.

Another way of shifting the context in which women see their skills is by getting involved in creating or organising networks themselves. At GE, the Women's Network is fully recognised by management, and female employees are encouraged to see getting involved as a rich opportunity for developing leadership qualities. Networks often offer a platform for members to showcase their own projects and hone their public speaking skills. For example, at one meeting of the CSSWN, a member gave a talk on her secondment experience in the private sector. At Hightech-Women, members with relevant expertise are encouraged to put themselves forward as contributors in '360 degree' discussions of business issues. Others, such as WiM, encourage members to apply for public appointments and senior roles in voluntary organisations as a way of securing further development and profile-building opportunities. In addition, through speaker-led events, networks expose their members to female role models whose personal biographies have the power to inspire.

The Women's Voices Network, created and run by the Scottish Leadership Foundation, offers a highly popular event called 'Sharing for Success', in which three senior women, selected for their experience and achievement, share their personal stories with the group. Jane Mudd, Director of Development at the Foundation, describes it thus:

The brief is loose to encourage a diversity of style and approach. The level of honesty and openness is incredible. They are sharing the learning from experience – the stuff you can't get from a textbook.

All these activities help to create a culture in which high aspirations and success for women are the norm. Too often women fail to push themselves into the sight-lines of those on the look-out for talent. As Vinnicombe observes, 'A problem that many women have is that they focus all their energies on their jobs and assume that this will get them promoted.'⁷⁶ In reality, women need to be more upfront with senior managers about both their past successes and future aspirations. There is a well-documented tendency for women managers to be overly modest about their own skills and talents or to give their teams the credit.⁷⁷ By normalising female success and ambition, networks can make it easier for women to take ownership of their achievements on their own terms.

Research: findings

- 14% of survey respondents set up a women's network themselves, or had been one of the founder group responsible for setting it up

Avoiding backlash

The previous chapter discussed the reservations that many women hold with regard to adopting separatist career advancement strategies. It is a dilemma faced by the leaders of networks too, who

have developed a range of counter-strategies for managing the risks inherent in creating women-only initiatives. Most commonly, these risks entail being labelled variously as ‘girly groups’; ‘mothers’ meetings’; ‘knitting circles’; or, perhaps most offensively, ‘the witches’ coven’. These tags betray the extent to which a meeting of women without the presence of men in a workplace setting is still regarded as either something of a curiosity or something rather sinister. This is despite the fact that all-male gatherings pass by frequently in many organisations without attracting comment of any kind. It also explains why some women are anxious that their involvement with networks does not become common knowledge. One network was requested by several members not to use their work emails in any correspondence, for fear that colleagues would find out. As a result, network leaders are highly aware of the need to promote a tone of seriousness in order to be seen as credible either within the organisation or industry. At Lloyds TSB, the committee decided for strategic reasons to avoid activities traditionally associated with women, such as fashion shows or shopping:

It was felt important that we provide some quality input linked to the business, while acknowledging the significance of being women. It is constantly a fine line to walk.

Laurel Powers-Freeling

The other tension at the heart of women’s networks is perhaps the most obvious one. If women need to extend their network of contacts, why limit themselves only to other women – especially in a world when the people with the most power are still more likely to be male? The barriers to women’s inclusion in male networks have been extensively discussed in chapter two, yet most networks see their ultimate objective as supporting constructive gender relations in the workplace rather than setting themselves up as rivals. They do this by involving men in their activities in a variety of ways. Some allow men full and equal membership; others grant them associate membership or admittance to specified events as guests; and others invite men as

speakers at seminars, conferences or dinners. Carole Plant believes that encouraging men to attend network events is an effective way of facilitating a collective discussion of how the dynamics of gender play out in the workplace and how to treat both men and women fairly:

It's useful in terms of understanding better how men and women operate differently in the workplace, and how they should be assessed in terms of results rather than how they set about achieving them. This is good for managers who are responsible for staff appraisals.

DAWN too has policy of open membership which includes Asian and non-Asian men and non-Asian women. As executive director and co-founder Manisha Dahad puts it:

I'm keen that DAWN catalyses the integration of Asian women into the mainstream – that it shouldn't be a force for segregation. Our activities are aimed at leading Asian women to higher levels of success. We constantly work with this objective to widen our reach and involve leading edge thinking across the board from other cultures, nationalities, and gender. And I welcome the growing interest from other groups in the Asian women space.

Getting involved in women's networks therefore helps women to increase their visibility among other women *and* men, in some cases – where male business leaders take an active personal interest in developing women's talent – the most senior men at that. But it may be true that networks which operate a tighter women-only policy also assist women in 'managing upwards', if only through the increased confidence or networking skills that members develop through the network and then are free to deploy elsewhere. The chief point is that being involved in a women's network does not preclude women from developing broader professional relationships with both sexes – a fear voiced by many non-networkers in the survey; in many cases, enhancing women's ability to do so is their explicit object.

Nonetheless, this tension remains a live one, so network leaders must constantly balance inclusion of men with protecting a safe space for women. And it is not the only tension. This chapter has focused on acceleration: how more women can propel themselves to the top and faster, and how they can help other women coming up behind them once they're there. There is, however, another dimension to women's working lives – one rooted in qualitative experience, in the conflicts between professional and domestic responsibilities, and in the complexities of women's multiple identities and roles. Networks create a space for women to articulate the psychosocial dimensions of being female and professional, and in this way create new knowledge and alternative narratives about organisations and about work. It is to this knowledge that the next chapter turns.

4. We are not alone

women bringing themselves to work

Women go missing in organisations because they are overlooked, or stuck in the wrong job, or because they don't put themselves forward at promotion time. But they also go missing because they leave. Glass ceilings and sticky floors may provide the motivation, but it's the open windows and doors that allow female talent to leave the building. This exit phenomenon appears to be a growing trend among professional women. A study recently carried out by Catalyst found that as many as 60 per cent of mid-career women in corporate America are packing in their jobs in favour of lower-pressure work environments, business start-ups or family responsibilities.⁷⁸ Research on a similar scope has yet to be carried out in the UK, but there is evidence to suggest that the trends are in the same direction away from the boardroom; women are now starting 35 per cent of all new businesses, and apparently relishing the rich offerings of life outside the corporation.⁷⁹

Some prominent voices have argued that these choices should be recognised for what they are – that is, as active choices on the part of women in an era of unprecedented opportunity. As one well-known woman entrepreneur recently put it: 'Women can make it to the top if they want to – the barriers are down. A lot of women are walking away from corporations and institutions because they want to live and work differently, not because anyone is forcing them out.'⁸⁰ This view is further reinforced by studies showing how increasing numbers

of women are rejecting the greasy pole in favour of the climbing frame. Drawing on research by Catherine Hakim, one recent think-tank study finds that fewer than 20 per cent of women in the UK are 'work-centred', with the remainder choosing to be either entirely 'home-centred' or to combine childcare with part-time work.⁸¹ Mary Lou Quinlan, who stepped down as CEO of US advertising agency N.W. Ayer in 1998, summed it up succinctly:

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. It's not about talent, dedication, experience, or the ability to take the heat. Women simply say, 'I just don't like that kitchen'.⁸²

The only way is out?

So women walk because they want to? Evidence from women's networks partially supports this line of argument. Networks can, under extreme circumstances, help their members make the final decision to leave their place of work. One interviewee described a corporate network set up by management for the purpose of tackling the barriers facing women in the organisation. In reality, it created a space for open discussion of the wider workplace culture, which confirmed the suspicion of a number of participants that there was no future for them there. Other networks outside the workplace may have the effect of exposing women to alternative career pathways and help them to recognise that they have options. In other cases, networks do help to retain women, but not in entirely positive ways. For one interviewee, the corporate network offered a lifeline which made life just about bearable in an otherwise hostile environment. Another concluded that: 'networks compensate for all the other disadvantages that women have to face.' In other words, networks can be necessary for survival.

This view from the office battleground supports the picture of women increasingly turning their backs on corporate Britain. But it suggests too that this is as much a 'push' as it is a 'pull' phenomenon. The important question is whether when women leave, they do so in

search of new challenges, feeling that their contribution has been valued and their talent developed to the full. For some women, rejection of mainstream workplaces and traditional career trajectories may indeed be a reflection of exactly this. However, it's difficult to swallow the logical conclusion – that organisations are gender-neutral places in which men and women have equal chances of progression – given the evidence to the contrary. Laura Tyson certainly thinks not: 'To call this a "choice" is too simplistic. Why do women make that choice so often? Yes, women walk away because they want to, but also because they feel they have to.'⁸³

Lack of ambition, it would seem, isn't the problem. Indeed, the very formation of networks to support their careers would imply that women value professional success highly. In fact, one recent survey found that women managers were highly ambitious with 56 per cent aspiring to a board-level position.⁸⁴ But if ambition isn't the problem then organisational culture definitely is. Nearly all the women interviewed by Coffey et al identified this as the hardest thing they had to deal with, and those in particularly hostile or unreconstructed workplaces found themselves considering their position on a daily basis: 'not because they had ceased to be interested in the work, but because of the unremitting stand-off between the culture and their values-based style of leadership.'⁸⁵ Many of the women who do jump ship have the scars to prove it. A survey of highly qualified women in the US who'd left their careers mainly for family reasons found that most respondents felt their decision had been forced upon them by long working weekends, unsympathetic employers and inflexible workplaces.⁸⁶ The cost of staying can be immense, as one interviewee suggested:

Women feel enormous pressure to be successful and to be seen to be successful, and often that means sacrificing more than is really fair.

Senior civil servant, woman

Often the sacrifice relates to family. Despite substantial progress on statutory paid paternity leave and in extending family-friendly

working policies to all parents, women still take on the lion's share of day-to-day responsibility for childcare within the household.⁸⁷ This can, in fact, make it difficult for women with caring responsibilities to participate in women's networks as often as they would like (a difficulty that is only slightly eased by networks which choose to hold their events at lunchtime). This unequal division of labour in the home explains why three-quarters of part-time employees in professional occupations are women,⁸⁸ and why flexible career schemes or family-friendly working practices are more likely to be taken up by women than by men.⁸⁹ Those flexible options are not bad news in themselves – for many women they are a godsend. Yet they do suffer from stigmatisation, becoming equated with lower-status (and often lower-paid), slower-moving 'mommy track' careers.⁹⁰ The trend for women rather than their partners to work flexibly when children arrive is explained by a combination of financial necessity (men, on average, earn more than women) and slow movement in attitudes towards men as carers. A recent focus group study exploring trends within the family found that women typically have very low expectations of the contribution that they can expect from their partners when it comes to childcare. The study concluded: 'there was a strong sense that women have to make more fundamental changes to their lives when having children than men.'⁹¹

Thank you for sharing

So how do networks fit into this picture? Clearly the scenario in which networks propel women out or persuade them to stay – dangling on all but the thinnest of threads – is not a desirable one. This may, however, be a case of degree. It was felt by many interviewees that the safe space for reflection and sharing created by networks *can* be a legitimate one, so long as it doesn't become all-consuming.

It's handy to chew the cud with other women. Sometimes you wonder if you're going mad, and the reassurance can be hugely valuable.

Senior civil servant, woman

At my level there aren't many other women, and it's just very useful to be able to share experiences. It can be tough for women at senior levels, and it's good to know that other women are going through the same thing.

Senior civil servant, woman

There are huge pressures put on senior managers these days, and the network provides a safe environment in which women are able to speak freely and discuss sensitive issues.

Senior civil servant, woman

This sharing process can involve bringing to the surface the gendering processes in the workplace which disadvantage women, whether that's being mistaken for a PA, being asked to make the tea, being spoken over at meetings or feeling unable to participate in a conversation about sport in the down-time before a meeting starts. These are all examples of, as one interviewee put it, 'the very small ways in which I am excluded as a woman', but which have a cumulative impact in creating unique and gendered forms of stress.

There's still not enough recognition of how being a woman in a male-dominated environment means there are challenges in terms of style of operation and behaviour in particular.

Questionnaire respondent

Women are not as aggressive as men (as a group) and may be shouted down in meetings, and again there is a slight difference in style. . . . We need to address these differences without having to apologise for them

Questionnaire respondent

I had a female boss who told me that women have to have bigger briefcases than men – because they have to pick up a pint of milk on the way home.

Senior civil servant, woman

Often, sharing frustrations within networks leads to forms of self-help and mutual exchange, as women identify common experiences and swap personal strategies for dealing with the stresses and strains they variously encounter. Coffey likens this aspect of networks to the North American tradition of quilting, in which women would gather together to work on the quilt, exchanging stories and experiences as they worked.

The women are all doing something communally – with networks it's often sharing a meal – and talking about their issues, telling stories and sharing tips.

In this light, women's networks should be valued for their role in offering friendship, an aspect that can be neglected in more hard-headed analyses of the benefits of networking. Almost half of questionnaire respondents reported having extended their network of friends as an outcome of network membership. Sustaining pre-existing friendships can also be a function of women's networks. Some have been explicitly created to support contact between women who had previously shared some sort of professional experience, such as 85 Broads for current and past employees of Goldman Sachs.

Research: findings

- 48% of women reported having extended their network of friends as a result of network membership

Going for it

A valuable by-product of the emotional support of this kind for women is confidence. This was reported as a key networking outcome by over a third of survey respondents, and mentioned frequently by interviewees as one of the top priorities for advancing women's careers. This concern is further supported by the literature, which shows that women constantly rate themselves lower than men on confidence, and on general performance mark themselves lower

in ‘360 degree’ feedback processes than others mark them.⁹² This can translate into a visible squeamishness about self-promotion. Coffey et al noted a lack of self-confidence among their interviewees and a marked tendency to attribute success to luck rather than ability. Similarly, these women felt embarrassed about ‘blowing one’s own trumpet’, an activity that they felt that comes more easily to men.⁹³

Research: findings

- 35% of respondents said they had gained in confidence as a result of being part of a women’s network

This is a big deal. Being confidence-poor and reluctant to push oneself into the limelight has very real implications for women’s careers. Susan Vinnicombe sees confidence as the key to self-esteem and drive: ‘When women are confident they are more resilient in handling the “barriers” facing women. In fact, they go further by seemingly programming themselves not to see barriers.’⁹⁴ When women lack confidence, this leads to self-doubt, questioning one’s competence and feeling isolated – hardly the best frame of mind in which to pursue a career. Carole Plant believes that an important role for the GE Women’s Network is in helping members to learn how to cope positively with rejection:

If we’re encouraging more women to put themselves forward for senior roles, then we have to prepare them for ‘coming second’. I think that men are perhaps better at this, whereas women have a tendency to internalise failure. We have to make sure that the network helps them to bounce back and persevere.

Senior women are particularly at risk of falling down the ‘visibility–vulnerability spiral’ which comes as part of the package of being a successful woman in a man’s world. Subject to intense scrutiny and frequent criticism because of their minority status, it is little wonder that their confidence gets knocked.⁹⁵ The bedrock of

support provided by networks can help women to develop emotional resilience in the face of such setbacks and rejections.

Who cares?

Nonetheless, it's hard to be confident when the distinguishing feature of your life is stress. Few men *or* women succeed in managing their work and home lives in perfect harmony. Yet those with caring responsibilities outside the workplace face particular challenges in holding body and soul together. Networks can be good fora for uncovering some of the complexities attached to these demanding roles and for exploring the diversity of experience among women. The CSSWN, for example, has a mixture of members with children, and members without. There are a few who had children early and made it through, and a great many more who left it relatively late and are now combining high pressure jobs with young children – and often elderly parents too. Network meetings have been instructive in shedding light on the way domestic situations can shape priorities and choices. For women with caring responsibilities, maintaining a certain level of flexibility in their lives can be more important than pay and promotion, despite knowing how far their talent and ability could take them; women without children recognise that they have been unencumbered by many of the typical career obstacles facing women, but at what cost to their personal lives?

There may be a role for networks in raising awareness of these complexities within organisations. Some civil service departments have established childcare networks and part-timer networks to help develop best practice and consider the distinctive issues facing the sizeable proportion of the workforce that does not conform to the model of full-time, uninterrupted work traditionally pursued by men. Networks may also be able to provide more practical support with regard to sharing information about childcare provision or advice on how to negotiate flexible working options with line managers. The Women's Returners' Network, for example, exists for the specific purpose of helping women get back into the workplace after taking breaks, and the City of Wakefield MDC's women's

network has run sessions on the impact on pensions of maternity leave or reduced hours.⁹⁶ WFTV finds that many of its freelance members struggle to get back into work in the absence of formal organisational structures or employers' policies, and tries to help where it can.

There is, however, a paradox in this. Participation in networks requires a time commitment in itself, which many women with caring responsibilities may not be in a position to make, as many interviewees and survey respondents pointed out. If women are based in remote locations where there are too few women to sustain a local network, attendance may also require travel, which can be prohibitive for carers. This is a worrying trend. These sorts of practical constraints are, after all, the key factors excluding women from men's 'out-of-hours' networks. There is something seriously wrong if women's networks perpetuate the same exclusion, privileging only those without family commitments. Elizabeth Coffey believes that networks, wherever possible, should schedule their events at times when women are able to take time out to attend. This is often over the lunch hour:

Women want to feel productive. They are often under various time pressures and have only so much of what I would call discretionary free time. That's why the lunch period is really good for networks – women feel able to take that time out.

Another option for networks is to vary the frequency, timing and format of meetings and events, offering a mix that women can choose from. These networks recognise that their capacity to support women throughout different stages of their professional lives is seriously compromised by scheduling patterns that cannot easily accommodate those with caring responsibilities. Additionally, corporate networks become far more accessible to women where employers allow time off to attend events and offer to reimburse or subsidise travel costs.

Creating jobs that people want to do

This discussion raises the larger question about how organisations

design jobs and structure careers. There is nothing ‘natural’ or timeless about how individuals perform work. The ‘career’ is in fact a mid-twentieth century middle-class invention, a product of the growth of large corporations and reflected in the rise of the archetypal ‘organisation man’, with his specialised knowledge and uninterrupted service, his loyalty to the firm rewarded with the security of a job for life and a gold watch on retirement.⁹⁷ Career structures have changed dramatically over the past 30 years as a result of widespread restructuring, new technologies and pressures on quality of service. Some argue that it is time to rethink the concept of career entirely, moving towards looser models of lifelong learning or work practice.⁹⁸

In this context, women’s atypical work patterns and distinctive leadership styles have been described as being ahead of their time, a symbol of what could be standard practice for all in the workplace of the future.⁹⁹ And yet, institutions are slow to grasp this prospect. Despite the prominence given to transformational leadership and ‘boundaryless’ careers in the management literature, the more familiar bureaucratic model of work is not yet a thing of the past. Narrowly conceived person specifications ensure that competent managers and safe pairs of hands still get the job; despite the rise of home-working, a culture of presenteeism still reigns supreme in many offices in the UK; and for all the buzz around achieving ‘balance’ in our lives, there is a strong and widespread perception that for the most senior roles giving anything less than 110 per cent to your employer simply will not do. One recent study revealed the extent to which many employers are unwilling to allow women in senior positions to work flexibly for fear of the impact on service quality.¹⁰⁰

Yet, increasingly, workers are less willing to give that extra 10 per cent if it means compromising their personal integrity or losing sight of the values that define who they are. This appears to be a particularly high priority for women, whose dissatisfaction with traditional workplace settings are leading them, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, towards more fulfilling alternatives that allow them to be true to themselves. Often this involves becoming

what Body Shop founder Anita Roddick has described as ‘creative outsiders’: one of the wave of entrepreneurs, freelancers and consultants making change happen in the cracks and gaps between corporations and public institutions. Sahar Hashemi, co-founder of Coffee Republic, described in a recent interview why she quit her City job to start up her own business: ‘I wanted work that lets me be myself. . . . There used to be two options: a career or kids. Either or. In the gap in between is where the women entrepreneurs are. They’re reinventing work for women.’¹⁰¹

For such creative outsiders, networking – building relationships, crossing boundaries, making connections – is at the very core of what they do, central to their personal identity, a way in which to operate as a professional.¹⁰² This is becoming true too for individuals in large organisations, where horizontal relationships across internal boundaries matter equally if not more for learning and innovating than formal line management structures.¹⁰³ Finding ways to build trust and social capital as well as upholding a principle of equity within such a complex, fast-moving business and policy climate is a major challenge for employers. To this end, women’s networks themselves may be pilot sites for pioneering new ways in which to be professional. One interviewee suggested that networks are spaces where traditional forms of interaction within organisational hierarchies are set aside and individuals relate to each other with their whole identities intact.

Networks are where people behave as peers even if they aren’t. They step out of their ‘box’ in the organisation. It’s where there doesn’t have to be a separation between your work focus and the rest of your life, or at least the boundary becomes much more permeable. It’s not about work–life balance. Your work and your life are integrated.

Senior civil servant, woman

The combination of informal face-to-face relationships with the ‘network technologies’ described above – that is, their flexibility,

distributed structures, and ability to cross boundaries – represents a potent tool for organisations. Networks may provide clues as to how to spread information, enable learning, *and* build trust and solidarity throughout an organisational culture, while providing individuals with an outlet for pursuing personal development and career advancement. The question then becomes one of using women's networks as a starting point for developing these capacities more widely throughout an organisation or across an industry.

Conclusion

One interviewee recalled writing an essay for her entrance exam to Oxford in the mid-1970s. Her subject matter was the new sex equality legislation outlawing pay and sex discrimination: 'I remember thinking at the time that things were going to change dramatically for women.' Over the course of the next 20 years she realised that the new dawn had still not broken. 'The reality is that things move very slowly. After a while it wears you out and you stop pushing. A network can give you the energy you need to keep going.'

As the new millennium rolls on, women need as much energy as they can muster to keep pushing for careers that give them the fulfilment and personal satisfaction they seek. Their employers, too, need to stay on this forward trajectory, and networks may be one way of keeping on the move, as the next chapter will explore.

5. The bottom line

what employers need to know about networks

In their classic of 1976, *The Managerial Woman*, Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardim describe the corporate workplace to their female readers as if it were a foreign country, whose customs and language they must learn if they are to survive. Their outlook is bleak: 'It is after all going to be a long time before the men's world of business becomes anything like a people's place of work. Millions of women will spend an entire career life living and working in a culture whose traditions, rules and implicit codes are derived from the male experience.'¹⁰⁴ Almost 30 years later, we can confidently say that things *have* changed for women, despite pockets of stubborn resistance where inequality is rife. For a start, employers today are much more actively aware of gender as a factor shaping each individual's experience of work, and of the need to recognise differences in order to treat all individuals fairly and develop their talent to the full. For the most forward-looking employers, this commitment is not simply a reflection of dutiful compliance to equal opportunities legislation, but a profound appreciation of how diversity in all its forms is integral to good decision-making.

Women's networks, therefore, in so far as they impact upon gender diversity at work, must be integrated within this larger paradigm of organisational change. This, after all, is their ultimate object. Women want success, and they want to be treated with respect. But they also want to work for organisations that get the most out of them and that

enable them to be the best they can be in their jobs. If the workplace is still too often a foreign land for women, then the last thing they want is a phrasebook or survival kit to help them to go native. What women need are ways into a wider process for recreating organisational cultures in the image of all the diverse and talented individuals who have something to offer. In this task, networks – especially corporate networks, with their position within specific workplaces – are well placed. But just how should employers and network leaders work together to transform the alien landscape of work into a homeland in which all can flourish?

The missing link

The ‘business case’ for diversity has enjoyed increasing visibility in recent years, rapidly becoming the dominant analytical framework in which equality and diversity policy gets made. In a recent survey as many as 80 per cent of employers recognised a direct link between diversity performance and business performance.¹⁰⁵ The more specific case for gender diversity is also widely documented. One of the most recent studies of 353 Fortune 500 companies in the US demonstrates a link between gender diversity in the composition of top management teams and financial performance.¹⁰⁶ And in the UK, the 2003 Female FTSE Index found a similar link between corporate performance and the presence of women directors on boards.¹⁰⁷ With such evidence before them, employers fall into complacency at their peril. As one management expert observes: ‘the recruitment, hiring and development of managerial women is increasingly seen as a bottom-line issue related to corporate success.’¹⁰⁸

This is a particularly strong current within the public sector, where 87 per cent of employers surveyed recognise the link between diversity and business performance, compared with a lower 71 per cent of private sector companies.¹⁰⁹ The reasons for this heightened awareness are inevitably linked to the high number of women as well as black and minority ethnic staff employed by the state. In 2001, women accounted for 47 per cent of public administration staff, 72 per cent of those working in education, and 80 per cent of those

employed in health and social work.¹¹⁰ In response to the demographic profile of their workforce, many public sector employers have become exemplary in offering flexible working options to their staff – 95 per cent of local authorities offered flexitime in 2000, and 94 per cent offered job-sharing¹¹¹ – making them an attractive prospect for many women. Flexibility, however, is not synonymous with development. We have already seen in the previous chapter the toll that working flexibly can take on a woman's longer-term career prospects. This is borne out too in our survey, which reveals that only a third of respondents believe that women's professional development needs in the public sector are adequately met. Some of the views expressed are included in box 5.1 below.

Box 5.1 In general, women's professional development needs in the public sector are:

- fully met 0%
- adequately met 33%
- inadequately met 47%
- not met at all 3%
- don't know 12%
- no answer 5%

Professional development tends to be restricted to quite a narrow field

Women have been a minority in the settings I have experienced. Although attitudes have improved I do not feel that our needs are believed to be different and therefore are not met by senior management. So nothing changes very quickly

Professional development of a CEO and leadership are still seen as luxuries and we still wrestle with fairly male definitions of a machismo/strength model of leadership

It seems to me that there are fewer opportunities than ever before for women to consider their position as women managers. Particularly in the public sector there is a view that women have made it – what's the problem?

I feel that there is no one who has any interest or concern about my continuing professional development. Job changes are very much the result of my own initiative (which is as I would want it), but there is no sense of the organisation identifying future career directions, or offering any specific support to develop the competencies that might be needed

A little less conversation, a little more networks

This disconnection between employer awareness on the one hand and professional development outcomes for women on the other needs to be addressed with some urgency. The problem, as many employers recognise, is that having top managers who understand the business case and support ongoing diversity initiatives and programmes is not in itself a guarantee of progress. The challenge of getting diversity to 'bed down' across organisations at all levels was frequently referred to by the diversity experts interviewed for this research. Efforts to change or shape working practices often risk becoming the dreaded 'tick-box exercise', privileging the clocking-up of outputs at the expense of concrete outcomes. In practical terms, business case arguments can feel abstract and woolly to the busy manager struggling to meet tight deadlines day in day out. As one interviewee suggested, the practice of cascading out central initiatives in a drive to change behaviour overlooks the extent to which short-term priorities dictate working life on the ground:

We have a culture whereby everyone gets their heads down and pushes on with the job in hand. It's often diversity considerations that are the first to go.

Diversity manager, civil service

It is often suggested that the solution lies in building wider employee 'ownership' of the diversity agenda. By engaging as many staff as possible in elaborating the business case, employers can ensure that this agenda enters the 'organisational bloodstream', resulting in behavioural changes rather than mere lip-service attention.¹¹² The million-dollar question, of course, is what such ownership looks like in practice. Some voices from the equality lobby argue that the only way to shift organisational cultures that fail to develop women to the full fast enough is through legislation, or at least the threat of legislation at some later date. It's certainly true that in many cases, the policy of voluntarism hasn't produced significant outcomes very fast. In the light of this failure, some argue that the 'positive duty' to promote race equality introduced for all public bodies through the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 should be extended to include gender, as it has provided an impetus for many employers to make race diversity an organisational priority in internal working practices.¹¹³

While legislation will always have a role to play, there are also many powerful examples of where voluntary initiatives, informed by the business case and managed in the right way, *have* delivered significant improvements in diversity performance. For example, when BT introduced home working for its staff, it saw a 96 per cent return rate following maternity leave, and a saving of around £220 million on real estate costs.¹¹⁴ This is where networks enter the frame, with their ability to address some of the informal barriers to women's progression that often remain untouched by diversity policies that focus on changing formal structures. From the outset, it is crucial not to over-claim for networks; they are not a universal solution to the problems of embedding diversity, and are at the same risk of becoming a token gesture or a box to tick if they aren't supported in the right ways. Yet networks, with their participatory and dynamic structures, do contain the thread that connects the key principles at stake, that is: legitimacy, ownership and capacity.

As we have seen, women's networks can exert an animating effect on a whole range of more familiar initiatives and strategies, be they

mentoring programmes, professional development modules or management training. They also have the potential to feed into and add value to a much wider range of common diversity practices and organisational change processes. Each of these is treated in greater depth below.

1. We are the champions

Diversity may need to ‘bed down’ throughout every layer of an organisation, but for many who work in this field, going straight to the top is a good place to start. Often this involves appointing various ‘champions’ at a senior level to keep the issue live. Opportunity Now defines a gender champion as a ‘board-level promoter of gender diversity or equality,’ and argues that ‘the causes gender champions are engaged to fight for are crucially important and will affect the culture of every organisation they touch.’¹¹⁵ Networks can support champions in this role by providing high-quality intelligence on the experiences of women throughout the organisation, and in strengthening the authority of champions to speak on the gender issue. All the diversity networks in the Department for Work and Pensions have board-level champions, who provide direct channels between staff and decision-makers. Many of the corporate networks formed in the late 1990s also serve as a conduit allowing this sort of knowledge to flow up the hierarchy. Several started life as impromptu councils of wise women, as concerned CEOs gathered their senior women around them to find out what was going wrong in developing female talent in the company.

Senior women often provide the first stop for the leadership once gender diversity is identified as an organisational priority, and the creation of a network is one effective strategy for sustaining that interest and leading it towards action. Equally, where women’s progression isn’t on the radar screen, a well-organised women’s network, rich in organisational knowledge, can help to make the case. Many networks invite senior figures to be their sponsors or to host events, and others secure regular meetings with board members to review progress made on women’s advancement within the

organisation. Persuading senior figures to make a stand on diversity issues, one interviewee from the senior civil service suggested, is of considerable symbolic significance:

It says something about a department that they have a women's network, and networks for gay people, and for ethnic minorities and the disabled. Often the figureheads for networks are quite senior, prominent people, and it says a lot that they feel it is important.

2. Target practice

Of all the elements of the current government's strategy to transform public services, targets have suffered perhaps the most sustained battering from critics. Deemed as irksome, a slur on the professional judgement of key workers, or a road to unintended consequences and perverse outcomes, targets have been cast as the villains of the piece. Diversity experts tend to hold their noses, too, seeing targets or quotas as remnants of the days when 'equal opportunities' was shorthand for playing the numbers game. As one expert puts it: 'Targets are a potential problem within a diversity-oriented organisation in that they focus attention on the numbers of people employed from different groups rather than the quality of the processes used in selecting them.'¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, diversity targets have their advocates too. For example, the civil service was charged in 1999 to increase the number of women and minority ethnic employees in the senior civil service by specified margins by 2004/5. These targets, although never ends in themselves, have served the purpose of concentrating minds and informing action, especially within departments with the worst records on promoting under-represented groups.

Is there a role for women's networks in making targets perform better? Quite possibly. At one meeting of the CSSWN, members studied key data demonstrating progress made to date by different departments against the service-wide diversity targets. For several interviewees, this was the first time they had engaged in depth with

these trends, and they greatly benefited from understanding the distinctive challenges facing different departments and the variation in rates of progress across the civil service. One interviewee felt that she was in a much stronger position to support efforts to meet the targets in her own department having engaged so thoroughly with a rich set of data and extended group discussion. Networks may be the key to developing this sort of distributed leadership and legitimacy for potentially difficult issues such as diversity targets. Communication of central initiatives or priorities in many large organisations operate through a uni-directional 'broadcast' model, when often the most powerful means of getting a message out is to use the horizontal, network-based strategies of viral marketing, which rely on peer-to-peer transfer of knowledge or ideas. While this approach must tap into the web of informal connections that link all individuals in a system, formal diversity networks may be a good place to start.

3. Making it count

A related but less directive force for raising awareness of the diversity agenda is the strategic collation, analysis and deployment of data. 'If you don't measure it, you can't manage it' is a truism for all areas of an organisation's operations, yet the effective management of knowledge as a means to more informed diversity strategies has been relatively neglected. Denise Kingsmill made this case in her 2001 review of women's pay and employment, arguing that, 'the failure to properly utilise or manage human capital, of which diversity is a key part, exposes a company to the same type and scale of risk as failure to manage financial or other resources.'¹¹⁷ In the follow-up report of the Task Force on Human Capital Management, Kingsmill recommended that the reporting of human capital management information should be included by all companies and public bodies in their Operating and Financial Reviews.¹¹⁸

In a post-Enron world, this sort of routine reporting is a crucial component of corporate governance and public accountability. The creation of publicly available data sets such as the Cranfield Female

FTSE Index on women's board representation, or the biannual disclosure of civil service diversity data, in themselves push employers to put their houses in order. Even where there are few media headlines, diversity statistics can be deployed internally to promote change, for example, by holding managers accountable for equality and diversity outcomes, or even by linking their performance on this score to pay and promotion. One interviewee remarked on the ripples of concern she detected in her department in the mid-1970s when gender statistics began to be collected. Applying for Investors in People status was mentioned by another as providing an impetus for reassessing working practices and processes.

Women's networks should be integrated in this framework of accountability and good governance. One of the potential risks attached to too close a focus on quantitative data is the relative neglect of contextualising qualitative accounts of what this data might mean for individuals on the ground. Another is the tendency to collect monitoring data but to fail to invite staff feedback or dialogue on that data.¹¹⁹ Networks, as we have seen, are a rich source of insight into the 'thick description' of how gender is organised in workplace settings. They already provide informal soundings to employers through gender champions or consultations with senior figures. The knowledge that flows through women's networks tends to be 'tacit' – that is, unofficial and informal, locked inside the heads of the members. Few networks currently seek to record or document these instances of knowledge transfer. The question is whether they could be captured in more systematic ways to support the collation and analysis of harder forms of data, without overly formalising the relationships in which they take place.

4. Innovation

Better information means better policies and more initiatives that are likely to have a real impact on increasing diversity at work. The previous chapters have set out how women's networks can contribute to the design of high-quality materials to meet training and professional development needs. In this way, networks represent a

source of additional capacity within organisations for trying out new ways of doing diversity. This sort of capacity for innovation within organisations is of paramount importance when dealing with complex, dynamic problems which prove resistant to the sort of off-the-peg solutions for which we still too commonly and instinctively reach, often in vain.¹²⁰ In the civil service, for example, responsibility for diversity is devolved to individual departments (although they are all bound to the service-wide targets). Departmental networks thus form part of the structures and capacities that exist for developing and implementing diversity initiatives, and cross-departmental networks assume an 'umbrella' role in joining up efforts across the piece. For example, the Civil Service Race Equality Network, the Civil Service Disability Network and the Civil Service Rainbow Alliance (for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender staff) all provide a learning space for diversity practitioners and other staff interested in thinking about diversity policy and practice.

This would imply an explicit learning agenda for networks across all the diversity strands. There are already examples of good practice, where networks actively engage with each other to share information and explore opportunities for collaboration. For example, at GE, leaders from all the global networks attend joint meetings in order to share best practice. The gender network within the Disability and Carers Directorate at the Department for Work and Pensions meets regularly with networks covering other diversity strands to ensure that issues of multiple discrimination or disadvantage are covered. There is also inevitably a fair degree of overlapping memberships and networking between network leaders that helps to build relations between different groups in the workplace and ensure that connections are made between strand-specific issues. For example, in the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA), the departmental Rainbow Network and PROUD, the race equality network, work closely together. Chris Park, Chair of the DCA Rainbow Network and the cross-departmental Civil Service Rainbow Alliance, believes that there is much room for cross-strand collaboration:

While the issues are different for different groups, there are huge commonalities, and we can achieve a great deal by working together.

Nonetheless, it is possible that learning and collaboration is an area that will require further exploration by network leaders and employers if the capacities of networks for innovation are to be fully realised. Relations between networks and human resources departments, for example, vary greatly, and may require further clarity in some cases. This point relates to the prior question mark over how networks capture and share their knowledge. ‘Communities of practice’ and ‘peer learning’ are familiar concepts for professionals, and refer to the ways in which practitioners collectively reflect on and seek to improve their shared practice. Where the focus is on policy and practice, these concepts may be helpful for diversity networks too. Yet women’s networks, as we have seen in the previous chapters, create relationships that are founded on not just a shared professional identity, but a shared *gendered* identity, linked to a shared understanding of how women’s working lives differ from those of men. Indeed, it has been argued earlier that networks could represent a force for challenging traditional conceptions of what it means to be professional. How learning and innovation take place within and between networks and their respective constituencies is a question warranting further research.

The difference women make

Despite the limited scope of this study, it is clear that networks – both women’s and those attached to other diversity strands – are a resource for both staff and employers, rich in human, intellectual and social capital. But it is also a resource that is rarely fully utilised, a symptom, perhaps, of wider institutional failure to harness all the talent and experience that exist within those groups regarded as relative ‘newcomers’ to the professional workplace. For example, one senior civil servant described the first time she experienced a meeting in which all the participants were women:

The atmosphere was completely different. It was co-operative rather than competitive, and I realised it was something I had never previously experienced throughout my time in the civil service.

She went on to describe her fear that women too often hold back from fully expressing their views in meetings out of a sense of needing to conform to the expectations of an organisational culture built by and for men. This means, she went on to argue, that the decisions that get made do not benefit from the full value of the women's perspective, which is not only a problem for equality, but a problem for employers wishing to make better business decisions.

We shouldn't have these targets simply because of equal opportunities. It should be recognised that women's perspectives can enrich the quality of the argument. Diversity is about fundamentally changing the culture.

This notion – that women can provide alternative perspectives on problems – brings us full circle and back to Gordon Holmes' speech to the first annual dinner of Business and Professional Women in 1939 with which this report opened. We have seen how women's networks raise issues and contribute to debates both internally and externally; how they broker the transfer of knowledge between members; how they provide intelligence to gender champions and CEOs; how they draw on the experience and expertise of members to design innovative services and products. It may now be time for network leaders to make their case as agents of change more forcefully to employers, who in their turn should recognise and draw on this valuable resource they have in their midst.

6. Directories of possibility

women's networks creating change

Try to imagine an organisation, or a sector, or an industry as if it were a giant network of nodes and links. Imagine that the nodes represent individuals, and the links the relationships between them. See the patterns that form and the clusters that take shape; see where the hubs lie and the outlying nodes sit. Now imagine you can pick out all the men in the network, and now imagine you can pick out all the women. See the complex patterns of personal and professional relationships that exist between them. See if you can perceive differences between the two: where are the men connected? And where are the women connected? Now imagine that a formal network has been created among the women within this giant web. See where the network has created new links, new clusters and new hubs. See how the network has altered the dynamics of the entire structure. Now try to imagine what this means in real life for working practices; for who talks to who and in what context; for how decisions are made; for how business gets done.

In the 1960s and 1970s, diversity was typically described as a giant melting pot, whereby differences were absorbed into the general social mix of any organisation, industry or sector. More recently, it has been likened to a giant mosaic made up of a diverse collection of unique individuals, in which 'each piece is acknowledged, accepted,

and has a place in the whole structure'.¹²¹ It's now time to re-imagine diversity in network terms, in which individuals' differences are given meaning through the configuration of relationships and ties within which they are suspended.¹²² These webs of connection not only mediate personal identity; they also structure the distribution of power and opportunity in any given system. And, as we have seen, the patterns are different for men and for women as a result of gendered socialisation processes, the unequal division of caring responsibilities between the sexes, and, in some cases, overt sexual discrimination or conscious exclusion of women by men.

Women's networks seek to counter these deeply embedded forces for inequality by enlarging the web of connection that exists among their members. By extending and developing these peer-to-peer relationships between women, networks become directories of possibility. Anything and everything could happen to a woman who connects with another woman in this space. She might get a new job, a business tip-off or the promise of an introduction to a useful contact; or she might hear an inspiring story of female success, or access advice on how to negotiate reduced hours; maybe she'll come away with the name of a reliable babysitter or a good plumber. And, more likely than not, she'll have shared her own experiences, strategies and knowledge with other women too.

In this way, networks are a form of organising among women suited to the complex gender politics of our times. Back in the days of Women's Liberation, feminism was about surrendering the individual will to the higher cause of the sisterhood and putting female solidarity above personal gain. The 1980s appeared to change all that, as a philosophy of individualism and self-help eroded such notions of shared consciousness or collective action. The last decade or so saw the rise of diversity as the organising idea behind identity, which put an end to any stable notion of what it meant to be a woman or a man. Networks reflect the logic of these disruptions in the politics of gender. On the one hand, they support women's desire for individual autonomy and self-determination (in a network structure, the unit of analysis remains the individual node, without which the structure

loses all shape). On the other, the links that connect those nodes represent the enduring desire among women for mutuality and support; for creating shared identities as professional women and for using that identity as the basis for collective action in advancing women as a group.

Almost uniquely, networks are an organisational form that enable women to pursue both personal and collective strategies for occupational mobility and culture change simultaneously. In the first place, the very act of connecting women to each other creates change in organisations or across sectors because it disrupts the patterns of social connectivity that existed before. A woman who thought she was the only one discovers another woman going through a similar experience, and through that connection both grow stronger. A woman attends a few network meetings and suddenly finds herself recognising people at conferences, and through them makes further contacts. A woman has a business idea but doesn't know how to make it happen. She finds a partner through a network and soon enough they've added one more to the growing tally of women-owned businesses currently changing the face of the UK's enterprise culture. All networks are in their own way building this capacity among women and subtly altering the balance of power through each woman-to-woman interaction they facilitate.

In the second place, as we've seen, connecting women is a creative activity; new things emerge, whether it's as tangible as a module for a training programme, as fleeting as a fresh insight into an old problem, or as action-focused as a letter-writing campaign to the Minister for Women to put more women on boards. In this light, the much-abused aspiration of 'having it all' may need revisiting. Networks demonstrate how women not only seek support in maintaining a balance between their professional goals and domestic responsibilities, but also desire a mechanism for developing collective responses to the challenges they face as women.

Women's networks: an evolutionary model

But is there a way of understanding more concretely how such

outcomes come to pass? And are there tools that employers and network leaders can use to shape the development of their networks to these ends? The answer is yes. Networks rely for their success on their self-organising capacities and dynamism, and much of the benefit to both women and employers is derived from their location outside formal hierarchies and conventional management structures. However, the networks discussed in this report are formal organisations in so far as women have chosen to create them and be part of them. Those who lead them make active decisions about how they should operate. In other words, networks *can* be shaped and managed. While all networks are unique, it is possible to identify some common phases that networks pass through as they develop over time. In practice these phases often run into each other; networks can move forward and back between them; and individual members may experience the same network differently. Nonetheless, the phases described below should provide a useful model for employers and women thinking about creating networks, or wondering how to steer the ones that already exist more purposefully towards shared goals.

Phase 1. Survival

The first stage for many networks is simply to offer a space to breathe easy. This is true where the workplace climate is particularly hostile to women, and where women have virtually no outlet for articulating and making sense of the challenges they face. Often survival networks are created by women themselves out of frustration, despair, even anger. This may not be the healthiest way to work through stress, but equally it may be impossible to move on to more constructive activities without starting with the problem, as Elizabeth Coffey acknowledges:

In the first phase, networks can become moaning pits. This sounds negative but it can be a very important stage for people who have pent-up frustrations that they need to get out. In many workplaces you need this 'blurring out' phase when

*women can share their experiences of how horrible the place is.
It's a sort of purging process.*

Phase 2. Support

The network's function as a safety valve is often necessary but must be managed carefully if members aren't to internalise a victimhood identity. The crucial step is in creating an equilibrium, in which women aren't simply expressing their problems, but are sharing tips and developing strategies for dealing constructively with those situations when they occur. This is when exposure to female role models and opportunities for personal and professional development begin to normalise women's success, build confidence and lead women to put themselves forward for senior roles. As a result, women feel happier and supported at work, confident that they can cope, and safe in the knowledge that they have somewhere to turn when things get tough.

Phase 3. Voice

This equilibrium should not become too comfortable though. The support system mustn't provide an excuse for inaction or an emotional crutch if the network is to become an agent for change. This is the most challenging stage of all for networks, because it involves strong leadership and political judgement, and because it requires women to scrutinise, openly and honestly, their own part in sustaining whatever problems they face. Elizabeth Coffey again:

The most effective networks ask, what's the issue or what's the problem? And then they ask, what can we do to change ourselves? How can we ensure that we aren't colluding in the negative situation? And then they'll think about what they can do to change the organisation.

This involves combining personal strategies for success – the 'what can I get out of this?' factor – with collective agendas for culture change: the 'what can we do together to address the wider issues?'

element. This is where networks must deploy their full powers of persuasion and influence, where they must engage management, broker meetings with senior figures, forge partnerships and alliances both internally and externally, and actively manage the knowledge and expertise of their members in order to win for themselves a real voice in how organisations conduct themselves and do business. The chief risk here is the inevitable cost of success, whereby the network is given too many responsibilities or takes on overly ambitious projects which may require it to formalise its structures and processes. This is not necessarily a problem if members support this move towards a more professionalised ‘think-tank’ or pressure group model. However, it may be at the cost of losing some of the dynamism, flexibility and social and emotional support functions associated with the network form. Table 6.1 shows an evolutionary model of networks, incorporating the first three stages of development.

Table 6.1 An evolutionary model

Network type	Benefits	Risks	Key characteristics
Survival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the network allows women a safe space in which to describe their experiences ● women at the end of their tether do not leave their jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the network reinforces a victim identity among its members ● the network is insular and unconnected to the mainstream 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● low-key meetings, often secret or unofficial convened by small groups of women, often taking place outside the workplace
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● women access mutual support and exchange tips and strategies for success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the network becomes a crutch and keeps women in their comfort zones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● larger, regular and more formal meetings, often involving guest speakers

Table 6.1 continued

Network type	Benefits	Risks	Key characteristics
Support contd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● exposure to female role models normalises women's success ● women build in confidence and self-esteem and develop emotional resilience for coping with setbacks ● women begin to put themselves forward for senior leadership roles ● women increase their contacts base both within and outside the network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● equality goals are not explicitly connected to wider business issues ● the network relies on a few key figures to keep it going ● the network attracts hostility from other groups or is seen as irrelevant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the network develops a corporate identity and becomes well known in the organisation or industry ● the network creates local chapters and diversifies its activities
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● women feel fully valued at work and succeed as women ● women's perspectives contribute to diversity policy and practice ● women make a full contribution to business decision-making and organisational change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the demands on the network risk becoming too great ● the network's processes become overly formalised as a result and the 'support' function declines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the network is widely respected and drawn upon as a source of knowledge and expertise on both diversity and business issues ● the network has highly placed supporters and partners through which it is able to leverage resources

Phase 4. Exit

Creating an effective voice network should be the ultimate objective of all employers or network leaders. And yet there is a further dimension which both parties should be aware of, and that is the role networks can play in accelerating women's exit from their current jobs. This is a delicate issue because employers naturally do not want to support networks that propel talented women out of their organisations. Nor do industry-wide networks wish to be a force for driving women out of industries in which they are already under-represented. However, as we have seen, this effect is most likely to occur where the network is providing a primarily survival function – that is, where the workplace or industry in question already has a serious problem regarding gender diversity that urgently needs to be addressed. The space created by a network may reinforce the view among its members that women are undervalued in their workplace or sector, and may therefore make it more likely that women will leave. However, if the network moves purposefully towards the support and, eventually, the voice phase, it is likely to have the effect not only of retaining women but helping them to feel more valued and effective in their professional lives.

A degree of mobility is expected of most professional people, and mature employers recognise that individuals develop and move on to find new challenges. The ultimate objective for all of us is to ensure that women, when and if they leave workplaces, leave feeling that their talent has been recognised, valued and developed, and that they have made a full contribution to the work of the organisation. It is hoped that in the future, when a woman walks, it will be unnecessary to refer to glass ceilings or walls, or to exclusion from informal networks, or to lack of childcare or flexible working options to explain it. This is because it will reflect a genuine choice on her part born of a world in which work for women isn't about merely surviving or coping, but about flourishing and thriving as full human beings. Looked at this way, vibrant women's networks both within and outside organisations have a role to play along the way in bringing this world about.

Recommendations

This report has explored the contribution of women's networks in the UK to creating inclusive workplaces and high-performing organisations. It has only begun to scratch the surface of a difficult and complex subject: namely, the way in which patterns of social connectivity influence the distribution of power and opportunity between women and men and shape organisational behaviour. Our study has, however, found that the prevalence and scope of women's professional networks is growing, and that they can make a significant, positive difference to individuals and to organisations.

This potential needs to be taken up by all those who can have a hand in helping women's networks to flourish, and all those organisations that are potential beneficiaries of network effects. Doing so is a delicate task, given that so many of the qualities of these networks spring from their self-organising nature. But employers, campaigning groups and public policy can all help to create an environment in which networks are championed and utilised to the full in trying to bring about systemic change in the workplace.

Our first recommendation is that every large employer should consider the business case for creating a women's network or supporting existing ones within their organisation or industry.

This requires further investigation to understand more fully how networks can formalise, make visible and attempt to shape patterns of interaction between women and employer organisations. This will inevitably require more action-focused research and case studies drawn from different organisational types and industries where networks are both plentiful and scarce.

While large employers are often the most obvious target, many women work for small organisations. The scope for networks to improve occupational mobility and flexibility for women in smaller organisations, where persistent inequality can be an even greater issue, is therefore also great.

Our second recommendation is that the DTI, NCVO and CBI should investigate the scope for encouraging network

membership and availability to women working in smaller organisations.

The business case for network development would be greatly enhanced by better metrics. For example, advances in social network modelling software make it possible to measure empirically the impact of networks in extending the quantity and range of members' contacts. In the future, every organisation could have its own 'network map' on the wall next to the official company organogram, rather like the one sketched out at the beginning of this chapter. Carried out at regular intervals, this sort of modelling could reveal how membership of formal corporate networks alter the patterns of connectivity between women and women and women and men over time, identify gaps where women are not joining and pockets of density where the network is particularly strong. This could be combined with simple, user-friendly systems which networks can use themselves to capture information about outcomes and impacts, all of which will help to build the business case for networks.

As a starting point, we recommend that:

An organisation with the relevant level of expertise, such as Opportunity Now, or the Cranfield Centre for Developing Women Business Leaders, should develop and pilot a benchmarking tool for use with corporate networks.

Government, in conjunction with the Economic and Social Research Council, should commission a longitudinal study to track and evaluate women's membership of work-related networks and their relationship to career choices, trajectories and satisfaction.

This could eventually lead to the development of further tools capable of tracking outcomes and impacts at industry or cross-industry level.¹²³

Another area for further exploration concerns the relationships that exist (or don't exist) between women's networks and those attached to other diversity issues. Much of the analysis contained in this report is of relevance for race equality networks, disability networks, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender networks and others. And yet, it is important not to generalise from women's experience. If

there *are* generic lessons about networks that apply equally to all strands, then networks provide a potential tool for integrating diversity efforts within organisations, and spreading the lessons from them.

We recommend, therefore, that employers encourage all corporate diversity networks to share good practice and build strong relations. Industry or cross-industry networks should actively consider diversity within their own membership and consider building links with other diversity networks, either with a focus on women or more broadly.

Third, there is much to gain in looking more closely at the evolution of networks as a form of organising among women. Chapter two provided a brief overview of the development of women's networks during the twentieth century, but there is scope for a more detailed historical treatment of this story. In particular, further elaboration of how they related to the feminist movement and women's entry into professional and managerial occupations would help to shed light on the role of networks as agents of identity formation for women.

We therefore recommend that networks, wherever possible, keep records of their activities and make their archives widely available to researchers.

These records could be incorporated within official company archives where they exist, or deposited in specialist research centres, such as the Women's Library, which already has holdings of a number of networks from the 1970s and 1980s.

Finally, there is a wider public agenda to consider. The findings of this report suggest there is a strong case to be made for campaigning organisations and policy and regulatory institutions to take greater notice of networks as one of the many equality tools in the available repertoire. Unions and professional associations too should consider the potential of women's networks for furthering the individual and collective interests of their members and for engaging employers in equality-related issues. All these institutions could play a larger role in supporting the creation and development of networks more actively

and benefit directly from greater understanding of the needs of women members. Though they must remain autonomous, networks could be an important stimulus or accelerant of organisational change, and become a vital element of workplace flexibility which works for women.

A public policy-led agenda for developing networks could include:

- a cross-sectoral programme of support and best practice development, led jointly by the Cabinet Office, Equal Opportunities Commission and TUC. This could include start-up grants, financial or technical assistance for specific resources, such as websites or publishing facilities, or sponsorship for events.
- a drive to create a greater range and choice of network membership across the public sector, and to forge 'bridging' links between different women's networks rooted in different departments, regions or agencies. Some public sector career opportunities could even include an 'entitlement' to network membership, along with a commitment to finding and supporting a range of alternatives through which to provide a diverse range of choice.
- a much stronger focus by trade unions and professional associations on women's networks as vehicles for representation and workplace support.
- specific investigation of the potential for certain kinds of women's professional networks to provide information, services and mutual support with regard to parenting and return to work.
- a national mentoring strategy, led by the Women and Equality Unit and involving existing women's networks and other relevant organisations, aimed at improving retention and distributing opportunities for progression among women in every sector of the economy.

Appendix 1

directory of women's networks in the UK

- Arab International Women's Forum
www.aiwfonline.co.uk
- Aurora Women's Network
www.busygirl.com
- Business and Professional Women
www.bpwuk.org.uk
- British Association of Women Entrepreneurs
www.bawe-uk.org
- British Association of Women Police
www.bawp.org
- CSR Chicks
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/csr-chicks/>
- Cosmetic Executive Women UK
<http://cew.org/>
- City Women's Network
www.citywomen.org
- DAWN
www.mydawn.co.uk
- DigitalEve
www.digitaleveuk.org
- Everywoman
www.everywoman.co.uk
- Financial Mail Women's Forum
www.fmwf.org.uk

Hightech-Women

www.hightech-women.com

National Black Women's Network

www.nbwn.org

Network

www.topwomenuk.com

Rural Women's Network

www.ruralwomen.org.uk

Scottish Businesswomen

www.scottishbusinesswomen.com

Thinkingwomen

www.thinkingwomen.org

Women's Business Network

www.wbn.org.uk

Women in Banking and Finance

www.wibf.org.uk

Women in Direct Marketing

www.wdm-uk.org

Women in Enterprise

www.womeninenterprise.co.uk

Women in Film and Television

www.wftv.org.uk

Women in Journalism

www.womeninjournalism.co.uk

Women in Management

www.managers.org.uk

Women in Property

www.wipnet.org

Women in Publishing

www.wipub.org.uk

Women Into the Network

www.networkingwomen.co.uk

Women Returners' Network

www.women-returners.co.uk

Appendix 2

methodological note

This research was carried out through a combination of methodologies, including in-depth expert interviews, case study work and a questionnaire. This was supported by a review of the literature relating to networks, women in management, and equality and diversity in the workplace.

In total, 24 interviews were conducted with a range of individuals, including network founders and leaders, high-profile women from the public sector and business, and a number of equality and diversity experts.

Interviews were also carried out with leaders and members of three case study networks. These were: the Civil Service Senior Women's Network, the Department for Work and Pensions Gender Staff Network Group, and the Ministry of Defence Bath/Bristol Women's Network.

A questionnaire was designed and sent to a non-statistically representative sample of 1,000 women, drawn largely from public sector organisations. In total, 235 completed questionnaires were received. The profile of the sample was as follows:

- 30% of the sample had worked in the private sector at some point previously; 58% of respondents had been working for 10 years or more, 22% for between 5 and 10 years, 7% for between 3 and 5 years, and the remainder

Girlfriends in high places

Employment	Percentage of sample
Central government	9.5
Executive agency	13
Local authority	9.5
NHS	20
Non-departmental public body	9
Regional development agency	0.5
Government office	1
Public sector (other)	21.5
Private sector	5
Self-employed	1
Voluntary/not-for-profit sector	10

- for 3 years or less; 92% of the sample worked full-time
- 95% of the sample were white, 1.5% were black or black British, 1% were Asian, 1% were of mixed ethnicity, and 1.5% were of other or unstated ethnicity; 2% of the sample considered themselves to have a disability; 95% did not, and 3% gave no answer
 - 41% of the sample were members or had been members in the past of one or more women's networks.

Notes

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