

Young law and management students' perception of their future career

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine young women law and management students' perceptions of their future career. Using focus groups, women participants stated that the main barriers to their future career progression would be conflict between motherhood and pressure to work long hours and pay disparities. The participants were unaware, however, of the many persistent barriers that restrict women's career advancement. Moreover, the law students had constituted themselves as future working mothers, while the management students constituted women as unreliable workers because of potential motherhood. These perceptions suggest that these young women are already conditioned to assimilate into current gendered employment structures evident in these two professions and are ill prepared to challenge gendered practices that restrict women's career advancement.

Introduction

McGregor, (2002) observes that the achievements of a few prominent New Zealand women has generated and sustained a popular myth that gender equality has been achieved. The reality is that women continue to earn less than men, are over-concentrated in a few industries and occupational categories, and are under-represented in senior roles (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2006). These outcomes persist despite government, organisational and individual efforts to address these issues.

Our own observations as a management lecturer of over ten years, and a co-joint Law and Management student echo McGregor's assertions. That is we often hear young women law and management students drawing upon a few high-profile women in business, politics and law as evidencing the resolution of gender discrimination in paid employment. These perceptions may well be supported by the near numeric equality between men and women enrolled in law and commercial degrees (New Zealand Department of Statistics, 2002). This educational attainment however, has not resulted in women achieving similar career status to men in these two professions (McGregor, 2002; Wilson, 1993). This situation is increasingly problematic for women's career potential and their future financial well-being. Moreover, it would seem that such gendered outcomes are unsustainable within the current tight labour market.

While many organisational studies reveal persistent barriers to women's career, we suggest that an understanding of young women's pre-employment perceptions of their career might provide additional insight to continued gendered employment outcomes. Our particular interest here is to gain insight into young women law and management students' perceptions of their future careers. The remainder of this paper is divided in to five sections. In the following section we contextualise our study by detailing the current position of women in the

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legal and managerial professions in New Zealand. In section two, we review the barriers to women's careers. Two focus groups, one comprising of law students, the other of management students, are described in section three. Our findings, presented in section four, reveal some similarities and differences between the two focus groups perceptions of their future careers. We conclude the paper by discussing how these women seem to have constituted themselves to fit current organisational and family structures based upon traditional male-breadwinner, female-caregiver roles.

New Zealand Women's Position in the Legal and Managerial Professions

In New Zealand, women completing undergraduate law and management degrees' have been increasing since the 1980s. By 2000, women made up nearly 60% of law graduates and accounted for 52.28% of graduates in commercial and business degrees (New Zealand Department of Statistics, 2002). These academic achievements have not translated to equal status within the legal or managerial professions. For example, while women represented 61% of bar admissions in 2006, they only accounted for 41% of those receiving practicing certificates, 19% of those achieving principality, and 35% of those gaining sole barrister status (New Zealand Law Society, 2006). Moreover, only 17% of partners in the top legal firms and 24% of New Zealand judges were women in 2006 (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2006).

Women's progress in management has also been slow. In their 1994 benchmark survey, McGregor, Thomson and Dewe reported that New Zealand women were underrepresented at every level of management. In her follow-up study, McGregor (2002) found little progress, and while women comprised 27.1% of total management positions, they continued to be concentrated in the lower managerial levels, with little progress to senior ranks. The Ministry of Women's Affairs (2006) revealed that women accounted for 7% of the Directorships of New Zealand's Top 100 listed companies, nine of the 37 Public Sector Chief Executives, 34.5% of the Boards of Directors of Crown Companies and 41% of board members of State Sector Statutory Bodies. The Ministry linked women's greater advances in the public sector to government policy initiatives

Explaining the Differences

In the past women's lack of pre-requisite education and skills partially explained their differentiated status in non-traditional occupations (Pajo, McGregor and Cleland, 1997; Wickham, 1986). This explanation is less valid within the context of this study given New Zealand women's academic achievements in undergraduate law and commercial degrees. Yet, educational attainment does not necessarily translate to equal entry of women in to male-dominated professions. The research is consistent in that a woman's first job placement typically fall outside organisational and professional career paths and is less likely be to be linked to training and development opportunities necessary for advancement (International Labour Organisation, 2004; McGregor, Thomson and Dewe, 1994; Place, 1981; Spencer and Podmore, 1987). In their more recent findings, The International Labour Organisation (2004) report that women with comparative skills to men are more likely to gain first job placements in positions defined as low-skilled and in non-strategic roles. The ILO concludes that these women effectively provide administrative support to their comparatively skilled male counterparts who gain first job placements in strategic and hence career enhancing positions.

While mentoring and networking have proven invaluable to women's career advancement (Corin, 1990; Wirth, 2001; McCarty Kilian, Hukai and McCarty, 2005), women still encounter more barriers than men accessing these relationships. As a result, women have less exposure to the career benefits long associated with mentoring and networking (ILO, 2004; Mendleson, Barnes and Horn, 1989; Newell, 1995; Still, 1993). These benefits include being awarded challenging projects, gaining access to senior colleagues, being socialised to the organisational culture and actively participating in meaning creation within the organisational context (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz and Lima, 2004; Ellis and Wheeler, 1991; Scandura and Williams, 2004; Underhill, 2006).

Women's exclusion from participating in mentoring and networking also denies them access to challenge dominant organisation cultures. It has long been established that these cultures are based on masculine values of competitiveness and aggressiveness; attributes that have become synonymous with management, and which women are believed to lack (Bunkle and Lynch, 1992; Olsson and Walker, 2004; ILO, 2004). These values manifest as the male work norm, earlier described by Bunkle and Lynch, (1992) as based on an uninterrupted working life where good workers are presumed to be unencumbered, independent, and able to prioritise paid employment over all other aspects of life. Within the managerial and legal professions, this male work norm manifests as a long-hours work culture. Wilson (1993) found that to be successful in New Zealand, women lawyers are expected to adopt long working hours. More recently, Olsson and Pringle (2004) found New Zealand women managers working 10-12 hour days.

Long working-hours impacts men and women's paid and un-paid working lives differently. For example, the International Labour Organisation (2004) reports that women executives are more likely than men to delay marriage and children, or to choose to remain childless. Where coupled, the male partner's career usually takes precedence. Women with children continue to perform the majority of unpaid work associated with home and family; responsibilities that are incongruent with the male work model (Burke and Nelson, 2002; Doucet, 1995; ILO, 2004; New Zealand Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2002; Wilson, 1993).

While the ILO (2004) reports shifting attitudes in some law firms, overwhelmingly they found women are reluctant to take advantage of reduced-hours policies because of the perceived impact on their career development. The difficulty in combining family and work responsibilities in the legal profession might explain Wilson's (1993) New Zealand findings that show young women law graduates replace the older and more experienced women lawyers who leave the profession. Wilson (1993) concludes this movement out of the legal profession affects the overall progression of women to senior levels and partnership status. This seems to be still evident, for example, in 2006 the New Zealand Law Society reported nearly twice as many women lawyers with less than five years experience as those with between 11 and 15 years experience. Women also leave non-traditional professions in response to sexual harassment; a phenomena that is pervasive in the legal (Gatfield, 1996; Wilson, 1993), and managerial professions (Olsson and Pringle, 2004).

Method

We chose the focus group method for this research based upon Carson, Gilmore, Perry and Gronhaug's (2001) assertion that focus groups are useful when researching new phenomena. Moreover, they suggest that simultaneous interaction of participants generates deep insight into the phenomenon under study. To gain this interaction, they recommend that each focus group should comprise of between four and six homogenous members. To generate homogenous focus groups we sought a purposive sample of key informants. The purposive sampling, as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994), involves selecting participants with knowledge or information relating to the research question. In harmony with this, Gilchrist (1992) describes key informants as having knowledge about the issues under inquiry, therefore, are able to provide rich information relatively quickly.

Our three sample criteria included i) that the participants be young female law or management students, ii) that these students enrolled in university immediately after completing their secondary school education, and iii) that the participants had not studied gender issues. We assumed that these sample criteria would generate focus groups of young women who had little exposure to gendered issues associated with organisational processes. This was important because of our interest in gaining insight into young women's pre-employment perceptions of the impact of gender on their future career. Drawing on these sample criteria and our research question, we generated two homogenous focus groups using the snowball technique described by Robert, Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran (2001) where key informants recommend additional participants fitting the sample criteria.

The first of these focus groups was made up of five female law students, ranging from 22-23 years of age. Three of the law students had worked at law firms in their summer breaks. The second focus group was made up of four female management students, ranging in age from 18-23 years. Both focus groups were facilitated by the second author.

The focus groups were conducted in a structured manner, with participants being presented with five pre-determined themes to consider. Visual aids were used to keep the participants focused on each theme, and to enable each question to be discussed fully before moving to the next theme. We drew on Robert et al., (2001) recommendation and used thinking time to allow participants to formulate their own understanding of each theme before opening up to group discussion.

In the first theme, participants' stated their understanding of the gains made by women in employment generally. For the second theme we asked the participants to compare their grandmothers and mothers opportunities with their own. Third, we asked the focus groups if they thought they would encounter any barriers to achieving their desired careers. In the fourth theme, participants described their perceptions of women's status in the legal or managerial professions. Finally, the groups considered whether more work was needed to advance gender equality in these professions.

We acknowledge that the sample size of 9 participants and two focus groups limits this study. However, these focus groups reiterated the conversations that we have had with women students over the past ten years of involvement in management studies and are reflective of extant literature in this area. Moreover, the findings lend themselves to more research in this area.

Findings

The two focus groups identified very similar issues within the first two themes of the gains made by women in employment and comparing their opportunities with their mothers and grandmothers. Because of these similarities we have merged the discussions from the two focus groups and present statements that capture the essence of their reflections. In contrast, the two groups differed in their perceptions on the three themes of the barriers to career progression, position of women in law or management, and whether more work was needed to create gender equality. To capture these differences we separately present each focus group's discussion on these themes.

Gains made by Women in Employment

Both focus groups identified the increasing number of women in the workforce generally, and in law, medicine and accountancy specifically. Indeed, they believed that:

“Girls tend to be doing better than guys now at school and they tend to work a bit harder, so why shouldn't they be represented equally in the workforce.”

Both groups mentioned the Equal Employment Opportunities Trust (e.g. see <http://www.eeotrust.org.nz>), but were unaware of the work of the Trust in advancing women's careers. The law students identified the government work-life balance initiatives (see <http://www.dol.govt.nz/worklife/index.asp>); whereas, the management students perceived reduced gender discrimination and a narrowing of gendered income gaps as gains.

Comparing the opportunities of grandmothers, mothers and themselves

The participants identified access to tertiary education, a life before marriage, access to career and professions, and greater financial and social independence as their greatest opportunities compared to their grandmothers and mothers. Supporting this, they described their grandmothers as being married before the age of 21, financially dependent on husbands or family, and their main activity was caring for family. The grandmothers, who were engaged in paid-employment, were restricted to family-owned businesses, home-based cottage-industry, or cleaning jobs. Yet, participants seemed in 'awe' of their grandmothers', as captured here:

“I am probably more proud of what my nana has done than what I have done. Sure it looks good to have the degrees, but I mean she brought up 5 kids on a widows benefit - which would have been nothing. I couldn't do that.”

In contrast, all of their mothers returned to paid employment when their youngest child started school. Some mothers, however, met resistance and disapproval from relatives:

“Grandma believed that a women's place is in the home, cooking dinner for her husband and children.”

Their mothers paid employment reflected the gendered occupations available to women at the time, specifically nursing, teaching, office administration, secretarial work, working on trains, waitressing, and cleaning. While one participant believed her mother became a teacher “because that was all she ever wanted to do”; the focus group recognised structural constraints on women's employment choices, as captured by this statement:

“Regardless of whether your mother had wanted to be a teacher, there weren’t a lot of other choices available to her at that time.”

Families were also identified as constraining their mothers’ employment choices as poignantly illustrated by the experiences of one mother who, at age 15, was withdrawn from school to help financially support the family, as such her:

“...opportunities were limited to what would give her enough money to help out her parents and eventually allow her to move out and no longer be a burden on her family.”

Reflecting on these familial and structural constraints, these women believed that:

“There are more opportunities, and more options for our career. We will not be limited by the discrimination that our mothers faced because we are women.”

However, they attributed these new found opportunities to their mothers and grandmothers:

“I feel proud of their achievements and hopeful of our opportunities because of what they have done before us.”

Perceived Barriers to Achieving Career Goals

The law students identified the long-work hours-culture and male domination as barriers to women. They all stated a desire to become mothers, and some wanted this more than a career. However, they perceived an incompatibility between long-work hours and motherhood, as captured by this statement:

“I still want balance, but I don’t think at this stage you can balance going really, really far in a law career and having kids and a family because you just have to put too many hours in at the office. At this stage you have got to decide do I want a family or do I want to go all the way in my career.”

This group linked these incompatibilities to the wider social trend of women delaying child-bearing in to their 30s and 40s to enable them to establish their career. Some expressed concern over possible employer reactions to starting a family, as expressed here:

“I am scared of what they are going to say when I say that I want to have kids. I mean are they going to be angry because they have employed me because they didn’t think that I was going to leave”?

Some perceived difficulties in returning to the legal profession after an absence for childrearing. Yet, they believed that returning ought to be possible:

“Just because we are in a field where everyone else is moving forward and up, it doesn’t mean that you can’t go back to it. It’s just like saying that just because you left school so long ago you can’t go back to being a student.”

The management students perceived age as the main barrier to their careers, as captured here:

“Even now when I go for part- time jobs, I have had someone say that I haven’t got a job because I am too young and I wouldn’t get the respect of those who I would be in charge off. I don’t want this to happen to me when I graduate because I have worked really hard to get qualified.”

While all the management student participants wanted children, they did not perceive any barriers or difficulties associated with leaving and subsequently returning to the workforce. Interestingly, one participant perceived that her biggest barrier to pursuing a career would be her fiancé’s traditional values and attitudes with regards to women’s roles in the home, she noted:

“He is happy for me to have a job but not to become a fully driven ‘career woman’. His expectations of me on the home-front will be a barrier to me being able to put in all that extra work that my career will require of me.”

Following this was the view that resonated with the whole focus group:

“Nothing has stopped us achieving what we want up until this point and it will be no different once we enter the workforce.”

However, one management student concluded these reflections by suggesting:

“I think that when there is a man and a woman applying for the same job, the man will always get it, because the man is not going to take maternity leave or have children to take to school; so I understand why there are issues. Women are expected to do a lot more to get where they want to go.”

Perceived Employment Outcomes in Law and Management

The law students were aware of disparate gendered outcomes in the legal profession, as illustrated here:

“There are always so many more girls at law school than there are guys, but when you look at entry level solicitors, men always out number women. Where do all the girls go – what are they doing?”

Through their work experiences they had also observed the scarcity of women in senior levels:

“Of the partners in one firm, only 3 are women out of 55 partners – two of them aren’t married and one is married with no children.”

They linked these disparate outcomes to male dominance in law, a situation they perceived did not exist in other professions, as encapsulated here:

“I mean we have a female prime minister here which is huge for New Zealand, and a lot of the top companies have women CEOs – so I think it is definitely happening in different fields. But fields like law that are totally male dominated, it is going to take a bit longer to see the changes.”

The management students also referred to the successes of a number of New Zealand's high profile women, and perceived they would have similarly successful careers, as noted:

"They have what I am going to get, a successful and fulfilling career with no barriers or glass ceiling to break through."

However, the management students were aware of pay differences; one explanation was that:

"Men are more likely to ask for pay rises whereas females are more likely to hang back and wait for their good work to be noticed. Females are maybe more likely to work really, really hard and wait for their work to be appreciated and then be paid for it."

Another explanation was that the gendered pay gap resulted from women's family role. The following series of comments were made in light of this:

"There are no pay differences for low levels but further along it comes down to equal pay for equal work – and equal chance of promotion. But if women are having families they are not getting the equal opportunities that men are getting."

And that:

"I don't think that women and men will ever be equal in terms of pay in the workforce..."

Because:

"Women are less reliable than men." "Women are more likely to leave." "Paying women equally would not reflect this."

Work to gain Equality

The law focus group suggested a number of work-place solutions to enable mothers to return to the profession, including onsite childcare and part-time work options. At the same, these women dismissed these solutions as captured by the following:

"As much as you want equal opportunity everywhere it has got to be viewed in terms of the viability for businesses to act in a certain way. As much as we are women who will be fighting for our own jobs, we are going to be in a profession dealing with companies and even your organisation where everyone wants to succeed and the ability to have a workforce that is able to deliver is important. You would want to be able to say 'yeah go and have your family and come back and you can still be partner', but that is not fair on those who have chosen not to have families."

The women in the management focus group believed unequal pay needed to be addressed, as they noted:

"...to make it fairer for women to engage in paid employment."

Discussion and Conclusions

The women in both focus groups readily identified the opportunity to engage in higher education and non-traditional careers as significant gains made by women over the three generations represented by their recollections of their grandmothers, mothers and their own lives. The participants in both groups also identified the small number of high-profile women in business, politics and the public sector. The management students viewed this as evidence that gendered disparities no longer existed. The law students perceived these same examples as indicating that gender equality had been achieved in other occupations, but not in the male-dominated legal profession. The two groups, however, had differing perceptions of employment outcomes in their chosen fields, and of the types of barriers they might encounter when pursuing their careers as compared to their male counterparts.

The law students were aware that the large number of women law undergraduates did not translate to similar numbers of women entering the legal profession; yet they were unable to explain this anomaly. These participants were also aware that few women achieved senior status in law firms, and of those they knew of personally, were mostly unmarried and childless. They perceived these differences to be directly related to the conflict between women's family role and the masculine culture as manifest in long-working hours within the legal profession. Indeed, they did not articulate a domestic role for fathers' in balancing multiple commitments of work and family.

The law students did offer a number of solutions for working mothers that law firms could consider, for example, child-care facilities, part-time work and policies to ease mothers' transition back to work. However, they quickly conceded these options, while supporting mothers, were not necessarily feasible for law firms who had to ensure that the client expectations of accessibility were met. Moreover, they viewed that accommodating mothers would be unfair to the women who had chosen to remain childless to pursue a legal career; a choice, they noted, that men contemplating fatherhood did not have to make.

In many respects, these law students had constituted themselves as the 'other' who did not fit the masculine work culture embedded in the legal profession. They simultaneously recognised motherhood as a barrier to career progression in law and internalised full responsibility for raising children. Their reflections echo Wilson's (1993) earlier findings that women are expected to amend themselves to fit the legal professions long-hours work culture.

The management students were much less aware of gender segregation within management; but viewed continued gendered pay disparities as a barrier to women achieving similar career status as their male counterparts. They conceded pay disparities may never be resolved because of women's child-rearing responsibilities; which in their view, made women unreliable workers. Yet, they did not locate themselves within this broader category of 'unreliable women workers', nor did they perceive an impact on their own careers resulting from motherhood. In this way, the management students externalised motherhood by simultaneously constituting 'women' as 'other', but did not recognising themselves as potentially this 'other'.

While these two focus groups, to varying degrees, articulated their perceptions of the impact of motherhood, male work-norms, and pay disparity on their future careers, they were silent about many other documented organisational barriers to women's career advancement. They

did not, for example, raise the issues of differentiated first job-placements (although, the law students were aware that more male than female law graduates entered the legal profession), differentiated access to training and development, differentiated access to mentoring and networking relationships, or sexual harassment. These silences might reflect their limited organisational experiences and exposure to broader gender-studies throughout, both of which were selection criteria for participation in the research.

The perceptions expressed here indicate that these women have to some extent normalised gendered practices based on male bread-winner, female caregiver roles. The implications of this insight suggests that more research is needed to inquire about both young men's and young women's expectations of career and family roles. Broadening our analysis in this way may enhance organisational and government level strategies aimed at achieving employment equality.

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