Managing like a man women and men in corporate management

Judy Wajcman.

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JUDY WAJCMAN

Polity Press

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Introduction

The feminization of the paid labour force has been heralded as one of the most important social changes in the twentieth century. Many argue that women's new-found economic independence is revolutionary. It has been accompanied by a profound cultural shift, with the emergence of a new consciousness and widespread public discourse about gender equity. A liberal commitment to equality between the sexes is now broadly accepted and is even enshrined in law.

Western societies have achieved some progress towards gender equity in the public sphere of the labour market. In the private sphere, intimate relations are changing as well, with modern marriages said to be taking a new companionate form. What it means to be a man or a woman is no longer ordained by 'nature'. Gendered identities have undergone a major transformation.

Even so, as we approach the end of the twentieth century, men continue to monopolize the elite levels of corporate power in almost all regions of the world. While the legitimacy of patriarchy has been eroded, it is far from being rendered obsolete. The material and institutional structures of patriarchy are still largely intact.

How can we even begin to understand the persistence of sexual inequality within an explicit framework of equality? This book suggests that an investigation of the gender relations of senior management in a 'post-feminist' age can be instructive for a number of reasons. Firstly, the managerial job is a repository of power and authority, the site of decision-making and rule-making within organizations. Women's access to senior management is both a symbol and

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a measure of organizational change. Over recent decades women have entered lower and middle managerial levels in large numbers without major disruption to the ways organizations operate. Only when they are present at the top are they perceived as a direct threat and challenge to male power. After being excluded for so long, women who have gained institutional power may make a difference to the way the job is done. How differently do men respond to women sharing what remains largely male territory?

Secondly, to study senior women managers is to study exceptional women in an atypical context. They inhabit a corporate world that is very male dominated, and they are inevitably disruptive to the status quo. When a woman occupies a position traditionally filled by a man, the significance of her sex, for both how she operates and how she is treated, is subjected to scrutiny in a way that the 'normal' hierarchical order is not. The usually hidden processes and tensions of gender relations at work are likely to be more visible in high-technology multinationals where women are breaking new ground.

Finally, there is an increasing preoccupation in both feminist theory and organization theory with questions of culture and subjectivity. These issues are particularly critical to management, because managers are deemed to have certain attributes and personalities, and a certain leadership style. After all, what managers do most of the time is communicate directly with people. So sharing a common language and understanding is crucial. Management literature is now preoccupied with the dynamics of cultural change within organizations and how to harness it in the pursuit of profit.

This book is innovatory in several respects. A key argument of the book is that management incorporates a male standard that positions women as out of place. Indeed, the construction of women as different from men is one of the mechanisms whereby male power in the workplace is maintained. There is now an extensive literature on women and management, much of it prescriptive in nature. However, most of this writing is exclusively about women managers, treated in isolation from men. Quarantining women in this way has the effect of locating women as the problem, and reinforces assumptions that men are uniformly to the management-manner born. This book is unique in comparing men and women in similar senior managerial positions. It is a study of men and women who work alongside each other doing the same jobs, encompassing the experiences of both sexes in the managerial hierarchy. Since masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, with meaning only in relation to each other, this study is then able to analyse the gender regimes of management. I use the concept gender regime (a term introduced by Connell 1987) as a shorthand for institutionalized power relations between men and women where gender is a property of institutions and historical processes, as well as of individuals. Gendering processes are involved in how jobs and careers are constituted, both in the symbolic order and in organizational practices (discursive and material), and these power relations are embedded in the subjective gender identity of managers.

The nexus between work and home in the formation of particular gender regimes is central to the argument. Although studies of the workplace and research on family and home life are now well developed, these areas have become separate specialisms within sociology. This book examines the interconnections between home and employment within a single framework and presents substantial material on the home lives of managers. In addition, I bring together insights developed on gender and work from perspectives in different disciplines. Thus I draw on industrial relations, on organizational behaviour and management studies, as well as on sociological and feminist analyses.

The research is based on a study of managers in high-technology multinational companies that boast sophisticated equal opportunity policies and are formally committed to their implementation. However, this project is not simply an evaluation of sex equality strategies in the workplace. Rather, it is a comparative analysis of men's and women's experience in a changing corporate climate.

I approached five major companies, all of which agreed to participate. Although located in Britain, they are global companies with strikingly similar approaches to the management of labour. The companies are all multinationals, and indeed the firm where most of the data were collected, the case study company, is US owned. Although multinationals' behaviour in relation to labour is shaped by the regulatory systems of particular nation-states, there seems to be a general move away from hierarchical organization towards a more flexible structure. Corporate restructuring, accompanied by organizational 'delayering' and the decline of the long-term, single-organization career, is the common trend in capitalist economies. The organizational processes which are reshaping management in the UK mirror those operating in American, European or Australian firms. The central issues raised in the book, therefore, are not specific to one country but have a much wider relevance.

The companies operate in the technologically advanced sectors of oil, chemicals and computing services, and were selected for the

following reasons. Firstly, they are companies widely acknowledged to be at the forefront of equal opportunity policies. So the project set out to study best practice companies. Secondly, it seemed appropriate and timely to examine the private sector. Most existing research in this area deals with the public sector, for example, the British National Health Service. Finally, it is often claimed that the new fast-growing high-tech industries provide easier access to women managers than those that have inherited long-standing organizational structures.

This research adopts a questionnaire survey methodology. However, I also draw extensively on qualitative data derived from indepth interviews conducted during 1994 with 20 women and men managers in the case study company. The interviewees, who participated in the survey, exhibit characteristics typical of the profile of the overall sample. A full description of the case study company, which I have called 'Chip', can be found in chapter 4.

The use of the term 'manager' varies considerably from one organizational setting to another. In some it is used to designate levels of status or personal prestige, while in others it delineates a variety of functional responsibilities (see, for example, Nicholson and West 1988; Stewart 1967). Generally the term describes those who, in one way or another, and to varying degrees, coordinate and control the behaviour of others. For this study I accepted the definition used by the organizations themselves. Senior managers, the subject of this study, are those earning over £40,000 a year in 1993. This level of managerial salary is consistent across the five companies involved, all of which recognized £40,000 as the cut-off between senior and middle management. Given how few women there are in the most senior positions, this definition also allowed for a reasonable sample size. It produced a remarkably similar number of women (on average 24) across all the companies. Although the companies in the study would be regarded as 'leading edge' cases, in fact women are still seriously underrepresented at senior levels of management in all those selected for analysis.

The questionnaires were sent to 439 managers between October and December 1993. All of the senior women managers and a representative sample of men in equivalent grades were surveyed. A total of 324 managers completed the questionnaire: 108 women and 216 men. The response rate of 74 per cent (89% for the women and 68% for the men) is exceptional for a mailback questionnaire, indicating a high level of interest in the subject matter of the survey. Male managers were included, both in their own right and as a control group in

relation to the women. A simple random sample of the men would have been, on average, more senior than their female counterparts. So a crucial element in the research design was matching the sample of men so that they were similar to the women in all respects other than gender. The findings presented here are based on the aggregate data from the five companies, and all the differences referred to in this paper reach the conventional (5%) level of statistical significance. They are unlikely to be due to chance.

The profile of women who have achieved senior management positions in all the companies is broadly similar to that of their male colleagues. Crucially, as stated above, the research design controls for differences in managerial level. In terms of age, the highest proportion of managers in the survey (56%) is in the 35-44 age group (see table I.1), reflecting the age distribution for this occupational group in national labour force surveys. Women managers tend to be younger and have joined the organization more recently. However, there is no sex difference in the age of first managerial appointment: 87 per cent of both men and women reach managerial level by the age of 35. Respondents move around within the company. Over 80 per cent of both men and women were recruited to their present post through internal promotion. Indeed, over 60 per cent of the sample have been with their company more than a decade. So men and women have had equal exposure to the promotion system in their company.

While human capital theory emphasizes women's supposed lack of qualifications, recent studies have found that women are generally better qualified in formal terms for equivalent jobs. However, no gender differences in educational qualifications emerge in this study, with almost half the respondents having degrees and a further third having some sort of postgraduate qualification. With regard to the related issue of training, once again the same proportion (74%) of

Table I.1 Percentage distribution of respondents according to their age

Age categories	Men	Women
Under 25	0	0
25–34	9	23
35–44	56	56
45–54	33	21
55 and over	2	0

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Introduction

Table 1.2 Percentage distribution of respondents in terms of principal management function

Functional specialism	Men	Women
Administration/company secretary	1	2
Management services	1	0
Finance/accounting	9	12
Education/training	1	2
Personnel/HR/IR	5	14
Production/manufacturing	2	2
Computing/IT	10	7
Development/strategic affairs	8	7
Marketing/sales	31	21
Corporate affairs/public relations	2	4
Management consultancy	4	6
General management	24	18
Other	2	5

both men and women have taken a training course that they themselves had suggested for their own self-development, financed by the company.

Respondents were asked about their job title. A higher proportion of men than women describe themselves as managers (85% of men and 69% of women), whereas 31 per cent of the women describe themselves as functional specialists. A substantial proportion of both men and women in the study describe themselves as 'general managers' (26% and 20% respectively). When asked about their principal management function (see table I.2) the women are more likely to report being in personnel/human resources and service functions, whereas men are more likely to report being in marketing and sales. These responses broadly reflect the wider labour market patterns of gender specialization in management function, although if anything there is a smaller concentration of women in the human resources function than one might expect (see Legge 1987).

However, there is a marked sex difference in the numbers of people for whom the respondents are directly responsible. Whereas 64 per cent of the women manage fewer than 10 people, this is true for under half of the men. Over 20 per cent of the men manage more than 50 employees, whereas only 12 per cent of the women carry similar managerial responsibilities. Men are more than twice as likely as women to have responsibility for over 100 employees. So even at the same managerial level, men are given greater managerial responsibilities than women. It should be noted, however, that this is not independent of management function. As more of the women are professional specialists, they are less likely to have extensive responsibilities for subordinate employees.

The research findings from this project specifically inform the arguments developed in chapters 3 to 6. While the original empirical research presented here is fundamental to the argument I am making, it is not possible to address all the relevant issues that bear upon the topic through a single set of data. So I have situated my data within the wider context of contemporary theoretical debates in this area, as well as drawing upon and bringing together the broad range of other recent findings on managers in large firms.

The book begins with an overview of the theory and practice of sex equality in organizations. In this first chapter, I review feminist debates about whether we should aspire to equality based on sameness as, or difference from, men and the political consequences of adopting one or other of these positions. I argue that these academic theories cannot simply be translated into a feminist practice on equal opportunities. Rather, we should reject the sameness/difference dichotomy and focus instead on policies that challenge the norms of male work patterns. Even the recent focus of equality initiatives, managing diversity, still holds men up as the standard against which women are measured and found wanting. This standard has to be radically challenged. In the following chapters, I explore how gender is threaded through the fabric of organizations and the managerial job, and suggest ways in which this pattern might be changed.

Chapter 2 assesses conventional explanations of women's underrepresentation, or men's overrepresentation, in the higher levels of management. I go beyond the orthodox analysis that invokes the unequal domestic division of labour, to argue that the 'sexual contract' constitutes women and men as fundamentally different kinds of workers. I then discuss recent developments in organization theory that focus on the construction of masculinity and femininity at work. Management is an occupation historically and culturally associated with men. It is seen as intrinsically masculine, something only men (can) do. The very language of management is resolutely masculine. Organizations are then a crucial site for the ordering of gender, and for the establishment and preservation of male power.

In this book I have also used the term management to describe the organization of domestic work in the household. I do this for two reasons. One is to highlight the sex-biased definition of management

which, like the established usage of 'work', refers to paid employment in the labour market. The other reason is that it also draws attention to the increasing commodification of domestic tasks within the home.

The question of whether women are becoming more like men or are 'doing it differently' has been popularized in discussions about whether high-flying women bring a distinctive female style of management to organizations. Chapter 3 examines the thesis that management style is itself gendered, in terms of whether there are differences in how women and men actually manage. After placing these arguments in the wider context of corporate restructuring in the 1990s, I conclude that the similarities between women and men who have achieved senior management positions far outweigh any differences between women and men as groups. This commonality comes about because women's presence in the world of men is conditional on them being willing to modify their behaviour to become more like men. If there are no significant sex differences in management style, in what ways are women disadvantaged by the fact that they are not men?

Chapter 4 takes issue with the argument that men and women have a profoundly different orientation to paid employment, and that work is more central to men's identity. The women and men in my study have similar career patterns and are equally highly motivated. What needs explaining is why, in general, women's experience of organizational life is so different from that of their male colleagues. The systematic difference here is that women encounter sex-specific obstacles to promotion opportunities. Although men's attitudes towards formal equality for women managers are by and large favourable, there is a divergence between such attitudes and organizational reality. I explore how the masculinist assumptions underlying management structures and practices continue to marginalize and exclude women from senior management roles.

Organizations are infused with sexuality and emotion. Chapter 5 considers how relationships between the sexes are negotiated, including the way sexual harassment is dealt with in an equal opportunity environment. The motif of women's 'difference' is explored further here. I argue that women are sexualized in a way that men are not, and that male sexual imagery pervades the symbolic order of organizations. As a result, women managers face the contradictory demands of being feminine and being businesslike. Their authority is always in question and under threat. In male-dominated companies such as those in my study, this problem is particularly acute.

Echoing themes from the previous three chapters, chapter 6 presents an analysis of the management of home life. An emphasis on the gendering of jobs and the masculinity of organizations should not distract us from the extent to which opportunities in the labour market are shaped by people's family commitments and aspirations. In this chapter, I examine the extensive and complex domestic arrangements necessary to sustain the life of a senior manager and find that the occupation itself is premised on a particular organization of family life. The pressures of combining work and home responsibilities affect men as well as women. However, men and women do not have the same relationship to the domestic sphere and this domestic inequality has far-reaching consequences for their ability to be equal at work. The differences between men and women managers are much more marked in how they manage their household than in how they manage at work.

In the conclusion, I reflect on the contradictory nature of women's relationship to power. On the one hand, management as an occupation has been opened up to women, providing fresh possibilities. On the other hand, power and authority, while taking new forms, remain gendered as male. While sex equality policies in the workplace have not been transformative in themselves, they have been crucial in contesting and making more transparent the established gender order in organizations.

Note

1 All the managers in the sample are 'white'. This book is about the gender relations of management. Many of the issues I raise could be related to the ethnic and racial characteristics of senior managers. Hence the absence of non-white managers in the sample reflects reality at the level of management studied here.

Sex Equality in Organizations

One of the central tenets of the contemporary women's movement is that sexual inequality is tied to the fact that in every society men and women largely do different kinds of work. Indeed, sex segregation in the labour market is now a subject of mainstream quantitative sociology. Existing divisions have tended to result in studies of work and employment that look at men and women in isolation from each other. This research looks at women and men doing the same work and is thus an excellent basis for evaluating the impact of equal opportunity policies, and comparing the experiences of the sexes and their relationship to the organization.

The entry of women into senior management has generated much popular debate about whether they are 'making a difference' to the way organizations are run. The emphasis has shifted from encouraging women to emulate a male leadership style to asserting the value of qualities characterized as feminine that women bring to management. This bipolar framework of sameness or difference can be seen in other responses to the barriers women face at work. Different family commitments are traditionally the reason cited for women not reaching senior levels. Some argue that with the advent of 'family friendly' policies, women can now have the same careers as men. Others argue that a separate 'mommy track' should be provided to accommodate the different careers of women. This stance fits well with the emergent policy of fostering diverse and pluralistic patterns of work and careers that are equally valued. In the present chapter I explore the extent to which the theory and practice of equal opportunities, as currently conceived, address these questions and problems. Reflections on feminist thinking about sameness and difference. equality and diversity, are important here and as a thread woven throughout the text.

It may be taken as an indication of the success of equal opportunity legislation and policies that this study is possible. There are now some women at the top. Yet a marked gender imbalance persists at the apex of organizational career structures. Conventional equality initiatives have had a limited impact on women's position in the workforce. There is not much room at the top for women, and we shall see that successful women are not so much representatives of, as exiles from, their sex.

The drive for 'equal opportunities' within organizations has been decried as too limited a strategy in some quarters, while provoking strong opposition in others. Its central objective is to break down the sexual division of labour and this makes it a controversial reform. It involves dismantling the barriers that block horizontal movement by women into male-dominated areas of work, as well as those that prevent their vertical progress to higher levels in organizational hierarchies. Its implementation means opening up access to the organization by fair recruitment practices, providing training courses for women, and reviewing appraisal and promotion procedures. Such initiatives should result in an increase in the numbers of women in senior professional and managerial positions, and greater recognition of their competence and authority.

It is now widely acknowledged that these policies have not achieved the changes they are supposed to achieve. In this chapter I discuss the theoretical frameworks within which equal opportunity policy has developed. Feminists have long debated whether women's subordination can best be overcome by a focus on equality as sameness with men, or by a recognition of sex difference. We will see that arguments based on sameness and on difference have always been in play, and are apt to be invoked according to their strategic utility in particular circumstances. Both approaches, however, position women as the problem and accept men's life experience as the norm. They fail to challenge the conceptualization of work, and of organizations, as gender neutral. The title of this book, Managing like a Man, proclaims the profoundly gendered character of an apparently neutral occupation from which women have been largely excluded, namely, managerial work.

From Equal Opportunities to Positive Discrimination

Legislation against sex discrimination in the United Kingdom dates from the 1970s. The Equal Pay Act 1970, which came into effect in

1975, made it unlawful to discriminate between women and men in pay or other terms of their contracts of employment. It specified that women were entitled to the same pay as men if doing the same or broadly similar work. A companion Act, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, made it unlawful to treat women less favourably than men (or married people less favourably than single people) in education, training or employment, or in the provision of goods, facilities or services. It introduced a concept of indirect discrimination, which is deemed to occur when an employer applies to both sexes a condition of a kind such that the proportion of one sex who can comply with it is considerably smaller. In 1976 the Race Relations Act was passed. introducing the same provisions in relation to ethnic minorities as those applying to women.

This legislation and other influences such as labour market changes have stimulated the development of equal opportunity policies at the organizational level. These policies emerged as a response to shortcomings in anti-discrimination legislation, such as the reactive nature of anti-discrimination laws and the reliance on individual complaint. The provision of equal opportunities, by contrast, is described as proactive intervention to create a non-discriminatory environment.

In the UK formal policies are usually initiated and controlled by personnel/human resource departments and tend to follow a common format based on the codes of practice issued by the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality. These policies outline procedural approaches to avoid discrimination and promote equality. The first part is based on the steps considered necessary to comply with the anti-discrimination legislation. The second part outlines those initiatives compatible with, but not required by, the legislation which are thought likely to enhance the opportunities of previously disadvantaged groups. Such policies are now widespread and form part of normal business practice, particularly among large organizations. A recent company-level industrial relations survey found that 75 per cent of those surveyed had an equal opportunity policy in place (Marginson et al. 1993).

Signs of progress towards greater equality of opportunity in employment can also be seen in the growth of Opportunity 2000. This business-led campaign was launched in 1991 with support from the Conservative government, to 'increase the quality and quantity of women's participation in the workforce' by the year 2000. Its focus has been on higher management. The organization claims to include the most progressive UK companies and counts among its founder

members a quarter of The Times Top One Hundred Companies. As for the companies, membership enhances their profile and encourages the efficient use of human resources. By 1997, over 300 organizations from both the public and private sectors were members. Together they employed over a quarter of the UK workforce (Business in the Community 1996). Almost one-third of these member companies now offer flexible work arrangements; half provide some kind of childcare or career break option; and almost all provide some form of training or education designed to increase women's opportunities at work.

The dominant approach to gender equality at work is most commonly characterized as 'equal treatment'. Enshrined within the liberal legal tradition, anti-discrimination legislation provides the right, on an individual basis, to be treated the same as a person of the opposite sex in the same circumstances. The way that antidiscrimination legislation has interpreted treating 'like as like' is that people should be judged not by their gender or ethnicity but by their job-related capacities. In practice this has led 'liberal' policies to focus on the development of techniques to ensure that women are assessed in the same way as men. Jewson and Mason (1986) extend this analysis to equal opportunities initiatives more broadly, calling the dominant policy approach 'liberal'. This model, common to North America and Western Europe, regards current inequalities as distortions of the rational, efficient workings of the market, which can be corrected by increasing bureaucratic controls: formalizing and standardizing recruitment, promotion and training procedures.

Many feminists have pointed out that equal opportunities policies take an oversimplistic view both of the problem of inequality (seeing it as a managerial failure to treat like as like) and its solution ('equality' can be achieved by treating women the same as men). They have designated the legislation and associated policies as offering only 'formal equality'.

Feminism in the 1970s was characterized by a profound ambivalence towards the notion of 'equality', and the value of liberaldemocratic reform. While the movement formulated demands for an end to discrimination, legal rights and financial independence for women, and while it actively promoted equality legislation, there was scepticism about both the possibility and the desirability of equality with men. In my view the goal was neither feasible nor desirable. Sameness is judged against a unitary standard of male characteristics and behaviour. As Pateman (1988: 231) expressed it: 'women's equal standing must be accepted as an expression of the freedom of women

as women, and not treated as an indication that women can be just like men.'

These issues have been further complicated by the fact that feminist theorists have become increasingly concerned that the category 'women', which is invoked in equal opportunity policies, falsely universalizes women's experience (Eisenstein 1984; Nicholson 1990; Riley 1988; Young 1990). After all, policies based on sameness/equal treatment require women to deny, or attempt to minimize, differences between themselves and men as the price of equality. Avoiding the accusation of essentialism, or the assertion of fixed, unified and opposed female and male natures, seems to be at the heart of much contemporary feminist theory and politics. In the words of Schor (1994: xiii), 'can there be a feminist politics that dispenses with the notion of Woman?' Indeed, according to Bacchi (1996), there is now an almost insurmountable rift between feminist policy-makers and feminist theorists, with the former campaigning for 'women' and the latter disputing the legitimacy of the same project.

This critique of equality based on sameness provides important insights into the limitations of many equal opportunity initiatives. It is, however, a position that is difficult to sustain across the range of activities being pursued under the label of equal opportunities (Liff and Wajcman 1996). Even the anti-discrimination law, which seems to be straightforwardly about treating women the same as men would be treated in the same circumstances, arguably goes further and acknowledges women's difference in some circumstances.

The equal value amendment to the UK Equal Pay Act is a case in point. The original legislation provided for equal pay on an equal treatment basis, that is, the same pay for doing the same job. Since occupational segregation means that women are rarely in the same situation as men, the original legislation had little effect on pay differentials. The equal value amendment rules that people in different

jobs involving comparable skill, responsibility, working conditions and effort should receive equal benefits in terms of pay. Since jobs can be judged to be of equal value while being different in terms of other characteristics like type of work or qualifications required, it is difficult to treat this situation as a case of equal pay being awarded to

people in the same situation.

Similar tensions arise from trying to fit the range of equality initiatives seen in many organizations within the 'equal treatment'/'sameness' definition. In practice many go beyond formalizing selection and other personnel procedures to ensure equal treatment for women who, in all aspects apart from their gender, are the same as men in terms of their suitability for a post. Organizations which are proactive on equality issues have stretched and reinterpreted the equal treatment model in a number of ways.

One set of initiatives could be said to be aimed at reducing the barriers which prevent men and women from achieving the same goal. Here we could include the provision of childcare and other measures to reduce the difficulty of combining waged work with domestic commitments. Also in this category one could include single-sex training schemes to provide women with the skills required to gain entry to occupations in which they have traditionally been seriously underrepresented. Many people object to such schemes, arguing that if women have to be 'helped' to be like men, then such initiatives constitute not equal treatment but an unfair advantage. Even so, all these things can lawfully be provided (although, of course, they are not required).

In other cases organizations are examining job requirements and conditions in more radical ways than those required by indirect discrimination clauses, in an attempt to ensure that women are able to fulfil the requirements. Such initiatives include the removal of certain formal qualifications, such as a degree, unless it can be proved that the job could not be done by someone with a different set of experiences. Jobs which were traditionally worked on a full-time basis have been opened up to those wishing to work part-time or job share. The argument here is that it is very difficult for women to gain equal treatment because job conditions are constructed around men's skills and patterns of work (Webb and Liff 1988). These changes aim to make requirements more 'neutral' so that women are more likely to be in the same situation (able to satisfy job requirements) and thus qualify for equal treatment (access to jobs).

If feminists are critical of these initiatives, studies report that men experience them not as equal treatment but as a lowering of standards, or rewriting the rules to suit women. Men commonly express the view that equal opportunity has 'gone too far' and that women are being appointed in preference to men. It is perhaps obvious that groups who currently have a dominant position in the workforce are likely to feel threatened by equal opportunity initiatives. Those who have been successful in gaining jobs and progressing up organizational hierarchies generally feel that they have achieved their positions as a result of their own merits. They may be quite happy for other individuals to do the same regardless of their gender or ethnicity but are concerned about policies which they see as giving these groups special help.

Men's resistance to sex equality is thoroughly explored in Cockburn's (1991) study of change in four organizations. She found widespread annoyance with maternity leave and related provisions such as special leave, part-time work and job sharing. Many male managers felt maternity leave and flexibility were now 'too generous' and were 'fed up to the back teeth' with the continual absences of women for 'one thing or another'. 'There is a deep-rooted feeling among many men at all levels that pregnant women and new mothers are "cheating", "taking us for a ride" or generally "messing the organisation around". Yet sick leave, which is more frequent and less predictable than maternity leave does not incur the same blame' (Cockburn 1991: 94). Recent surveys carried out in universities in Australia and the Netherlands found that many academic men believe that women are unfairly advantaged by current equal opportunity hiring practices (Bacchi 1996: 28). It would seem that even modest policies that attempt to place women and men on the same footing can provoke a backlash.

Current anti-discrimination legislation and equal opportunity initiatives draw primarily on an equal treatment/sameness notion of equality. There are of course, as these examples show, important elements within them which demonstrate an awareness of the limitations of such a naive perspective. It is evident that sex equality policies are more complex than the sameness/difference arguments would allow. However, a conception of equal opportunity which requires individuals to be treated the same can never adequately address the fact that women are situated differently. Ignoring women's relationship to the private sphere, for example, conceals the way women are penalized for their difference. Unless difference is recognized and taken account of, women will not be able to compete equally. As they stand, equal opportunity policies can only mean assimilation to a pre-existing and problematic male norm. Indeed, a more radical approach is taken in a number of countries where the emphasis is on confronting difference and where special treatment or positive discrimination is mandatory.

'Hard' Affirmative Action

Leading equality policies in the United States, Canada, Australia, Sweden, the Netherlands and Norway are analysed by Bacchi (1996) in her recent book The Politics of Affirmative Action. The term 'affirmative action' originated in the United States, but because of the increasing opposition it provoked, many countries have sought to distance themselves from the term. Other terminology has been adopted such as employment equity, equal opportunities and now positive action, as it is commonly described throughout Europe. In all the countries Bacchi studied, the stated goal of labour market affirmative action programmes is to encourage women into nontraditional jobs, that is, jobs traditionally performed by men, and to increase their access to positions of higher pay and status. There are generally said to be two kinds of affirmative action programmes, 'soft' programmes and 'hard' or 'strong' programmes. The former refers to programmes which increase the possibility that members of underrepresented groups will be appointed or promoted. These include initiatives such as recruitment policies or training programmes to assist disadvantaged groups to compete more effectively. Hard programmes are those specifying that being a member of an underrepresented group counts in assessing candidates for appointments and promotions. Quotas are one form of preferential hiring and promotion. This type of policy explicitly recognizes that equality can be understood as treating (different) people as different.

Federal contractors in the USA were first required to devise and carry out affirmative action programmes in the late 1960s. Executive Order 11246, signed into law in 1965 by President Johnson, barred discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, or national origin in federal employment contractors and subcontractors. The order requires executive departments and agencies to 'maintain a positive program of equal opportunities'. In 1967 the Order was expanded to include sex discrimination. This was strengthened by the Equal Opportunity Act of 1972 which empowered the Civil Service Commission to review and approve equal opportunity plans and to monitor the progress of federal agencies and departments in achieving equal opportunities for women and minorities.

Affirmative action is a process which involves at least three steps. The first is to analyse an employer's workforce to determine whether the percentages of sex, race, or ethnic groups in specific job classifications correspond to the percentages of those groups generally prevailing in the relevant labour market. Second, if some of the groups are manifestly underrepresented, the employer's entire personnel process is scrutinized to identify the particular procedures responsible for the disproportionate figures. Third, if the employer finds that elements of the personnel process tend to exclude a group, a broad range of race- or gender-conscious measures may be undertaken to remedy the imbalance. These include adoption of goals and timetables for recruitment, training, hiring and promotion of minorities and women, a recruitment programme to attract members of the excluded groups, and an effective monitoring system.

Feminists have argued for positive discrimination/affirmative action as a legitimate remedy to overcome the effects of past discrimination and the only way to achieve 'genuine' as opposed to mere 'formal' equality. This approach requires programmes aimed at enhancing the competitive chances of the members of socially disadvantaged groups in access to education and in the processes of recruitment, selection and promotion in employment. Its purpose is to break the cycle created by the tendency of those in power to appoint and promote people like themselves. While the policies adopted, particularly in the US, have been impressive, they have had limited impact on sex segregation in senior management.

It is important to understand the origins of positive discrimination in the US as a response primarily to the historic subordination and enslavement of black people. Strong measures were seen as legitimate to remedy the effects of gross discrimination in the past. In this context, 'women' are regarded as another 'minority' group against whom discrimination will not be permitted, rather than as a starting point for policy formulation in this area. This understanding is reflected both in the theoretical literature on affirmative action, and in its practice, both of which mainly focus on race issues. This construction of affirmative action opens the door to invidious comparisons as to the relative disadvantage of women and other 'minority' groups. It may further divide the already fragmented powerless groups. 'Setting "women" against other outgroups minimizes change in at least two ways. First, the "spoils" are to be divvied up. And second, only those who can manage to fit their case to established categories of "disadvantage" get heard' (Bacchi 1996: 49).

Furthermore, the predominant understanding is that affirmative action means 'preferential treatment' to assist 'disadvantaged' people to move into better jobs. In this discourse of affirmative action, the 'beneficiaries' become the problem. As Radin (1991: 134) says: 'the dominant ordinary language view is that affirmative action gives benefits to people who are less qualified or less deserving than white men or indeed are wholly unqualified or undeserving.' Such an approach assumes that appointment procedures as currently implemented are objective and form an exclusive basis for the assessment of individual suitability. In practice, this is usually understood to mean that the merit principle forms the basis for appointment to

positions and for promotions. This understanding of affirmative action as assistance to the 'needy' also accepts a broad vision of society as open to opportunities, except in a few instances.

Contrary to this view, a concern of this book is to challenge the apparent neutrality of selection procedures and criteria. Many years of feminist theorizing have established that definitions of merit and skill are not fixed but depend on the power of particular groups who define them (Cockburn 1985; Phillips and Taylor 1980; Young 1990). The specification of job requirements requires subjective judgements about necessary skills and working practices: decisions which may result in the job becoming gendered. 'Merit' is rarely defined. Indeed, one might say it is the 'black box' of the equal opportunities process, the key to its functioning (Burton 1991). Outgroups remain outgroups because ingroups assess them by reference to their own image. Studies have shown that selectors continue to hold stereotypes of women and men which affect their decision-making, and have difficulty conceptualizing job requirements in gender-neutral terms (Collinson et al. 1990; Curran 1988).

In subsequent chapters I will look in more detail at how jobs themselves, and the qualities which are sought in applicants, are sextyped. Suffice it to say here that notions of suitability are socially constructed and inseparable from the acceptability of candidates (Webb and Liff 1988). Viewed thus, affirmative action is not 'preferential' treatment but an acknowledgement that power and bias are at work in appointments.

However, despite being a more proactive strategy, affirmative action remains subject to limitations similar to those afflicting conventional equal opportunity reforms. Even at its 'hardest', affirmative action still involves moving members of disadvantaged groups up the ladder while leaving the structure of the ladder unchanged. It stops short of questioning the processes by which institutional power is claimed and distributed.

Currently affirmative action faces increasing opposition and is fast losing ground in the US. Critics portray it as inappropriate and excessively interventionist, going against the grain of the American equal opportunities myth. The conservative attack is shifting popular opinion against hard affirmative action. Only 'soft' measures, which seek to alleviate sex discrimination through advocating gender-neutral or 'same' treatment, are now legitimate. Compensating individuals for past social and educational disadvantages rooted in difference now seems contrary to the principle of merit. Disenchantment with affirmative action in the workplace in the US has led to the recent interest in 'managing diversity'. It is to this new model of equal opportunities that we now turn.

Managing Diversity

If affirmative action was the policy of the 1980s, 'diversity management' is replacing it as the policy of the 1990s. In North America, and increasingly in Britain and Australia, the intention of equality initiatives is to value or manage 'diversity', which purports to be a positive valuing of differences between people. In a key article in Harvard Business Review, Thomas describes the new way forward 'From affirmative action to affirming diversity': 'The goal is to manage diversity in such as way as to get from a diverse work force the same productivity we once got from a homogeneous work force, and do it without artificial programs, standards - or barriers' (1990: 112).

Proponents of this approach argue that businesses are limiting themselves by continuing to employ only people in the same mould as those already in place. Women and ethnic minorities, it is argued, can bring new strengths to a workforce and help organizations maintain their competitive edge. Rather than being rejected, difference should be managed effectively.

Compared with over 20 years of 'equal opportunities' initiatives, 'managing diversity' strategies are still in their infancy and it is not always easy to distinguish reality from rhetoric. In an early contribution to the US debate, Copeland (1988b) describes ten measures typically included in a 'valuing diversity' programme. Most of these would not be out of place in any broadly based equal opportunity policy. They focus on initiatives to recruit people from underrepresented groups, activities in the community to develop a good public image with these groups, providing 'high flying' women and minorities with access to career development track jobs, mentoring, executive appointments to get underrepresented groups through the 'glass ceiling', training for managers to counter stereotypes and increase their understanding of organizational barriers, and ensuring that organizational provisions such as holidays and food are inclusive of the needs of all. In the case of the others, the language may be different but the underlying concept is not. For example, diversity training for employees is said to 'improve employees' understanding of corporate culture, success requirements, and career choices that

will affect their advancement' (Copeland 1988b: 48); 'diverse input and feedback' is about assessing employees' needs directly rather than assuming what they are; and 'self-help' is about encouraging the development of support networks. Responsibility for these changes and their success rests with line managers.

There does appear to be a move away from the conventional approach to equal opportunities towards initiatives that are more individualistic and line manager based. There does not, however, seem to be any significant change in the ways in which access to scarce resources such as senior jobs should be granted. Initiatives aim to get the best out of people, overcome barriers, and ensure that minorities receive the same advantages previously granted only to the dominant group. It is difficult to see a focus on equality based on difference rather than sameness as a key aspect of this new equal opportunities approach, despite the 'diversity' label.

Instead, at least part of the appeal to organizations seems to come from the compatibility between diversity approaches and some of the ideas that have been characterized as 'new industrial relations' or 'human resource management' (Storey 1992; Sisson 1994b). Conventional equal opportunities approaches are deeply rooted in the old approaches to managing labour in that they are bureaucratic in style and tend to see the workforce as a collectivity. They rely on setting rules for managers to follow and on policing whether or not they do so. In contrast, human resource management stresses the role of the individual and the importance of involvement and commitment. An approach based on diversity fits much more comfortably with this style than conventional approaches to equal opportunities, since it recognizes differences within the workforce and sees it as the responsibility of the individual to grasp opportunities offered by an empowering organization. 'This vision sidesteps the question of equality, ignores the tensions of coexistence, plays down the uncomfortable realities of difference, and focuses instead on individual enablement' (Thomas 1990: 114).

There are other strands to this debate which do seem to challenge the 'sameness' notion of equality in a radical way. Copeland (1988a) argues that the objective is to make people feel comfortable and motivated so that they can work as effectively as possible. The lesson for managers is that people will work better if they do not feel they are being squeezed into a narrow mould. Others have gone further and argued that mixed work teams will understand a wider range of customer needs and hence help the organization to be more competitive (Gordon et al. 1991; Greenslade 1991).

In the area of women and management this type of argument blurs into one that argues for a new form of homogeneity by claiming that an alternative style of manager will be more appropriate to organizations in the future. A feminine style of managing, different from but superior to men's, is apt to be lauded, and it might be supposed that this development will result in an influx of women into senior positions. However, we should be wary of confusing the so-called feminization of management style with the question of whether women or men are selected to do the job. As we shall see in chapter 3, it is still men who can best lay claim to whatever characteristics are seen as desirable in a manager.

These examples do challenge the equal treatment model. People may not want to be treated the same with respect to all aspects of their work lives. Instead they might value different working arrangements, or benefit packages, and by successfully managing diversity employers might expect to benefit. What is less clear is what is being said about the basis on which access to scarce resources (such as a job) should be decided. If it is true that a job can be done successfully in a number of different ways, how should candidates be compared? On the equal treatment model, equality is ensured by developing job criteria against which all candidates can be judged without regard to their gender. For the diversity model to be able to defend a different kind of fairness, it would seem necessary to develop some way of comparing approaches that are different but equivalent. There is little explicit discussion of this issue in the diversity literature.

The problem is that apparently progressive ideas like recognizing diversity can actually undermine the proposition that women as a group are the targets of discriminatory practices. There appears to be a shift in the discourse on managing diversity away from any sense that specific groups experience 'disadvantage'. Liff (1996) argues that the version of managing diversity that is most likely to appeal to organizations in the current climate is one that will result in dissolving differences rather than valuing differences.

The contrast can be described in the following terms. On the one hand, valuing diversity approaches are ones which focus on gender differences and see the need to recognize and adapt to them to ensure that women are not disadvantaged. On the other hand, the dissolving differences approach focuses on individual differences. It recognizes differences within the workforce and sees all employees as 'different'. Equality, if it is seen as an issue at all for this model, resides in tapping employees' distinctive skills to the full and rewarding them in ways that fulfil their distinctive needs. This model denies the existence of systematic disadvantage based on social differences and implies that equality can be achieved by treating everyone as ungendered individuals. Like the equality policies discussed above, managing diversity does not seek to change the nature and order of jobs and occupations. Rather it encourages a wider range of people to be able to fit into conventionally structured positions.

In the current economic climate, where management ideas about the importance of decentralized organizations, teamworking and innovation predominate, it is this individualized version of managing diversity that is likely to prevail. 'Those concerned about gender equality should be anxious about such a development . . . It allows for individual difference but has no strategy for dealing with the ways in which job structures and personnel practices have been shown to systematically disadvantage women, ethnic minorities and others and to advantage white males' (Liff 1996: 22-3). There can be little wonder that many feminist writers concerned about women's equality have been extremely cautious about recent approaches based on the acknowledgement of difference.

Sameness, Difference and Equality

The extent to which women are the same as or different from men, and the political consequences of making such an assumption, have been much discussed. As mentioned earlier, a considerable amount of feminist theory has agonized over essentialism and criticized liberal equal opportunity programmes for targeting a homogenizing category of 'women'. These theorists have rightly pointed out that the category of 'women' is only constructed in relation to the category of the other. We understand male and female characteristics in relation to each other rather than as independent categories. Indeed, the construction of women as different from men (taken as the measure) is one of the mechanisms whereby male power is maintained. To engage in a dialogue about gender difference within gendered hierarchical workplaces is highly problematic since there is an inexorable tendency for difference to be evaluated as inferior.

At the same time many feminist theories of difference are not particularly helpful for analysing the particular set of problems we have already drawn attention to and will encounter further in this book. The recent feminist theory that draws on deconstructivist ideas has rejected any attempt to define an identity for women as a group (Nicholson 1990; Scott 1988; Young 1994). Instead, it highlights differences within the categories of women and men (rather than between them) and recognizes other identity categories such as ethnicity. The presentation of a single binary division between men and women simultaneously polarizes the difference between them and exaggerates the homogeneity of each category. As such, the common concerns of, say, black men and black women are obscured, while those of black and white women are exaggerated. This emphasis on different kinds of women with distinctive problems does highlight the limitations of the concept of 'women's needs' embodied in equal opportunity programmes. These feminist notions of equality through difference parallel the shift in equality policy towards managing diversity.

However, simply drawing attention to differences among women does not by itself guarantee a progressive outcome. Too much emphasis on difference between women can lead to the disintegration of the category 'women' and make it harder to understand how women's collective disadvantage is institutionalized at work. On the other hand, too much emphasis on sameness can lead to the uncritical reproduction of the male norm. Politically, therefore, we cannot avoid using the concepts of sameness and difference. In particular, some understanding of the ways in which women are different from men is necessary in order to understand the gender construction of workplaces.

I have attempted to show here that, in practice, workplace equality initiatives have always invoked both sameness and difference. Even when reforms have been constructed primarily around granting equality to women who could prove that they were the same as men, they have left space for claims on the basis of women's difference. The problem is that there is only limited evidence that the policy initiatives from either perspective have led to a reduction in inequality between men and women. Several researchers have found that organizational structures have either been unaffected, or have adapted and incorporated such policies with no significant changes to the gender hierarchy of organizational positions (Bacchi 1996; Cockburn 1991; Dickens 1994; Halford 1992; Shaw and Perrons 1995). The limits to both sameness- and difference-based initiatives have led much contemporary feminist thought to critique or 'destabilize' this binary opposition, and to a growing interest in moving beyond these divisions (Barrett and Phillips 1992; Hirsch and Keller 1990).

Can those who suggest we go beyond sameness and difference offer a better way forward? Scott (1988: 172) argues that 'the only response is a double one: the unmasking of the power relationship constructed by posing equality as the antithesis of difference, and the refusal of its consequent dichotomous construction of political choices.' What this seems to involve in practice is a stress on the multiple identities shared by people, both men and women. Taken to its logical conclusion this approach denies any intrinsic coherence to the category 'women', or, for that matter, any other socially constructed category. So it is far from clear what the gender equality project would mean once the structural inequality on which it is founded has been undermined.

The fundamental problem with this position is that gender is not just a characteristic which divides people into two categories, 'men' and 'women'. Rather, societies are organized through sexual difference and each sex is assigned its own tasks, identities, responsibilities and roles. It is important to stress that the basis of men's power is not simply a product of the ideas we hold and the language we use, but of all the social practices that give men authority over women. Managers' perceptions of job requirements and procedures for assessing merit have been shown to be saturated with gendered assumptions. How will this be changed by the discursive deconstruction of the category of gender? Feminists can argue (as they have for years) that not all women get pregnant, but it seems unlikely that this observation will stop managers thinking 'yes, but no men will.'

In the course of this research I became frustrated with current feminist theorizing about whether we should aspire to equality, to difference, or to a deconstruction of the dichotomy. These debates leave unresolved many of the questions raised by my study of the gender relations of management. The way to emerge from the circularity of sameness and difference approaches is to recognize that, while we must keep both these concepts in play, we need to concentrate on the fact that women workers are disadvantaged. The issue is not that we are different but that this difference is the basis for the unequal distribution of power and resources. As Bacchi (1996) has demonstrated, feminists have been forced into lengthy debates about the ontological status and content of the category 'women' precisely because those in power demand that women justify their claim to categorical recognition. Definitions of 'women' are by their nature political. Men are not called upon in the same way to justify their privilege. Numerous feminist authors have noted that 'man' remains