# Factors that Contribute to Women's Career Development in Organizations: A Review of the Literature

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*Extensive research has focused on factors that hinder the advancement of women in organizations. However, scarce literature exists about factors that facilitate such development. This paper reviews recent scholarship on women at work, through an analysis of existing literature, in order to identify factors that facilitate the advancement of women's careers. This paper explores implications for organizations and Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals and proposes future research.*

Key words: women, career development

Organizations face the pressure of accommodating the demands of a more diverse workforce, which is comprised of increasing numbers of women (Wirth, 2001a). Career development practices and relevance has changed over the past decades (Herr, 2001). However, in order to respond to women's career development needs and remain competitive, organizations must pay attention to what helps them succeed (Burke, 2002). The purpose of this paper is to review recent scholarship on women's development in organizations, through an analysis of existing literature, in order to identify factors that facilitate such development. Implications for organizations and HRD professionals are presented.

## Problem Statement

Extensive research has identified factors that hinder the advancement of women in organizations. Yet, scarce literature exists about factors that facilitate such development. According to Burke (2002), there is a need to document efforts by organizations to develop women managers and professionals, and more knowledge about factors that positively influence the advancement of women in organizations is needed because research has mostly focused on barriers. Despite the fact that the workforce is becoming more diverse (Fernandez, 1999), and more women are participating in the workforce (International Labor Organization (ILO), 2004), too few studies in the field of Human Resource Development (HRD) have addressed issues related to diversity, such as gender and race equality, power, discrimination, and others (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). In addition, Wright (2003) stressed the need to emphasize more positive aspects of work and life in organizational research. This paper addresses a more positive perspective of women at work by providing a review of the factors that contribute to their development.

## Background of Women at Work

Research has documented barriers that prevent women from advancing in their careers. The existence of male stereotyping around the executive role, lack of support, and exclusion from networks are mentioned by Tharenou (1999). Other identified barriers include the absence of effective management training programs, access to training and development opportunities, inadequate compensation systems, inflexibility of work schedules, and absence of programs to balance work-life demands (Mattis, 1994).

Major demographic trends are occurring in the global labor force that will have direct implications for organizations. Among them is the large movement of women entering the workforce; it is estimated that about 63% of the total worldwide workforce in 2003 were women (ILO, 2004). Within the U.S.A. only, it is expected that by the year 2010 women will account for 48% of the total workforce (Schmidt & Duenas, 2002; U.S. Dept of Labor, 2004). A survey conducted by the Institute of Management (1994) revealed that women managers were likely to resign from their positions twice as often as their male counterparts. A major explanation for this phenomenon is the existence of invisible artificial barriers created by attitudes and prejudices in organizations that prevent women from accessing higher-level positions (Wirth, 2001a). Research on the career development of women managers in general has referred to the existence of a glass ceiling as the invisible barrier that restricts advancement of women to top executive positions (Igbaria & Wormley, 1992).

Among others, major barriers to advancement reported by women executives include stereotyping, discrimination, the existence of male-dominant cultures in organizations, less access to career development opportunities, and their exclusion from networking (Catalyst 1992, 1996; Marshall, 1995; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; Riley & White, 1994). In addition, Bae (2002) found that one of these barriers comes in the form of access to training. He found that women are less likely to be trained than men.

Conlon (2003) pointed out that career development will need to address unique needs in an increasingly more diverse workforce. Thus, organizations cannot afford to underestimate the issue of women's development (Poindexter, 1993; Wirth, 2001b). In order to eliminate barriers for women, organizations face a demanding challenge. Poindexter (1993) suggested that women's perspectives, goals, and needs must be addressed and understood if organizations want to serve women employees better. Wirth (2001b) argued that gender equity boosts productivity, increases economic growth, and improves the welfare of families. The way organizations respond to the needs of women will determine how successful they are in assessing what talented women have to offer. Thus, organizations will need to consider present and future needs of women and respond actively to them (Burke, 2002).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical construct for this paper is career development for women. A review of women's career development literature revealed that there are a number of contextual micro-level and macro-level factors that influence women's careers (Phillips & Imhoff, 1997). Other studies have addressed the development needs of women in organizations (Bierema, 1998; Mallon & Cassell, 1999; Tanton, 1992; Tharenou, 1999, 2001), and it has been argued that the nature of women's development is different from their male counterparts (Bierema, 1998; Phillips & Imkoff, 1997; Stroh & Reilly, 1999). Women do not follow linear or lifespan careers as men tend to do, rather they see themselves interacting between career and relationships (Powell & Mainiero, 1992). As Bierema (1998) suggested, women's development is different from men's because women experience more interruptions in their careers. Interruptions are mostly due to family responsibilities that women face being the primary providers of child and elder care (Albrecht, 2003; ILO, 2004). The nature of women's development is changing, and it is contextual (Bierema, 1998). The changing nature can be attributed to changes driven by the information age, shifts in careers, demands for work-life balance, and inequalities in the workplace (Bierema, 1998), as well as personal choices such as the increasing decision in the U.S. not to marry and not to have children (Hewlett, 2002). For women, the demands of work-life balance and the existence of gender inequalities are critical factors for success. Women face unequal pay for the same type of work that men do or have fewer job promotion opportunities (ILO, 2004, Tharenou, 1999).

At the same time, societal and organizational contexts have influenced women's development because, traditionally, norms, values, and assumptions have emulated men's career development models in which women do not find a place (Bierema, 1998). According to Bierema (2001), women's development has also been dominated by male-oriented theories that do not explain women's career patterns. These theories contemplate development in terms of stages of advancement, in which certain specific experiences are needed in order to transition from one stage to another (Mainiero, 1994). Women's careers are affected when they lack experiences that are critical to success (Tharenou, 1999). It has been suggested that organization cultures that are male dominant represent a barrier to women's advancement (Marshall, 1995; Ragins et al., 1998) because in such cultures men usually accumulate more power and resources than women. Therefore, successful career development of women depends highly on the context in which it takes place. This paper explores factors that enhance women's development in organizations.

**Research Question**

The research question addressed in this paper is: What factors contribute positively to women's development in organizations?

**Research Methods**

A comprehensive literature review was conducted using the descriptors "women at work", "women's development" and "women career development". With the exception of seminal works, most of the sources cited were less than five years old. The databases used were Business Source Premiere, ERIC and key journals related to HRD, Organization Development and Career Development. The literature search yielded books, conference papers, refereed and non-refereed articles, and online sources. Sources were chosen based on scholarly relevance. Additionally, manuscripts themselves often revealed additional sources for research, which were pursued using the

method noted above. The emergence of patterns and themes resulted from an inductive analysis of the literature, and the initial research question went through iterations of refinement as part of this process.

## Results and Findings

Eight themes emerged in reviewing the literature and were identified as factors contributing to women's development in organizations.

*Organizational and Government Policies*

Organizational and government policies are critical to achieving gender equity in the workplace and to contributing to women's advancement (Shapiro & Olgiati, 2002). A number of government initiatives have been implemented over the past few years in the U.S.A. First, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) has been aimed at responding to unexpected illness needs of families. Second, the Affirmative Action program or the Equal Employment Opportunity law was oriented towards allowing equal access to work for women and minorities (Albrecht, 2003). In addition, the U.S. A. Congress enacted the Glass Ceiling Act of 1991, the purpose of which was to encourage organizations to create a more diverse workforce by paying attention to eliminating barriers that hindered the development of women and minorities (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

Organization policies include providing assistance to dependent care, creating flexible working conditions and providing on-site care facilities (Schmidt & Duenas, 2002). Although the above policies were created to increase equality at work, much remains to be done in terms of policy implementation and policy coverage. For instance, it has been found in regards to the FMLA that many employers are not subject to this Act. FMLA does not cover all the leave policies that affect women, who are still the primary caretakers of sick children and relatives, such as short-term child illnesses or parent/parent-in-law care (Albrecht, 2003).

*Supportive Work Environment*

A study conducted by Catalyst (1998) found that a major factor contributing to women's retention and development within organizations is the implementation of work-family programs and creating environments that are supportive for women.

Schmidt and Duenas (2002) argued that organizations that want to remain competitive have started to pay attention to work environment issues and have tried to incorporate development practices that operate well for male and female workers. As a result, efforts have come in the form of policies and regulations to make the work environment more worker-friendly.

Family friendly policies (FFP) created to balance work-life demands (Collins, 1993) are also seen as business strategies. They intend to respond to the concerns of employees who have family responsibilities and include childcare initiatives, flexible time schedules, and parental leaves (Albrecht, 2003). Childcare initiatives are keys to the retention of working women with children (ILO, 2004). In an Almer, Cohen, and Single's study (as cited in Rogier & Padgett, 2004), it was found that flexible time schedules have been used for a number of years due to the belief that they help employees manage work-life balance better. For women, being able to work with flexible time schedules makes it easier to balance work and life demands and, consequently, make it easier to progress into upper-level positions (Rogier & Padgett, 2004).

Several employers have successfully implemented family-friendly policies (FFP) (Schmidt & Duenas, 2002). However, research has also suggested that FFPs have produced inconsistent benefits (Albrecht, 2003). Controversy exists as to what the outcomes of such policies are and how effective they are in serving women employees. The major point of the controversy, according to Albrecht (2003), is that the context in which these policies take place has not changed. First, inequality exists because women still are the major childcare providers, and this affects their roles at work. Additionally, despite the increase in childcare facilities, there is still a lack of adequate quality and affordable childcare (Albrecht, 2003). Second, the development of flexible time schedules has had a negative impact on women's careers in management and other professions. Among some of the negative results mentioned by the literature are reduced income, envy of colleagues, loss of more interesting assignments, lack of promotion, less access to resources, and being seen as less committed and less competent (Albrecht, 2003). Third, parental leave policies vary greatly among organizations, and their very presence does not guarantee that they will be implemented or that they will cover all aspects needed (Albrecht, 2003).

In sum, the implementation of organizational policies is a critical factor to enhance women's development. Serious commitment to create programs that support those policies and developing a better understanding of the conditions under which these policies are successful is needed (Schmidt & Duenas, 2002).

*Top Management Commitment*

According to Morrison, White, and van Velsor (1987), in a study conducted with women executives, top management support was found to be among the factors that contributed to women's career success. Similarly,

Catalyst (1990) suggested that organizations' initiatives were more likely to be successful if CEOs recognized the need for initiatives and implemented strategies for advancing women. The primary responsibility for creating a supportive environment rests on organizations (Schmidt & Duenas, 2002). A supportive environment provides workers with friendly workplace policies, but commitment from top management is crucial in implementing such policies. Thus, it is clear that top management has to be involved in addressing women's issues at work.

*Organizational Support System*

The existence of an organizational support system is another factor that facilitates women's development (Morrison et al., 1987). This system needs to include an assessment structure for tracking achievement that measures how well women are advancing through the ladder in order to assess progress within the organization. Such a system would monitor pay, promotion opportunities, inclusion in decision-making, respect, and credibility (Morrison et al., 1987). It would measure performance and promotion of women, identify assumptions, and assess employees' needs, career goals, and potential discrimination factors (Mattis, 1994). Finally, a study on women manager expatriates revealed that an organizational support system contributes to their job satisfaction (Culpan & Wright, 2002).

*Mentoring*

Another factor that contributes to women's development includes mentors and access to networks (Morrison et al., 1987). It has been suggested in the career development literature that mentors play a crucial role in women's development in organizations (Henning & Jardim, 1977; Kanter, 1977; Mattis, 2001; Morrison et al., 1987). This is especially true for women who report more barriers to advancement from social processes than men do (Tharenou, 1999). Women executives in the UK and U.S.A. reported that they need the support of mentors to advance (Ragins et al., 1998; Riley & White, 1994). Mentor relationships help women advance by providing them with self-confidence and reducing their levels of stress. This is also confirmed by Nelson and Quick (1985) who found that especially important is the role of female mentors who provide role models to their protégés, helping them cope with discrimination, stereo-typing, family/work balance, and social isolation.

*Networking*

Edwards, Woodwall, and Welchman (1996) revealed that being visible through access to experiences such as sponsorship and networking is also crucial to women's development among women managers. According to Burt (1992, 1998), Catalyst (1990), and Tharenou (1999), women rely on networking with other women to advance to executive levels. Ibarra (1997) found that women need networking ties with other women in order to advance. Although the networks vary in terms of origin, membership, and structure, they share a common goal. Most of them focus on career and skills development; they promote networking, and attempt to improve communication among women members and management (Catalyst, 1990). In addition, networking provides women with more information and options than they would have without it. It gives them the opportunity to strengthen ties with prospective sponsors (Burt, 1998).

*Training and Development*

In general, training and development opportunities are believed to enhance employee overall achievement and performance. A major factor contributing to women's development and participation in managerial work is access to education and training and development initiatives (Wirth, 2001b). This is corroborated by Burke (2002), who suggested that access to education, training, and development are part of the challenge to support women's advancement in organizations. Specifically, access to formal management training programs, access to the appropriate and relevant training, tailoring training to the needs of women, and training in gender equity are believed to be factors that positively influence women's advancement in organizations (Loutfi, 2001).

In addition, a report on accounting firms in the U.S.A. (American Institute of CPA'S, 1995) suggested that successful practices for supporting women employees include educational programs and advisory groups that aim at enhancing career opportunities and workplace environment for women employees.

Training and development initiatives are crucial to women's development in organizations because they provide women with the skills, credentials, and knowledge they need to succeed in their jobs. However, Tharenou (2001) found that training and development, along with education and challenging assignments, predict advancement only into middle management. As stated earlier, in a study conducted by Bae (2002), it was found that women in the U.S.A. are less likely to be trained than men.

*Organization Culture*

Organization culture is among the factors that are central to promote a supportive work environment (Lobel, 1999). Organizations are based on norms, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions, which in turn influence organizational practices, tacit norms, and values (van Vianen & Fisher, 2002). Bajdo and Dickson (2001) found that organizations that maintain cultures that promote gender equity are more likely to have an increasing number of women in management positions. However, no studies were found in the literature as to how such cultures look like.

**Conclusions**

The purpose of this paper was to identify through a literature review factors that facilitate women's development in organizations. This paper has argued that the advancement of women in organizations depends on eight factors: the existence of government and organizational policies, support from top management, an organizational support system, mentoring and networking opportunities, education, training, and development opportunities, and a supportive organizational culture. What this paper found is that, despite the fact that the literature review reveals that there are ways in which organizations can promote women's development, it is critical to understand how these factors operate. An interrelationship between these factors is addressed below (Table 1).

*Table 1. Interrelationship among the Factors that Contribute to Women's Career Development*

| *Factor* | *Definition* | *Relationship* |
|---|---|---|
| Government and Organizational Policies | Legal framework of policies created to achieve gender equity in the workplace | Assists organizations by giving them a legal framework in which to operate |
| Supportive Work Environment | Existence of work-family programs and Family Friendly Policies that help women manage balance work-life demands | Influences organization culture and it is influenced by top management and by organization culture |
| Support from Top Management | Commitment to implement initiatives to advance women | Influences the decision making and implementation of all factors |
| Organizational Support System | Assessment structure for tracking achievement that measures how well women are advancing | Provides a system to track Mentoring, Networking and Education, Training & Development initiatives |
| Mentoring | Relationships that provide women with role models that help them cope with self-esteem, discrimination, stereo-typing, family/work balance, and social isolation | Requires top management support to promote it and affects organization culture |
| Networking | Communication that promotes access to information about career development | Requires top management support to promote it and affects organization culture |
| Training and Development | Programs that enhance employee overall achievement and performance through acquisition of skills, credentials and knowledge | Requires an organizational support system to measure the outcomes |
| Organization Culture | Norms, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions, that influence organizational practices, tacit norms, and values | Influences all the factors and assures that beliefs, attitudes and assumptions reflect practices, norms and values |

It is critical to assure that government policies create a supportive umbrella for organizations to operate. This means that goals for policies at both levels should be aligned. Second, top management commitment and support is needed for any organizational change to happen (Warrick, 1995). Once this is achieved, a system that allows tracking career advancement for women should be in place. Fourth, as part of the process, it is critical to understand the nature of mentoring and networking programs that work better to help women advance. Commitment towards granting more access to training and development programs for women, as well as more specific knowledge about the types of training and development initiatives that help women advance is also needed (Tharenou, 1999). Finally, for the successful implementation of all practices above mentioned, it is critical to assure that organization cultures in place are supportive.

The uniqueness of this paper is that it holds a positive discourse of gender and organizations by reviewing a variety of recent sources and by analyzing factors that enhance women's development in organizations. Additionally, this paper brings the Human Resource Development perspective into the issue of women's development at work. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for practice and future research.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Professionals in HRD are concerned primarily with the development of individuals in a workplace context. In addition, they are interested in the development of work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction that benefits the individual, the organization, and the larger community (McLean & McLean, 2001). Career development is another critical area in HRD (van Dijk, 2004). It is mainly concerned with individual needs and outcomes, career objectives and development, and performance and alignment with organizational goals (Upton, Egan, & Lynham, 2003). HRD can play a key role in women's development in organizations because it can help align individual and organizational needs.

At the individual level, HRD can create specific training and development opportunities tailored to women's needs. This is the case for management training programs needed to gain managerial skills (Tharenou, 1999). HRD can also create more effective career planning programs and mentoring and networking opportunities that respond to women's needs. As Fernandez (1999) suggested, this can be accomplished through assessment and analysis of needs, listening to women's aspirations and goals, assisting employers with establishing goals, committing to specific plans, and holding management accountable for the changes implemented.

At the organizational level, HRD has the potential to help organizations increase their awareness about equity and family-work balance, thus creating a supportive work environment for women. It has been suggested that, if organizations are sensitized to the needs and benefits of family-work life balance initiatives, it is more likely that women's and workers' needs in general will be addressed (Albrecht, 2003). Equal opportunity policies and managing diversity enhance the competitive advantage in organizations (Cassell, 1996). Thus, organizations must recognize that women and other minority groups should be valued and utilized (Mallon & Cassell, 1999). HRD professionals can help organizations be more competitive by helping them foster diversity initiatives that are inclusive to each employee.

**Recommendations for Research**

This paper has revealed factors that help women advance in organizations; however, these factors are contextual. There is a need to understand how contextual and individual factors operate towards enhancing women's development. Future research can explore how these factors affect women's advancement in specific organizations. While explanations of how factors interact with women's careers must be taken into account within an organizational context (Edwards, Woodwall, & Welchman, 1996), we do not know what supportive organization cultures look like. Most of the sources cited in this paper were from the U.S.A. and were related to women in managerial positions, both of which caused limitations for this study. It is clear that more research that addresses women in positions other than management is needed to investigate further factors that facilitate development of women at work (Bae's, 2002). Perspectives broader than the U.S.A. are needed to understand fully the impact of practices on developing women at work around the world. Future research should address factors that contribute to women's development in different countries.

In addition, the role of organization development in creating career development interventions that help maintain, develop, and retain women in the workforce should be examined (Cummings & Worley, 2005). Recent research on career development programs suggested that organizations should consider the culture embedded in those programs to assure that they are not gendered biased needed (Cummings & Worley, 2005). More research about supportive organization cultures and how they interact with the contributing factors mentioned in this paper is needed.

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