The glass ceiling that women encounter refers to a subtle and almost invisible but strong barrier that prevents women from moving up to senior management.

(Burke, 2005, p. 13)

This book contains the authentic voices of 60 women concerning the career challenges they have faced and how they have overcome them. It is set in the context of change for women and the first chapter sets the scene for the views of these 60 successful women, the challenges they have faced, the choices they have made particularly with regard to having children, and the changes they have seen and expect to see.

Introduction

Women's participation in paid work is a subject of interest to feminists, historians, sociologists, politicians, demographers and economists. It is a topic that is at the heart of many of the changes that took place in the latter half of the twentieth century and continue to affect us all in the twenty-first. The past hundred years have brought enormous changes for women at work in the UK and the rest of the Western world. One of the biggest changes has been the gradual encroachment of women on the previously almost exclusive male world of leadership and management. However, a decade into the twenty-first century, women still face particular challenges if they wish to be leaders at work. First, the image of a leader or manager remains resolutely male (Schein, 2001, 2007; Embry et al., 2008) and, despite equal opportunities legislation in the UK and elsewhere, this image influences those who are responsible for making appointments to senior roles. The persistence of the image is a
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barrier to women who aspire to seniority at work since women generally are not expected to be leaders. The second major challenge for women who aspire to a senior role at work is likely to be the decision whether or not to have children. It is no coincidence that many women who are successful as managers and leaders are childfree. For a woman, having both children and a demanding leadership role involves some difficult and constrained choices forcing her to prioritize one or the other.

This book is based on the views and perceptions of 60 women who hold leadership and management positions in work. It looks at some of the ways in which they have handled the challenges that women face in building a career and how they have found opportunities for support and development. I am extremely grateful to the women for allowing me time to interview them and permission to use their words in the public arena. Having researched and written on women in leadership in education for the past 15 years I welcome the opportunity to broaden my work to include women from a range of professions in both the public and private sectors, not only education (secondary and tertiary) but also medicine, finance, retail, oil and gas, property development, law, broadcasting, publishing and advertising. The women interviewed represent an age range from late 30s to early 70s, with the largest group being in their 50s. Most of them are married and about half have a child or children. Many of them are London-based, but others are situated in the North and Midlands of England. Although all are working in England at present, a number have lived and worked internationally. Several originate from the USA, two from other European countries, one from New Zealand and one from Malaysia. The title of the book indicates that the women interviewed are ‘top’ women. Most are at the apex of their organizations, including chief executive officers, board members, head teachers and heads of tertiary educational institutions. The surgeons are consultants. Those who are not heading up their business or institution have discrete responsibilities within them, are important as specialists, or may lead on specific projects. It is the views of all the interviewed women that dominate this book.

To put the views of these women into perspective, the next section sets out the general context for women leaders, specifically in relation to the UK, but the picture presented is fairly typical of the context in comparable developed economies (see, for example, Vinnicombe et al., 2008).

Women in top jobs

Although women now represent nearly half of the labour force in the UK (ONS, 2007), they are still poorly represented at the top levels. In