This chapter explores the career paths of husband and wife partnerships in the family firm. It examines the processes that characterise a general pattern of female kin subordination and male kin domination as wealth is accumulated in the family business. It argues that business growth has very different outcomes for wives and husbands in business partnerships. It will argue that male partners in parallel with the growth of the business are able to carve out careers as business heads and chief executives. By contrast, it will show that female partners are unable to make the transition from the stereotypical image of ‘helpmeet’ to company professional. The argument developed suggests that such women are systematically marginalised from the nucleus of organisational power and finally excluded from the family business. This is first evident when the business takes shape in organisation form with the introduction of bureaucracy, the formalisation of managerial structures and the specialisation of function. It will be suggested that it is at this point that the unequal character of the marriage business partnership magnifies the contradictions of the class gender nexus when attempts are made to co-ordinate the role of wife and business partner in the family enterprise.

In highlighting the relationship between gender power and organisational power the chapter focuses on a number of partnerships in both ‘new’ and ‘old’ wealth categories. It shows that whilst not all wives are excluded from senior positions, women’s authority is neutralised in formal decision-making processes. Although eleven of the wives in ‘new’ business partnerships held directorships, they appear to tacitly surrender their influence over the strategic management of the enterprise and issues of inheritance. Illustrative of the women’s weakness is the finding that none of the seven working wives in the ‘old’ businesses,
irrespective of the sector position, occupy a formal managerial position. This is most surprising since many of wives work in the landed sector where integration between home and the workplace may suggest an easier accommodation for the restructuring of the sexual division of labour in such partnerships on a more democratic basis. Yet the old hierarchies were, if anything, more rigidly intact. Turning to the ‘new’ businesses, for the eleven director wives this job proves to be a paradoxical experience, when such appointments parallel another pattern, the demise of women’s organisation power. One of the consequences of this is that the business in this phase of development means very different and unequal career trajectories for female and male kin.

The debate about women and organisational power has very largely centred on the corporate sector. Of prominence is Davidson (1992) concern with the problems women managers encounter when attempting to enter the male world of the boardroom. The difficulties women face as career managers is also illustrated by Coyle (1989). She argues that they are in segregated sectors, such as local government and the hotel industry, where only 10 per cent of them succeed to senior posts. Grant and Porter’s (1994) study of the medium-sized business sector is also indicative of the limitations of women managers’ organisational power, because characteristically such enterprises have fewer employees. These studies convey the sense in which structured inequality creates conditions that limit women’s organisational power, but Grant and Porter (1994) interestingly observe that there is an incompatibility between women’s managerial approach and organisational structures. Women managers, they argue, lack authority. One of the themes that emerges from this literature is the notion of a separation between women’s power and authority in organisations.

Wajcman (1998) examines women career managers’ organisational power. She argues that resistance to senior women managers is ubiquitous within organisations and that it stems from the uncertainty that their presence generates amongst organisational men and women. The effect of such ambivalence to women in power is that their organisational authority is considerably compromised. This argument has resonance with Savage’s (1992) earlier work, where he argues that although women have increasingly moved into managerial and professional posts, they have been channelled into niches requiring high levels of skill and expertise, but with very little organisational discretion. This raises the question: Why doesn’t expertise enhance female managers’ organisational power?