

# Cracking THE GLASS

More than ever, women's issues are being pushed to the forefront of global debate, so why do we still encounter blatant sexism in the workplace? Sarah Lang reports

In 2013, Emily Johns' life fell apart. The graphic designer had moved from Auckland to Wellington two years earlier for her then partner's promotion, and begun questioning why his design career was progressing so much faster than hers, despite the fact she'd graduated years before, topped her class and done award-winning work since. Was it the glass ceiling, she wondered? But she had a more pressing problem.

"When I got pregnant, my boss asked me to leave. He didn't even pretend there was another reason." Johns offered to work from home, come in as needed and return full-time after three months. He said no. "What he did is illegal, so I got a lawyer." Two-and-a-half months (and thousands of dollars she could ill afford) later, she accepted a confidential settlement through mediation. That's why we can't use her real name. "Ironically, I didn't need maternity leave. Two weeks after the settlement, I miscarried."

Devastated, she decided to go freelancing. After three months, she was offered a job by a studio where she'd been renting a desk and mentoring junior staff. "The day I was supposed to start, the director told me he didn't like me and didn't want me there. According to others, I reminded him of a woman he disliked. I was shell-shocked."

After an unsettling job interview elsewhere, she decided the only way to avoid possible discrimination and reach her potential was to move to another studio: her own. Johns, 39, now works for clients around New Zealand and the world, and manages a flexible, female-friendly workplace; her design and management skills aren't in question. Is hers an isolated case, or do such things happen more often, if more subtly? Is the glass ceiling still intact?

## DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The term 'glass ceiling' was coined in the late 1970s to describe the invisible but real barrier to career advancement for women, due not necessarily to sexism but to an unfair system or set of attitudes. Forty years ago, feminists thought the term would die

*Women hold just* **19%**  
**OF NEW ZEALAND'S  
SENIOR MANAGEMENT ROLES**

out. Now, with Helen Clark and Hillary Clinton running for the world's top jobs, it seems the slow but steady march towards gender equality in leadership is near the finish line. Sure, we've paid closer attention to Clark's suits, teeth and hairstyle than to John Key's ties, wrinkles and hairline, but we've had two female prime ministers, and in September Dame Patsy Reddy became our third female governor-general. However, our second female governor-general Dame Silvia Cartwright once warned that seeing a few very visible women reach the top can be "a double-edged sword" that masks ongoing gender inequality in leadership.

The issue made headlines in July, when *Business Insider Australia* asked Kevin Roberts, then chairman of global advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi, about the industry's low numbers of women in leadership. "The f\*\*\*ing debate is all over," he said. "[Women's] ambition isn't a vertical

ambition, it's this intrinsic, circular ambition to be happy. They're very happy, they're very successful, and doing great work. I can't talk about sexual discrimination because we've never had that problem." He clearly hadn't read the research, across several industries, busting the myth that women don't want the top jobs.

The subsequent outrage from senior women in advertising, which led to Roberts' resignation in August, wasn't just about him having the gall to speak for women. But he did us a favour, in a way, by prompting heated conversations around the water-cooler and, hopefully, in the boardroom. Was he just voicing what men really think but don't dare say? Or was he condescending and offensive, not to mention wrong?

Brand consultant Kate Smith, who has worked in advertising for 30 years, challenged Roberts' statements publicly at the time, and later spoke to NEXT. »





She says that while working at ad agencies (not Saatchi & Saatchi), she often wasn't listened to or taken as seriously as men. "A managing director once told me not to speak in a meeting, although I knew the clients and he didn't." In another meeting, male colleagues made condescending comments about a client's female marketing director, who was about to join them. "When I questioned it, they looked at me like I was insane and carried on. It's like, 'Don't be a bad sport'. You almost start thinking it's okay."

Smith was later headhunted to Saatchi & Saatchi as a national planning director. "But people who make the leap from that position to CEO or managing director are overwhelmingly male." After 10 years she left to start her own consultancy. "Partly because I didn't want to fight so hard to be heard."

Smith, 55, has copped flak for speaking publicly, particularly for echoing criticism of James Hurman's book *The Case For Creativity* for including not a single female perspective (though she knows and likes Hurman, and has said it's unconscious bias, not sexism). "I've been called a feminazi, a whingeing old bag, a bully, and been accused of talking about this to raise my business profile, which I'd never do, don't need to do, and which wouldn't work anyway."

She'd like anyone discussing this to avoid emotionally charged, defensive reactions. "Very few men want to talk about this, because they think if they keep quiet, it'll calm down. They'd rather pretend it's just these crazy feminists bleating on. But anyone denying this is an issue is deluded. Look around you and look at the stats."

Not one of New Zealand's top-50 publicly listed companies has a female CEO. The NZ Stock Exchange, which has reported listed



## 42% of New Zealand's businesses don't HAVE ANY WOMEN IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT

companies' gender-diversity stats quarterly since 2013, draws attention to female board members rising from 12.4% in 2013 to 17% in 2015 – but that's only half the number of Australia. Meanwhile, the number of female 'officers' (chief executives and senior managers) is hovering at 21%. Delve deeper and the picture's even more worrying.

Women hold just 19% of New Zealand's senior management roles, according to the 2016 *Grant Thornton International Business Report*, the business consultancy's global survey of 10,000-plus publicly listed and

privately held businesses. This includes not just CEOs, COOs and CFOs, but also managers reporting to CEOs, such as HR directors, corporate controllers, sales directors and partners. But wait, there's more: 42% of New Zealand businesses don't have *any* women in senior management, and that figure's getting worse. As senior management roles outnumber board positions, and board spots usually go to those with senior management experience, things are going backwards where it counts.

How do we compare globally? From 36 countries surveyed for senior management and board appointments, we've dropped from third position in 2004 to 28th in 2016. "We're clearly moving in the wrong direction," says partner at Grant Thornton Stacey Davies. We're even falling behind more traditional patriarchal societies; the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia have nearly twice as many women in senior roles.

It's not just about equal opportunity. Decades of research by psychologists, sociologists, economists and demographers shows diversity – gender diversity included – makes businesses more money, partly by widening the talent pool, improving innovation and retaining staff. But although

dismantling sexism is hard, dismantling unconscious gender bias is harder.

Dr Shelley Correll, a Stanford University sociology and organisational-behaviour professor, says unconscious gender bias affects how we view people's capabilities, such as men suiting management better than women. Another biased assumption is that mothers, not fathers, will shoulder sick days and school pick-ups. An employment lawyer who's worked in HR for big firms (so can't be named) says many prefer not to employ women with young children, but don't have a problem hiring fathers. Although prospective employers can't legally ask if women have or plan to have children, many manoeuvre women into bringing it up in interviews.

*An employment lawyer who's worked for HR in big firms says many prefer not to employ women with young children but don't have a problem hiring fathers*

### HUSH-HUSH

Most women would only speak about the glass ceiling anonymously, fearing repercussions for their employment. One woman working part-time was excluded from key meetings after raising the issue. Another with young children talked about a macho culture where decisions are made at after-work beers and flexible hours are seen as slacking off, though she makes up the time from home. One woman working for a high-profile organisation was made acting communications manager and told she'd

get the permanent job, but it went to a man with no PR experience who knew the CEO.

Diane Foreman – CEO/chair of the Emerald Group, New Zealand's 2009 EY Entrepreneur of the Year, and judges' chair for this year's awards – has long been self-employed, but is a friend and mentor to many women facing the glass ceiling. Personally, the former Business Roundtable deputy chair has always faced sexism in the boardroom. "If you're a woman and tough, they say you're bitchy. If you're a man and tough, they say you're assertive. Only really senior, self-employed women can talk freely about this. It's really hard for female executives to speak up. Even if you've got a sympathetic, diversity-conscious boss now, you're terrified anything you say could be held against you in the future."

### UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Auckland University professor Dr Nicola Gaston, also a MacDiarmid Institute physicist, says there's a catch-22 for women. To avoid offending male colleagues or employers, many feel they should deny their experience of inequality, but this makes it look like there's no problem. In her book *Why Science Is Sexist*, Gaston writes about a dinner party where a male researcher asked: "Have neuroscientists figured out yet what the difference is in [the] brains of men and women that makes men better at science?" She was shocked into silence then, but not now. Gaston cites studies that show unconscious biases about women's

lack of aptitude for science influence course uptake, hiring decisions, publication outputs and grant success. That's why women are under-represented in science.

Professions with a long history of male dominance – like science, accountancy, law and advertising – are among the worst offenders. One male web developer says there's only one token woman in his eight-strong leadership team. "To boost numbers, I suggested complimentary sex changes." The (questionable) humour lies in the well-proven truth that like usually employs like, creating an echo chamber of men validating

*Not one of New Zealand's top 50*

**PUBLICLY LISTED COMPANIES HAS A FEMALE CEO**

their own practices. However, start-ups often prioritise diversity. In April, crowd-funding company PledgeMe took the unusual step of crowd-sourcing recommendations for a board position. It went to Jessica Venning-Bryan, general manager of brand at Wellington-based power company Flick Electric. In her 20s, Venning-Bryan worked in communications and managerial roles at various firms. One was shockingly misogynist. "I was picked on. In another job, I was told I wasn't capable enough or too emotional to deal with parts of the business. The hardest part was male colleagues taking credit for my work. Initially, I thought I had to suck it up, then realised I shouldn't put up with it."

Venning-Bryan, 36, decided running her own business was the way to smash the glass ceiling, particularly while she has young children (now eight, six and four). For four years, she ran a business consultancy, joining Flick in 2014 partly because of its commitment to diversity. Last year, she co-founded Cultivate Mentoring Lab, a six-centre not-for-profit that pairs mentors with less-experienced women to help them puncture the glass ceiling "before their confidence is eroded like mine was". Many mentees have experienced gender discrimination. "Discrimination is all the little things like inappropriate jokes and screen savers, sexist language, describing women as emotional and shrill, talking over them at meetings."

"We've talked the talk for long enough," says Davies of Grant Thornton, which has released companion report *Women in Business 2016: Turning Promise into* »





*Practice.* “Making progress requires the collaboration of companies, governments and women.”

The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women requires New Zealand to report on its measures to improve outcomes for women. The Ministry for Women’s latest report, covering 2012-2016, admitted there are “gender disparities”, particularly relating to the pay gap and women in leadership. The ministry is doing what it can, but the government puts the onus for change on businesses and women.

## THE QUOTA QUESTION

Dr Jackie Blue, who found Parliament was quite the boys’ club as a National list MP from 2005-2013, left to become Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner, and can advise but not compel government. She counts at least 11 NZ groups and initiatives promoting gender equality in leadership, including The Future Directors scheme and the 25 Percent Group (pushing for women to make up a quarter of board members). On August 31, the NZ Stock Exchange released a consultation paper recommending businesses develop diversity policies for boards, addressing gender diversity at a minimum. That’s promising, but pretty policies don’t always translate into results. Blue thinks the stock exchange should follow the UK’s and Australia’s lead by requiring measurable implementation of such policies. “I feel we’re near a tipping point, but it needs a helping hand from government.”

Mandatory equal-opportunity programmes in the public sector have seen its gender diversity improve, with women now



out. “They counter the uneven playing field women face, and the Human Rights Act allows for affirmative-action policies.”

Foreman says you can’t legislate for gender diversity, and that individual businesses should lead change because diversity improves the bottom line. She wants boards demanding development plans for every executive, male and female. “Just reporting [gender-diversity numbers]

*Female board members have increased from 12.4% to* **17%**  
**FROM 2013 -2015, BUT THAT’S ONLY HALF THAT OF AUSTRALIA**

43% of board members, 44% of senior managers and 39% of CEOs. But as 85% of us work in the private sector, many think big businesses should role-model change for smaller ones. Blue’s calling for legislation requiring New Zealand’s 750 private-sector companies with 250 or more staff to publish figures on their gender pay gap and the numbers of women on senior-management teams and boards, a measure the UK will introduce next year. What about women-in-leadership quotas – aka gender-diversity mandates – as in Norway, Germany, Spain, France and Iceland? Women we spoke to worried about whispers that any woman would do. Blue thinks quotas are a step too far for most Kiwis, but doesn’t rule them

is BS. It says how many people have the disease, not how you’ll eradicate it.”

On August 3, Jo Kelly-Moore, the first female dean of Auckland Cathedral and a former lawyer, gave a talk titled Breaking the Stained-Glass Ceiling: Women in Leadership in Aotearoa. Kelly-Moore, who’s co-founded a mentoring scheme to help women become leaders in the church, smashed the ceiling partly because a male vicar championed her. “Many men think there’s no problem and dismiss it as women bleating on. We need men joining us in this conversation. As New Zealand’s CEO, does John Key think there’s a problem? Is he committed to changing the situation?” We asked him. He didn’t respond. □

## Experts’ tips for women

**JOIN** a women’s mentoring scheme, eg Cultivate Mentoring Lab, or industry-specific training schemes like the Agri-Women’s Development Trust, or the NZ Women in Leadership programme for academia.

**JUST APPLY** – women only apply for roles if they think they have 80-100% of the required skills; men do so with 50-60% of the skills.

**BE AWARE** of your legal rights, including the right under the Employment Relations Act to ask for flexible hours, without sacrificing salary or seniority. Businesses must provide flexibility unless there’s a good reason not to.

**NEGOTIATE** strongly for salary or work conditions on a new

job or promotion, including things that are important to you, like the ability to still do hands-on work, or get regular feedback.

**DON’T** be afraid to take on new duties; see them as stretch goals.

**DON’T ASK**, don’t get. If you’re excluded from key meetings, ask to be there. If you have kids, ask to do professional networking at lunchtime rather than after 5pm.

**MEET** other women regularly to share stories and swap advice.

**SPEAK UP** for other women. For instance, if you see a woman being talked over in a meeting, say, “I think she has something to say.”

**TELL** your employer about private business co-operative Diverse NZ Inc’s practical tools that businesses can use to become more diverse – and make more money.