

**THE PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION OF FEMALE PUBLIC
RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS: A SOUTH AFRICAN PILOT STUDY**

by

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ABSTRACT

THE PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION OF FEMALE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS: A SOUTH AFRICAN PILOT STUDY

In the last decades of the twentieth century, women have advanced into the business world, not only as employees but as managers, corporate officers, board directors and CEO's. Many political, environmental and structural changes have made this possible. Yet even with these numerous changes, women are still battling to push themselves through the pipeline and into top management positions. Furthermore, if women do reach the higher rungs of the corporate ladder, they are more likely to receive less professional recognition than their male counterparts.

Statistics show that this phenomenon is also occurring in the field of public relations around the globe. According to a study conducted by O'Neil (2003:168), female practitioners have significantly less formal structural power (employee support, organisational roles, hierarchical position and gender ratios of work groups) than male practitioners. As a result, many academics believe that the glass ceiling in public relations still exists and that the feminisation of the field is increasing this disparity.

Public relations is still a relatively new discipline in South Africa and although there have been an increasing number of research studies specifically focusing on South African public relations practice, there is virtually no studies focusing on the contribution and position of female practitioners in the field. This study, therefore, investigates the professional recognition of female public relations practitioners in South Africa. This was achieved by meeting the main objectives namely, to gather data on the factors that influence the professional recognition of female public relations practitioners in South African organisations as well as South African public relations practice.

Originally, the study aimed at being a replication of an American research project by Toth and Cline called 'Public relations Practitioner Attitudes Toward Gender Issues: A

Benchmark Study. Unfortunately, the survey instrument was not available due to the deteriorating health of Dr. Cline over the last seven years, and since this study is largely exploratory in nature, it became a pilot study. The methodology used for this study was triangulation, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, and the research instrument was a questionnaire. Once the data was collected from respondents, the findings were contrasted against the findings of similar studies in the United States, the United Kingdom and other countries.

The key findings of this study shows that female public relations practitioners in South Africa appear to be more positive about the recognition they receive than their U.S and U.K counterparts. A majority of respondents believe that female public relations practitioners are equal to their male counterparts in terms of status, power and respect. Yet, there are strong indications that the glass ceiling does exist in South African public relations. One such indication is a low salary average. Another is that gender discrimination seems to be pervasive throughout the field, especially in the case of sexual harassment and gender stereotypes. Female practitioners still have to battle the stereotypes of mother, sex object and iron maiden.

Corporate culture and structure also continues to pose a barrier to the advancement of female practitioners in the form of out-dated company policies regarding programs such as part-time and flexi-time work options, job-sharing and telecommuting. Balancing family and work responsibilities continues to hinder female practitioners although they are said to be more efficient than their male counterparts at the balancing act. The most surprising data finding of the study, however, was that practitioners believe that a lack of mentorship is not a barrier to the advancement of female practitioners. Mentorship plays an important role in the promotion process, and Lahtinen and Wilson (1994) go as far to say that mentors could be key to the advancement of women. It is clear that a majority of practitioners are obviously unaware of its importance.

This study will not only contribute to the body of knowledge about public relations practitioners in general but will also provide great insight into the position of female

practitioners and the issues they face in public relations practice and in South African organisations. As there are so few research studies on this topic, it will help encourage and create a foundation for other such studies that will hopefully investigate deeper into the topic. It was also important to the value of the study that it was not created in a vacuum and that it could be contrasted against statistics in other countries providing a more meaningful, global perspective. This has allowed correlations and comparisons to be made which has presented some expected similarities as well as some marked differences. However, the true value of the study lies in creating a much needed awareness of how far female practitioners have come and how far they still need to go in terms of receiving professional recognition in their field.

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