

The glass ceiling in education: why are so few women becoming headteachers?

Confidence issues, family commitments and sexist attitudes are preventing some women from stepping up into headship positions, according to experts

The [teaching](#) profession is dominated by women. Out of the 365,000 teachers in England, 74% are female. But when it comes to the number of heads across the country the data tells a different story.

With far more women than men working in schools you would expect to see a greater proportion becoming heads, but a higher percentage of men than women make it to senior leadership level. According to figures from the Department of Education, in 2012 4% of women in schools were headteachers compared to 6% of men.

And the tale continues when it comes to pay, with [23% of men working in schools sitting in the top pay bracket compared to 19% of women](#).

Kate Chhatwal, who works with aspiring leaders as director of headship at [The Future Leaders Trust](#), isn't surprised by the figures.

She believes that women are coming up against more hurdles than men when applying for headship positions.

"Recently, I spoke to a recruiter who said that he could tell from the way a candidate had dressed and done her nails that she wasn't going to roll her sleeves up and work well with the primary children," she says.

"It can be a minefield for women. Recruiters can have quite traditional views of what they're looking for and it can be tricky to navigate that. On a number of occasions I've heard female candidates referred to as pit bulls and rottweilers, because they've been perceived as coming across as too aggressive, when the same behaviour in men is seen positively as being tough and strong."

Confidence can also be an issue. "Men seem more prepared to think, 'well, I'm almost there I'll take a punt on it,' whereas women often feel like they need to tick all the boxes before they can apply for a role," she says.

One of the ways the trust tackles this is by running women only workshops to boost participants confidence. Sessions explore how to be assertive, communicate confidence and avoid talking yourself down in an interview.

Dr Karen Edge has also been looking into the problem as part of her research at the [Institute of Education](#).

She's been speaking to 70 school senior leaders in London, New York and Toronto as part of a study on generation X leaders (people under the age of 40) funded by a grant from the [Economic and Social Research Council](#).

The preliminary evidence has shown that women in England may be having a radically different and potentially more difficult leadership experience than those in America and Canada.

"We've had several conversations with women in London who have waited to pursue a leadership post because they want to have children, but this hasn't come up with participants in Toronto and it's been mentioned much less by people in New York," she says. "Women in England seem to be more worried about being a leader and a parent. They often don't think the two are compatible."

Edge believes this might be because schools abroad aren't inspected to the degree they are in London. "A couple of participants have actually said they've waited for their school to be Ofsteded before having children," she says.

The intentional weakening of local education authorities in England by central government may also be a factor. In Toronto leaders are hired by school districts and if they go on maternity leave the district is responsible for appointing their replacement. Leaders also report to their district and can be moved between schools within their area.

"Perhaps we are seeing a more shared sense of responsibility for school success. It is not just down to one leader in one school, as in many cases it is in London," says Edge.

"This isn't to say that being a female leader is easy in any jurisdiction – or perhaps a parent for that matter. Our participants have often become parents later and leaders earlier than their parents' generation. This means leaders are more likely to have very young children or toddlers, which was less true before."

These problems are going to be looked at in greater detail in the second part of the study, but right now it's clear that there are some pressing issues that need to be considered.

"Education policy needs to catch up with the changes occurring with this generation of leaders," says Edge.

"Otherwise, we're going to lose a lot of incredibly talented people."

Taken from The Guardian Teacher Network.