

Women's Career Progression:
findings from ARC SPIRT project
2002-2003

Associate Professor Anne Ross-Smith
Presented at the Senior Women
Executives and the Cultures of
Management conference
29 November 2004

Project Objectives

- To provide an in-depth analysis of the lived experience of senior women.
- To identify, document and evaluate factors that support and sustain women in senior positions.
- To investigate the impact, if any, of senior women on the cultures of management.

Participants

Investigators

Associate Professor Anne Ross-Smith, UTS
Dr Margaret Peters, UniSA
Dr Colleen Chesterman, ATNWEXDEV

Partners

5 universities,
5 mainland state public services
2 financial institutions

Overall 19 organisations with approx 30% women
in senior executive positions (top 3 levels)

Interviewees 255 male and female executives
Australia-wide.

Critical Issues

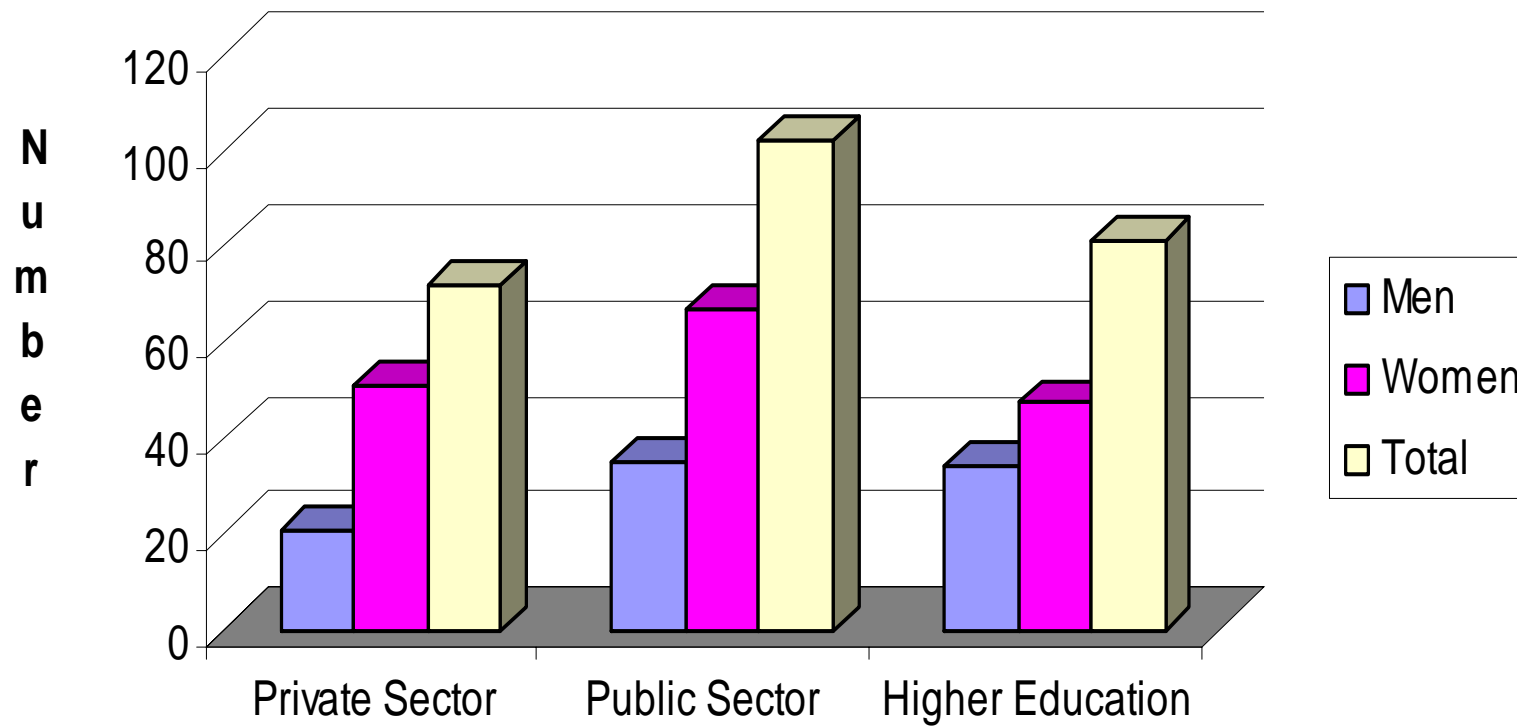
- What impacts women's career progression?
- What supports and sustains women executives?
- Does presence of women in senior positions have any impact?
- Are there changes to cultures when women are in senior positions?



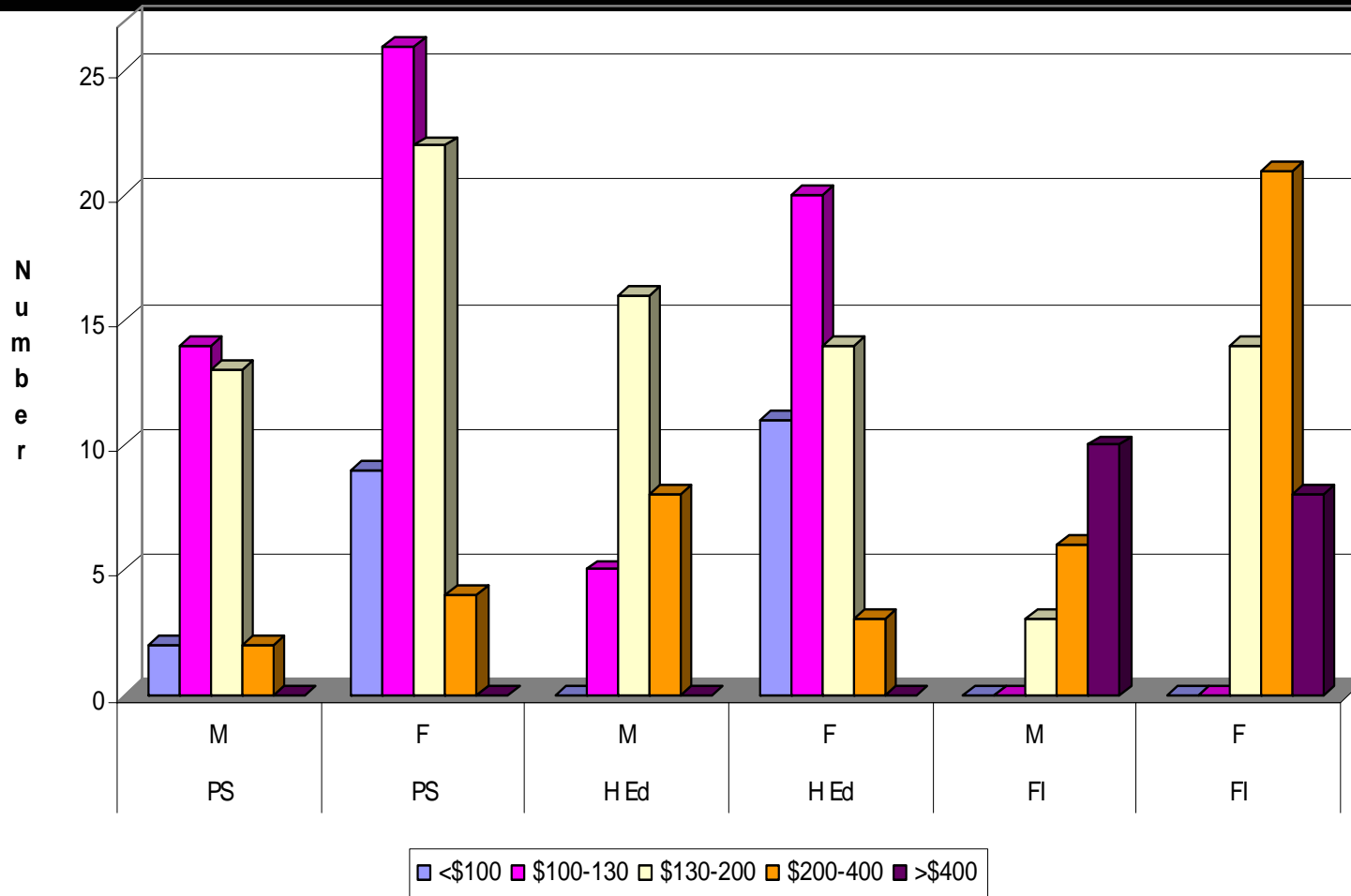
Sector Differences

- Salaries – higher overall in private sector, gender bias not apparent
- Age – older in universities
- Qualifications – significant sectoral differences
- Dependants – related to age, issues especially for private sector

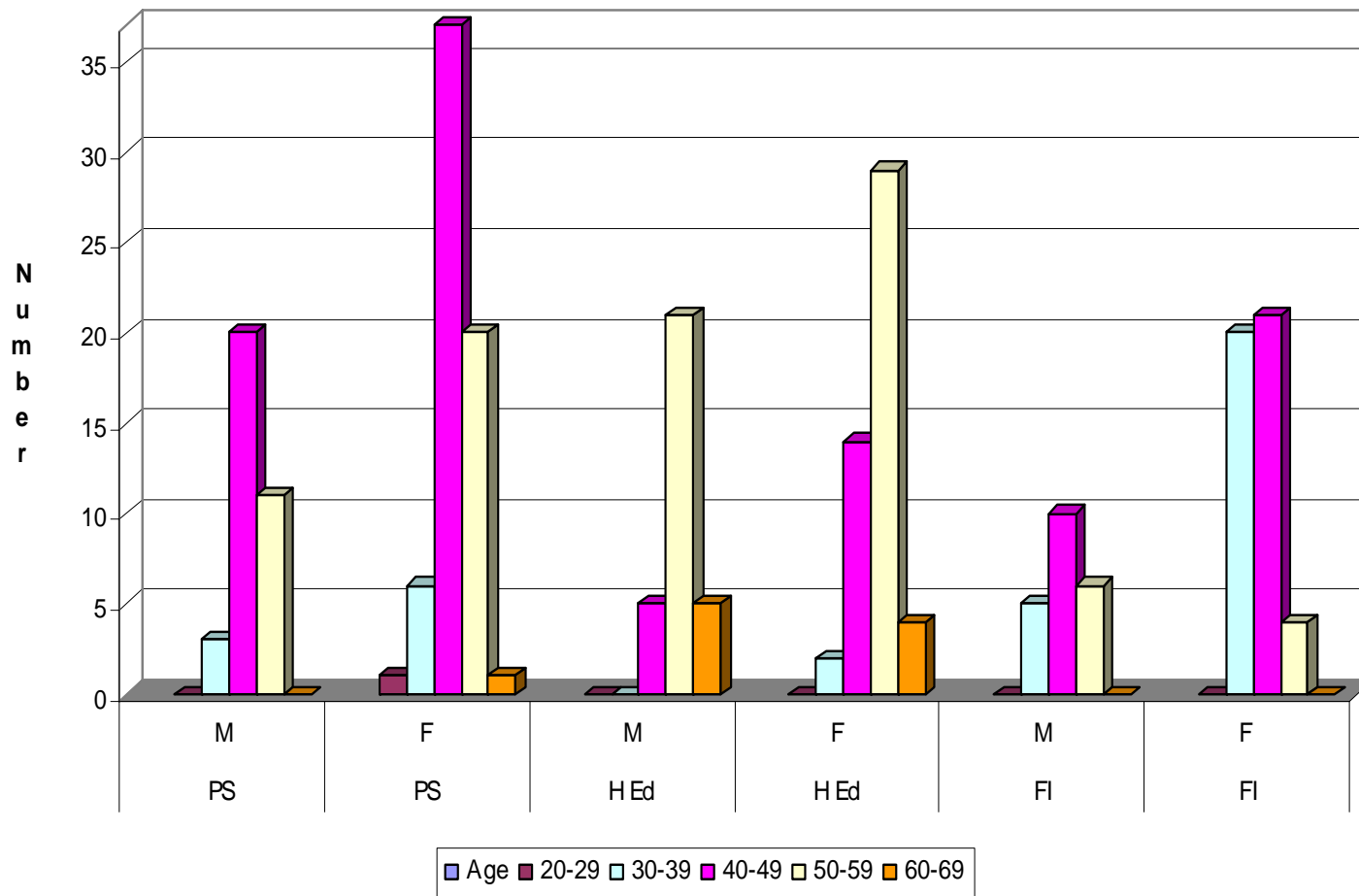
Senior Executive Men and Women



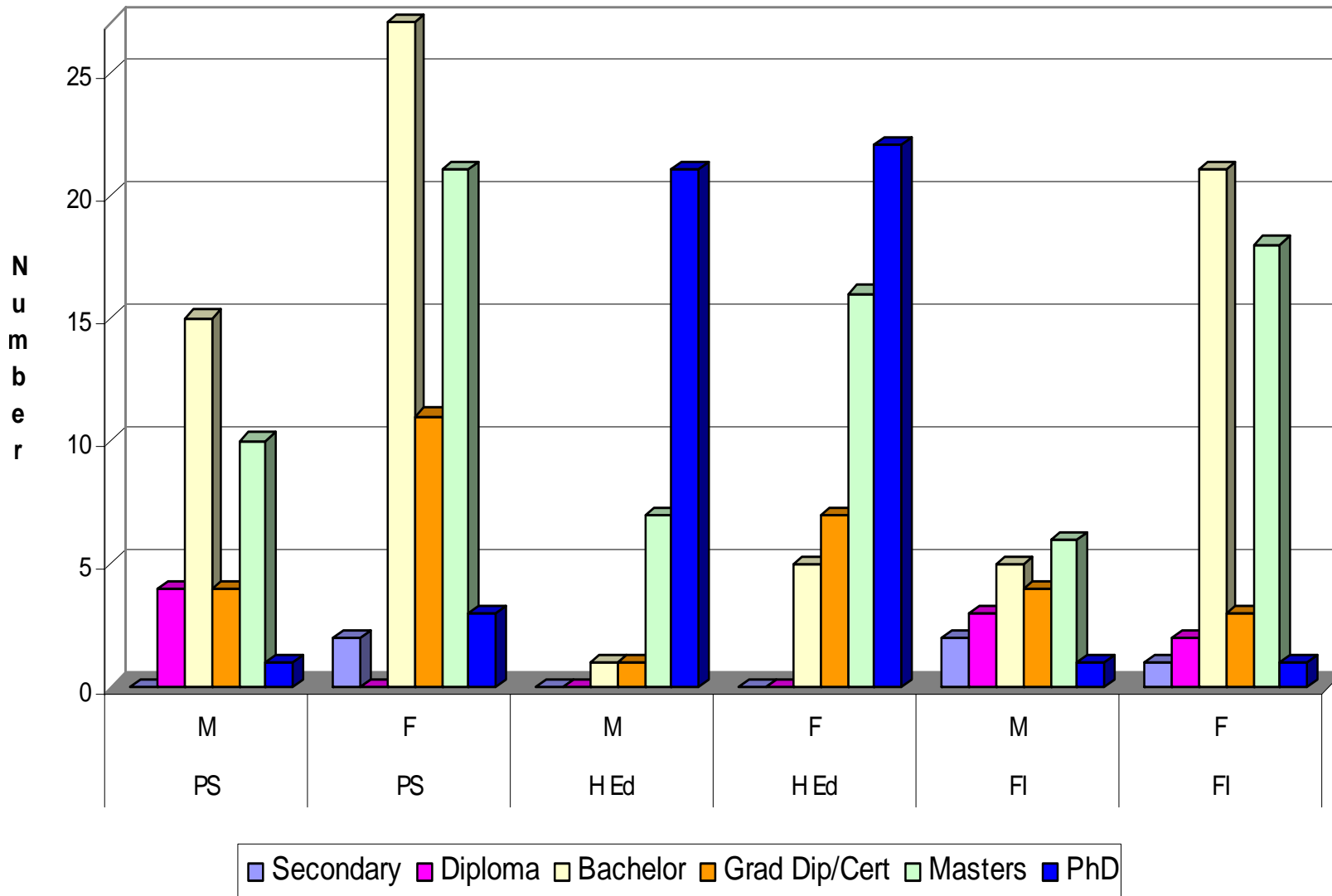
Salary by Gender



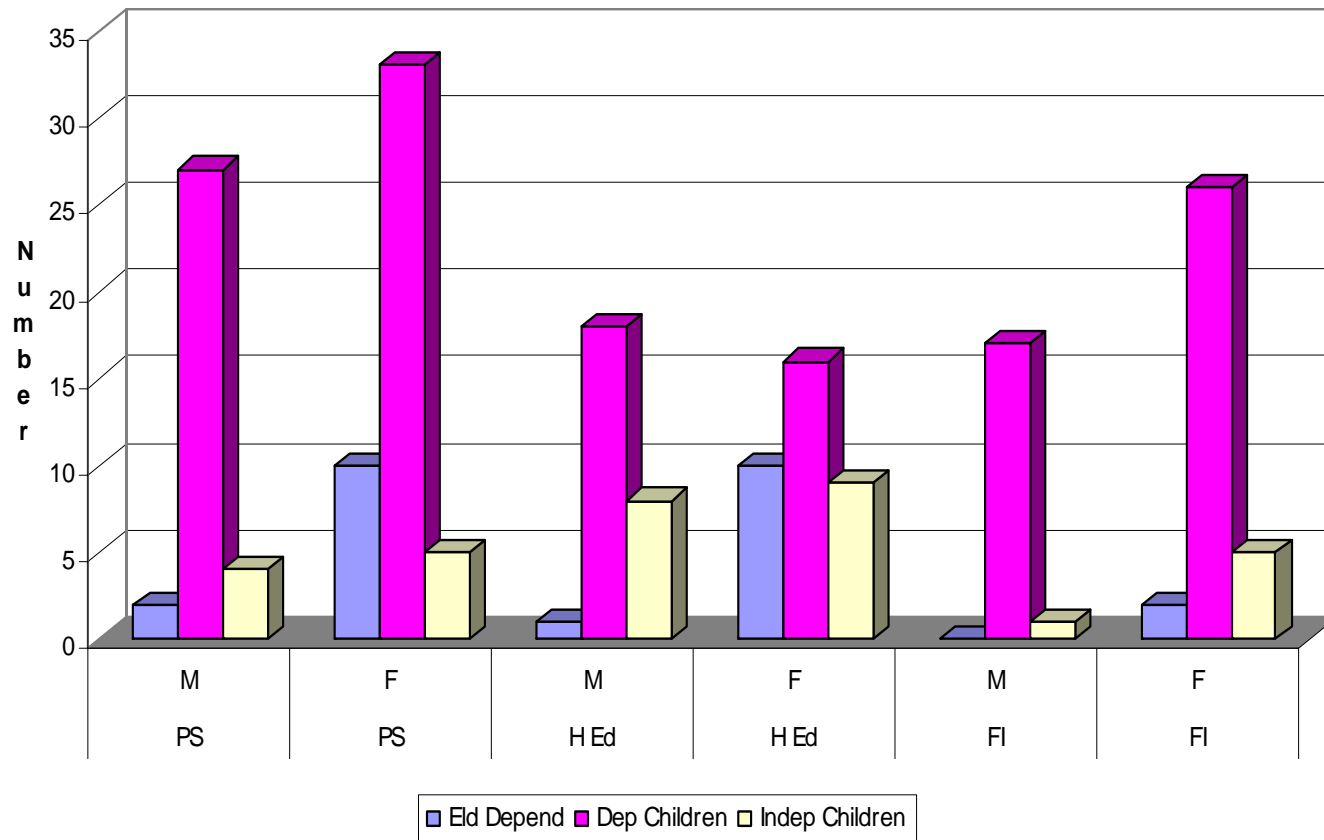
Age by Gender



Qualifications by Gender



Dependents by Gender



Faith in merit

- Older women were pioneers and often told stories of the discrimination they faced
- Younger women believed they had got their positions on merit



Gender Discrimination: a thing of the past?

Look this was probably still a sexist organisation in the early nineties.... You know I think it would have been terribly tough to be a woman making her run in this place in the 80s and the start of the 90s. Since then I believe, not overnight and you still get pockets where they are slower to change than others, but over a ten year period I think we have moved from a sexist organisation, no more sexist than any other organisation out there, don't get me wrong, but to one where gender is now genuinely irrelevant and unacceptable as a criteria in a meritocracy.

Male, Private Sector, 50-59

Reticence

Women's tendency to undervalue their own skills and talents

“I think it’s a gender thing, girl’s disease as we call it here. They don’t know how good they are.”

Female Public Servant



What is it about women?

- Previous cultures of discrimination
- Uncertainty about credentials
(see higher degrees)
- Wanting to be certain they could do job – reticence
- Wanting to get ‘balance’
- Resistance to demanding jobs

Why don't they apply?

...what is it that stops some women applying for jobs? Is it family, is it home, is it the outside commitment, is it strength of purpose to carry through? ...It's just, at the Dean level we're not so successful and one wonders whether women draw the line at wanting to do those sorts of jobs. This is the other phenomenon to do with women's careers, that some them just decide that they've got a really good job and a really interesting job doing their profession.

Female DVC



Reticence

Oh no, women never have career plans. ... We actually have a Women in Leadership group where quite often senior women come from an organisation and share their stories and they always start out with 'Oh well I left school and I went to train as a teacher and here I am Director General of something.... .

Female, Public Sector, 40-49



Seeking Balance/Resistance

I'm not inclined to go any further in that I see the stress and the political environment of the more senior positions and they're not at all attractive to me. There's really wonderful remuneration for them and conditions in terms of cars and what have you, so obviously that's really nice. But ... what are the incentives? The main thing is it's interesting work and nice people and a sense of having made a difference.

Female, Public Sector, 40-49



Issues

What steps can overcome reticence,
ambivalence and resistance?

How much of this is generational ?



Is this the future?

So now at my age I need to progress my career quickly and what I don't want to do is sit in roles for six or twelve months too long. I haven't got time to do that. And once I understand the issues of the role and got on top of it, I've added value. I believe it's just sensible to allow me to move on...

Later in the interview....

If I was to get pregnant, that would be the death of me here.

