Equality still a ways off

ANNE KRISHNAN, Staff Writer

Recent research is delivering mixed news about women in the workplace.

The good news: Having women in high-level management positions narrows the wage gap between male and female workers.

The bad news: Young women are turning away from male-dominated positions in science, technology -- and the corner office.

A study by researchers at UNC-Chapel Hill and the University of California at Irvine shows that women received higher salaries if a larger proportion of the managers in their industry locally were women. Meanwhile, a study by RTI International showed that 114 of 137 young women who had aspired to male-dominated jobs as high school seniors had changed their goals seven years later.

Most of the glass-ceiling research has been about whether or not women get to be in management positions, said Philip Cohen, who, with UC-Irvine sociologist Matt Huffman, conducted the UNC study. But what types of managers they become, and whether they pull other women up with them, is valuable information, he said.

The research by RTI, a think tank in Research Triangle Park, suggests that the women don't necessarily lose interest in management or high-tech fields but that they shift toward careers that allow more flexibility for their families.

What male-dominated fields are we talking about, and why does it matter?

Think doctors, lawyers, CEOs, engineers and scientists. Those fields tend to pay more than the typically female-dominated fields, said Pam Frome, the RTI study’s principal investigator.

Cohen also found a gender difference among managers. Women tend to be concentrated in low-status industries such as food service and in positions such as purchasing manager, he said. His research showed that low-status managers don't have the same influence on other women's wages as their more powerful...
colleagues.

How can women be encouraged to pursue male-dominated professions?

It takes more than science and math enrichment classes aimed at girls, Frome said. She’d like to see programs that expose girls to real-life role models: women who combine family lives with careers in male-dominated fields. Likewise, she suggests classes for boys that talk about equal responsibility for caring for children and the home. Finally, employers need to enact and enforce policies regarding flex time, family leave, day care and other family-friendly approaches, she said.

How does North Carolina look when it comes to high-ranking women?

North Carolina is ranked 35th among the states when it comes to the number of women-owned businesses with employees per 10,000 women. In 2002, women in North Carolina owned 173,847 firms and employed 225,440 workers, with a payroll of about $4.9 billion.

However, the state's supply of women-owned businesses is growing faster than average. North Carolina's 24.3 percent growth in the number of women-owned companies between 1997 and 2002 ranked fifth among the states, according to a Small Business Administration report.

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