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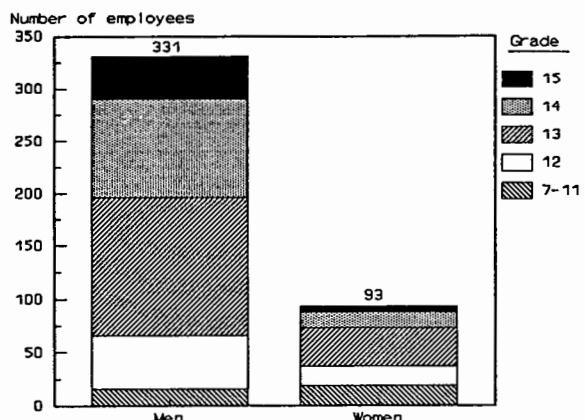
Advancement of Economists in ERS: Is There a Glass Ceiling?

At the end of 1991, ERS employed 94 women in the Economist series.¹ That is double the number of ERS economists who were women in 1980. The total number of ERS economists has declined since 1980, so there was an even greater increase in the proportion of ERS economists who were women during the 1980-91 period, 9 compared to 22 percent.

The existence of barriers to advancement of women to mid- and high-level management in the U.S. workplace has recently been addressed and dubbed a "glass ceiling." More specifically, the glass ceiling phenomenon describes a situation where, despite comparable human capital--e.g., skills, education, and experience levels--women are still unable to advance into management positions. Although the number of ERS economists who are women has increased, does a glass ceiling exist at ERS? We have addressed the question by focussing on the grade structure of economists in ERS by gender. The grade structure in Federal Government indicates an employee's rank and salary.²

- **How are women represented in the higher grades?** The higher grade levels among ERS economists continue to be dominated by men (fig. 1). In 1991, only 13 percent of ERS economists grade 14 and above were women. Forty-two percent of all men were in the grades 14 and above, compared to 22 percent of all women.
- **How has the share of women at each grade level changed over time?** The proportion of women in the economist series increased at all grade levels between 1980 and 1991 (fig. 2). The higher the grade level, the greater the rate of increase.
- **Are women being promoted from within ERS?** The women at the 14 and above levels are more likely than the men to have less than 5 years of experience with ERS. For example, in 1991, 40 percent of the 14 and 15 level economists who were women had less than 5 years of experience with ERS, compared to only 6 percent of the men (fig. 3). One explanation for this situation is that ERS is the beneficiary of the increased incidence of two-career households which draws highly-qualified women to the diverse job market of the Washington, D.C. area.³ Many other issues are at play here, including the differences in the age distribution and relative mobility of men and women. However, with respect to a possible glass ceiling for women in ERS, the question arises as to whether women are being promoted from within. To answer this question, we looked at the percent of grade 14 and 15 level economists (as of January 1992) who were promoted during the previous 5 years, excluding the new hires during this period. Half (50 percent) of all women in these higher grades were promoted during the 1987-91 period, this was higher than for men (40 percent) (fig. 4).
- **Do women face higher standards for promotion within ERS?** Women who are at the higher grade levels (14 and 15) in the economists series are much more likely to have a Ph.D. than are men. On the other hand, men have more experience at ERS than do women at these levels. To more definitively address the role played by gender in ERS' grade structure, a regression model for grade level was estimated for all economists with the following independent variables: having a Ph.D., years in ERS, last performance rating, race, and gender. Gender was found to be insignificant in explaining the grade level of economists in ERS (based on data for January 1992).⁴
- **What is the record of advancement of women into the Senior Executive Service?** The highest levels of advancement for career civil servants is to the Senior Executive Service (SES). ERS currently has 7 SES positions. In 1991, for the first time, one of those positions was filled by an economist who is a woman. The SES positions in all of USDA are notoriously lacking in diversity. Out of the 338 SES positions in USDA, 89 percent are held by men. Furthermore, the groups defined as "feeder groups" to the SES positions, the 14 and 15 level positions, are just as lacking in diversity. USDA is currently addressing this problem through a SES Candidate Development Program. If accepted into this highly competitive program, candidates will be prepared for, although not guaranteed, SES positions that open in the future.⁵
- **Bottom-line:** Clearly, women are being hired at the higher grades more frequently. And evidence suggests that women are being promoted from within, as well as being hired from outside ERS at the high-grade levels. Based on this evidence we conclude that a glass ceiling does not currently exist in ERS. We fully expect women will continue to follow the trail up the career ladder in ERS. This is not to say that the situation captured by these statistics is as positive for each individual employee. We do not know about the career opportunities ERS afforded the employees who left. First-line supervisors are critical in determining the quality of the professional experience for economists, especially for entry-level economists, such as new Ph.D.s. If retention is a problem for women at the entry levels for new Ph.D.s, is it because they are not meeting their career expectations at ERS? Are their expectations reasonable? If so, how much of the problem is due to the lack of awareness or the traditional views of the first-line supervisor? No simple answers exist to these questions. However, ERS has recently taken steps to address the retention issue by establishing a position for a Coordinator of Recruitment and Retention Issues. In addition, the USDA has required that an Equal Opportunity criterion be included with the other criteria used to evaluate all employees on an annual basis. Although accomplishments in this area will always be difficult to quantify, the addition of the element has likely caused many individuals to evaluate their habits and attitudes towards nontraditional employees in ERS.

Figure 1--Number of ERS Economists by grade and gender, 1991 *



* Excludes SES.

Figure 2--ERS Economists who are women by grade level, 1980-91

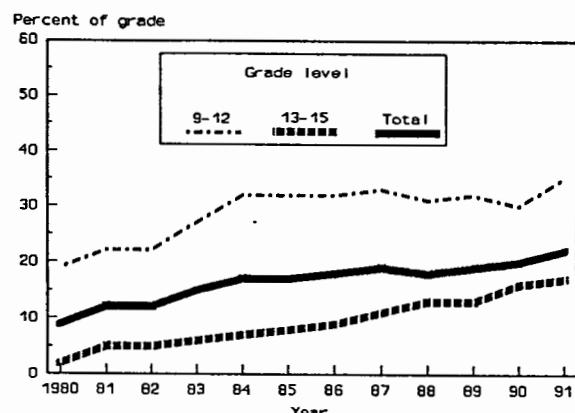


Figure 3--Years of experience with ERS of 14 and 15 level Economists (as of January 1992)

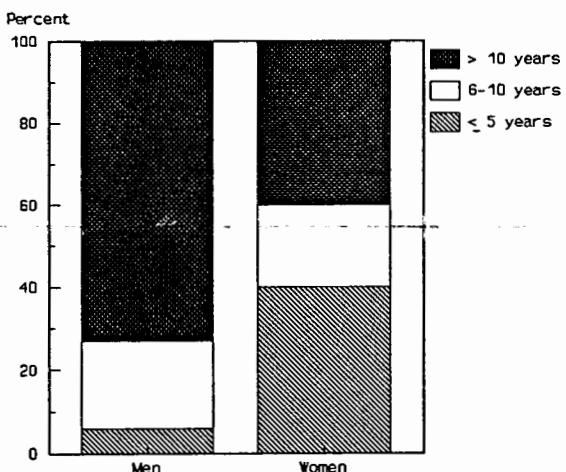
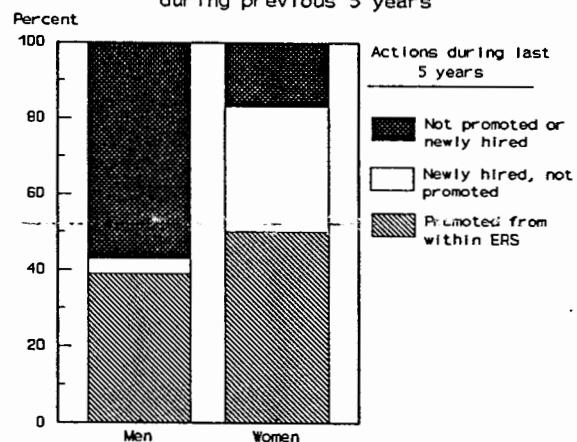


Figure 4--Promotion and hiring actions of 14 and 15 level Economists (as of January 1992) during previous 5 years



Prepared by Mary Ahearn. Sue Bentley provided valuable assistance with data analysis. Pat Browne provided the annual Affirmative Employment Program Plans and Agnes Prentice prepared the graphs. Data are from the administrative records of the Economic Management Service, USDA. ¹ Economists are 93 percent of all ERS researchers, analysts, and administrators. The ERS economist series includes individuals trained as general economists and all types of applied economists; agricultural economists dominate this occupational classification in ERS. As of January, 1992, 28 of the 94 women in the series had Ph.D.s. ² The salary of an ERS economist is based on his or her grade: 5, 7, 9, 11-15, and Senior Executive Service (SES) levels. Each grade has steps within it, as well. For example, a new Ph.D. without any significant, relevant work experience is generally hired at the 12-level, at steps that range in salary from \$38-44,000. The 13 level is considered the full-performance level, first-line supervisors are grade 14, and second-line supervisors are grade 15. Although first and second-line management are at the 14 and 15 grade levels, not all grade 14 and 15 levels are managers. Higher levels of management are generally SES positions. ³ Jagger and Harwood found that AAEA members in a dual-career household reported that the number one strategy they used in career planning was to live in a large city (CWAE Newsletter, Spring/Summer, 1989). ⁴ This is consistent with findings reported by Reichelderfer for ERS in 1983 (Agric. Econ. Res., No. 35, 1983) and with findings reported by Ahearn for members of AAEA for 1987 (CWAE Newsletter, Winter, 1988/89). ⁵ The program is open to individuals from outside Government. The next deadline for applying is in October 1992. For more information, call Dan Rainey at (202) 690-0799.