

"Second Class Citizens"?: Researching the Position of General Staff Women in New Zealand Universities

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Introduction

Historically, women in the workforce in New Zealand, like their counterparts in many other countries, have been disadvantaged vis-a-vis their male peers. They have been concentrated in relatively few (mostly low-pay) jobs, in lower rather than higher positions in occupations with promotional structures, and/or have been paid less than men for doing the same work. Even fairly recent studies of working conditions - in, for example, the banking industry (Neale, 1984), the Department of Social Welfare (Burns, Rutherford, Neale and Searancke, 1987), the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (Warren, 1988), and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (Green, 1991) - document the persistence of these inequities. Women in certain minority groups (for example, Maori women, women with physical disabilities) have tended to be particularly disenfranchised in these respects (National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women, 1990).

Traditionally, New Zealand unions representing those working in the education sector have tended to be at the forefront of attempts to rectify these disparities. Major initiatives include the establishment of the Promotion of Women Review by the Post-Primary Teachers Association (see Watson, 1988 for an overview of activities). Within the university sector more specifically - which is the focus of the present study - Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies have been in place since the mid/late 1980s to try and redress existing inequities in the hiring and subsequent treatment and promotion of staff.

Some writers - particularly those directly involved in implementation of EEO procedures - have emphasised the improvements that have begun to accrue, both with regard to the overall proportion of women in the university workforce and the number being promoted into senior academic or general¹ staff positions (for example, Korndorffer, 1992). Korndorffer argues that, "We need to be able to celebrate the positive changes that have been made, [and] consolidate progress . . ." (p.128).

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¹ Non-teaching or support staff

Nevertheless, there is still clearly a long way to go. Information on the careers of female and male academics in New Zealand universities reveal that women continue to comprise less than one-third of all staff, and are further under-represented in senior, full-time, and/or tenured positions (Slyfield, 1992). Although women comprise the numerical majority of general staff on all campuses they tend to be conspicuously under-represented in some departments/categories (for example, Works and Services, technicians) and, like their counterparts elsewhere, in those occupations with well-defined career structures (Korndorffer, 1992; Wilson and Byrne, 1987).

In her recent review of Australian universities and colleges, Wieneke (1992) additionally argues that the relative lack of detailed data on gender inequities in the employment of general staff, compared to the considerable literature relating to academics, suggests that general staff women suffer a two-fold disadvantage: they perceived themselves as "second class citizens" with reference to both male general staff and female academic staff employees. This paper reports some of the findings from a study which examines this premise within the New Zealand context.

The study was conducted by staff of the Educational Leadership Centre at the University of Waikato, who were contracted in 1992 by the New Zealand Public Service Association and the Association of University Staff of New Zealand (Inc.)² to examine the current working conditions of general staff women employed in the nation's seven universities. The study explored a wide range of issues not only in terms of "objective" criteria (such as actual salary levels, opportunities for skills upgrading, promotional histories) but also in terms of women's subjective perceptions of their work situation when comparing themselves to general staff men and academic staff women (for full project details see Strachan & Duirs, 1993). While it would have been interesting to have also explored the views of both general staff men and academic women staff with respect to the disadvantage perceived by the general staff women, the available funding (\$20,000) and time frame (one year of part-time work) meant that it was beyond the scope of this particular study.

Research design and procedures

The first phase of the study involved a postal survey of a randomly selected sample of 40 percent of all general staff women in New Zealand universities. Of 1,342 questionnaires distributed, 808 (60.2 percent) were returned.

The second phase involved the conduct of individual and group interviews with women who had indicated a willingness to participate in further discussion of issues raised by the questionnaire³. Fifty-two were selected for an individual interview, providing a cross-section of employees with regard to age, ethnicity, occupational grouping, seniority and length of service. Invitation to participate in group interviews was organised in consultation with staff at each campus, and the final selection included librarians (two

² The Ministry of Education also assisted with funding.

³ Respondents provided contact details on a detachable sheet to preserve questionnaire anonymity.

groups), secretaries (two groups), technicians, research assistants, Maori women, Pacific Island women, contract and part-time workers, and, in the case of one university, a heterogeneous group of general staff women from one school that had recently gone through a process of institutional amalgamation which had brought changes to their working conditions. A total of 106 women were involved in group interviews. All sessions were tape-recorded, and transcripts submitted to participants for further comment and/or deletion of any personal contribution they did not wish to be included in the data analysis.

This paper firstly presents some of the factual information and then looks at some of the more subjective perceptions. Particular emphasis is placed on questionnaire data from women in six occupational groups: administrative assistants (n=57), librarians (n=43), and technicians (n=112) representing employees normally requiring at least degree-level qualifications, and clerks (n=66), library assistants (n=57), and secretaries (n=187) representing those not normally required to have tertiary qualifications.

Although this study examined the second class citizenship premise of general staff women it did not do so in the same way as Wieneke (1992). Whereas her study focused mainly on a comparison between the positions of general staff men and women using statistical information gathered on such aspects of employment as salary and qualifications, this study also examined the premise from the point of view of the women themselves.

Findings

First of all, to set the scene, some demographic information derived from the entire survey and interview samples is presented.

Upgrading qualifications and staff development opportunities

The findings present a clear picture of employees who are actively seeking to upgrade their personal and professional skills and qualifications. Just over three-quarters (77.7 percent) of survey respondents reported they had been offered staff development opportunities by their university, and of these 88.7 percent (557, or 68.9 percent of the total sample) had attended courses. The great majority of those attending courses (89.8 percent) reported finding them useful to their present positions, and comments at interview were also typically complimentary. Most course participants (73.2 percent) said they had been actively encouraged to attend, although interview data suggested that the quality of relationship between a staff member and her supervisor was perceived as possibly determining the likelihood of permission being granted.

The data also suggest that this generally positive attitude towards upgrading of skills and qualifications was in many cases linked with dissatisfaction regarding current and possible future occupational status.

Grading and regrading

The general staff sector contains a very wide range of job categories and salaries. Positions within categories are assigned grades. Three hundred and eighty four (47.5 percent) survey respondents did not identify their specific grading on the questionnaire, and some claimed not to know what this was (a problem also revealed during interviews). However, 47 percent of respondents considered their positions were inappropriately graded, given the work they were expected to do (and the previous experience they personally brought to the job). Interviews revealed that although it was generally understood that the grading was supposed to reflect the work done in a job, many women considered their university unwilling to acknowledge that the nature of many jobs had changed substantially in recent years - involving different tasks and greater responsibilities.

It was perceived to be very difficult to get the grading of a position changed. Two hundred and eighty eight respondents (35.6 percent) reported having applied for such a change, but less than half had been successful (131, or 16.2 percent of the total sample). The most frequent criticism of the system was that little or no constructive feedback had been provided when applications were unsuccessful.

Career and promotion opportunities

Overall, many of the women participating in this project reported feeling trapped and frustrated by promotional structures and processes that they perceived to take little account of their personal ability to do the job. Of great concern to the women was the lack of career structure. Fifty-nine percent of those women who responded to the questionnaire did not believe that the university could provide them with a career path and only *two* of the 47⁴ women interviewed saw a clearly defined career pathway for themselves.

From questionnaire and interview data a picture of confusion emerged over the way the promotion system worked: what was required and expected of them, and what criteria were employed in decision-making. It was acknowledged that financial constraints might be placing overall limitations on opportunities for promotion, but such limitations notwithstanding, many considered the system to over-value professional "paper" qualifications at the expense of personal and professional experience. One woman commented that without a university degree, appointments are seldom made to positions above Grade I, and that the holding of a degree carries more weight than experience when decisions are being made with regard to short-listing applicants for appointments.

The Maori women who were interviewed also commented on the difficulty they had with a performance appraisal system which demanded substantial self-promotion. They wanted universities to develop more culturally sensitive procedures which, while recognising their abilities and contribution, did not require them to self-promote.

⁴ Five of the original 52 selected for interview were unable to participate due to illness or other unforeseen circumstances.

A Senior Administrator who is responsible for the appointment of general staff believes that although she supports the introduction of Equal Employment legislation and practice, it is the requirement to advertise all vacancies and the present position of the employment market that have been responsible for the lack of career paths for general staff. She comments: "All you can do is apply for senior jobs, and given the economic situation the competition is incredible".

Salary

The data show that 71.2 percent of the women earn under \$NZ30,000 with 34.9 percent earning under \$NZ25,000. Less than seven percent earn over \$NZ40,000 and only two percent earn \$NZ50,000 or more (Table 1).

Table 1: The percentage of women in each salary band⁵

Salary	%
Less than \$20,000	14.2
\$20,000 - 24,999	20.7
\$25,000 - 29,999	36.3
\$30,000 - 34,999	15.1
\$35,000 - 39,999	6.2
\$40,000 - 44,999	2.9
\$45,000 - 49,999	1.9
\$50,000 + over	2.0

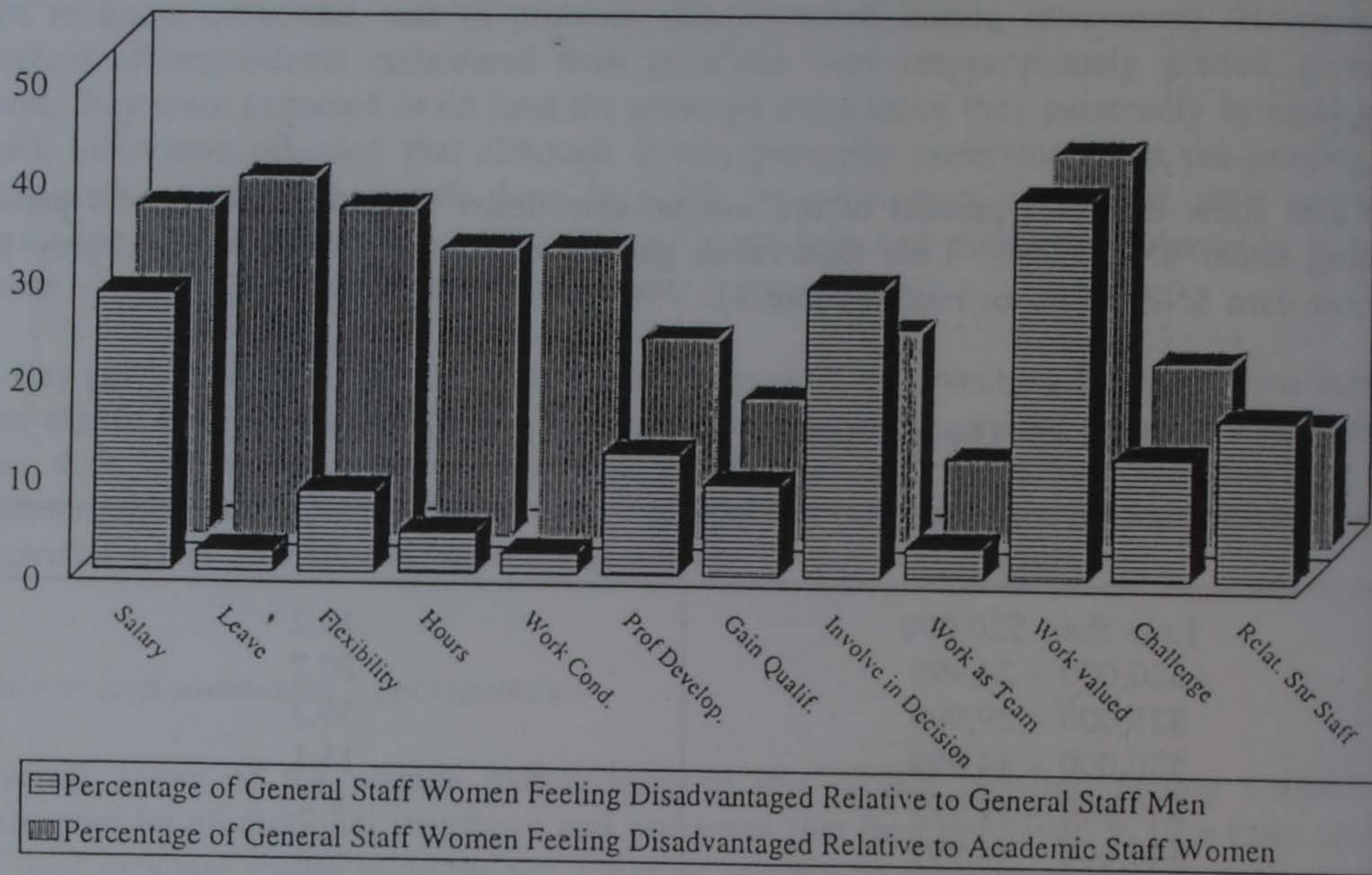
Dissatisfaction with salary was a major issue for those women who were interviewed, both those interviewed individually and those interviewed in the groups. Thirty of the 47 women interviewed individually (63.8 percent) expressed dissatisfaction with their salaries and gradings. Many did not believe their salaries adequately reflected the work they had to do, their experiences or their qualifications.

As with grading and promotion, a major issue for many women was that their previous work experiences did not appear to be considered when deciding on salaries and that there was undue emphasis placed on formal academic qualifications. However, one woman was critical of the starting salaries for those with degrees: "Most of the people who come to the library have at least a basic degree. I think in general, salaries start at \$22,700. For three years of intensive work it is not a lot" (Library Assistant).

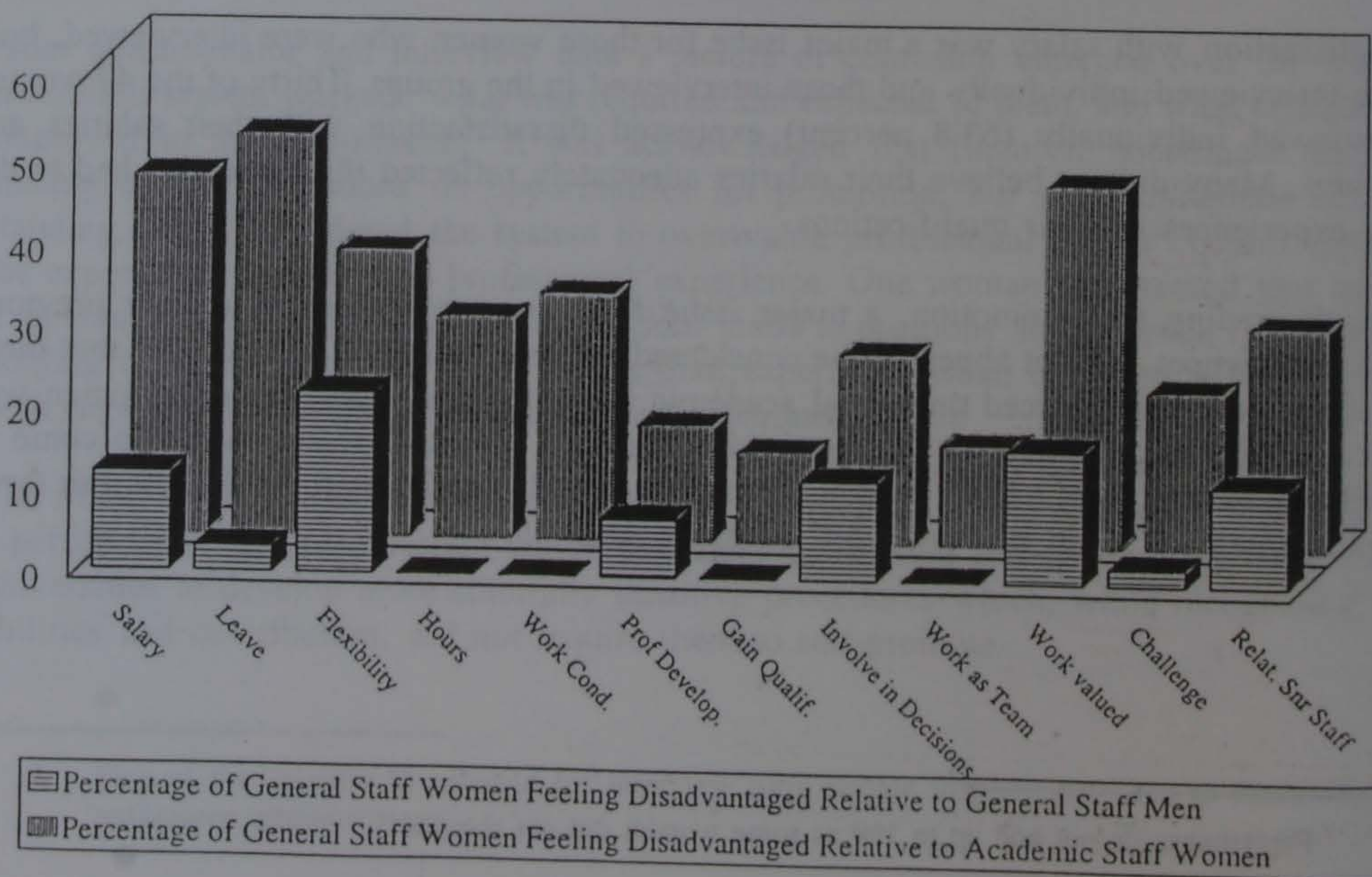
⁵ Percentages do not add up to 100 as some women did not respond

Figure 1

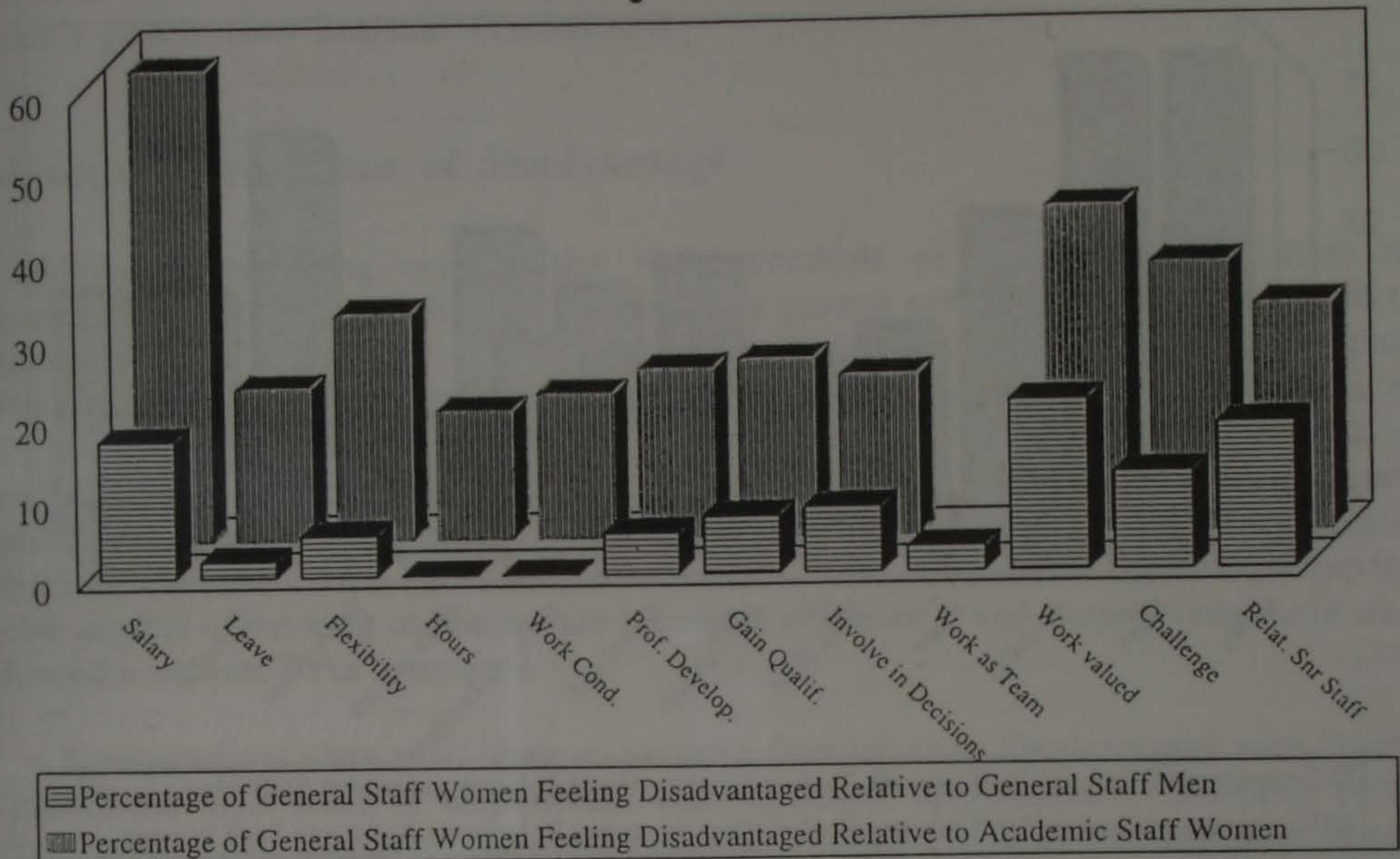
Administrative Assistants



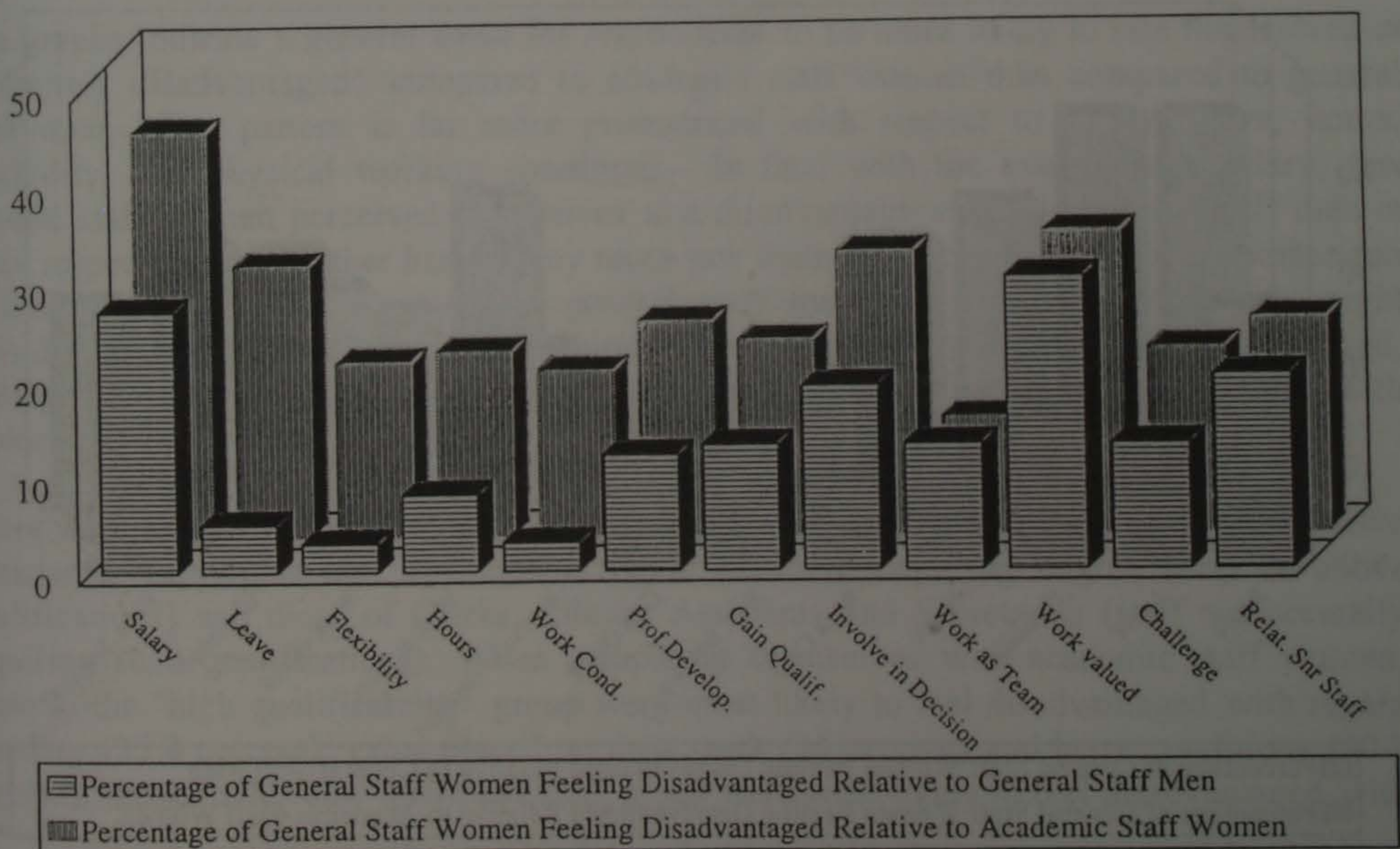
Librarians



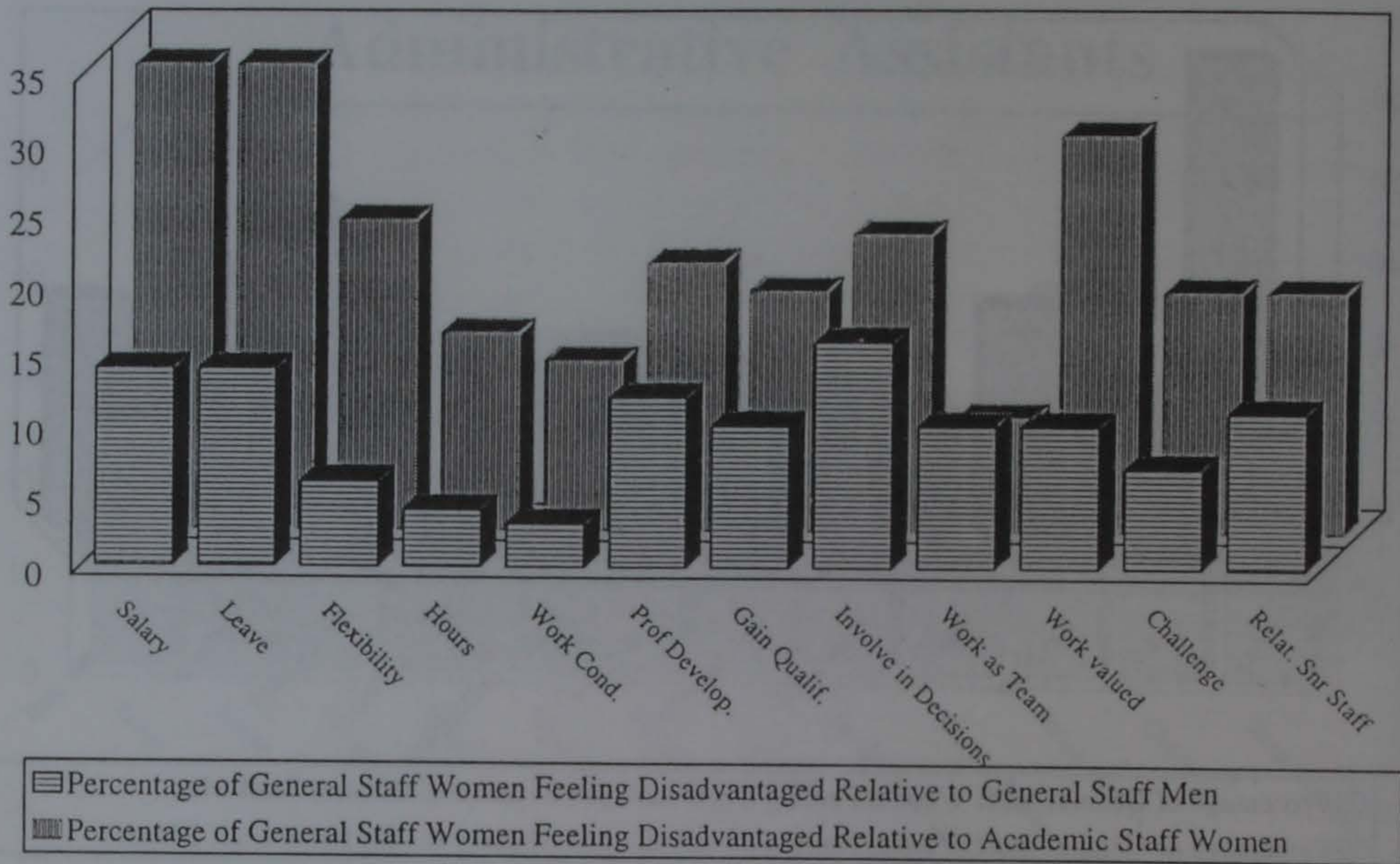
Library Assistants



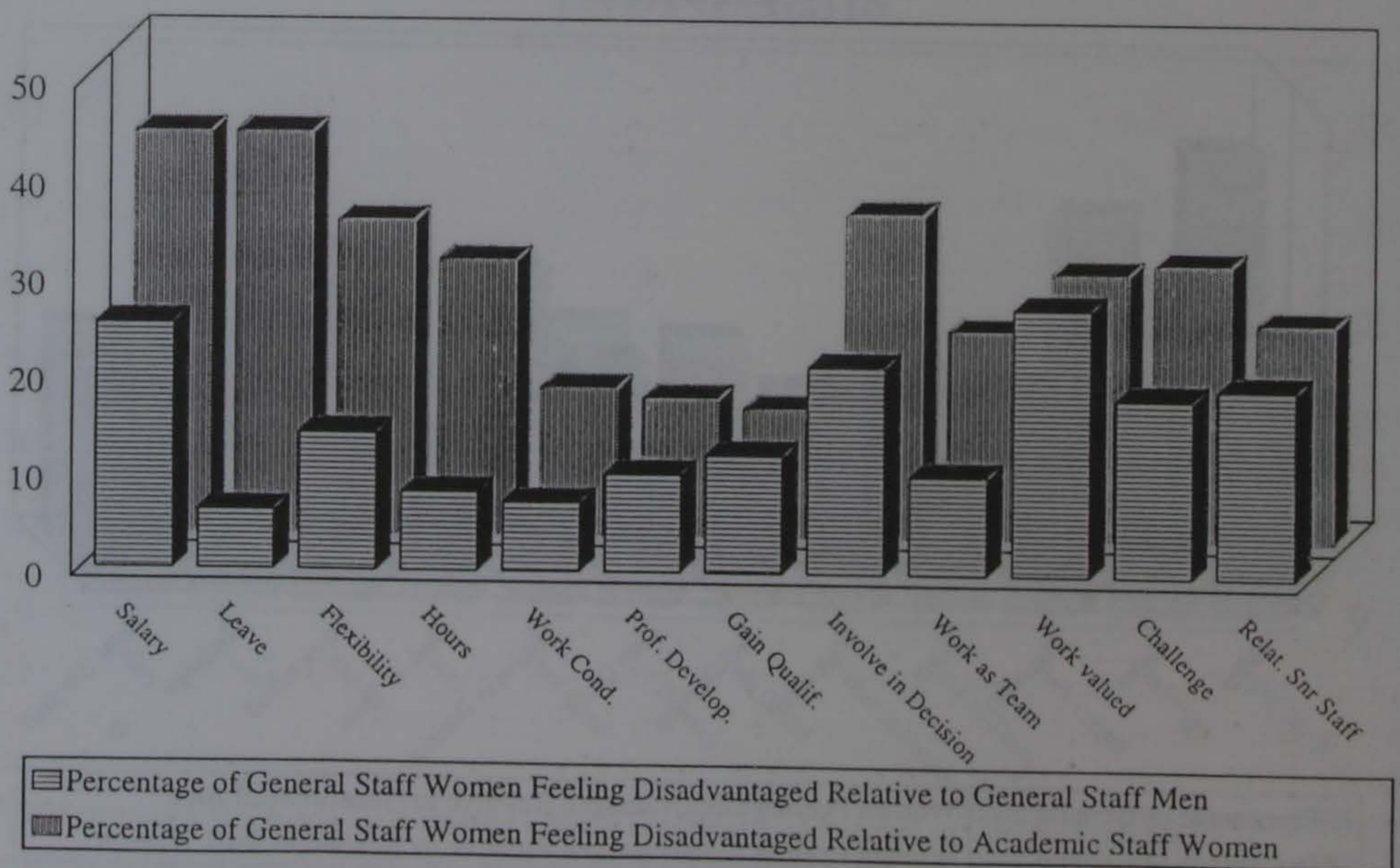
Clerks



Technicians



Secretaries



Others thought that the merits of the person, their experiences and skills, were not taken into consideration or valued when deciding upon salary and grading: "I was told I had to be a Grade II technician because I had an honours [not a masters] degree. They didn't seem to take into account that I had had quite a lot of overseas experience and qualifications I couldn't gain in New Zealand" (Technician).

Subjective perceptions of disadvantage

In addition to providing opportunities for respondents to voice their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their conditions of service in a general sense, the survey also sought to identify to what extent any dissatisfactions were derived from perceptions of being disadvantaged relative to certain co-workers. The questionnaire required respondents to indicate whether they felt disadvantaged (Yes/No/Somewhat) in each of twelve aspects of their working conditions with respect to two distinct comparison groups: academic staff women, and general staff men. Data from representative sub-groups (Technicians, Librarians, Administrative Assistants, Secretaries, Library Assistants and Clerks) on the twelve aspects of working conditions are presented in Figure 1, and identify only those who indicated a definite "Yes" response.

Overall, respondents were most likely to perceive themselves as disadvantaged with regard to one of the most basic of employment criteria, salary; approximately two-fifths (40.6 percent) considered themselves disadvantaged when compared to academic staff women and one-fifth (20.9 percent) when compared to general staff men. However, also featuring prominently was a more subtle and intangible feature of the work environment - the extent to which one perceives one's work as valued by others. Over one-third of the group (34.3 percent) saw themselves disadvantaged in this regard vis-a-vis academic staff women, and nearly one-quarter (22.8 percent) felt disadvantaged vis-a-vis general staff men.

The graphs indicate a general trend for respondents to be more likely to rate themselves as "definitely disadvantaged" compared to academic staff women than compared to general staff men. The pattern is far more pronounced with respect to salary, leave, hours, flexibility, and physical working conditions. In fact, with the exception of salary, few general staff women perceived themselves at a disadvantage vis-a-vis general staff men in these respects. On the other hand, many more saw themselves disadvantaged in comparison to both academic staff women *and* general staff men with regard to what one might consider the more "psychological" features of the work environment (feeling challenged, feeling part of a team, being involved in decision-making, having a good relationship with senior staff and believing that one's work is valued).

There were some similarities and some differences between the responses of Administrative Assistants, Librarians and Technicians (staff normally requiring degree level or above qualifications) and those of Clerks, Library Assistants and Secretaries (staff not normally requiring such qualifications). When comparing themselves with academic staff women, those in the "high qualifications" group were most likely to feel disadvantaged with regard to salary (35.8 percent), value placed on their work (34 percent) and leave conditions (30.8 percent); those in the "low qualifications" group were most likely to feel disadvantaged with

regard to salary (43.8 percent), value placed on their work (34.5 percent) and involvement in decision-making (29.7 percent). When comparing themselves to general staff men, respondents in the "high qualifications" group most frequently reported disadvantage in respect of value placed on their work (18.4 percent), their involvement in decision-making (17.9 percent) and salary (17.5 percent); those in the "low qualifications" group most commonly perceived disadvantage with respect to the value placed on their work (25.8 percent), salary (23.2 percent), involvement in decision-making and relationships with senior staff (both 19 percent).

Statistical analysis of data from "high" and "low" qualifications groups revealed significant differences between them mainly with regard to what we are calling "psychological" aspects of the workplace. Thus, respondents in the "low qualifications" group were significantly more likely than those in the "high qualifications" group to rate themselves at a definite disadvantage vis-a-vis general staff men in regard to level of challenge at work (X^2 [chi square] = 8.41, $df=1$, $p<.01$), feeling part of a team ($X^2 = 7.34$, $df=1$, $p<.01$), relationships with senior staff ($X^2 = 4.21$, $df=1$, $p<.05$), flexibility of working hours ($X^2 = 3.99$, $df=1$, $p<.05$) and work being valued ($X^2 = 3.90$, $df=1$, $p<.05$). Similarly, they were more likely to rate themselves at a definite disadvantage vis-a-vis academic staff women with regard to feeling part of a team ($X^2 = 6.01$, $df=1$, $p<.02$), level of challenge ($X^2 = 5.66$, $df=1$, $p<.02$) and involvement in decision-making ($X^2 = 4.61$, $df=1$, $p<.05$).

There were also a few significant differences between respondents in specific occupational categories. Among the "high qualifications" group, Administrative Assistants were significantly *more* likely than Librarians and Technicians to report seeing themselves disadvantaged vis-a-vis general staff men with regard to their work being valued ($X^2 = 17.61$, $df=1$, $p<.001$), involvement in decision-making ($X^2 = 5.49$, $df=1$, $p<.02$), and with regard to salary ($X^2 = 5.98$, $df=1$, $p<.02$). On the other hand, the clearest feature of comparisons with academic staff women was that Technicians were significantly *less* likely than Administrative Assistants and Librarians to report feeling disadvantaged in terms of physical working conditions ($X^2 = 10.09$, $df=1$, $p<.01$), leave ($X^2 = 9.45$, $df=1$, $p<.01$), hours worked ($X^2 = 5.25$, $df=1$, $p<.05$) and work being valued ($X^2 = 4.14$, $df=1$, $p<.05$).

Among the "low qualifications" group, Library Assistants were significantly *less* likely than Secretaries and Clerks to perceive themselves disadvantaged vis-a-vis general staff men in terms of involvement in decision-making ($X^2 = 6.47$, $df=1$, $p<.02$), feeling part of a team ($X^2 = 5.56$, $df=1$, $p<.02$), and hours worked ($X^2 = 4.29$, $df=1$, $p<.05$). Secretaries were much *more* likely than Library Assistants and Clerks to report feeling disadvantaged with regard to flexibility of working hours ($X^2 = 7.98$, $df=1$, $p<.01$). When comparing themselves to academic staff women, Library Assistants were much *more* likely than Clerks and Secretaries to feel disadvantaged regarding salary ($X^2 = 5.59$, $df=1$, $p<.02$), but significantly *less* likely to feel disadvantaged with regard to working as a team ($X^2 = 7.92$, $df=1$, $p<.01$).

Discussion

Like the women in Wieneke's (1992) Australian study, the participants in this research project were mostly in positions commanding salaries at the lower end of university salary scales. Just over 70 percent of questionnaire respondents were earning below NZ\$30,000, and only two percent were earning NZ\$50,000 and above. This "bottom heavy" picture is typical of the pattern to be found throughout the wider workforce in New Zealand (National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women, 1990).

In the light of this, it was not surprising to find that, in the more detailed analysis of data from six occupational sub-groups, our respondents were more likely to perceive themselves disadvantaged vis-a-vis co-workers with regard to salary than with regard to any other major feature of their employment conditions. This was particularly apparent when they compared themselves with female academic staff, and it should be remembered that many of these women are highly qualified and in some cases will have academic qualifications equal to - or even higher than - some of their academic colleagues. However, the interview data also force us to recognise a dilemma faced by general staff women (and those who are responsible for their recruitment and promotion): on the one hand there seem to be problems when due recognition appears not to be given to their formal qualifications, while on the other there seems to be a fairly widespread feeling that too great an emphasis is sometimes placed on formal qualifications to the exclusion of other elements of personal ability and experience.

The data clearly indicated that there are some important differences between the way in which general staff women perceive their position within the university environment vis-a-vis general staff men and vis-a-vis academic staff women. In general terms, the picture is one in which a substantial minority of general staff women perceive themselves disadvantaged relative to their academic staff peers in almost all aspects of their working environment. While few feel disadvantaged relative to general staff men in respect of basic conditions of service, there is evidence that many feel comparatively undervalued on the job. Academic staff women may not be aware of the perceptions of disadvantage felt by general staff women. It would be useful for further research to explore to what extent they are aware of, as well as the implications of, this perception.

It would appear that disadvantage is more in terms of the "type" of job done (Technician, Librarian, etc.) rather than in terms of gender. There is, of course, a cross-over factor here in that the majority of general staff are women (60 percent), including both full-time and part-time staff, so there is a reinforcement of the "earning gap". Again, further research needs to explore what are particular implications for those involved in negotiating individual and collective employment contracts. It could well be that unless formal qualifications are recognised, the universities as employers will be reinforcing the earnings gap and continuing to keep women at the lower end of the salary scales. There could also be implications for recruitment and retention of general staff as found by Wilson and Byrne (1987). Disadvantage of the type reported here may be a contributing factor in explaining why almost 70 percent of the women respondents in this research had been employees of the universities for less than six years.

It must be a matter of great concern that more than one-third of our sample felt definitely disadvantaged in terms of the value placed on their work (this figure rises to 49 percent if one includes all who felt definitely or "somewhat" disadvantaged). While improvements in salary, promotional opportunity, physical working conditions, and the like could presumably serve to alleviate this problem to some extent, it seems likely that more subtle changes to the everyday interpersonal climate in the workplace are equally important. Additional research is needed to provide further insights into the "quantity and quality" of interpersonal interactions and interpersonal relationships of general staff women, so that effective - and acceptable - strategies for change can be offered.

However, the findings of the present study also highlight the fact that we cannot simply hope to identify strategies that will be equally effective for *all* general staff women. What appear to be major bones of contention for those in some occupational categories seem less important in, or virtually absent from, the work perceptions of those in other areas. Moreover, the data make us aware that even *within* particular occupational groups there will be individuals whose past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations differ widely. Can we devise strategies for improving quality of life in the university workplace which take such individual differences into account?

Conclusion

Perceived and real inequities exist in the employment of general staff women in New Zealand universities. For many of the women involved in this study, second class citizenship, as described by Wieneke (1992), was perceived more in relationship to women academic staff than their male general staff colleagues.

With a reduction in funding, tertiary institutions may well consider staff redundancies as a way of saving money. We do not have to look very far to see this occurring in many small and large businesses and corporations. Both employers and employees (including the unions), within the universities, will need to ensure that those already experiencing the inequities highlighted in this research are not inequitably targeted when cost cutting measures are implemented, as they inevitably will be.

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