

# Still in the Ghetto? Experiences of Secretarial Work in the 21st Century

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Secretarial work has been described as one of the most persistently gendered of all occupations. Historically, it has been characterized as a ghetto occupation with three key features: low status and poor pay, narrow and feminized job content and poor promotion prospects. Twenty years ago, when a major study last took place in the UK, it was thought that new office technologies might transform the role, leading to a newly defined occupation equally appealing to both men and women. In this article, we report on the findings of a questionnaire survey involving 1011 secretaries. We found evidence of continuity and change. Secretaries are now better qualified and generally well-paid. A minority is undertaking complex managerial tasks. However, most secretaries continue to perform traditional tasks and career prospects for all remain bleak. We conclude that processes of role gender-typing are deeply entrenched and that secretarial work remains largely a ghetto occupation.

*Keywords:* secretarial work, horizontal segregation, ghetto occupations

## Introduction

One of the most persistent features of the labour market in industrialized countries is that it is highly segregated along gender lines, both vertically and horizontally (Mitra, 2003; Wood, 2008). There is evidence that there is no single country in the world where men and women have reached equality in employment (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, 2006). In terms of vertical segregation, women are overrepresented in low grade occupations at the lower end of the career hierarchy. For example, women occupy fewer than 5% of top management positions in the USA and they represent just 8.7% of board members in Australia (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, 2006). Horizontally, women are disproportionately clustered into a narrow range of jobs that are typically regarded as 'ghetto occupations'. Ghetto occupations have been classified as those which are female-dominated and of low status, poorly paid, with narrow job content and that offer few prospects for promotion (Bradley, 1989; Crompton and Sanderson, 1990; Lowe, 1987; Schein, 2001).

Explorations of women's experiences of employment in these highly segregated occupations can make an important contribution to the debate by exposing the processes by which gender typing is sustained. However, such studies are sparse (Gwartney-Gibbs and Lach, 1994; Karlsson, 2011). Here, we report on the findings of one such investigation focusing on the job content and careers of women working in what was described nearly 30 years ago as the most persistent ghetto occupation; secretarial work (Silverstone and Towler, 1983). We analyse the responses to a questionnaire survey involving 1011 secretaries and address two questions, firstly, does secretarial work continue to meet

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the criteria for classification as a ghetto occupation and, secondly, how do secretaries themselves experience their work (Truss, 1993, 1994; Truss *et al.*, 1992, 1995)?

## Role gender typing and ghetto occupations in the labour market

Women are overrepresented in certain occupational groupings (Snyder and Green, 2008). These may vary among countries (Guerrier *et al.*, 2009), but macro-level studies have suggested that, in industrialized economies, these generally include clerical work, unskilled factory work, low-grade service work, nursing, cleaning, teaching and caring occupations (Bradley, 1989; Crompton and Sanderson, 1990). Analyses of these ghetto jobs have concluded that they share certain common features in terms of job content, pay, status and career prospects (Bradley, 1989; Novarra, 1980; Scott, 1986).

Although some have proposed a more optimistic view and argued that desegregation is occurring (Adkins, 2001), most are of the opinion that this is not the case. Even in occupational areas where women appear to be more equally represented, such as medicine and information technology (IT), more detailed analysis has shown that men and women tend to be clustered in different kinds of roles, with those offering higher status and better career paths predominantly occupied by men (Guerrier *et al.*, 2009; Stanworth, 2000). Equally, an investigation into the patterns of men's work in the highly feminized occupation of nursing found that they were disproportionately represented in specialisms that could be regarded as having a more 'masculine' identity, such as intensive care, accident and emergency, psychiatry and anaesthesia, which were fast-paced and technologically driven (Snyder and Green, 2008). One study of organizational restructuring found that gendering processes were unconsciously in-built from the start, leading to the creation of a gender-segregated structure even in the absence of deliberate discrimination (Skuratowiz and Hunter, 2004).

Explanations of gender-typing processes have drawn on a number of perspectives (Gwartney-Gibbs and Lach, 1994). Supply-side theories suggest that women's individual choices over how to balance work and caring responsibilities may influence both men's and women's perceptions of the suitability of particular roles for women (Hakim, 2002). Human capital theory suggests that women lack valued attributes such as the qualifications, skills, experience and work commitment that would make them attractive to employers in certain roles, although commentators have noted that, even where women have high levels of human capital, they continue to suffer from exclusion (Blackwell, 2001; Bradley, 1989; Crompton and LeFeuvre, 2003; Mitra, 2003; Wood, 2008). Others have pointed out the constraints created by structural factors at a broader societal level, as well as the role played by organizational processes such as recruitment, training and development and promotion in developing and maintaining gender typing (Brenner *et al.*, 1989; Corby and Stanworth, 2009; Guerrier *et al.*, 2009; Schein, 2001).

Feminist perspectives suggest that the explanation for women crowding into certain labour market segments lies in the context of patriarchal societal structures. While stereotypical male jobs are associated with attributes such as achievement orientation, forcefulness and strength in decision-making, traits often felt suited to management and leadership positions, stereotypical women's jobs are linked with notions of nurturance, affiliation and a relationship orientation (Wood, 2008). Studies around the world have concluded that gender stereotyping and implicit bias impact significantly on women's occupational status, opportunities and choices, and conversely, render some occupations unattractive to men (International Labour Organization, 2004; Snyder and Green, 2008; Wood, 2008).

Although it has also been noted that gendering processes are complex and may vary across national settings, as well as amongst both men and women (Connell, 2006; Crompton and LeFeuvre, 2003), there seems a general consensus that processes of sex-typing are deeply entrenched through multiple factors across most societies, leading to the creation of female ghetto occupations (Bihagen and Ohls, 2004; Lowe, 1987). Lowe (1987, p. 59) comments:

Such jobs are traps, their very conditions creating a vicious circle. Poor wages and routine tasks tend to produce the kind of work patterns — high turnover, weak job commitment and limited

aspirations — which reinforce employers' discriminatory attitudes and perpetuate the inequalities inherent in existing labour market structures.

Because secretarial work has often been referred to as the archetypal female ghetto occupation (Benet, 1972; Pringle, 1989; Silverstone and Towler, 1983), understanding more about the nature of secretarial work, women's experiences of secretarial work and their career trajectories can shed light on the processes by which the sex typing of occupations is sustained.

## Secretarial work: the archetypal women's ghetto job?

In the UK there are currently 787,000 secretaries, representing around 3% of the total UK workforce (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2009). Labour market statistics have consistently shown over the past five decades that in industrialized countries the gender composition of the secretarial role is almost exclusively female (Connell, 2006; Grassl, 1984; Khalid *et al.*, 2002; Leung, 2001; Lowe, 1987; McNally, 1979; Mandon, 1980; Murgatroyd, 1982; Silverstone and Towler, 1983; US Bureau of Census, 1990). In the UK 96% of secretaries are women (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2009). Secretarial work therefore constitutes an important area of employment for women.

The most recent significant studies focusing on secretarial job content and careers in countries such as the UK, France, Germany and Australia took place 20 or 30 years ago (Kanter, 1977; Pringle, 1989; Silverstone and Towler, 1983; Truss, 1993; Truss *et al.*, 1995; Vinnicombe, 1980). More recent studies have focused on other aspects of the secretarial role (Leung, 2001; Karlsson, 2011; Kennelly, 2006; Khalid *et al.*, 2002; Snow *et al.*, 2003) but have not examined what, if anything, has changed in terms of the content of secretarial work overall and the career prospects of secretaries, in order to address the persistence or otherwise of the ghetto features of the role.

Three core features of ghetto occupations have been identified: low status and poor pay, narrow and feminized job content and poor promotion prospects (Lowe, 1987; Truss, 1993). In terms of job content, prior studies of the formal content of the secretarial role have found that secretaries generally perform four types of tasks: gatekeeping, for instance dealing with visitors; text production and typing; routine office work and other tasks, including work on their own initiative (Vinnicombe, 1980). Truss (1993) found that secretaries in the UK tended to perform a narrower range of tasks than their French or German counterparts but that all secretaries have the opportunity to exercise agency to extend their role. However, their core gatekeeping role has been described as indicative of their powerless and lack of control (Mital, 1979). Secretaries, it has been argued, have no real goals or aims of their own; their job is an extension of that of their boss, and their purpose is to facilitate their boss's achievements (Pringle, 1989). In Fox's (1974) terms, the secretary/boss relationship displays tensions typical of a high trust relationship that is not adequately recognized or rewarded, or of high demand/low job control conditions. Snow *et al.* (2003) also found that due to these characteristic features of the role, secretaries were particularly vulnerable to psychological symptoms of stress.

However, much of the literature on secretarial job content was written well before the widespread adoption of personal computers, mobile devices and the Internet, and research took three different perspectives on it. Writing in 1974, Braverman argued that the secretarial role was a relic of the capitalist patriarchy and was susceptible to deskilling and work fragmentation through the application of office technologies that he felt would lead to the creation of two distinct roles, administration and text production. This was part of a broader movement that has viewed new technologies as tools that would perpetuate and even heighten gendered workplace distinctions (Kirkup, 1992; Wajzman, 1991). However, others were of the view that technology would give secretaries the scope to develop new and more interesting jobs (Bruand, 1985; Mandon, 1980; Dougherty, 1987). A third view was that technology would not, in itself, lead to any particular outcomes for secretaries (Lowe, 1987; Silverstone and Towler, 1983). One recent study that has examined the impact of technology on secretaries (Khalid *et al.*, 2002) found that most secretaries are using new technologies such as e-mail and the Internet, and the study suggests this role is changing in such a way as to enhance the power

and status of the secretarial role. However, the authors' data stop short of providing concrete evidence to support their assertion.

In terms of the secretarial role more broadly, studies have shown that it can include considerable variety. Secretaries often do not have job descriptions and their role definition moreover encompasses aspects of intangible social and emotional labour alongside their formally specified duties (Pinto, 1987; Pringle, 1989; Silverstone, 1974). However, it is in this domain that secretarial work has particularly been found to reflect norms of female employment that are typical of ghetto occupations. Secretaries have been referred to as the 'office wife', whose role extends beyond the formal boundaries of a job description to include the undertaking of personal and domestic work for her line manager, such as personal correspondence, running errands and providing a sympathetic ear (Benet, 1972; Pringle, 1989; Vinnicombe, 1980). Some have argued that this stereotypical 'wifely' role has served to reinforce patriarchal relations between boss and secretary and perpetuate the secretary's inferior status in the employment hierarchy (Kanter, 1977; Kennelly, 2006). The secretary has been described as a status symbol for her boss, whose informal qualifications in terms of her appearance, femininity and interpersonal skills are integral to the successful performance of her role (McNally, 1979; Pringle, 1989). Pringle (1989, p. 70) argues that secretarial roles are part of wider gendered work cultures: 'they domesticise or masculinize capitalist work conditions, making them more human and tolerable, but also ensuring that people are less likely to challenge them or to seek reform'. Truss *et al.* (1995) found that most secretaries in the UK in their study performed personal tasks for their bosses, such as fetching cups of coffee and running errands, with both bosses and secretaries regarding this as an expected feature of the role. In a study of men working in temporary clerical roles in the USA, Henson and Rogers (2001) show how men in these occupations face challenges to their sense of masculinity and enact coping strategies to distance themselves from these features of the role and its associated low, feminized status.

Reflecting another core area of ghetto occupations, secretarial work is perceived to contain limited internal advancement opportunities alongside poor chances for promotion outside secretarial work (Pringle, 1989). Truss *et al.* (1992) show that secretarial career advancement is often dependent on the career of her boss: if the boss is promoted then the secretary may move up the ladder with her. Conversely, should the boss lose her job, then the secretary's job is also under threat. It has also been suggested that being promoted in secretarial work itself may in any case not be meaningful, since a more senior secretarial role does not automatically entail more interesting or demanding work (Silverstone and Towler, 1983; Truss *et al.*, 1992).

Once at the top of the secretarial ladder, there is then no automatic access to the mainstream hierarchy, as secretarial work is not felt to enable the development of transferable skills (Colwill, 1985; Truss, 1993). Silverstone and Towler (1983) found that 60% of their sample of secretaries had no opportunity to be promoted out of their current jobs; Truss (1992) found that just 14% of secretaries considered promotion prospects for secretaries to be good or excellent with 60% stating that possibilities were poor or non-existent. More recently, Leung (2001) found that 70% of secretaries participating in her study in China felt their promotion prospects to be uncertain, despite the assertion by Vinnicombe (1980) that secretarial work provides an ideal preparation for a management role. Kanter (1977) argues that the explanation lies in secretarial work itself, since it can serve to foster behaviour amongst role incumbents that renders occupational advancement problematic. Secretaries are expected to compensate for their bosses' limitations in areas such as tidiness or storing and retrieving documents, but paradoxically, this very skill is interpreted, to the detriment of secretaries, as evidence of their own lack of the capabilities required for occupational advancement (Truss, 1992).

In sum, secretarial work has been regarded as an occupation framed in all respects through the lens of gender as a feminized role set apart from the mainstream hierarchy of the organization, the successful performance of which has been bound up with being 'successful' in stereotypical female terms (Kanter, 1977; Leung, 2001). Karlsson (2011) shows how the social construction of gender is linked with modernity to maintain the associations of secretarial work with notions of carefulness, accuracy, punctuality and the absence of risk-taking, all of which are detrimental to the status and career advancement of secretaries. Connell's (2006) study of gender segregation in Australia found

that the most persistently gendered role of all those that she examined was that of the secretary. One of her conclusions was that gender divisions could be reduced only through the restructuring of the labour process and 'the gradual elimination of secretarial jobs and the absorption of a good deal of keyboard and communication work into professional and managerial jobs' (pp. 841–2), suggesting that the only possible route to address the gendering of the secretarial role is to eliminate it altogether.

## Methods

### *Overview of research process*

The purpose of this study was to examine whether secretarial work can justly be termed a ghetto occupation. This involves three interrelated features: low status and poor pay, narrow and feminized job content and poor promotion prospects (Lowe, 1987; Truss, 1993). A second purpose was to shed light on secretaries' work experiences and attitudes.

In order to address these questions, data were gathered through an online questionnaire which was made available to members of several extensive databases, including the 5000 members of the Global PA Network, and around an estimated further 5000 members of other secretarial databases during July 2009. Links to the survey were posted on a number of secretarial websites. Consequently, we do not know how many people were aware of the survey and could potentially have participated. The participants were invited to complete the survey if they were working as a secretary, personal assistant (PA) or executive assistant, and were offered the chance to be entered into a prize draw for a £100 voucher as an incentive take part. In total, 1011 usable responses were received (Truss *et al.*, 2009). We estimate that this represents a response rate of somewhat less than 10%. The questionnaire was designed to be completed in 15 minutes, and a small pilot study was completed prior to launch of the final survey, which led to some minor adjustment to the wording of some questions. A check on the completed surveys revealed that 100% of the sample gave their job title as secretary, PA or executive assistant.

### *Measures*

Items were derived from a number of sources.

*Job content.* Drawing on personal experience and knowledge, secondary sources, conversations with secretaries and prior empirical research (La Valle *et al.*, 1996; Pringle, 1989; Truss, 1993, 1994; Truss *et al.*, 1995; Vinnicombe, 1980), a series of 30 single items referring to secretarial tasks was derived and cross-checked through the pilot process. The respondents were asked about the frequency with which they undertook these tasks on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'daily'. Further single questions with a simple 'yes/no' response category asked whether the secretary undertook personal work for her boss and whether they had been asked to undertake a personal task that they felt was going 'beyond the call of duty'. Respondents were able to give examples of this in a text box. Similarly, respondents were asked about the frequency with which they used a range of communication media, such as e-mail, on a five-point Likert frequency scale.

*Careers, training and development.* Training availability was measured using two questions, (for example, 'I receive training that keeps my technical skills up to date'). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .86. Promotion prospects were measured using three questions that captured opportunities to be promoted overall, within and outside secretarial work in the respondent's current organization. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .72. Person–job fit was measured using three questions (for example, 'I feel that my job and I are well matched'). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .89. In all cases, the participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements on a five-point Likert-type scale.

*Perceived status.* A single question, on a five-point Likert-type scale, asked whether secretaries were treated as valued employees in their organization. This was supplemented by further information on salary and education.

*Attitudes and experiences.* Perceptions of reward fairness were measured by two questions (for example, 'My reward package is fair compared with others doing a similar job in other organizations'). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .80. Opportunities for voice were measured with three questions (for example, 'I have opportunities to participate in decisions that affect my job'). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .82. Line manager satisfaction was measured using eight questions (for example, 'I trust my line manager'). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .94. Performance appraisal quality was measured using three questions (for example, 'My performance is assessed based on a set of clearly defined competencies'). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .82. Respondents were also asked single questions about the extent to which they felt valued in their organization, whether their manager keeps them informed, whether their suggestions were taken seriously, whether they are able to participate in decisions affecting their job and whether they are glad they became a secretary. Job satisfaction was measured with a single question, as recommended in previous research (Wanous *et al.*, 1997). All of the abovementioned measures were taken on a five-point Likert-type scale.

In addition, a set of questions captured respondents' baseline characteristics, educational background and salary level. We first report on the descriptive findings from the data, before moving on to a more detailed analysis.

### *Sample description*

Out of the 1011 participants in the survey, 99% were women, reflecting national level statistics and historical trends (ONS, 2009). Two per cent of the sample were aged below 25 and 9% were aged 56 and over, with 26% aged 26–35, 34% aged 36–45 and 29% aged 46–55. The respondents were asked about their job title; just 11% had the word secretary in their job title, while 65% used the title personal assistant and 24% the title executive assistant. This may suggest that the title secretary is being replaced by titles of a higher perceived status.

Most respondents worked full time in permanent roles for between 30–49 hours per week. 42% said they worked between 40–49 hours per week, while seven per cent worked more than 50 hours a week. Fewer than half, 43%, said that they worked for just one boss, while the rest worked for two or more. A study in the early 1990s found that 38% of secretaries in the UK worked for just one boss and so it is interesting to see that this proportion has, if anything, increased somewhat (Truss, 1992).

## **Findings**

### *Status and pay*

The respondents were asked about their educational attainments, pay and perceptions of their organizational status. A total of 35% reported having a higher educational qualification, with 5% holding a postgraduate qualification. Only 2% reported having no qualification at all. A study in the early 1990s found that just 10% of secretaries working in two sectors were educated to degree level (Truss, 1992a), so the figures in our present study represent a substantial increase in educational achievement. We also asked the respondents about the secretarial qualifications they had obtained prior to starting their current role. The responses indicate the breadth of qualifications that are available for secretaries, ranging from single skill qualifications, such as typing, to specialist certificates and diplomas and a foundation degree in administration. There is no nationally recognized training programme for secretaries. Almost half of respondents (49%) had a secretarial certificate, diploma or foundation degree, while 19% reported not having any relevant qualifications.

Interestingly, four-fifths of the respondents agreed that having a professionally recognized PA qualification would raise the status of secretaries. Overall, secretaries appeared well-qualified.

Low salaries are said to be indicative of highly feminized, ghetto occupations (Lowe, 1987). In our study, reported salaries varied between less than £15,000 to over £50,000, although 60% of the sample reported earning between £25,000–40,000 p.a., while 2% earned over £50,000. The Secs Life salary survey (2009) found that the average salary for a senior secretary in London was £30,960 and outside London £22,389. Crone Corkill (2009) found average salaries for PAs in south-east England varied between £29,000 and £37,200, while for executive assistants the range was £32,750 to £45,750. The *Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings* (ONS, 2009) showed that the median pay for all job categories was £25,816 and for managers £35,750. However, the median pay for secretarial and related occupations was £14,575. The pay ranges for secretaries in our sample are therefore broadly in line with other secretarial salary surveys. However, our survey, in common with the other two secretarial salary surveys, is clearly out of line with government statistics by a significant margin. It may be that secretaries taking part in occupation-specific surveys are not representative of the group as a whole. Certainly, taken together with the data on job titles that we collected, and the age data, there is some evidence that our sample may be somewhat biased towards the more senior end of the occupation. Nevertheless, if we compare the median pay band for secretaries in our sample with government data on managerial salaries and median pay levels for all occupations, there is some evidence that secretarial pay at the top end may equate to management-level salaries, which would reflect positively on the status of secretarial work and lend weight to the argument that secretarial work may be emerging from the ghetto.

Despite these positive findings on qualification and salary, only 38% of respondents agreed that secretaries were treated as valued employees in their organization, comparable with the 35% who agreed with this statement in an earlier study (Truss, 1993) and reflecting the findings of recent research in China (Leung, 2001).

### *Job content*

Overall, the five most common tasks undertaken by all PAs in the sample out of the 30 possible options, either on a daily basis or several times a week, have not changed substantially in several decades (Truss, 1992; Vinnicombe, 1980).

However, managing spreadsheets is a relatively new element; comparable with our findings, Khalid *et al.* (2002) found that 53% of secretaries undertook this task, suggesting that this is an emerging area of significance for the role. We also found that 79% rarely or never did audio typing and 72% rarely or never used shorthand. It can reasonably be conjectured that these findings are linked to advances in technology and the growth of e-mail. Our study lends support to the view that using media such as e-mail, text and MSN has become subsumed in the secretarial role, and they are regularly used by secretaries, rather than used to replace them. All secretaries who responded used e-mail frequently during the day or every day (compared with 82% in Khalid *et al.*, [2002]). Telephone and face-to-face contact continued to be used very regularly by secretaries (see Table 1).

*Table 1: Sample overall: most frequently performed secretarial tasks (%)*

Managing a diary	97
Photocopying	79
Typing documents	70
Booking and organizing travel	63
Managing spreadsheets	59

Table 2: Examples of personal work

Tasks	Percentage of total sample	Example
Arranging personal and social activities	7	Book a back wax for my male Head of Department.
Personal errands	5	Walking his dog — it's not the walking, it's the poop picking.
Personal secretarial tasks	4	Doing research for his 8-year-old daughter's homework.
Buying personal items and presents	4	Buy his wife's birthday present.
Caring tasks	2	Collect their father's ashes from the funeral parlour as they had extended their holiday — due to the nature of the task I did carry it out, as I felt obligated.
Personal domestic tasks	2	Sew up his trouser seam (while he was still wearing them!) when the stitching had become undone.
Covering up for manager	0.2	Take the blame for something that was my Director's responsibility.
Other	5	Clean the car park as we were expecting important visitors.

Much has been written recently about the possible growth of the managerial element of secretarial work (Ensmann, 1995; McGuire, 1996; Robinson, 2000). Certainly, we found that a significant minority of secretaries (37%) reported managing others as part of their role. Out of those managing others, 38% managed one other person and 22% managed more than three people. The respondents reported supervising a wide range of staff, most commonly administrators and other secretaries, but also domestic staff such as housekeepers and chauffeurs as well as graduate trainees, sales staff, regional managers and financial controllers. These findings reflect an underlying trend identified in a recent study of 1200 office workers (*Personnel Today*, 2003) which found that 62% of secretaries undertook office management tasks, 38% were involved with recruitment and 23% managed other staff. However, a more detailed examination of the data (see below) indicates that the prevalence of managerial-type roles may not be as great as this overall percentage would suggest.

Undertaking personal work for one's boss has been a core feature of secretarial work for some time, and is closely associated with the gender-typing of the role, reflecting wider gender role norms (Kanter, 1977; Kennelly, 2006; Leung, 2001; Pringle, 1989). In our survey, only 18% of respondents reported never doing any personal work in the course of their day-to-day work, while 12% reported doing personal work daily and 13% a few times a week. We also asked secretaries to indicate whether they had ever been asked to undertake work that they felt was going beyond the call of duty. Over one-third, 36%, said that they had. A content analysis of the qualitative examples given revealed eight different categories of personal work, summarized in Table 2.

These findings are comparable to those of other studies that have explored the extent to which secretaries undertake personal custodial tasks beyond their formal job descriptions (Kennelly, 2006; Khalid *et al.*, 2002; Pringle, 1989; Truss, 1993).

The respondents were asked about the extent to which they were able to use their skills and abilities in their current job. While 53% believed they were well matched with their job and 52% agreed that their job gave them the chance to do the things they do best, a significant minority, over one-quarter of respondents, did not. Fewer than one-third (30%) believed their job utilised their full abilities, while 56% said they did not. Overall, these findings suggest that the skills and abilities of a significant proportion of the secretarial workforce remain underutilised.

### *Development, promotion and careers*

One-quarter of secretaries reported having received no training at all since starting their current role. Most commonly, where the secretaries in our sample had undertaken training, it had been skills-focused, such as IT software, time management, interpersonal skills and managing others. Fewer than half of secretaries (42%) said that they were encouraged to undertake training and development and only 38% agreed they received training that kept their technical skills up to date.

Perceptions of secretarial career paths were overwhelmingly negative; just 20% felt they had the opportunities they needed to be promoted; and 15 and 12%, respectively, believed it was easy for secretaries to be promoted outside and within secretarial work in their organization. Broadly, these perceptions reflect the pessimistic findings of other recent and historical studies concerning the poor promotion prospects in ghetto occupations (Kennelly, 2006; Leung, 2001; Pringle, 1989; Truss *et al.*, 1992).

### *Work experiences and attitudes*

In order to address the question of how secretaries experience their work, we asked them about the opportunities for participation and involvement in their work organization. A total of 64% agreed that their manager kept them well informed and 61% agreed that their suggestions were taken seriously overall. However, only 49% agreed that they were able to participate in decisions affecting their job and almost a third (30%) were not.

We asked the secretaries a series of eight questions to evaluate their perceptions of their line manager. For the scale overall, we found that two-thirds of them rated their line manager positively.<sup>1</sup> This compares favourably with the 61% of respondents rating their line manager positively in a wider study of employee attitudes and engagement (Alfes *et al.*, 2010). As individual items, 76% reported that their line managers treated them with respect, 74% reported that their manager listened to their suggestions, was an effective leader, and was fair in the way they treated them. In all 72% reported that they trusted their line manager; 70% felt that they communicated effectively, 59% said that they made employees feel valued and 57% said they acted on their suggestions. Overall, this would suggest that the secretaries' views of their line managers were very positive. However, only 23% of all secretaries said they were rewarded for new ideas or innovations.

In our sample, 60% of secretaries overall agreed they were satisfied with their job, with 12% being very satisfied. The overall level of job satisfaction is higher than that of 52% found in a larger study of the workforce as a whole reporting they were satisfied with their jobs (Truss *et al.*, 2006). However, when asked whether they were glad they had decided to become a secretary, 50% said they were while 21% said they were not and the remainder were undecided.

### **Group comparisons**

In order to examine whether there were significant differences in job content and career prospects within the sample and to shed further light on the way in which secretaries experience their work, the 30 secretarial tasks were subjected to exploratory factor analysis. A principal components analysis revealed the presence of ten components with eigenvalues exceeding 1. To help in the interpretation of the components, a Varimax rotation was performed. The rotated solution revealed a conceptual distinction among different types of secretarial tasks, namely, traditional secretarial tasks, managerial tasks and a range of specialist tasks (for example, event management, translating and interpreting and financial management). We focused on tasks related to managerial and secretarial domains in order to examine in more depth the potential variations in levels of responsibility and job variety that secretaries may experience. These two components consisted of 15 tasks, explaining 23.80 and 14.70% of the variance, respectively. The two-component solution explained 38.50% of the variance overall.

Table 3: Mean values and standard deviation of group comparison

Type of task	Frequency tasks	Personal work	Training and careers	Satisfaction with reward and performance appraisals	Voice	Satisfaction with line manager	Person-job fit
Traditional tasks (SD)	High	3.86* (.98)	2.93 (1.07)	3.17 (.94)	3.41 (.94)	3.73 (.84)	3.10* (1.01)
	Low	3.24 (1.28)	2.90 (1.02)	3.18 (.88)	3.37 (.88)	3.65 (.89)	2.90 (1.04)
Managerial tasks (SD)	High	3.39* (1.24)	3.30* (1.07)	3.32 (.92)	3.76* (.86)	3.89* (.76)	3.30* (1.06)
	Low	3.04 (1.35)	2.88 (1.05)	3.15 (.93)	3.36 (.93)	3.70 (.85)	3.04 (1.01)

Note: \* Significant at  $P < 0.05$  level.

This variation in job content highlights the importance of distinguishing between different types of secretary, rather than assuming that all secretaries undertake the same kind of work (Leung, 2001).

The managerial tasks (component 1) included the following five tasks: training other colleagues, managing other employees, recruiting new employees, training employees and appraising employees. Traditional tasks (component 2) included the following ten tasks: managing a diary, booking and organizing travel, filing, photocopying, audio-typing, preparing reports or other documents, doing research, managing spreadsheets, preparing presentations and typing documents.

We aimed to explore whether the frequency with which participants engaged in managerial and secretarial tasks, respectively, had an influence on the secretaries' perceptions of their work and their working environment. We divided our sample into groups according to whether they carried out either traditional secretarial or managerial tasks 'rarely' or 'daily'. A total of 76% of the sample reported regularly undertaking traditional secretarial tasks while just 9% reported carrying out managerial tasks on a regular basis. This supports recent research in other countries which suggests that the secretarial occupation continues to be dominated by women undertaking fairly routine tasks (Leung, 2001) but runs counter to the contention by Khalid *et al.* (2002) that secretaries are systematically taking on more managerial roles.

A series of independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to explore the impact of the frequency with which secretaries engaged in either traditional secretarial tasks or managerial tasks at the level of (a) carrying out personal work for their manager, (b) training and careers, (c) satisfaction with reward and performance appraisals, (d) voice, (e) satisfaction with line manager, and (f) person-job fit. An overview of the findings is presented in Table 3.

*Carrying out personal work for managers.* Secretaries who frequently carried out managerial tasks ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) conducted significantly more personal work for their bosses than those who did not ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $t[892] = 2.34$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Similarly, secretaries who frequently carried out traditional tasks ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) carried out more personal work for their bosses than secretaries who did not ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ;  $t[907] = 5.90$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). This suggests that, regardless of whether or not a secretary is frequently involved in managerial tasks, a core gendered element of the role persists for most (Kanter, 1977).

*Training and careers.* Secretaries who frequently carried out managerial tasks felt that there was more training available to them ( $M = 3.3$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) than those who carried out fewer such tasks ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ;  $t[829] = 3.43$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). There was no significant difference in the perceptions of training availability between these two groups. Furthermore, no significant differences were found between either group regarding attitudes towards their career. This suggests that taking on management

duties does not lead to perceptions of enhanced promotion prospects, and lends weight to the argument that secretarial work is a ghetto occupation (Truss, 1993).

*Satisfaction with reward and performance appraisals.* No significant difference emerged for either satisfaction with reward or performance appraisals, regardless of whether a secretary was frequently engaged in either managerial or traditional tasks.

*Voice.* Secretaries who engaged in managerial tasks ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) reported significantly more opportunities for voice than those who did not ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = .93$ ;  $t[827] = 3.88$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). No significant differences emerged for secretaries who engaged in traditional tasks either on a frequent or an infrequent basis.

*Satisfaction with line manager.* Secretaries who often engaged in managerial tasks reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction with their line manager ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = .76$ ) than those who did not [ $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = .85$ ,  $t(831) = 2.02$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ]. There was no significant difference between engaging in traditional tasks frequently or infrequently.

*Person–job fit.* Secretaries who engaged in managerial tasks ( $M = 3.3$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) reported higher levels of person–job fit than those who did so infrequently ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ;  $t[823] = 2.13$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Similarly, those who frequently engaged in traditional tasks ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) reported a higher level of person job fit than those who infrequently engaged in traditional tasks ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ;  $t[839] = 2.21$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ).

Finally, in order to account for the substantial variation we observed within the secretarial occupation, we examined how secretaries who carry out specialist tasks on a regular basis perceived their working environment and their job content. Only very few secretaries reported that they carry out specialist tasks such as event or financial management on a regular basis. For example, only none secretaries in our sample carried out translation services. However, those secretaries who engaged in specialist tasks regularly reported that they performed less personal work for their managers than those who carried out these activities less frequently. They also had more opportunities for training, experienced more opportunities for voice and reported higher levels of person–job fit. These results seem to suggest that specialist tasks give secretaries the opportunity to move away from the stereotypes traditionally associated with the secretarial profession.

## Discussion

In this study we set out to discover whether secretarial work can justly be termed a ghetto occupation in terms of narrow and feminized job content, poor career prospects and low status. We analysed questionnaire data from over 1,000 secretaries and PA and the picture that emerges is a mixed one of both change and continuity.

Regarding the status of secretarial work, we found that the occupation continues to be highly feminized but that educational level and salaries appear high compared with other occupational groups. The title, 'secretary' appears, from our survey at least, to be in significant decline in favour of titles that may be perceived to enjoy higher status, such as personal or executive assistant. This suggests that the status of the occupation may be rising.

In terms of job content, however, little seems to have changed in the past 20 years in terms of the most common tasks undertaken by secretaries, and it was clear that gatekeeping continues to predominate (Vinnicombe, 1980). However, alongside this, there was also evidence that a minority of secretaries are undertaking managerial work and taking responsibility for managing other office and, sometimes, domestic staff. We found that those high on the managerial component experienced more opportunities to undertake training, felt that they had more opportunities to voice their concerns, and reported higher levels of person–job fit. However, only 9 per cent of our sample reported regularly

undertaking a range of managerial tasks. Fewer than 30 per cent of secretaries overall reported that their jobs enabled them to use their full abilities. In other words, most secretaries felt that they were not able to use all their skills in their work, but those undertaking more managerial tasks felt much more positive than the others. A very small minority of respondents regularly undertook a range of specialist tasks and the role content, work experiences and prospects of this minority seemed more positive than those of the majority. This may well be due to the greater autonomy and specialized focus of their role, and further research investigating variation in the secretarial role at a more qualitative level would be welcome.

One area where little seems to have changed is in the expectation that secretaries carry out personal work for their bosses. The kinds of tasks reported here do not vary from those reported in studies 20 or 30 years ago (Benet, 1972; Pringle, 1989; Truss *et al.*, 1995; Vinnicombe, 1980). This aspect of the role, perhaps more than any other, marks out secretarial work as being fundamentally different from other office-based roles and serves to perpetuate its gendered composition. Kennelly (2006) argues that some women enjoy the nurturing and caring element of secretarial work but that reframing it as a manifestation of a collective public service ethos rather than individualized caring would serve to raise its status.

Little change is also evident in the area of careers, where secretaries continue to report the same lack of prospects either within or beyond secretarial work, discussed several decades ago (Benet, 1972; Kanter, 1977). The precise content of the secretarial job, the extent to which the secretary performs managerial tasks as part of her role and the level of job-related training received do not impact on perceptions of career opportunities. It is clear that secretarial work continues to be, for many incumbents, a dead-end job in which the participants feel devalued and unappreciated by their organizations, even if their opinion of their own line managers are more positive. In this way the role can rightly still be described as a ghetto occupation, despite the evidence of rising qualification levels and salaries. This would appear to be bound up with the persistence of personal work in the secretarial role linked to a patriarchal ascription of the secretary as office wife, and with the devaluing of skill in feminized occupations such that advancement opportunities are curtailed (Kanter, 1977; Wood, 2008). These findings have some resonance in research studies on women's employment in other occupational spheres. For instance, Murray and Syed (2010) show how the dominant masculine schema of the professional career versus the feminine schema of domestic care serves to limit women executives' career paths and Griffiths *et al.* (2007) show how women's pathways into non-feminized occupations in the ICT industry are constrained by both normative and structural factors. Despite decades of equal opportunities' legislation, women's work experiences continue to be shaped through deeply persistent gendered world-views (Murray and Syed, 2010), and attitudes towards stereotypical male and female roles remain entrenched (Wood, 2008). It is likely that the overtly gendered connotations of the secretarial role render it particularly susceptible to these ongoing processes.

Although our study has shed light on some important features of secretarial work in the UK in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are some limitations. Firstly, there are certain questions that could usefully have been included with the benefit of hindsight, such as secretaries' attitudes to undertaking personal work. Secondly, we are not sure whether our sample was truly representative of the secretarial occupation as a whole: available evidence suggests that it may have been somewhat biased towards more senior secretaries and so the data should be interpreted in that light. It may be that secretaries who are more junior have different experiences. Thirdly, it would have been useful to have undertaken some in-depth interviews alongside the quantitative data to explore how the secretaries experience their role. Finally, it would have been interesting to have explored the views and opinions of line managers and human resource professionals. Further research that focuses on these issues would be welcome.

## Conclusions and directions for future research

In conclusion, our study has shown that secretarial work continues to be highly feminized in terms of its gender composition. It has also shown that there have been some changes in terms of job content

and training prospects as well as salary and qualifications that would suggest a degree of upskilling and rising status for a minority of secretarial workers. There was evidence that the role is changing, with new technologies having been subsumed into the role, rather than serving to replace it. However, the characteristic features of stereotypical female ghetto jobs are still strongly in evidence, such as limited promotion prospects and the ongoing expectation that secretaries will perform custodial and personal tasks on behalf of their boss. This expectation marks secretaries out as a discrete and different, feminized group in the workplace, and serves to lower the status of secretaries and secretarial work in the context of patriarchal organizational norms and structures. Our conclusion is that secretarial work largely continues to be a ghetto occupation offering few career advancement opportunities.

However, these pessimistic views should perhaps be leavened with a more balanced perspective (Gwartney-Gibbs and Lach, 1994). As McNally noted some 30 years ago, 'from the remote and lofty observation platform of the sociologist, routine non-manual work may seem a colourless enclave of boredom and monotony' (1979, p. 38). We must pay heed to the voices of secretaries themselves, who emerge as substantially more satisfied with their jobs than a large cross-section of workers in a range of other jobs (Truss *et al.*, 2006). Half of secretaries were glad that they chose their occupation, and most had positive views about their own line manager. Where they wish to see changes are in the status, recognition and promotion prospects afforded to them. Rather than seeking the potential solution to the persistent gendering of the role in the elimination of secretarial work (Connell, 2006), the current economic climate may afford an opportunity for secretaries to legitimately shed their custodial tasks in favour of work that contributes more directly and visibly to organizational objectives. Where the management of secretaries is decoupled from the boss–secretary dyad and is subjected to the professional norms that are extended to other workers in terms of job description, performance and career management, then the role may finally start to lose its gender attributes and become part of mainstream organizational hierarchies. Then secretaries will be able to emerge from the ghetto.

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## Note

1. Where secretaries had more than one line manager, we asked them to report how they felt most of the time.

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