



# Perspective on Transit Industry Response to Increased Gender Awareness

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## PERSPECTIVE ON TRANSIT INDUSTRY RESPONSE TO INCREASED GENDER AWARENESS

### INTRODUCTION

The nineties have been a period of tremendous change for the transportation industry. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, Clean Air Act Amendments, Americans with Disabilities Act, and increasing sensitivity to gender and ethnic diversity have caused agencies to reassess their standard operating procedures. Greater knowledge has been sought by senior level transportation officials in an effort to prepare agencies for the changing policy and social environments. A variety of techniques have aided the dissemination of information including seminars and workshops, revisions to policy manuals, and strengthened procedures regarding how issues will be resolved. This research examines the level and nature of direct transportation agency response, specifically in regard to increased gender awareness in the transportation organization. That is, what departments have taken the lead in educating employees as to the types of behaviors and comments that are insensitive and subject to being misread by women? Also, how might the complaints being filed in transit agencies be classified and how much are transit authorities spending to address gender related issues?

### BACKGROUND AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Through the 1970s and into the early 1980s, the transportation profession was dominated by males, from the ranks of bus operators to the upper echelons of senior management. As women took on greater prominence in the general working world, however, the number of female representatives in transportation increased. The change has been rapid. Carmen Turner became the first woman named as General Manager of a major U.S. transit agency when she took the helm of the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority in 1983. Current records of the American Public Transit Association (APTA) reflect 42 female general managers in 1996.<sup>1</sup> While this percentage represents a notable increase over the last 13 years, the figure accounts for less than 15 percent of all U.S. transit agency general managers. This trend toward larger numbers of women in the upper ranks of the transportation arena can be expected to continue into the early part of the 21st century.

The presence of increasing numbers of women in the transportation industry, as in other domains, has encouraged a reexamination of company cultures. For instance, incorporating women into the work force raised questions regarding opportunity in many organizations. Eliminating mental barriers that allowed women to move from secretarial and clerical position to driving buses and holding senior management positions, required a shift in customs. Companies began to ask themselves whether there were legitimate reasons that women were not hired into certain positions. When rationale was found to be lacking, women accepted and excelled at many newly acquired tasks.

The nation's transit agencies represent a range of settings. Some are large, encompassing multi-modal, complex transit systems, while others are small and operate a few buses in locales that are mid-sized or sparsely populated. Thus, changes in procedures and responses to gender issues have been varied, as well. Some agencies served as industry leaders encouraging greater roles for women; others moved more slowly and may not yet offer better opportunities for female transportation professionals. Those agencies that have aggressively promoted equitable advancement opportunities recognize the impor-

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tance of providing women with significant work assignments, mentors and networks that had previously only been available to their male counterparts. The agencies that are adapting to the changing workforce should reap benefits in improved recruitment and productivity.<sup>2</sup>

Steps toward a more totally gender integrated workforce, initially, required modification on the part of women, as well as modification of corporate cultures. For example, upwardly mobile women adjusted their dress and demeanor to mirror that of their male counterparts. Common dress included dark, conservative suits and light colored blouses. As the numbers of women entering the workforce in the 1980s increased, society, in general, broadened its traditional view of the role of women. For many males this meant changing how women are approached and spoken to, and for the first time, led to defined boundaries of acceptable male-female behavior in the workplace. For some the parameters were instinctively understood, but for others written and oral communication were needed to clarify appropriate conduct. The **New Hampshire Business Review** reports that for some individuals a shift in attitude must occur for them to understand that their actions in private may not be appropriate for work.<sup>3</sup>

Farsighted managers recognized that workers proficient at identifying negative circumstances would be less likely to commit infractions. So far-reaching was the need for an enlightened workforce that seminars and workshops on sexual harassment and gender sensitivities became commonplace in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Education which focuses on prevention is key to avoidance of negative circumstances. In those instances where incidents occur, the proper handling of those events is critical. Managers must not ignore or downplay situations that may arise, but respond quickly and decisively to minimize future problems. It is critical that employees understand that implicit or explicit verbal or non-verbal advances are not only unacceptable, but also unlawful. Further, managers must be cognizant that gender may not be the basis for employment decisions. As recently as 1991, Guy reports that a focus group of federal employees included one male who expressed the view that a male with a family to support was more entitled to consideration for a promotion than other individuals.<sup>4</sup>

Seminars and conferences on gender related issues need not only focus on potential negative circumstances surrounding women in the workplace. Research conducted by Jana Zviblman showed that many working women focus on achieving their professional goals and not on blatant discrimination.<sup>5</sup> The strategies used by Zviblman's interviewees included improving communication, image and self-esteem. These women not only adapted traditional male methods for advancement, but incorporated their own unique methods of operation. For instance, many women have determined that exhibiting sensitivity and concern regarding personal needs of cohorts can be responsibly handled in the workplace.

College courses that support the transportation industry experienced increasing numbers of women students entering in the late 1980s. The number rose consistently through the early 1990s. Several of the transportation degree programs at Universities in the Southwest region now report stable or slight decreases in the entering number of female students as of the Fall 1996 semester. Academic institutions in Texas and Oklahoma note up to 10% decrease in female transportation engineering students entering in 1996. Degree areas for management and policy reflect similar trends. It is yet not known whether the Fall 1996 female class represents a plateau for transportation or whether perspective female students are choosing other areas of study, signifying a diminished interest in the transportation field.

Transportation officials must recognize that the industry is now competing with a cadre of other disciplines for the best and most competent workers, including women, to conduct the tasks required for daily operation. Therefore, it is critical that the transit agency be structured to meet potential challenges, provide fair and equitable treatment in the workplace, and have avenues available to meet potential problems. The structure and operating parameters for several transit authorities are reviewed in the following sections.

## RESEARCH THRUST

Research from May to September 1996 which queried transit agencies in one region of the country, Federal Region VI, regarding their experience with gender related issues. The basic question to be addressed in this research is whether transit agencies in Federal Region VI have structured their organizations to enhance the position of women in their organizations. This matter is examined through the methods and size of departments designated to resolve issues, the finances spent on gender sensitivity and the nature of gender related complaints.

## METHODOLOGY

Twenty six (26) transit authorities are listed in Federal Region VI (New Mexico, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Texas) that are members of the American Public Transit Association (APTA). There was no APTA member from the state of Arkansas. Three agencies were identified in Arkansas to participate in the research. Each agency was mailed a survey which questioned their general agency background and experience with gender specific items. A list of the agencies that were mailed a survey is attached as Appendix A. Fifteen (15) surveys were completed representing a 51.7% return rate.

## FINDINGS

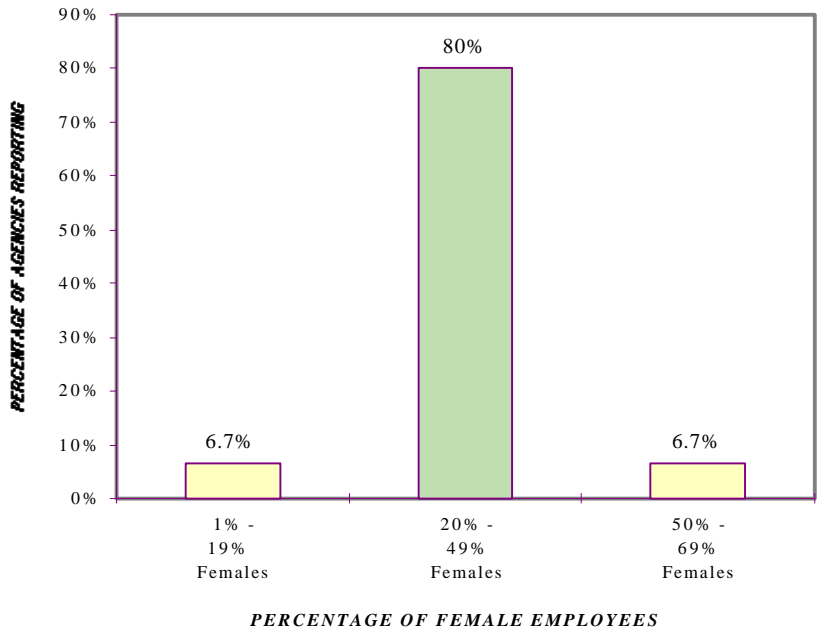
### General Characteristics:

The agencies responding exhibited a range of sizes from small with fewer than four employees to two agencies with more than 1000 employees. Of note, however, is that there were no agencies which had 501 to 999 employees. Eighty (80) percent of respondents had workforces that are 20-49% female. This upper end of this range compares favorably with the national statistics which showed the workforce as 45.5% female in 1992.<sup>7</sup> One agency reported having more than 50% of its workforce as female and one had fewer than 20% female. (See Figure 1).

Most respondents (66.7%) had annual revenues of less than \$5 million annually; although the other respondents had incomes ranging from \$6 to over \$100 million annually. The survey asked the agencies to estimate expenditures over the last five years that had been used to increase gender awareness. Seventy-five (75) percent did not respond; one agency indicated zero.

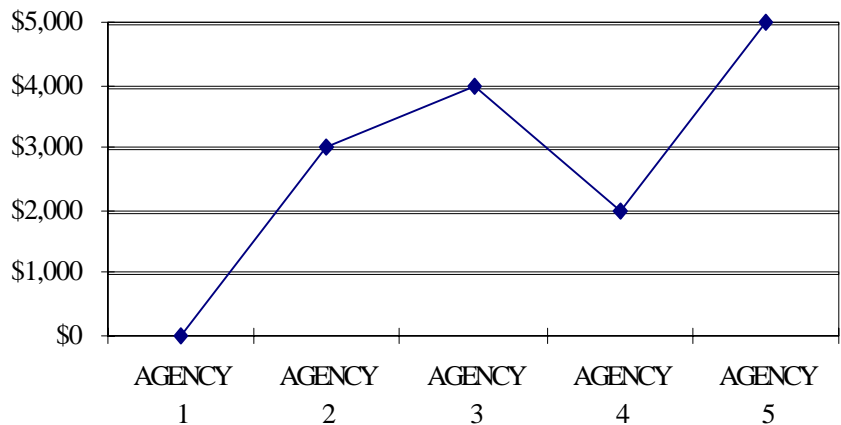
The five agencies that responded spent less than \$5,000 annually (Figure 2). Those agencies that have neither encouraged employees to attend gender awareness sessions nor sponsored such sessions, would be expected to expend \$0. However, the other agencies would have been expected to pay for seminar attendance or perhaps publish brochures or flyers, thus having some program expense. It is possible that these records are part of other line items and difficult to extract.

**Figure 1**  
Gender Distribution



**Figure 2**

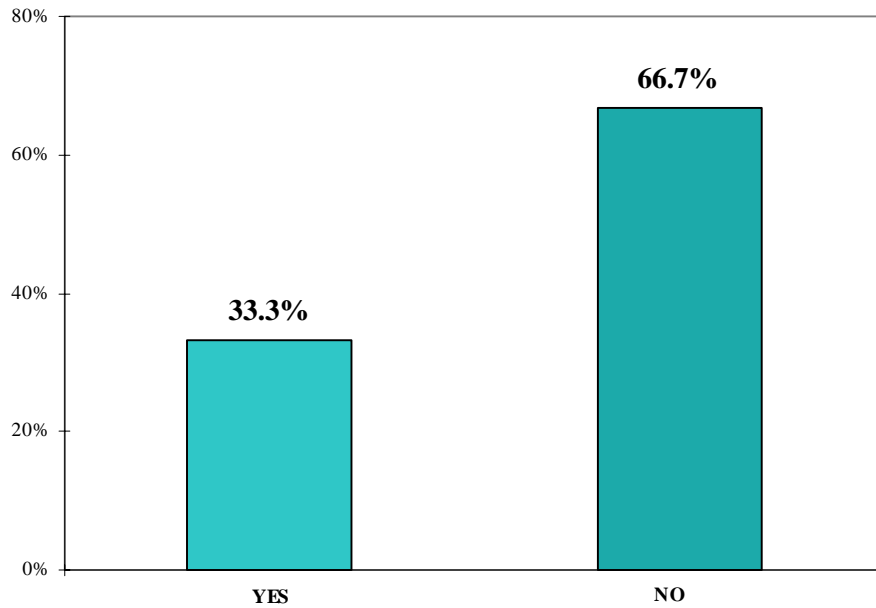
How Much Money Does Your Company Spend On Gender Awareness?



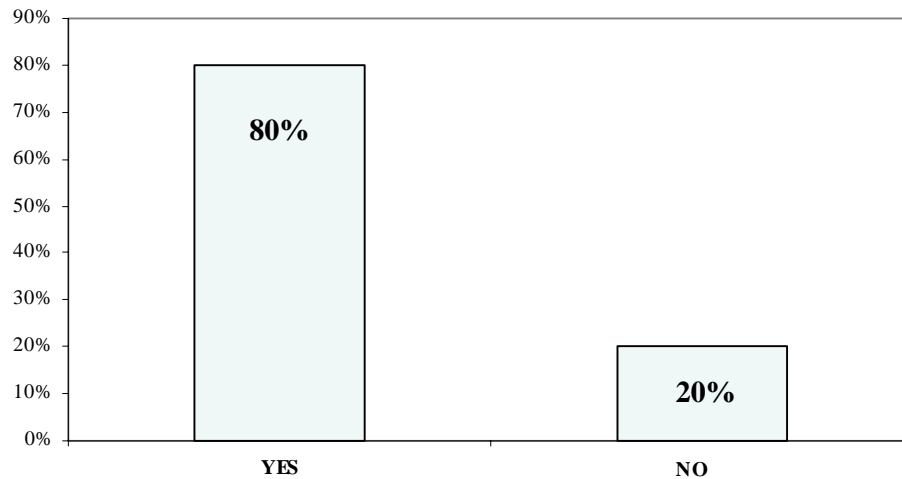
Slightly more than one-third of the responders sponsor seminars and workshops to educate employees to be more perceptive to gender-appropriate demeanor at work (Figure 3). It is also encouraging that 80% of respondents encourage employees to attend conferences, seminars, and workshops sponsored by others (Figure 4). Because many of the agencies are relatively small with undoubtedly strained annual budgets, the session attendance is a more cost-effective option. It should be noted, however, that a breakdown of respondents showed that 20% of the respondents (3 agencies) neither sponsor their own seminars nor encourage employees to attend sessions sponsored by other organizations. The survey responses were examined to determine whether a relationship exists between size and an agency's conduct of seminars and workshops. No trend was observed. One small agency with fewer than 15

employees sponsored a workshop; while no agency with between 16 and 99 employees sponsored such a session. The next category was 100 to 499 employees; 50% of this group sponsored seminars and 50% did not. The largest agencies with more than 1000 employees also divided evenly with one agency sponsoring sessions and one agency not doing so. (See Table 1). There was also no observed pattern between an agency's annual revenue and its sponsoring its own workshops.

**Figure 3**  
Do You Sponsor Your Own Seminars?



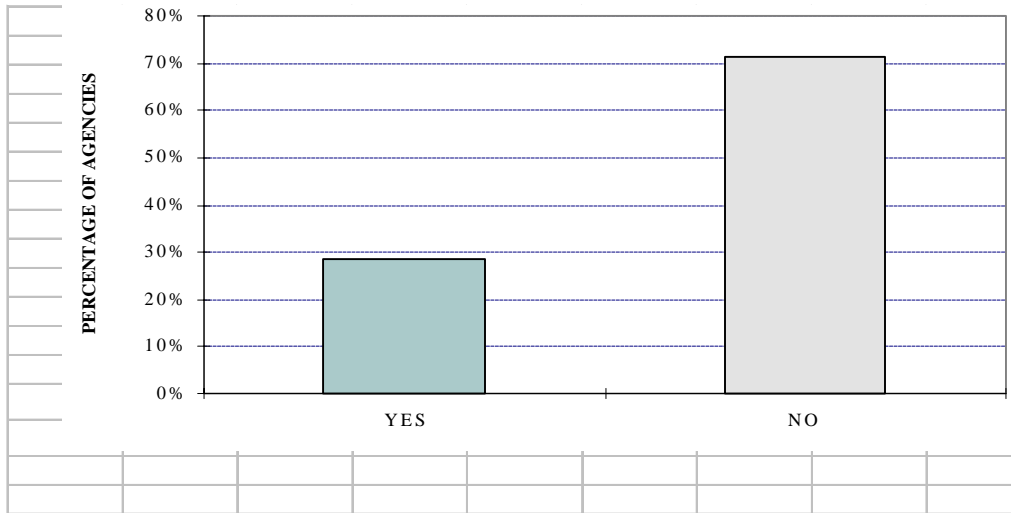
**Figure 4**  
Do You Encourage Our Managers to Attend Conferences Sponsored By Others?



**Table 1**  
Do You Sponsor Your Own Seminars?

Number of Employees	Yes	No	Total
1 - 4	0	1	1
5 - 15	1	1	2
16 - 99	0	4	4
100 - 499	3	3	6
1,000	1	1	2
			15

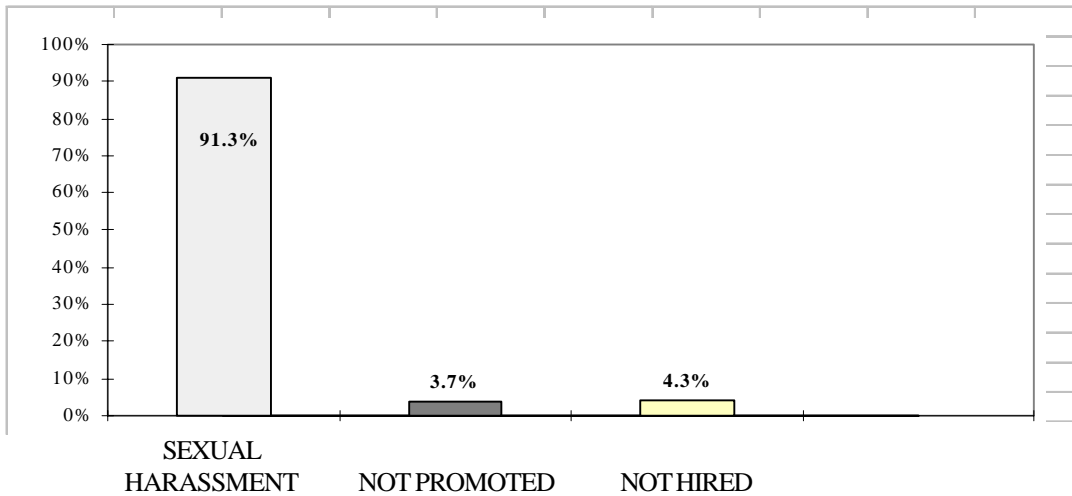
**Figure 5**  
Issues Filed Against Your Company?



## GENDER RELATED COMPLAINTS

Of the 15 agencies that answered the survey, 71.4 percent had not had any complaints or legal actions filed against their agency (Figure 5). For the remaining 28.6%, the number of charges ranged from 6 to 10 per agency. By far, the most frequent accusation was sexual harassment which represented 91.3 % of all complaints (Figure 6). The survey questioned whether complaints were handled internally (by the agency) or by an external arbitrator. Half of the responders indicated that complaints were handled internally; the others reported that complaints may be handled either internally or externally. The methods of resolution were divided among in-house counseling, treatment by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) or civil action.

**Figure 6**  
Nature of Complaint



**ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

More than 80% of the agencies had not revised their organizational structure in response to increasing numbers of women in their organizations. The 13.3% that had made modifications noted an increase in personnel. Most policies advise personnel to take issues to their direct supervisor or manager first, presuming that the manager is not the problem. If so, the employee is generally advised to report to the Human Resources division. The respondents confirmed these practices in the transit agencies as problems were most often addressed by the individual manager or Human Resources/Personnel. Other departments that handle gender issues are equal employment or affirmative actions offices. Of note, is that most agencies have more than one department handling gender issues (See Table 2).

**Table 2**  
What Department or Individual Handles Gender Issues?

	HR	MGRS.	EEOC/AA	LEGAL	OTHER
AGENCY					
1	X	X			
2		X			
3			X		
4					X
5	X				
6	X	X			
7	X	X			
8	X				
9	X	X			
10	X	X			
11	X	X			
12	X				X
13	X	X	X		
14		X			
15				X	

**HR:** Human Resources Department  
**MGRS.:** Individual Departmental Managers  
**EEOC/AA:** Equal Employment Opportunity Comm. /Affirmative Action Personnel  
**LEGAL:** Legal Department



### CONCLUDING SUMMARY

Most individuals would agree that issues involving gender sensitivity are often gray, as opposed to clear-cut black or white. These matters may be legal, spanning areas of civil rights or may be social infractions. Agency attention to items of gender awareness is intended to increase the consciousness so that individuals are more aware of others in their surroundings. There are strong reasons for the transit manager to be increasingly cognizant of diversity related issues. Liburdi writes that the industry should take steps to ensure "the attractiveness of transportation as a career field for women".<sup>8</sup> Even though technology will play an increasingly important role in transit organizations, it will be the people who make a commitment to the transit industry that will assure its future viability.

The review of Federal Region VI transit agencies shows that responses of these organizations to provide a competitive, fair environment for women is varied, ranging from those who have not actively solicited gender sensitive enlightenment for their personnel to those who have taken the lead in sponsoring such activities. Admittedly, to encourage great incorporation of women into the transit industry has required some financial or time investment from existing personnel. However, the cost of not attracting talented women into the field of transit may be more costly in the long run.<sup>9</sup> It is important that transit agencies "institutionalize" their commitment to women through challenging assignments, mentoring, appropriate training and by providing an equitable work environment.

The intent of this research was a first step at documenting organizational response within transit agencies to proactively accommodate the gender changing work force. Where institutionalization is occurring, the experiences may benefit those agencies that have not made modifications to the same degree as the more advanced agencies. This is clearly a first step. A more complete research would expand this regional study to a national scale. The additional database would more likely lend itself to advanced statistical techniques that would more thoroughly describe and explain the structures encouraging positive gender awareness efforts in transit agencies.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DISCLAIMER

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### APPENDIX

**Surveys were mailed to each transit agency listed in the *Transit System Members* section of the American Public Transit Association 1995 Membership Directory for Federal Region VI.**

Little Rock Transit\*  
Chattam Area Transit (North Little Rock)\*  
Pine Bluff Transit \*  
City of Albuquerque Transit Department  
Louisiana Transit Company (Harahan, La.)  
Monroe Transit System  
Regional Transit Authority (New Orleans)  
Shreveport Transit System  
Central Oklahoma Transportation & Parking Authority  
Metropolitan Tulsa Transit Authority  
Brazos Transit System (Bryan, Tx.)  
Capital Area Rural Transportation System (Austin)  
Capital Metro Transportation Authority (Austin)  
CityLink (Abilene)  
City Transit Management Co. (Lubbock)  
Corpus Christi Regional Transportation Authority  
Dallas Area Rapid Transit  
El Paso Mass Transit Department  
Fort Worth Transportation  
Laredo Municipal Transit System  
Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (McAllen)  
Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (Houston)  
Port Arthur Transit  
Town of South Padre Island  
South Plains Community Action Assoc. (Levelland)  
Temple Transit  
Tyler Transit  
Via Metropolitan Transit  
Waco Transit System

Survey responses were received from 15 transit agencies. Agencies were assured anonymity so respondents were not identified.

\*Not an APTA member, but included as part of Federal Region VI representative from the state of Arkansas

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>American Public Transit Association. 1995 Membership Directory. Washington, D.C. Data provided by Gwendolynmary Simpson, Deputy Executive Vice President, American Public Transit Association, September 1996.

<sup>2</sup>Guy, Mary Ellen. "Workplace Productivity and Gender Issues". Public Administration Review. May-June 1993. Vol. 53, No. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Allen, Martha. "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace—Alive and Well in New Hampshire." New Hampshire Business Review. Vol. 15. February 19, 1993.

<sup>4</sup>Guy, Mary Ellen. "Workplace Productivity and Gender Issues". Public Administration Review. May-June 1993. Vol. 53, No. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Zvibleman, Jana. "Womanspeak: Working Women Take on a New Attitude". Business West. Vol. 9. April 1993.

<sup>6</sup>Telephone Interview with personnel associated with Transportation Engineering or Public Administration Programs at Texas A&M University at College Station, University of Texas at Austin, University of Houston, and Oklahoma State University

<sup>7</sup>U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bulletin 2307, Employment Earnings, Monthly, January Issue.

<sup>8</sup>Liburdi, L. C. "Education and Training Needs of Women in Transportation " Transportation Research Board Special Report , p. 187, 1985.

<sup>9</sup>Baron, James N. and Andrew E. Newman. "For What It's Worth: Organizations, Occupations, and the Value of Work Done by Women and Nonwhites". American Sociological Review. Vol. 55: 155-175.