

A new survey has claimed women in business, politics and the public sector hit a 'concrete ceiling' when it comes to advancing their careers. JAMES COWLING spoke to key Bristol businesswomen to discover whether they're struggling to reach the top.



Success story: Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway in a scene from hit movie *The Devil Wears Prada*, which is about a powerful female fashion magazine editor

THE so-called glass ceiling that prevents women progressing in the workplace is more like "reinforced concrete", the chief executive of the Equality and Human Rights Commission has warned.

The commission's annual *Sex and Power* report, which looks at women in positions of power and influence across the public and private sectors, suggests progress has stalled.

The number of females in top roles has dropped in 12 out of 25 categories, with fewer MPs, cabinet members, senior police officers and judges now than 12 months ago. In another five categories, the number of women remains unchanged since 2007's report.

In politics, fewer women hold positions of power in Parliament, the Cabinet or the UK's regional assemblies.

Dawn Primarolo, MP for Bristol South, and Kerry McCarthy, who represents Bristol East, are two of 125 women MPs out of a total of 645 MPs in the House of Commons.

Ms Primarolo, Minister of State for Public Health, said she was "very disappointed" by the figures, but pointed out that the Government had policies to help women into work.

She said: "The Equality Bill will look at a range of measures to ensure nobody is discriminated against.

"It also means employers will be able to choose - for example - a woman over a man with equal qualifications in areas where women are under-represented.

"The same could be the case where a man could be chosen ahead of a woman in roles where men are under-represented.

"This legislation should help women on the path to the top jobs

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING



Lucy Bristow



Peaches Golding



Tracey Williams

but, of course, we recognise we've still got much more to do to achieve equality. We have, however, been making progress.

"Take Bristol, where we have two women MPs, a woman leader and chief executive of the city council, and women leading Bristol Primary Care Trust, the Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Trust and North Bristol NHS Trust."

Peaches Golding is regional director of Bristol-based Business in the Community. It encourages firms to put something back into

society, and she said: "When you have business mergers, you often lose diversity among staff - people seem to favour a safe bet.

"I've also found that people from ethnic and minority backgrounds tend to feel very confident about starting their own business, which diverts people from the mainstream pool of staff.

"I've been very lucky to have a supportive husband and I also work very hard, so my gender hasn't made any difference."

Recruitment consultant Lucy

Bristow was one of the first women to launch a job agency in Bristol, Lucy Bristow Appointments, which is 20 years old this year.

She said: "I've never really found a problem - when I set up in 1988 people weren't offering the same type of service. We recruit staff up to middle management and it's a case of giving the right person the right job, regardless of their sex."

However, Bristol businesswoman Tracey Williams believes sexism is stopping women's careers.

Ms Williams, who owns Clifton firm Burton Sweet Corporate Finance, co-founded the Corporate Finance Network, designed to provide networking for women in the sector. She said: "As recently as last week, I had lunch with a contact from another firm who told me he simply won't hire any women in their 20s or 30s for a job as there is the issue of maternity leave, which shocked me.

"I'm at the highest position I can be in our organisation but I got fed up with the problems of cliques in our industry. Yesterday's report did not surprise me."