

# INEQUALITIES AT WORKPLACE: THE GLASS CEILING PHENOMENON- THE PRESENT SCENARIO AND FACTORS INTRINSIC TO IT

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## Abstract

The present era is marked by its immense potential to develop and further the modernization of the civilization. It has presented the mankind with opportunities and means to put forth and utilize their talent to aggravate the progress. However, various researches testify that gender biasness has been the truth of the professional society at large. This paper seeks to highlight the limited access of women professionals beyond the defined walls of society and industry and the major challenges faced by them. The discussion would take into purview women participation in workforce and limited representation of women at senior positions, a phenomenon known as the “Glass Ceiling”. It also explores the various aspects- cultural, societal, psychological and organizational- that are intrinsic to the “glass ceiling” phenomenon. This paper also puts forward certain recommendations to break through the glass ceiling.

**Key Words:** Glass Ceiling, Glass Elevators, Glass Cliff, Gender Discrimination, barriers

## 1.1 Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is all uproar with women rights and equality itinerary that needs to be followed by the opposite gender as a part of their moral obligation if not their belief. Banners and media promoting freedom of women bearing examples of how “equal” women are to men, is a common sight. The statistics of surveys on “women empowerment” justify that in terms of advancement on career front, the role of women has shown marked improvement. These facts and figures definitely are undeniable. Although it has been a belief “a women’s place is at home” (Jacob, 1999; Moore, 1995), the present century presents a picture, wherein, women are thinking beyond the defined boundaries of the society and emerging as the part of the workforce that contribute directly to the advancement of the nation.

According to a report published by PewResearch Centre dated 14<sup>th</sup> January 2015, women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies comprise 5.2%. This trend improves to 5.4%, when the consideration is Fortune 1000 companies. However, the same report identifies that the representation of women at corporate board rooms is 16.9% i.e. one-sixth of the board

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members for Fortune 500 companies.

In terms of qualification and degrees the 21<sup>st</sup> century women have proved to be no less than men. Considering the fact that the employment status of women has increased with more women joining the executive and managerial levels, the question remains why is there a dearth in representation of women in the top management and as business leaders?

The limited representation of women at senior management positions draws attention to the fact that discussion on gender discrimination at workplace, a phenomenon widely known as

“glass ceiling” identified by Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990, as “a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women from moving up in the management hierarchy.”

The term “Glass ceiling” first appeared in the Wall Street Journal, 1986. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as “an unacknowledged barrier to advancement in a profession, especially affecting women and members of minorities”.

The glass ceiling phenomenon elucidates a “barrier” so strong that it is difficult to even crack let aside be broken in most cases. With various attributes that “define” this barrier, it acts as a limit to the incumbent’s aspirations, who in most cases are aware of it, but restrict themselves to their present roles.

This “barrier” can come from various directions. Studies conducted on this topic have tried to identify the dimensions that are contributing factors strengthening of the “glass ceiling”.

## **1.2 Aim of the Study**

This paper seeks to explore the aspects that are central to the emergence of the glass ceiling phenomenon and to suggest paths to promote equality at workplace.

### **Objective of the Study**

- To understand the concepts of glass ceiling, glass wall and glass elevator
- To comprehend the prevalence of the gender discrimination at workplace
- To highlight the aspects of the glass ceiling phenomenon
- To suggest ways to promote gender equality at workplace

## **Research Methodology**

This study is based on secondary data from research papers and e-books. It explores the glass ceiling phenomenon and seeks to highlight the factors intrinsic to it. The paper is developed by understanding the view of various researchers on the glass ceiling concept with reference to the current situation affecting it.

### **1.5 The Glass Ceiling**

Women experience various barriers during their career progression. These barriers can come anytime through their career path. As pointed by Adair, 1999, Baxter and Wright, 2000, and many others, women may face many hidden barriers as they progress upward in the corporate ladder.

A branch of study highlights that leadership quality is characterized by boldness, authoritarianism, obstinacy, and other characters that are deemed to be “masculine”. Women in general are viewed as empathic, expressive, kind and nurturing. Research in field of control and leadership qualities reveals that presence of “masculine” traits is more pronounced in effective leaders. Women leaders at senior positions who adopt more of aggressive, self-determining, self-sufficient, and sovereign characteristics are viewed as too competitive and believed to defy established social standards. Autocratic leadership when adopted by women manager is bound to face too many criticisms than when practiced by male.

The society has always normed that women need to be active only within the boundaries of family and its wellbeing. Nevertheless women have proved to have justified and excelled in all her support roles towards her assigned task. Alongside, they have also ascertained their ability to handle both personal and professional life. Yet there exists a mindset that although women can complete any task assigned efficiently and effectively, there still remains certain constraint that hinders her performance. A most common view is that women cannot put in her 100% effort to her work as there are other responsibilities that burden her. This belief is so strong that in case of promotions and career advancements, irrespective of her contributions and performance, women are prone to face gender based discrimination. This is longer term leads to restricted growth, inability to take charge of crucial responsibilities, delay in promotions and limiting career progress of the women workers.

### **1.6 Glass Walls and Glass Elevators**

The glass ceiling restricts the female professionals of lucrative career and aspirations.

Alongside the concept of “glass ceiling” that restrict women from higher positions, there also exists a practice of limiting women by isolating them from multifarious job roles. This phenomenon is known as the “glass wall”. Gerald Hanks explains: “glass walls” and “glass elevators” refers to the institutional barrier that segregates the women to jobs that does not lead to executive advancement. According to Hanks, unlike “glass ceiling”, “glass walls” and “glass elevators” allows women to advance within specific departments, but curtails their advancement to leadership positions.

### **1.7 Glass Cliff**

This term was coined by Michelle K. Ryan and Alex Haslam in 2004. It denotes that women at senior job positions are more likely to be subjected to precarious job role than their male colleagues. Such jobs often lead to a higher risk of failure and criticism. Hence breaking through the “glass ceiling” may lead to the “glass cliff”. The metaphor of the “glass cliff” has been used to denote the risk of failure to handle risky situation.

Eagly and Carly, 2007, suggests the presence of “labyrinth”, which denotes that women are subjected to many obstacles in her career progression, compared to men.

### **1.8 What are the barriers that lead to the “glass ceiling phenomenon”?**

Matters relating to gender-based differentiation, stereotyping and isolation affect career path of women. These barriers are from cultural aspect, societal aspect, psychological aspect, or from organizational aspect.

#### **1.8.1 Cultural Aspect**

The society plays a crucial role in shaping the personality and mindset of its inhabitants. Across the world there still exist immensely conservative societies that prefer to restrict women within set boundaries. Owing to the cultural norms women tend to face unique challenges that curtail her independence to choose a career of her choice and aim high.

In an article titled “The Battle for Female Talent in Emerging Markets”, Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Ripa Rashid states a situation in United Arab Emirates, where the norm is that without a male family member accompanying them, women are not supposed to board a flight or stay at hotels. Hence, in case the job in the UAE requires the female employee to travel abroad, she can only board a flight when a male member of her family is willing to accompany her. The same article cites the case of a Brazilian woman, who was fired on ground that she was planning to

have a second child. Such examples are found all across the globe. In Asian countries as case in point India and China, it is believed that taking care of family and doing household chores is an indispensable part of a woman's life. She should sacrifice her professional front but ideally should not delegate these responsibilities on someone else.

### **1.8.2 Societal Aspect**

The society is not yet free from the belief that women have the right to choose their lives. It tends to raise an eyebrow if women choose profession over their set duty of household chores. The scenario where women have to work for late hours is seldom approved by society and that too after a thorough scrutiny of the need of the situation. Women are allowed to work, but they should work only to support their families- is the norm. A successful woman for the society is the one who earns for her family without compromising on her responsibilities towards her family.

Women are expected to take breaks in her career for child bearing, child rearing, and taking care elders etc. In line with the society, now there are arrangements in the companies too as flexible work shifts and work from home options especially for the women staff. However, a women burdened with responsibilities at home cannot concentrate towards work (Anker, 1977).

Women get caught up in the dilemma regarding her priorities. This tends to affect her performance. Moreover, it is the wife who is expected to relocate on the ground that her husband is transferred or is switching job. These factors has a directly effect on her career.

### **1.8.3 Psychological Aspect**

It has been the practice that since tender childhood the roles of women are etched in the minds of the female child. Girls grow up to understand that her roles in the society would only be justified if she proves to adhere to the norms set by the society and make sure that her family does not suffer. So strong is the impact of these principles that a women cannot think of foregoing her responsibilities towards her home for her professional front. If a week demands that she needs to dedicate some extra hours to her project, her conscience constantly pricks that she should have been at her home. The end result is that her mind would be divided into two, making it difficult to concentrate on her job. To overcome these psychological barriers and the societal prejudices is very tough for women.

Studies by various psychologists reveal that certain character traits of women as emotional, caring, soft-hearted and sensitive, etc. pitch them against challenging senior level roles.

#### **1.8.4 Organizational Aspect**

Women participation in workforce is increasing across the globe. Yet workplace that has still now been dominated by men is not all willing to accept that women are as productive when it comes to performance. This mindset is the by-product of the long stereotyping of women employees, as a community whose career can only flourish at the domestic front and at organizational front, the role of women is just to earn the extra buck that is to be invested for the wellbeing of her family.

It has been a common situation, where the wife would forego her promotions to escape transfers. But the husband has the freedom to advance in his career, while the wife would be working on a clerical 9 to 5 shift and return home to take care of her children and in-laws. This is deemed to be normal and acceptable to the society. This differentiation has been accepted and nurtured at workplace too. Therefore, when in the present era, women seek equal opportunities for promotions it looked is not deemed as a fair demand.

Women often have to take mid-career breaks, at times of maternity, to look after ailing family members or taking care of elders. These breaks affect the career progression of women.

#### **1.9 How to break the glass ceiling for once and for all?**

Gender based discrimination has been the truth since ages. However, instances are there that marks the fact that the barriers can be cracked. With the government promoting and ensuring that women do not face discrimination at work place with regards to career growth and the world vouching that women aren't less capable than men, the scenario is showing signs of change.

The first thing that needs a change is the mindset of the society. Educating girls needs to be not looked up as a qualification to marry her off, but it needs to be accepted as her capability to choose a career. At home front, family needs to relieve women of her assumed duties and let the women choose her way of life. The family should encourage the women to take up challenging roles at workplace.

At workplace, the training and mentoring practices should provide opportunity for women to participate. Effective measurement of performance should be done to identify high performers regardless of gender. Career guidance needs to be provided to women to make them understand their roles and prospects.

The government too has a very important role to play in keeping strict vigilance that women are discriminated against at workplace. Any complaints received in this regard should be addressed. The government should undertake regular monitoring of the progress of women at all fields and special impetus to be put to understand the participation and promotion of women at senior leadership positions.

## **1.10 Conclusion**

The concept of glass ceiling can only be curbed by participation of both men and women alike. The idea of equality as guaranteed by our constitution needs to be accepted in true spirit. Progress can only be achieved with modernization of thoughts and acceptance of the truth that for the organization to flourish only the best performers are desired- and this is not limited to genders.

For every nation to progress and to adopt modernization, a complete revamp of the previous and age old traditions needs to be begun. With emerging names of female business leaders as Arundhati Bhattacharya, first women Chairperson of State Bank of India, Ursula Burns, CEO, Xerox Corporation, Indra Nooyi, CEO, PepsiCo, Meg Whitman, CEO, HP, and many others, the sound of cracking of the glass ceiling is already being heard. The process needs to be hastened for a better future.

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