

A Study on Glass Ceiling Practices in Business Organizations: Barriers to achieving Gender Equality

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“When women are more involved in decision-making, they make different decisions—not necessarily better or worse—but decisions that reflect the needs of more members of society” -Klaus Schwab-Founder and Executive Chairman, World Economic Forum

ABSTRACT

Female employees have for a long time have been kept devoid of their due. They are considered as inefficient managers. This notion prevents the business organizations to promote female managers to the upper rung of the organizational hierarchy. This practice of preventing female employees reach the top position of the organizations is generally referred to as ‘Glass Ceiling’. In other terms, “Glass ceiling” refers to mean “the unseen, yet unreachable barrier that keeps women from rising to the upper rung of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements”. To be more specific, the connotation is one of the most compelling metaphors for analyzing inequalities between men and women at workplaces. “Glass ceiling” comes under the category of gender discrimination meted out to the women folk in the economic arena, as the practice works as a barricading to give women their due credit in an industrial set up. Glass ceiling serves as a barrier to achieving gender equality. The present paper will try to make a precise and honest effort to explain the practice or phenomenon of glass ceiling as an instrument of gender discrimination, various expressions of gender discrimination, and its impact upon the female working force. The paper will also try to suggest remedies to breaking the notion of glass ceiling in business organizations.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling; Gender Discrimination; Gender Insensitive

INTRODUCTION

The very fact of women being adequately represented in the work-force, but hardly

present in the senior managerial positions has been labelled “the glass ceiling”, “a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women from

moving up in the management hierarchy”(Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). The “glass ceiling” is one of the most compelling metaphors for analyzing inequalities between men and women in the workplace. The term first came into use in 1986, when two Wall Street Journal reporters named Hymowitz and Schellhardt coined the phrase to describe the invisible barrier that blocks women from advancing to senior leadership positions in organizations. Since then, the expression has been used widely in the popular media, official government reports and different academic platforms. The term “Glass ceiling” refers to mean “the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps women from rising to the upper rung of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements”. The term suggests that although it may now be the case that women are able to get through the front door of managerial hierarchies, at some point they hit an invisible barrier that blocks any further upward movement. The ILO’s *Global Employment Trends* (2003) reported that women continue to have lower labour market participation rates, higher unemployment rates and significant pay differences compared to men. Women represent over 40 per cent of the global labour force, approximately 70 per cent of women in developed countries and 60 per cent in developing countries. Men are in

the majority among managers, top executives, and higher levels of professional workers whilst women are still concentrated in the lower categories of managerial positions.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The practice of ‘glass ceiling’ has corrosive impact on the psyche of female species. The present paper makes an attempt to understand the concept of ‘glass ceiling’ and how this practice has evolved into an instrument of gender discrimination against women. Another aim of the paper is to cite out the reasons for this discrimination. The paper, at the end, will also suggest some recommendations to break the ‘glass ceiling’ and facilitate the progress of women at workplaces.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH WORK

1. To understand the concept of ‘Glass Ceiling’ as practiced in different forms in organizations.
2. To examine the reasons for gender discrimination based on the principle of ‘glass ceiling’.
3. To examine how this gender discrimination in the form of glass ceiling has an impact on the female workforce.

4. To suggest ways to break this glass ceiling so that a better and conducive atmosphere could be created for the welfare of women managers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Secondary sources of literature have been used to explain the subject. The paper has incorporated findings from various research papers, reports, websites, and other sources to draw inferences on the subject. The methodology adopted is descriptive in nature and explains the events as it appears.

AN OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Powell and Graves (2003) conducted a study to indicate that proportion of women in the managerial ranks has increased in almost all countries. But irrespective of this, most of the women working at managerial level find it hard to make upward progression to the top most management positions. They are confronted with the phenomenon of ‘Glass ceiling’ practices by the organizations to hinder the progression of female managers. It can be noted that the proportion of women in lower and midlevel management positions has increased dramatically, while the proportion of women reaching top management positions or climbing up the

corporate ladder has remained relatively small (ILO, 2002).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) offers the following description of the obstacles to women’s career development (ILO, 2002):

“Cultural biases, gender stereotypes, and attitudes against women, coupled with their not being viewed as primary income-earners, are the major obstacles to women’s advancement”.

Glass Ceiling as a phenomenon leading to gender discrimination occupies a significant place in available literature on the subject. Simpson and Altman (2003) describes glass ceiling as ‘a well enshrined phenomenon supported by conclusive evidence’. Several empirical studies have been conducted to establish the presence of practice of ‘glass ceiling’ in organizations worldwide which act as an instrument of gender discrimination. Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995 a: iii) defined the concept of glass ceiling as “artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities”. These barriers reflect “discrimination...a deep line of demarcation between those who prosper and those left behind”. However, discrimination against women in the workplace has impacted their advancement in jobs that acquire higher societal recognition among men. This discrimination acts as an instrument of

exploitation which puts adverse and repressive affects on female employees. Prejudices, glass ceiling effect or gender diversity are such barriers which are unseen and yet cast spell a lot on working woman so that organizations having intention to retain them, ultimately are in vain (Nandy, Bhaskar & Ghosh, 2014). Glass ceiling effect is instigated by the issues of gender differentiation and gender stereotyping which affect women continuously (Nandy, Bhaskar & Ghosh, 2014).

THE NEED FOR FEMALE MANAGERS:

Gender Diversity adds creativity, innovations, and multifarious approach towards problem solving in an organization. Women managers serve as the vital and rich fountain of precious 'human resource'. There are several advantages of having female managers on board. The literature underlines the following from women's participation on boards and in senior management positions (Tuminez, 2012):

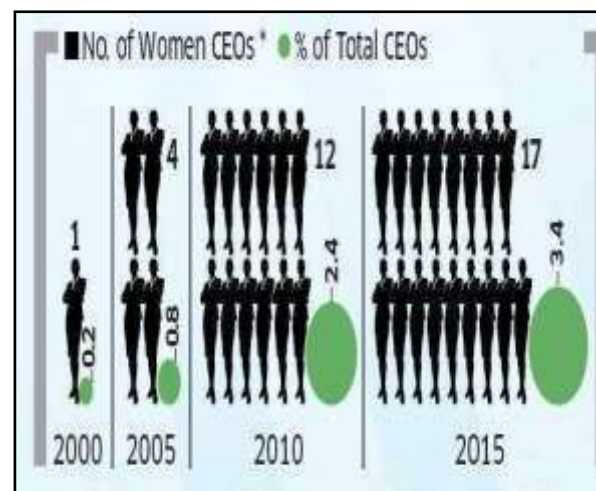
- Women managers bring empathy, flexibility, communication and collaboration to the team.
- Women serve to 'social sensitivity' and collective intelligence by bringing varying perspectives,

opinions and expertise that would otherwise not be found in a team of male members.

- Women are more diligent in attending board meetings and influence male members to attend the board meetings.
- Women tend to be more risk averse, thereby, resulting in risk mitigation of running a business.

INDIAN SCENARIO:

For a country like India where a large portion of the workforce belongs to female workers, it is really heartening to see that very few women are seen to be at the top of the managerial or board room cadre in organizations. The ITes service which employs almost one-third of the female workers has no female CEO in any of its organization operating in the country. The picture below presents the grim reality of female workers in the Indian organizations.



Source:

<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/its-a-slow-rise-to-the-top-for-women-ceos-in-india/articleshow/52159156.cms>

India is ranked 28th in terms of the presence of women directors on company boards. The following figures force us to ponder on how successful women have been in breaking the glass ceilings.

- In 2010, Women held only 5.3% of board directorships of BSE-100 companies.
- Gender Diversity Benchmark, 2011, reports that India has the lowest national female labour force and the worst leaking pipeline for junior to middle level position women.
- 28.71% of those at the junior level of the workplace
- 14.9% of those at the middle level.
- 9.32% of those at the senior level.
- Out of 323 total executive directorship positions (generally considered to be prerequisites to holding the CEO position) on the Bombay Stock Exchange 100, just eight (2.5%) are held by women.

- 54% of companies on the Bombay Stock Exchange 100 have no women board directors.

However, things are taking a good turn now. Earlier in the name of family responsibility, female workers were not given representation in the upper level management. But now the things are changing, of course, with a slow pace. Indian business organizations and even multi-national companies who have a substantial presence in India have become increasingly conscious about bringing gender diversity into their senior management and decision making structures. Some of the leading Indian companies have consciously directed their Human Resource departments to look for talented women to fill their senior management slots wherever appropriate. In fact, some organizations are giving a clear direction to their head hunting partners to fill middle and senior management positions with women candidates. MNCs such as the American Express and leading Indian companies such as Bharti Enterprises have mandated their recruiting agency partners to have sufficient women representation at the interview stage, so that the chances of promoting diversity at the top should improve. This is a welcome sign towards breaking 'glass ceiling' in the corporate world.

Discriminating Gender: Different

Expressions:

Gender discrimination of women at workplaces causes exploitation of the women. Exploitation, in any form, is an expression of violence, as violence, according to the World Health Organization, is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation. The practice of ‘glass ceiling’ finds expression of violence in different forms. Woman managers are subject to exploitation when they are made victims of gender discrimination while working in organizations. Some of the types of exploitations they face during the course of their stay in organization include:

1. Psychological:

Glass ceiling encompasses various tactics to undermine a woman’s self confidence such as yelling, insults, mockery, threats, abusive language, humiliation, Harassment, contempt and deliberate deprivation of emotional care or isolation.

2. Physical:

The most obvious ranges from pushing and shoving to hitting, physical abuse with a weapon, torture, etc.

3. Sexual:

Any form of non-consensual sexual activity (ie, forced on a person) ranging from harassment, unwanted sexual touching, to rape. This form of violence also includes incest.

4. Financial:

Encompasses various tactics for total or partial control of finances, inheritance or employment income.

5. Spiritual:

Works to destroy a women’s cultural or religious beliefs through ridicule or punishment, forbidding practice of a personal religion or forcing women to adhere to religious practices that are not their own, etc.

But why do women face gender discrimination? The UN has identified the following underlying causes for discrimination against women:

1. Historically unequal power relations:

The political, economic and social processes that have evolved over many centuries have kept men in a position of power over women. Many organizations operate with this mental approach and framework, which naturally allows the women managers to counter the problem of glass ceiling and gender discrimination.

2. Control of women’s sexuality:

Many societies use violence as a way to control a woman’s sexuality, and likewise

in many societies violence is used to punish women who exhibit sexual behavior, preferences and attitudes that violate cultural norms.

3. Cultural ideology:

Culture defines gender roles and some customs, traditions and religions are used to justify violence against women when women transgress these culturally assigned roles.

4. Gender stereotyping:

Lippman in 1922 introduced the term stereotype to represent the typical picture that comes to mind when thinking about a particular social group. Women employees are generally taken to be humble, modest and accommodating. They are believed to be weak or emotional while taking tough decision. Women are also believed to be challenge averse. They “shy away from competition and men compete too much, this decrease the chances of women succeeding in competition for promotions and more lucrative jobs” (Jain & Mukherji, 2010).

5. Gender Insensitivity:

The lack of gender sensitivity is still a problem in many organizations. Interestingly, companies who have female CEOs are generally more gender- friendly. Although women managers at the senior

level have tried to introduce some gender-friendly policies, it has only been successful in a few cases. Several of the women managers at the middle level have stated that they had to take a break from work and their career for family reasons, because their companies were not sensitive enough to appreciate the situation. Certain policies could promote women and make the organization more gender inclusive.

6. Government inaction:

Government negligence in passing a suitable and stringent legislative framework to curb the practice of glass ceiling has aggravated the problem. The major reason for this is the disguised nature of this practice. Organizations always succeed to find a solid ground to explain why they have not given promotions to the women managers working in their organizations. The organizations always blame the competencies of women managers.

THE IMPACTS OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION:

Loss of Productivity

Women who are victims of glass ceiling and sexual discrimination lose motivation and morale necessary to perform their jobs effectively. This also leads to a loss in

productivity. Things that may lead to this loss of morale and motivation could include jokes about women's gender that imply inferiority, offensive jokes of a suggestive or sexual nature and jokes implying that an employee's work is sub-par due to her gender.

Promotions

Stereotypical views related to women cause supervisors to engage in the illegal practice of passing a person over for promotion due to gender. While this can happen to both genders, supervisors most often pass over women for promotion due to preconceived notions about their roles and abilities. For example, a fire chief may repeatedly pass over a female fire fighter for promotion, due to resentment stemming from women applying to the force or due to a belief that men inherently perform better in these positions. Supervisors may pass over qualified males for promotions in industries that employ a high percentage of women compared to men, such as teaching positions or those industries involving care of children.

Family Responsibilities

Women who have young children at home may experience push-back when interviewing due to family responsibilities. Although law prohibits a prospective employer from asking about family

responsibility outright, it often comes out during the interview process anyway. This may provoke the hiring manager to pass over a qualified female candidate if he feels she will be torn between her home and job responsibilities. If the woman makes it into the position, her supervisor can view her employee file to see that she has young children signed up on insurance or other benefits. He then may choose to give her less responsibility or assign menial tasks to her that do not fit her job description. Although illegal, this practice still exists in offices today.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BREAK THE GLASS CEILING

1. To advance women in managerial and leadership roles, support of top management becomes a pre requisite. The Chief Executive Officer should recognise the important role of women in the development of the organizations.
2. The organizations should identify the specific barriers in the culture and working environment that impedes the progress of women.
3. Training programmes, such as mentorship, career guidance, and leadership development should be implemented to address the problems of stereotyping of women and rewards should be tied to successful performance in the companies.

4. Financial support should be increased for the academic programs for women in the non-traditional fields, such as science and engineering. This will promote women to acquire non traditional positions in the organizations.

5. A system should be implemented to identify and monitor the progress of high potential women so that they are able to compete with men.

6. A gender sensitive approach should be adopted to understand the needs and issues related to female managers and a proper development avenue should be provided to them.

7. The government should also keep a vigil on the unfair practices hindering the progress of women managers. Women Cell needs to be formed at state and district level to monitor the menace of glass ceiling. The focus should be on chalking out mutual solutions to curb the practice of glass ceiling in the organizations.

THE COMPANIES ACT, 2013: A STEP TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY:

With the aim of enhancing corporate governance and the image of an organization, The Companies Act, 2013 was approved in August 2013. A noteworthy feature of the Companies Act, 2013 act is to improve board diversity and to enhance the responsibilities and accountability of executive directors,

managerial personnel, and independent directors. One of the new requirements pertains to the appointment of women directors to company boards. The act requires the following classes of companies to have at least one woman director on their boards:

- Every listed company
- Every public company having:
Paid-up share capital of INR 1 billion
- Turnover of INR 3 billion or more.

The introduction of this provision is no doubt a welcome step towards gender equality. Companies meeting these criteria are required to comply within one year; newly incorporated companies meeting the criteria must appoint a woman director within six months of incorporation. The board is required to fill any vacancy of a board seat previously held by a female director no later than the next board meeting or three months from the date of such vacancy, whichever is later. This provision will not only introduce female managers to the boardroom, but also give an impetus to the female workers to work harder to get ahead in their career progression. This step has helped to increase the gender gap in board room representation in a significant manner.

**Gender Representation: Breaking the
‘Glass Ceiling’**

2012	2013	2014
5.8%	7.3%	8.6%
Increase in %	1.5%	1.3%

CONCLUSION:

According to McKinsey & Company, Women Matter study, 2013 on “Gender Diversity in top Management: Moving Corporate Culture, Moving Boundaries” companies with ‘critical mass’ of female executives perform better than those with no women in top management positions. The reason for this outperformance lies in the leadership behaviors that women leaders tend to exhibit more often than their male counterparts. In India today - as in much of Asia, women are increasingly encouraged to study and to achieve new heights in their profession. Yet at the same time the responsibility of home and family still rests primarily with them. Many recognise this reality, but companies - for the most part, are doing little to address this. What is needed in India is for more companies to think strategically about their female population - as workers, customers and investors, and to take steps to address their needs in ways that will empower them to contribute more fully. This will help in eliminating the practices of ‘glass

ceiling’ and help the country grow stronger in every respect.

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