

Glass Ceiling an Invisible barrier to Women's Success

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Abstract

The socio-cultural, legal, personal, and organizational forces that affect a woman's emergence to the upper echelons of an institution are universal problems. The glass ceiling is a reality in the true sense. This is not only because women are usually held to higher standards than men but also because they are neither made aware of, nor given opportunities that would catapult them to the upper grating. Often, women with technical competencies in line functions such as manufacturing, R&D and operations end up in staff functions. This phenomena of "Glass ceiling" could be explained as an invisible top boundary in corporate towers and other organizations, above which it is difficult or rather impossible for women to rise in the ranks. "Glass ceiling" is a metaphor for the hard-to-see informal barriers or norms that keep women from getting promotions, pay raises, and further advancements in their career. It is termed as "glass" because it's not usually visible, and a woman may not be aware of its existence until she actually "hits" the roadblock. It may not be an explicit practice of discriminating against women — though some specific policies, practices, and attitudes may exist that create this road block without the intention to discriminate.

Keywords : Women , Glass Ceiling , workplace

Introduction

The term "Glass ceiling" was invented for stellar economic organizations, like corporations, but later began to be applied for invisible limits above which women had not risen in other fields. The U.S. Department of Labor's 1991 definition of the glass ceiling is "those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions." Glass ceilings exist even in organizations with declared policies around equality of advancement when there is silent bias at work or even behavior within the organization that ignores or undermines the declared policy.

Origin of the Phrase

The term "glass ceiling" was popularized way back in the [1980s](#). It was used in a book "The Working Women Report" by Gay Bryant in 1984. Later, it was referred in a 1986 "Wall Street Journal" article on barriers to women in high corporate positions. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the first use of the term was in 1984, in "Adweek:" "Women have reached a certain point — I call it the glass ceiling. They're in the top of

middle management and they're stopping and getting stuck." A related term is a [pink-collar ghetto](#), referring to jobs to which women are often relegated.

Has there been a paradigm shift in the outlook towards women ?

The conservative feminist organization called the *Independent Women's Forum* points out that in 1973, 11% of corporate boards had one or more women members and in 1998, 72% of corporate boards had one or more women members.

On the other hand, the *Glass Ceiling Commission* (created by [Congress](#) in 1991 as a 20-member bipartisan commission) looked at Fortune 1000 and Fortune 500 companies in 1995 and found that only 5% of the senior management positions were held by women. Elizabeth Dole once said, "My objective as Secretary of Labor is to look through the 'glass ceiling' to see who is on the other side, and to serve as a catalyst for change."

In 1999, Carleton (Carly) Fiorina, was named CEO of a Fortune 500 company (Hewlett-Packard) and she declared that women now faced "no limits whatsoever. There is not a glass ceiling."

The number of women in senior executive positions still lags considerably behind the number of men. A 2008 survey from Reuters showed that 95% of American workers believe that women have made "important advances in the workplace over the last 10 years" but 86% believe that the glass ceiling has not been broken, even if it has been cracked.

The different kinds of Glass Ceilings faced by women

1. Political Glass Ceilings

In politics, this phrase "Glass Ceiling" was first used in 1984 when Ms [Geraldine Ferraro](#) was nominated as a vice-presidential candidate (with Walter Mondale as presidential nominee). She was the first woman nominated for that spot by a major U.S. party. When [Hillary Clinton](#) gave her yielding speech after narrowly losing the essentials to Barack Obama in 2008, she said, "Although we weren't able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about 18 million cracks in it." This term became popular again after Clinton won the California primary in 2016 and then when she was officially nominated for [president](#), the first woman in that position with a major political party in the United States.

2. Pink-Collar Ghetto

The term "[pink-collar ghetto](#)" explains that many women are stuck in certain jobs, mostly low-paying jobs, because of their sex. "**Ghetto**" is used literally to evoke an area where people are marginalized, often for economic and social reasons. In the 1970s, as the Women's Liberation Movement supported women in the workforce, larger discussions arose around the crystalline pay discrepancy between men and women of similar

roles and experiences. From this gender discrepancy, the term “[pink-collar ghetto](#)” was coined. Pink-collar jobs were paid less than both white and blue-collared jobs (typically held by men) and required less education than white-collar jobs. This may include jobs in the beauty sector, nursing, social work, teaching, secretarial work, or child care.

"It's estimated that today more than 55 percent of women working outside of the home are trapped in the pink ghetto. Probably there are fewer women in this category today than there were 10 years ago, mainly because women themselves have realised the hindrance and made effort to bring about the change."

The pink-collar ghetto is characterized not only by low wages, in most cases, but also by a lack of a career path. "The opportunities for advancement are probably less as compared with some other jobs," There is a possibility to move up, but it takes a long time to get there, and even when you do get on top they're often not the highest paying ones. Women often are considered official emissary to the pink ghetto because of preconceived notions that what they are doing is women's work anyway also because of men's discomfort in dealing with women on a professional level, very few role models and mentors available for women and because many managers assume that women are not serious about their careers. These stereotypes and assumptions and personal beliefs have impacted negatively on women's opportunities for career advancement.

Despite these barriers, many women have plunged in the pink ghetto by choice. When women have to make choices between family and career and balancing their lives ultimately women choose pink-collar jobs, because they have more flexibility in terms of work hours.

3. Maternal Wall

Women who have been very successful in their career may suddenly find their competency questioned once they become pregnant, take maternity leave, or adopt flexible work schedules. Their performance evaluations may drop and their political support evaporate. The “family gap” yawns: An increasing percentage of the wage gap between men and women is attributable to motherhood.

When a childless woman is not in the office, she is presumed to be on business. An absent mother is often thought to be struggling with child care. Managers and coworkers may mentally cloak pregnant women and new mothers in a haze of femininity, assuming they will be empathetic, emotional, gentle, non aggressive—that is, they are not very good at business. If these women shine through the haze and remain tough, cool, emphatic, and committed to their jobs, colleagues may accuse them for being insufficiently maternal. Compounding the problem, managers can from the most benevolent of motives deny mothers the chance to rise.

[Nearly half of the men feel a child does well having the mother stay at home.](#) Clearly, this sentiment is a widely-held cultural belief and the one that can quickly derail careers, even with the best of intentions. Managers, who believe they are respecting the time they feel a mother needs with their children, can deny mothers opportunities to take on new projects, to attend influential career-building networking events or to

meet with new clients. Pregnant women, working mothers and even women of childbearing age may face what is referred to as a "[maternal wall](#)." Certain stereotypes related to women's role in their family and needing to take time off after birth and for childcare often place women at a disadvantage in their careers compared to men and fathers.

While several women stand nose pressed against the glass ceiling, many working mothers never get near to it. What stops them is the "maternal wall." Where mothers are concerned, coworkers and bosses often comprehend a trade-off between competence and warmth.

4. Bamboo Ceiling

It was in 2005, Jane Hyun coined the phrase "[bamboo ceiling](#)" to describe the barriers Asians and Asian Americans face in achieving upper-level professional success in the United States. Since the publication of Hyun's book, a variety of sectors (including nonprofits, universities, and the government) have discussed the impact of the ceiling as it relates to people of Asian descent and the challenges they face. As described by a senior writer at [Fortune magazine](#), "bamboo ceiling" refers to the processes and barriers that serve to exclude Asians and Asian-Americans from executive positions on the basis of subjective factors such as "lack of leadership potential" and "lack of communication skills" that cannot actually be explained by job performance or qualifications.^[3] Articles regarding the subject have been written in [Crains](#), [Fortune](#), [The Atlantic](#) and [Forbes](#) (2016).^{[4][5][6]}

5. Concrete Ceiling

While the glass ceiling originally referred to women (in general), it's clear that women of color face an even tougher barrier — a "concrete ceiling." This term was coined in [2016 by Jasmine Babers](#) to describe the significantly tougher hurdle women of color face in reaching elevated success in their careers. We all know the term "glass ceiling" — it's the invisible barrier hindering the advancement of women in their professional lives. However, there's a new term out there, that may complicate the way we look at feminism: the "[concrete ceiling](#)." Similar to the glass ceiling, the concrete ceiling is a barrier for success. The difference between the two terms is that the concrete ceiling is a term specifically made for women of color.

A concrete wall reflects the barriers that women of color face more accurately. Let's start by looking at the difference between the materials. While glass is tough, you can shatter it and you can see through it to the level above and you know that there is something to aspire to. We understand what is seen can be achieved. Concrete, on the other hand, is practically impossible to break through by yourself. It's definitely impossible to see through. There is no visible destination, just what seems like a dead end. This is what women of color face in the workforce: an often impenetrable barrier, with no vision of how to get to the next level. This new term had to be created, simply because the experiences of white women and women of color are extremely different, but too often ignored. The problem is not ambition. Women of color have made impressive strides towards higher levels of education and success.

Some of the glass ceiling and concrete ceiling barriers include different pay scales for the same work, ethnic, religious and racial discrimination, stereotyping and preconceptions of the role and ability of women. The good news is that even concrete can be cracked, but it is not easy.

6. Glass Escalator

Coined in 1992 by Christine L. Williams, the "[glass escalator](#)" refers to men who tap into female-dominated fields and accelerate into higher positions. [It has also been suggested](#) that men enter female-dominated industries in an effort to obtain job stability, financial security and better family benefits. The *Glass Escalator* effect talks about a situation where men employed in female or minority dominated professions are promoted faster, and tend to rise to higher positions with more ease than their female colleagues; thereby implying that even in typically female jobs, we are more likely to see more men than women in leadership positions.

Rationality for a Glass Ceiling?

1. **Culture** - In Indian culture, girls are generally expected to be feminine and therefore polite, accommodating and nurturing, whereas boys are expected to be masculine and therefore competitive, aggressive and fearless. In the workplace, managers and leaders are expected to be competitive, aggressive and fearless — aka masculine — in order to make strong business decisions and lead a team to success. Such differences in gender roles could limit and can even punish women in their academic and professional careers who aspire to reach upper-level or leadership positions. Additionally, it doesn't help the thought that women are stereo-typically expected to raise children, cook, clean, run errands and prepare dinner. Having all of these additional expectations placed on women doesn't exactly help them balance a career, build a family and have a personal life of their own. In addition to gender roles, gender biases and stereotypes also limit women from moving up in their careers.

For the women who do make it past the job interview, the bias doesn't stop there. One study found that [more than 42% of women](#) (compared to 22% of men) experience discrimination in the workplace. The acts of discrimination come in the form of:

- Earning less than men who do the same job.
- Being treated as incompetent
- Experiencing micro aggression regularly
- Receiving less support than men who do the same job
- Missing out on important career opportunities
- Feeling isolated
- Not receiving a promotion
- Getting rejected from a job

2. **Sexual Harassment** - Sexual harassment is explained as: "Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this

conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.”

Instead of reporting the harassment, women are quitting their jobs completely to start over somewhere else. One study found that of the women who experience sexual harassment within the first two years at a new job, [80% of them quit](#). No wonder it's so difficult for women to reach higher-level roles when many of them are faced with these challenges early in their careers.

Conclusion :

Economic growth of a nation depends on the magnitude of growth and skills of its labour force, the progression of people from low to high productivity activities, and the investment in [education](#) and skill development of future generations, all of which is facilitated when our women join the workforce.

Companies should implement the following changes to combat the ceiling:

1. Develop career planning policies including mentoring and leadership development programmes for women as part of a company's overall corporate strategy.
2. Identify high-potential women early on in their careers, involve them in decision making and provide them with opportunities to lead high profile projects so that they build their competencies and skill-sets to ascend to the upper levels of the company.
3. Create a climate in the company that is more inclusive and holistic, and more conducive to the management styles of women.
4. Make accommodations to women to enable them to strike the right work-family balance.
5. Have an open communication policy.
6. Consciousness among women managers to make mentorship of other women one of their primary responsibilities.

Contrary to popular belief, the glass ceiling is a very prevalent phenomenon in the corporate world today. It is observed that women have to work harder than men in general to gain the same recognition. One of the main reasons for this practice in India is the societal pressure on women. On the other hand, the sense of familial duty and support helps women get back on track after a abatement. Thus, the ceiling will be breachable only with increased awareness and empowerment of the leaders of tomorrow.

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