



GLIMPSES OF GLASS CEILING: RESEARCH REVIEWS

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Abstract: Over the last few decades, we witnessed a sea change in the social status of women as they came out of their confinements from homes, to work outside and play multiple roles with competence. This could become possible because of spread of education, awareness and skill training among the women but unfortunately, taking up a career came up with a lot of challenges for them. Working women went through a lot of stress and strain in balancing between professional and personal life, unhealthy work place with discriminatory practices and the problem of glass ceiling. Glass ceiling as a metaphor dealt with subtle gender disparities between men and women at workplace. It was an invisible barrier that prevented women from getting high positions in jobs regardless of their eligibility and efficacy. The present paper reviewed various studies on glass ceiling in the West and India and explored its existence across the globe. Findings were content analyzed and possible ways to handle the issue were suggested on the basis of socialization, gender role expectations, psycho-social needs and empowerment of working women.

Index Terms - Glass ceiling, Discrimination, Gender role, Working women

I. INTRODUCTION

History of India and the world as well witnessed a gradual change in the status of women over the decades. During the Muslim rule in India, women were confined to the four walls of the house and were treated as mere objects of pleasure for men. However, the status of women started improving during the early part of 19th century with Raja Ram Mohan Roy's movement against women's subjugation to men, western influence on Indian culture and Mahatma Gandhi's call for women participation along with men in the freedom struggle against the British rule (Singh, 1998). Today because of spread of education and increasing standard of living, more and more women started working, earning and deliberately trying to make a place for themselves in the work front. Although gender equality had been embodied in the Constitution of India yet discrimination against women continued to exist in many forms and in various contexts. Discrimination against women at workplace was one such context and opting for a career came with several challenges for a woman. Working women

faced a lot of problems like mental and physical stress, burden of striking a balance between professional and personal life, prejudiced and stereotypical thinking of men, ego hassles with colleagues and the problem of glass ceiling (Kumari & Mohanty, 2014).

The Concept of Glass Ceiling

The term “Glass Ceiling” had been used to refer to the gender disparities between men and women at workplace. It was an invisible barrier that prevented women and minorities from climbing up the corporate ladder regardless of their qualifications and achievements (The United States Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). It was called “invisible barrier” because career progression of women was mostly restricted through accepted norms and implicit biases and not through defined corporate policies (Kagan, 2019). The concept of “Glass Ceiling” came to the forefront as an American social issue when an article was published in The Wall Street Journal in 1986. It explained about the subtle barriers that women confronted when they started climbing to the top of the corporate ladder of glorious achievements. As a consequence, a 21-member bipartisan body in 1992 called “Federal Glass Ceiling Commission” was formed. Its objective was to identify the barriers and to understand the best practices and procedures that had led to career progression of women and people of color (Jackson, 2001; FGCC, 1995). The body revealed that the barriers that pulled women from climbing to the top of the corporate ladder were imperceptible but very much in existence. The very existence of the barriers and its detrimental role in career progression of women had also been revealed through several research studies (Keenawinna & Sajeewanie, 2015; Nandy, Bhaskar & Ghosh, 2014; Bombuwela & Chamaru, 2013; Philips & Imhoff, 1997).

An e-article by Joshi (2019) mentioned that as per World Bank Data, women occupied less than a third of India’s overall workforce which was the lowest among BRICS nations. China was at 64%, Brazil at 59%, Russia at 57% and South Africa at 45%. Although company policies of many organizations advocated gender equality in terms of recruitment and promotion, yet only 15% of employees in Fortune 500 companies were women and only 6 were CEO’s (Swain, 2010). In Indian organizations, the percentage of women holding leading position varied from 3 to 6 percent (Nandy et al., 2014). This was quite disheartening and at the same time thought provoking because such discrepancy pointed to two possible explanations. One that women were less efficient than men to hold top positions in organizations and second, there were invisible barriers that prevented women from occupying the top position. It was inferred from the data that the company policies for checking gender inequality was not implemented strictly.

Evidence further suggested that the first possibility was not applicable as women differed in leadership style; they were as efficient leaders as men (Schein, 2001; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). So, the only explanation for low representation of women at top positions was attributable to the existence of implicit biases that made up the glass ceiling. Rampant job segregation, stereotypes surrounding women, sex discrimination in terms of pay, incentives, organizational resources, foreign assignments, inclusion vs exclusion in planning and decision making at workplace; old-boy network, personal constraints of women and widespread sexual harassment were

the elements that built up the glass ceiling and restricted deserving women to rise to the top in many organizations (Swain, 2010).

Studies related to Glass Ceiling in western countries

Prevalence

In the west, men were viewed as leaders in organizations while women were seen to be the followers. Women in managerial positions went through more stress than their male counterparts and felt isolated at workplace. This extra stress gave rise to low self-confidence and less obvious forms of discrimination, which caused women to believe that they occupied minority status both in organizations as well as in society. Therefore, they were less inclined towards taking leadership roles in male dominated organizations and sectors (Davidson & Cooper, 1992). In another study conducted on 51 organizations in Canada, it was revealed that though, attrition rates of women employees were as equal as male employees, they were less promoted compared to their counterpart in entry and managerial level (Gender Diversity at Work in Canada, 2022). More so, Cooper Jackson (2001) reported that organizations still preferred a male-oriented management style where aggressive and direct behaviours were the norms. It was so because men believed that women were less likely to possess skills required for managerial positions compared to them (Schein, 2001). In a study conducted on 29,809 management-track employees of a large retail chain in North America, it was found that firms persistently undermined the potential of their female employees (Benson, Li & Shue, 2023). Arfken et al., (2004) found that in almost 63% percent of the companies that they surveyed, women did not exist in board rooms and there were no women directors in the board.

Surprisingly, there were research evidences that confirmed the existence of Glass ceiling in various organizations even in a country like Sweden, a country profoundly known for its feminine culture (Albrecht et al., 2003). Hunt and Philips (2004) were of the view that gender discrimination was deeply seated in the social hierarchy and this influenced perception of people about men and women in leadership roles. In other words, men and women had been ascribed with different roles and possessing expertise to lead an organization was not viewed as a trait of women. This stereotypical view influenced the very selection process where women were eliminated. Thus, they were deprived of their legitimate rights to get selected for the jobs and promotions as well.

It was consistently observed that gender disparities were more prevalent at the top hierarchies than at the lower levels, and it became more challenging as a person's career advanced (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001). This had also been supported by the research findings of Adler and Sinclair (1999) which revealed a significant difference in the representation of men and women at senior management positions in USA and Australia.

Research by Lyness and Thompson (1997) further indicated that the achievement of women was either not valued or was attributed to luck rather than their ability or skill per se. This erroneous stereotypical view potentially reduced the organizational rewards that women employees received compared to their male counterparts. Gibelman (2000) in his research on employees, working in 74 different non-profit organizations in USA found that females were well represented in direct service positions. But in top management positions,

men out-numbered women. He also found that men earned more than women at all hierarchical levels of the organization.

In a study conducted on 448 top level employees, Lyness and Heilman (2006) evidenced that women were less likely to get promotions than males. In order to get leadership roles, they had to be highly impressive which was not the case with men. In other words, when selecting women for leadership roles, the bar for qualifying for the post was raised and it was much higher for women than for men. Ohlott et al., (1994) in their study pointed out that women employees operating in the same cadre as that of men, were not given the same amount of responsibilities and supervisory tasks as their male counterparts. It was observed by Forster (2002) that although more women were opting for international assignments but they were not given a chance to handle these assignments because of stereotypical attitudes displayed by top management of their home country. Contrary to this, Kollinger's (2005) study marked that in Austria, organizations attributed lack of interest on part of women managers for international assignments and this was ascribed to be the reason behind poor representation of talented women managers in international assignments.

Vale and Gold (1998) observed that organizational culture acted as the greatest barrier to career growth of women. They noticed that women employees avoided promotion, so as to keep themselves away from bosses who believed in bullying and controlling. Study conducted by Fassinger (2008) revealed that women employees were not entertained in the old boy's club and excluded from social networks, corporate activities and organizational information which acted as a barrier in the advancement of their career.

Reasons for Glass Ceiling

According to Asplund (1988) the following reasons were responsible for the huge gap in the rate of career advancement of men and women:

1. Women did not receive the same training and support as men in order to get promotion.
2. When women employees started off, they were placed in positions that were off promotion tracks. So, they were at a disadvantageous position right from the very beginning of entering into the organization.
3. There was lack of recognition and appreciation of the achievement of women managers compared to men.
4. There was also lack of support from family members for a successful advancement in career.
5. Women were risk averse compared to men.
6. Women were not willing to take promotion in order to avoid the stress of additional responsibility.

According to Selmer and Leung (2003), corporate activities like fast track programs, individual career counselling and career planning workshops were more readily available to male employees compared to women employees

Professor Bertrand (2018) of University of Chicago Booth School, on the basis of his research findings, revealed that there were factors beyond gender discrimination at workplace that obstructed women from advancing in their career. It showed that the pay gap between men and women was because of the fact that most college educated women avoided taking majors that led to higher earning jobs. More so, the psychological differences between men and women accounted for up to 10 percent of the pay gap. In other words, women were more averse towards taking risk compared to men. Conversely, as men were more willing to take risks, they got the opportunity to compete for higher paying jobs and negotiated for higher salaries. Moreover, higher paying jobs were usually inflexible with regard to time schedule and it required a lot of commitment particularly with respect to time from the employees. Women faced difficulty because of this inflexibility as their primary responsibility of child care and household chores couldn't be much compromised with. This often, dissuaded women from taking up higher paying jobs. It was also found that men didn't take it easily when their wives earned more than them. It affected the marital relationship and in some cases, leading to divorce.

Simsek (2019) reviewed studies made and published between January 2000 and May 2019 in Turkey, focusing on factors affecting perception of Glass Ceiling in the field of academia. The findings suggested dual responsibility of women towards family and career; organizational policies and power conflict as the chief reasons behind preventing women from getting on to the top positions.

According to Brown, Irby and Czaja (1998), women employees took a break from work to start a family or to take care of the family as it was considered to be their prime responsibility. Returning back to work, they tried to catch-up to their counterparts but were hardly able to do so. Therefore, they missed out on the promotion track. Stone (2007) identified that women employees left their prestigious jobs because of gender inequality that they faced at home. Men unlike women were neither willing to compromise nor adapt their career in accordance with the demands of child care and family responsibilities. This indeed, acted as a major hindrance to the career advancement in case of women.

Another barrier that stood on the way of career progression of women and perpetuated Glass Ceiling was sexual harassment at workplace. In spite of the existence of anti-harassment cell at workplace, sexual harassment still remained as a serious problem. A survey conducted by Fortune 500 companies in 1988 revealed that 90% of women executives in large corporations, reported sexual harassment. Men at the top demanded sexual favors from female employees in return of their career progression and women who did not compromise, their career development got shut (Stockdale & Bhattacharya, 2009).

Studies related to Glass Ceiling in India

Prevalence

In India, there was dearth of research studies in the field of Glass Ceiling. But then those few studies done in this field, threw light on the existence of Glass Ceiling in the work place and the various factors responsible for it.

According to NASSCOM (The National Association of Software and Service Companies) -Mercer report (2009), Glass Ceiling very much existed in various IT companies in India with the career of women remaining stagnant at junior and middle level. Upadhya and Vasavi (2006) explored the regional diversity in IT workforce in India and found that though proportion of women employees increased in the IT industry over the years and some of them made it to the managerial positions, still then they remained under-represented and constituted about 24% of the workforce. Budhwar, Saini and Bhatnagar (2014) in their research indicated that the status of women in workplace, be it in managerial or operative positions were not very impressive. The biggest challenge that the working women faced today was striking a balance between professional life as managers and personal life as homemakers, and also dealing with the explicit as well as implicit discrimination against them at workplace. This was the reason for which they were offered less demanding jobs and their views were often not taken into consideration while handling any major issue in the organization.

Barriers to professional growth

Gupta, Koshal and Koshal (2006) on the basis of their research revealed that struggle between motherhood and ambition, reluctance to travel, getting transferred, off-site assignments acted as barriers to career advancement of women. They also found that women were excluded from informal networks and this often made them lose promotion opportunities.

According to Mohapatra (2011), gender discrimination against working women usually started from the stage of recruitment. Even when there were women candidates having equal qualification as their male counterparts, preference was usually given to males during the process of selection as well as promotion in later stages of career. Most of the Indian men doubted the credibility of women in work sphere, except in few areas like teaching, nursing and clerical sectors (Mohanty & Patnaik, 2017; Mohapatra, 2011). They further pointed out that the stereotypical view of women being less efficient and capable than their male counterparts, gave rise to unequal pay and perks for the same job done by men. Many women because of such practices at workplace went for less demanding jobs even though they were highly qualified. Mohapatra (2011) further added that conditioned by social and psychological tradition, women employees too did not lend support to the members of their own sex to advance in their career.

According to Monster Salary Index (2016), even though the overall pay gap in India had reduced slightly; women on the whole were still paid less and earned 25% less than men. To put it in perspective, as many as 68.5 % of women workforce in India experienced pay inequality for the same job. The highest pay gap existed in the sector of Information and Communication Technology (Mathur, 2017).

As per the research findings of Yadav & Khanna (2014) and Buddhapriya (1999), gender disparities were more prevalent at the top hierarchies than at the lower level. Buddhapriya (1999) in her book “Women in Management” revealed that in India, though women entered into the field of management decades ago, they remained highly underrepresented in senior management positions. She further mentioned that in public sector units also representation of women remained abysmally low.

It was highlighted by Kulkarni (2002) that right from the initial years of life; especially during the socialization process, women had been taught that they were inferior to men. It was nothing less than that of indoctrination. This was so very deeply ingrained in their mindset that the urge to become a leader, died off when they grew up.

Rai and Srivastava (2008) in their study stated the existence of many barriers that inhibited the career growth of women. Some of the barriers were related to women themselves and some others to the organizations. Interestingly, they pointed out that while there were barriers which prevented women from succeeding, various women entrepreneurs were successful in achieving leadership positions because of organizational and family support. In addition, it was their inner drive to succeed in the face of adversity, propelled them to surpass all kinds of hurdles and achieve distinctions in careers.

Recent work conducted on 252 women faculties at Higher Education Institutes of Jaipur, pinpointed gender stereotypes, attitudinal aversions, family and organizational factors as factors contributing to Glass ceiling and affecting their career advancement (Lahiri, Sarkar, Bhargava & Chahar, 2023). Similarly, in another study conducted on 553 women managers, working in banking, hospitality and information technology (IT) sectors in parts of Northern Indian states, Sharma and Kaur (2019) explored the level of Glass ceiling with respect to three major barriers namely personal, organizational and societal. Findings revealed an above average level of Glass ceiling with respect to organizational and societal barriers. It also indicated that the organizational barriers and societal barriers had significant impact on their work engagement. More so, marital status of the women managers acted as a moderator between the organizational and societal barriers and work engagement level of women managers. Basu et al., (2013) in a study on women IT employees working in Delhi, reported that family responsibilities, lack of support system/infrastructure, biased rules and regulations and societal attitude towards women were the major factors that restricted women from taking up opportunities to advance in their career.

Lack of interest of women employees in salary negotiation, perks, promotion, enhancing their niche skills, hoping from one job to another, reluctance to move out of comfort zone and to put in extra efforts to stay after office hours to develop and become aware of professional networks, and family constraints acted as hurdles to their career growth (Rajesh, Ekambaram & Rakesh, 2013). According to Upadhyya (2006), the very requirement of women to attend to short/long on-site commitment created a major hindrance in their career. Women due to family and social obligations found it very difficult to adjust with male colleagues when they had to travel overseas for assignments. Thus, they often opted out of it. Continuous refusal to take up foreign assignments, affected their promotion prospects and ultimately their career growth became stagnant.

Conclusion

Research reviews in the present paper on Glass Ceiling unraveled some of the subtle, invisible and undercover barriers that prevented working women from rising to the top of the corporate ladder. It is observed both in western and eastern cultures. These barriers not only existed at the workplace but also in the family and continued to affect the career progression of women. Be it a developed or a developing nation like India, Glass Ceiling was a truism and was in existence everywhere across various sectors. As a global phenomenon, it required immediate attention to promote women to grow professionally. Although women could come a long way from home to workplace, they were yet to utilize their full potential and reach the pinnacle of success. This was due to a large number of problems like discrimination, harassment, sexual exploitation, family bondage and responsibility contributed to their restricted growth in career advancement. The ugly tentacles of Glass Ceiling engulfed the emancipation of women in the true sense of the term.

In a country like India, on the one hand, women in the form of Goddesses were worshiped and considered as epitome of “Shakti” meaning power, and on the other hand, they were being treated as inferior to men since ages. It was discouraging and demotivating to observe such a downward trend. Though we entered into the era of modernization through creating concrete jungles, setting up industries, malls, trade, raising our living standards, imitating fashion trends so on and so forth from the west, somehow we really failed to become modern in our perception and attitude towards women. This itself spoke in a loud and clear voice that we continued to live in an illusionary modern world and that there were miles to go to bring in positive attitudinal changes in the mindset of people. This referred to the efficacy of women, particularly the working women and giving them the right positions that they rightfully deserved,

In India, if their potentials were not to be harnessed to the maximum, productivity of the nations would be at stake. In this context, it was worth quoting the views of Melanne S. Vervee (former United States Ambassador for Global Women’s Issue) who once said “When women progress, we all progress. No country can get ahead when it leaves half its people”. Similar were the views of Hilary Clinton and Swami Vivekananda who said “When women participate in the economy everyone benefits”. “The best thermometer to progress of a nation is its treatment of its women” respectively. India could achieve freedom from the three hundred years old British rule because of equal participation of men and women in the freedom struggle. Such was the power of unity.

Although gender equality had been embodied in the Constitution of India and we did have anti-discrimination bodies and redressal cells for working women in various companies, unfortunately it was not being implemented strictly. Women were as capable and efficient as men. All they needed was equality in terms of opportunity, pay, promotion, support from their colleagues (both male and female colleagues) and family, shared responsibility at home and strict implementation of anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies. Also, girls from the very beginning during the socialization process were to be treated as equal to boys. They were not only to be taught about their rights like right to life with dignity, right against exploitation, right to freedom of expression etc. but were also to be allowed to exercise them. In addition to this, boys too

were to be taught to respect, view girls as equal to them and to share responsibilities with them. Once this would be achieved, women would be empowered in true sense and this would break the Glass Ceiling and ultimately lead to progress of the nation.

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