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Basic Concepts & Definitions

Management researchers and policy makers recognized over two decades ago that a “glass ceiling” existed for women in management. The glass ceiling is often viewed as an invisible organizational barrier [For a description of organizational barriers, see Allen’s entry in the Sloan Work and Family Encyclopedia.] that is associated with gender or sex roles [For a description of gender, see Rothausen’s entry in the Sloan Work and Family Encyclopedia.] The glass ceiling is an invisible barrier that exists within organizations, and refers to women’s immobility into top decision making positions. The term, symbolizing inequality for women, first came to national attention during the groundbreaking three-year study of women executives, the Executive Women Project, which began in 1984 (Morrison et al., 1987).

Major research into the existence of the “glass ceiling” began with “Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can women reach the top of America’s largest corporations?” and was sustained through the across-industry study by the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission from 1991-1996, and continues with the work of organizations such as Catalyst and Boston College. Reports of the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995 a,b) provide disturbing statistical evidence: Ninety-five percent of senior managers of Fortune 500 service and Fortune 1000 industrial companies are men. In the Fortune 2000 companies, only 5 percent of senior managers are women. These numbers present a statistical profile that is troubling when we consider that the percentage of bachelor’s degrees earned by women rose from 35 percent in 1960 to 50 percent in 1980, and to 57 percent in 2000. Similar growth exists at the master’s degree level: from 32 percent in 1960 to 50 percent in 1980 and 58 percent in 2000. In contrast, the rate of growth is even greater for women earning business degrees. At the bachelor’s level the percentage rose from 7% in 1960 to 34% in 1980 and 50% in 2000. At the master’s level, the percentage of degrees earned by women went from a low of 4% in 1960 to 22% in 1980 and 40% in 2000.(U.S. Department. of Education, 2002) Therefore, more women are graduating from college, more women are earning degrees in business, but their presence in senior management is negligible. Despite comprising more than two-thirds of the population and more than 57 percent of the labor force in 1995, women were underrepresented at upper levels of management. This representation of women in management suggests that at executive levels we would see a similarly strong representation of women. Contrary to their presence at middle management, women comprise only 5 percent of executive suites. The data...
have not improved, for while women now make up more than 45% of the labor force, they represent only 12% of all corporate officers (Catalyst, 1999). Women are graduating and entering management positions yet there is a bottleneck at middle management levels (Current Population Survey (2001) http://ferret.bls.census.gov). Women experience glass-ceiling effects that keep them from climbing corporate ladders to levels above middle management. As more women graduate with business and other professional degrees and enter corporate life, the problem becomes more urgent they experience a slower progression compared to their male counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; OECD, 2002). So, while entry is easier, progression slows and in most situations regardless of their qualifications or achievements, women are prevented from climbing the corporate ladder to the top. Thus, the glass ceiling describes an organizational level beyond which female managers are not promoted even though they are as qualified as their male counterparts.

In theory, women dominated industries should have improved pay equity, lesser gender discrimination and contain a relatively higher number of executive women than men dominated industries. In January 2002, the General Accounting Office (GAO) (Dingell and Maloney, 2002) reviewed the status of women in management positions in ten selected industries. Women were more likely to be employed in the service industries and in finance, real estate, wholesale, and retail trade. Nearly 75% of employed women work in service industries, and in finance, real estate, wholesale and retail trade. The primary goal was to follow up on the findings on the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission and to further understand the continuing impact of the glass ceiling on women’s advancement to the top. The GAO data shows that women managers continue to lag behind their male counterparts, with full-time women managers earning less than their male counterparts in both 1995 and 2000. Furthermore, in seven of the ten industries, the earnings gap actually widened between 1995 and 2000. Not surprisingly, only five of the industries had women managers in the same proportion as in the industry’s workforce in 2000. Thus, across industries (Kirchmeyer, 2002), and particularly in industries employing the majority of U.S. women workers and the majority of U.S. women managers, women experience economic segregation and women managers are behind their male counterparts in advancement and pay. Blau and Kahn present economic analyses showing a decline in the wage gap and evidence that the high wage ratios for younger women decline with age. Therefore, as women move to the executive suite they experience a wider wage gap

The under-representation of women at top management levels occurs across occupations (Tang, 1997; Robinson-Walker, 1999; ACHE, 2001; Goodman et al, 2003), industries (Dingell & Maloney, 2002), and countries (OCED, 2002). The hard reality of the glass ceiling is encountered by management women particularly those at executive levels, regardless of the number of women employed or the numbers at management levels (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; GAO, 2002; OECD, 2002). Interestingly, this deficit occurs at a time when business and public policy initiatives are actively seeking to shatter the glass ceiling. The U.S. Department of Labor’s “Glass Ceiling Initiative” and the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (created by Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1991) provide volumes of research and
accompanying initiatives and laws to prevent discrimination against women, yet discrimination in its various forms continues.

This paper describes the glass ceiling, examines perspectives from which to understand studies of the glass ceiling and approaches to shattering the glass ceiling; and discusses implications for both the research and policy approaches.

**Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies**

Discrimination against women manifests itself in various forms, including: job segregation, wage gaps, sexual harassment, the denial of career development opportunities (including mentoring and poor performance evaluations), and a lack of promotion opportunities. Being a woman and working outside of the home calls for additional education about sex and gender biases and an alertness to the reality of workplace inequity. Additionally, working mothers are stereotyped as not being serious or reliable enough to take positions as managers because their priorities lean more towards raising a family; this is often presented as an either or argument, effectively advancing the myth that successful executives are unable to manage multiple priorities. Therefore, women are not taken seriously at work. If women are to earn an unbiased salary and experience career satisfaction, if corporations are to benefit fully from the capabilities of qualified managers, certain workplace attitudes and behaviors must change or be protected from expressions of partiality and gender/sex bias.

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

Research that explains the emergence of gender-related behaviors in organizations generally fall into three categories (Bartol et al, 2003; Cleveland et al, 2000; Powell & Graves, 2003): biological, socialization, and structural/cultural models. Biological models address genetic, hormonal, and physical characteristics; socialization models posit that gender identity and differences grow from life stage development that come through activities of daily living such as schooling, play, and work life. Structural/cultural models argue that social structures, systems, and arrangements define gender differences as being due to discrepancies in status and power. Researchers conclude that the study of gender and management has resulted in a sameness/difference debate with research on women in management becoming either polarized or marginalized. Thus, they argue for attention to the “biological, social and thereby often domestic fact of being female, and how this intersects with the conditions in the workplace” (Rees, 2003). Izraeli and Adler (1994) make the case that issues affecting women in management have been studied from three perspectives, with a fourth added to explain the persistence of the glass ceiling:
1) A reliance on individual-level differences between women and men.
2) An emphasis on organizational context.
3) The unveiling of institutionalized discriminations.
4) Revealing power's influence in the organization to preempt change.

Because research informs policy, and gender-associated discrimination is often remedied through policy that guides organizational behavior, it is important to recognize the implications of certain research and policy assumptions. One important benefit of having a framework for understanding research and policy foundations is being able to predict the effect of approaches to resolving the resultant problems of gender discrimination. Given the above perspectives, we can understand possible solutions that are derived from each of the four perspectives. Specifically, what are the implications of focusing on individual-level differences, organizational context, institutional discriminations, and/or power's influence? Other frameworks with different naming schemes exist for the glass ceiling and for the broad category of inequality. For example, inequalities may be explained through terms such as socialization, intentional discrimination (overt and subtle), unintentional discrimination (e.g., gender schemas, homophobic inclinations), and institutionalized discrimination (e.g., gender biases in the structure of jobs, reward systems, etc.)

Perspective one focuses on individual level differences between women and men and suggests that women must change. The suggestion is that the characteristics and behaviors displayed by men are normative, and that they are associated with successful work organizations. This perspective, of course, ignores those aspects of organizational life that mitigate and even thwart the presence of women at executive levels. Saying that women must change also ignores the volume of research that identifies the traits held predominantly by women as deeming them more qualified for national and international management assignments. At the same time research supports the position that had been earlier asserted by Kanter and later by Eagly that organizational roles do override gender roles. Kanter (1977) and Eagly & Steffen (1984) present discussions on the effects of proportions and the ensuing gender stereotypes and other effects that result from being viewed as tokens. A logical extension argues that because apparent sex differences are a product of structural positions of the sexes, in the absence of structural differences sex differences will be imperceptible. Yet, gender differences persist in terms of authority, benefits, and evaluative judgments. What is not conclusive are the causes for these apparent evidences of gender discrimination. To propose an individual level solution could be further evidence of discrimination, especially if the sources of disparities lie elsewhere.

The contextual perspective argues that attention to organizational context declares that women gaining qualifications held predominantly by men are not sufficient. It perceptively pushes forward to ask the
question: What are the societal and organizational factors affecting women’s managerial careers?

Authors adopting this perspective suggest that society in general and organizations in particular must engage in conversations that would investigate among other things, the reasons why women lag behind men in total compensation, why women have fewer direct reports than men, and why women have fewer international assignments when compared to their structural male counterparts (Lyness and Thomson, 1997).

Third, thoughtful attention to institutionalized discriminations requires acknowledging the discrimination, a commitment to change by management, and the cooperation to change across organizational levels. This view rejects the idea that organizations are gender neutral. In fact, institutionalized discrimination occurs when sex-related assumptions influence employment and workplace decision-making. For example, preferred workplace supervisory behaviors, communication styles, and leadership skills originate from sex-stereotypes. The logic states that a good manager possesses predominantly masculine characteristics. Powell, Butterfield and Parent (2002) used the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) to investigate men and women’s descriptions of a good manager and found after over twenty years, during which more women have moved into management positions, a good manager is still viewed in masculine terms. When these stereotypes influence workplace decision-making, managers are no longer interested in the descriptors of a good manager, instead, they employ leader stereotypes to select and promote managers. Thus preferred workplace behaviors become gendered. The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission recognized the existence of this perspective as it investigated the glass ceiling in both government and business and made its recommendations. Lastly, attentiveness to power’s influence means a requisite changing of the interests of the organization’s most powerful members. Evidence suggests that there might be a particular interest in maintaining the status quo, to limit the movement of women from middle to executive levels. With over half of all masters degrees being awarded to women, it is surprising that 95 percent of senior-level managers of the Fortune 1000 and 500 service companies are men (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995b). Whether discrimination against women in management is caused by cultural prejudices within a country (Take for example the fact that in male-dominated Japan women are assigned the primary role of mothers and wives, not managers; and definitely not managers over men. In Japan, “only 8.9 percent of working women have managerial positions, compared with 46 percent in the U.S.”), (Lev, 2004) or cultural prejudices within an industry (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995a, GAO, 2002), the effect is that those in power have the capability to preempt (or facilitate) change. The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission’s fact-finding report details (p. 26-36) societal, government, and internal structural barriers that affect the glass ceiling. If barriers exist, then women managers are more likely to be in service than in manufacturing industries. Yet, upon examination of employed persons within industry by gender and occupational level (p. 221), women do have greater representation in the service industry workforce, as expected, but lower representation at executive levels. This latter perspective in particular, gives researchers direction for pondering the perplexing question of why the glass ceiling persists. The glass ceiling has many effects;
the main consequence is inherent in its description, women’s upward mobility is impeded by many barriers. The presence of a glass ceiling is also associated with pay gaps between women and men. The gap is greatest for women who are close to and for those who have broken through the glass-ceiling (Morris, 2005).

While the wage gap is a reality experienced by women managers, it is widest for parents. Combining parenthood with advancement into management is particularly difficult for women (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001).

“Just looking at married managers (those most likely to be sharing their parenting responsibilities), nearly 60 percent of male managers in these ten industries have children in the home, compared to little more than 40 percent of female managers (working full- or part-time). Over all industries, over two-thirds of married male managers are raising children, compared to less than a third of married women managers. This discrepancy suggests that difficulties in combining family and work are a significant constraint on women’s attack on the glass ceiling” (Dingell and Maloney, 2002).

Women consistently work longer hours (paid plus unpaid) than men and perform the majority of the unpaid household work (Crittenden, 2001). Thus, women attempting to move into senior management are challenged not only by being parents, but also by the fact that women work longer hours without the requisite remuneration and reward of upward promotion. Now added to workplace stress from inequity we have a disproportionate distribution of household tasks. Women at the highest executive levels experience more obstacles than both their male counterparts and than lower level women. Executive women and men are similar in many ways, including pay grade and work attitudes. Yet, these women differ from executive men in that they have less authority, receive lower total compensation, have less international mobility, and have greater pressures from family demands[1] (Catalyst, 2003; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995a; Lyness &Thompson, 1997 ). The Families and Work Institute, Catalyst and The Boston College Center for Work and Family conducted a study of women and men executives at multi-national companies. “Leaders in a Global Economy: A Study of Executive Women and Men” found that “women at reporting levels closer to the CEO are more likely to have children and less likely to have decided not to have children than women executives at lower levels, when differences in age are controlled statistically. Moreover, these higher-ranking women are no more likely to have delayed or decided against committed relationships than women in lower status executive jobs.” Specifically,
• 18 percent of women versus 9 percent of men have delayed marriage or a commitment to a partner and 3 percent of women versus 1 percent of men have decided not to marry. Currently, 94 percent of men are married or in couple relationships compared with 79 percent of the women.
• Executive men and women have lives at home that are very different from one another: 74 percent of women surveyed have a spouse/partner who is employed full-time while 75 percent of men surveyed have a spouse/partner who is not employed.
• 35 percent of women versus 12 percent of men have delayed having children and 12 percent of women versus 1 percent of men have decided not to have children. Currently, 90 percent of men executives have children compared with 65 percent of women executives.

The glass ceiling is a pervasive barrier to the advancement of qualified women in management. Among these women there exists person factors that render the glass ceiling even more impenetrable; race has been long associated with both inability to enter, and restriction from the executive suite. African-American women often describe the barriers blocking their career advancement as the “concrete ceiling.” Women of color, African-American and Latinas, are less likely than white women to move into the executive suite (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995a, b). African-American women are the most underrepresented group of women in private-sector management despite the growth of this talent pool between 1991 and 2001 (Perspective, May 2004). The removal of barriers requires both societal and organizational efforts to ensure that women are not discriminated against because they are women. Strategies are needed that enable women to be viewed as the qualified professionals that they are. Structural barriers must be monitored and removed; biased attitudes must be identified and controlled by individual and organizational policies. The Commission recommended that to make full use of the nation’s capital, business should: demonstrate CEO commitment to workforce diversity, include diversity in all strategic plans and hold line managers accountable for progress, use affirmative action as a tool., select, promote and retain qualified individuals, prepare minorities and women for senior positions through expansion of access to core areas of the business, formal mentoring programs that provide career guidance and support, educate the corporate ranks to encourage merit-based practice and behavior, initiate work/life and family-friendly policies. And finally, business should adopt high performance workplace practices. Those eight recommendations to business share an emphasis on organizational context, addressing the question: What are the organizational factors affecting women’s managerial careers? The underlying perspective appears to come from an understanding that organizations have not been gender neutral; that discriminations have been institutionalized and must be unveiled and eradicated.

The next four recommendations are for government, first, to lead by example. Second, strengthen enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. Next, improve data collection including breaking out data by race and gender. And finally, increase disclosure of diversity data, specifically data on the most senior positions. These recommendations to government seem to originate from the same viewpoints
expressed to business. Additionally, they seemingly emerge from the point of view that there are powerful influences within both business and government to preempt change; thus, there is a need for monitoring, surveillance, and legislative actions.

Implications for Research and Practice

The glass ceiling exists for women in management and it is being studied and remedied from varying perspectives. A few women have moved beyond the glass ceiling into the executive suite, yet their number is not proportionate to their representation at middle management levels and is far below that of their similarly qualified male counterparts. For the glass ceiling to be shattered many issues and unanswered questions linger. First, what experiences facilitated their upward mobility? What processes did women in the executive suite use to attain their positions? Likewise, what were the attitudes and enabling (and blocking) behaviors of the position holders above them? And, how do women and men at the same structural level differ and what do they have in common? After answering these questions for executive women, it is also important to compare middle management women to executive women to develop predictors of movement beyond the glass ceiling. After all, the goal is to help them get past the glass ceiling; thus, the necessity to study causes for barriers and as well as successes.

Finally, to what extent does self-selection and selection by powerful others influence the compensation and progression of women and men in organizations. Executive succession is dependent on knowledge of the company’s succession strategies, gaining necessary experiences to best prepare for upward mobility, and awareness by those above of the manager’s experience and level of preparation. Built on that foundation is the managers realizations that much of what they receive as executives (compensation, number of reports, future assignments, perquisites, etc.) is negotiable. Negotiation is likely only if the manager is aware that negotiation is possible and has information about feasible limits. This need for a vast amount of knowledge suggests that executives who desire to be upwardly mobile need powerful networks that provide facts and champion their cause.

Much of the research on women in management is limited in that data cannot be compared across studies. Organizational levels and pay are not comparable across organizations. The more useful studies will be within organizations where data can be examined for men and women at each level and across levels after controlling for various relevant factors. Then we can move to helpful meta analyses that define comparable factors, such as pay ranges, pay, and levels within industries. Maybe with this level of intentional research design data can be more useful to inform policy. Finally, both grassroots and governmental agencies should continue to monitor the glass ceiling both to spur action to remove it and to acknowledge those organizations that are actively unbiased and who embrace the abilities of both men and women.
Appropriate research is necessary to monitor and to understand the glass ceiling. Yet, the best expression of inclusion is the removal of structural and pipeline barriers. At the firm level, leaders should demonstrate commitment to inclusion through specific actions. They should adopt high performance workplace practices. Leaders should build and communicate the business case for diversity. Accountability structures and measures to advance a diverse workforce should be developed, diversity should be included in all strategic plans, line managers should be held accountable for progress, and the corporate ranks should be educated to encourage merit-based practice and behavior. Minorities and women should be prepared for high visibility, high-impact and senior positions through the expansion of access to core areas of the business, formal mentoring programs that provide career guidance and support. Work/life and family-friendly policies should be initiated. And finally, selection, promotion and retention practices of qualified individuals should be through objective and unbiased workplace practices. (See Bryan, 1998; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995a & b; Catalyst, March & August 2003)

References


OECD Employment Outlook (2002). *Chapter 2: “Women at work: who are they and how are they faring?”* Published by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.


**Other Recommended Readings**


Catalyst maintains an informative web site at: www.catalystwomen.org

Families and Work Institute’s web site is www.familiesandwork.org


Representative Carolyn Maloney maintains an informative web site that addresses women’s issues and in particular the glass ceiling. A copy of the 2003 GAO’s report on the current state of the glass ceiling can be accessed at: http://www.house.gov/maloney/issues/womenscaucus/glassceiling.html