

Breaking the Glass Ceiling

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Abstract

Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles, even with the progressive nature of society today. The glass ceiling is a metaphor for the unseen yet ever-present barrier that women face, despite any qualifications or capabilities they may have. Various research has been done on the topic as to why this issue persists. The main reasons for this impediment have to do with traditional stereotypical views and gender biases, workplace discrimination, and generally less opportunities for networking and success than men have received. Regardless of these obstacles, women have proven time and again that they are resilient and more than capable of breaking the glass ceiling. There have been plenty of measures put in place to diminish the problem within organizations such as implementing anti-bias technology, proper training, and generally providing more support for women.

Breaking the Glass Ceiling

While today's world is constantly progressing in so many aspects, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions. Traditionally, women have always had the unfortunate stereotypical labels such as timid, domestic, or sensitive, which has led society to view them in these terms; causing them to struggle to be seen as anything but. Because of this perspective, women have felt discouraged to break away, speak up, or strive towards higher roles in business or beyond. Additionally, Nixdorf and Rosen explain that leaders were customarily thought to exhibit certain traits that predisposed them to act effectively in these positions (as cited in Klenke, 1996). These stereotypical views have caused women to develop a general lack of confidence. Since this all has inevitably resulted in more opportunities for men, women have consistently not had as many chances to grow or even start.

Unfortunately, these unconscious biases have been embedded in the mindset of organizations which has made it difficult for women to defy them. When women are involved in a workplace scenario, they are commonly viewed as emotional or accommodating instead of dominant and ambitious. This stops women from getting promotions or being hired into upper-level positions in the first place. A study from 1986 "by the Harvard Business Review of 1,900 male and female executives found that while these stereotypes have diminished since 1965, they were still widespread" (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). Additionally, organizations are predisposed to masculinity because of networking opportunities that cater to men. According to chief investment officer Anne Richards, "the problem for many women is that they have fewer networks than men, such as golf clubs and private members' clubs, which often help in gaining promotion and higher pay" (as cited in Oakley, 2012). She also explains recent research from the University of Bristol, "which found that a golf club was more useful than attending a top

university in helping someone gain a boardroom position” (as cited in Oakley, 2012). This inevitably contributes to workplace discrimination which has caused women to struggle to be taken seriously in business.

Even with the progressions of today’s society and more women role models than ever before, businesses have stubbornly maintained a gender bias. However, there have been many conscious efforts to better support women in the workplace and eliminate discrimination. After all, Rao et al. (2021) report research indicating that “gender diversity contributes to better organizational and financial performance, and organizations with a higher number of females in board positions display stronger financial and organizational performance as well as better corporate governance” (as cited in Rao et al., 2021). Despite the barrier of the glass ceiling preventing women from attaining leadership positions due to stereotypical discrimination or other male-dominated factors, women are proven to be essential to workplace success and are more than capable of achieving these roles.

Research has determined plausible reasoning for why women face barriers to advancing in organizations. Various outlets have explored the definitions of a glass ceiling, who is strongly impacted, and if this is truly a barrier or just another word for inequality. Nixdorff and Rosen report that the topic of women in leadership has only been the subject of research since the 1980s and that “since the studies and leadership theories were framed and developed through the eyes of men, the results were biased portrayals of women leaders” (Klenke as cited in Nixdorff & Rosen, 2010). Additionally, multiple studies examine women’s attitudes and outlook towards business versus men’s and found they are predisposed to feel unmotivated and underqualified. The majority of research surrounding the glass ceiling disadvantage relates to the unfortunate stereotypes and biases women have faced for years and continue to face today.

One of the most popular topics regarding women in business explores the definition of what the glass ceiling is and how it has impacted women's ability to excel in leadership. Ultimately, the glass ceiling has only made it easier for men in business which in turn makes everything more difficult for women. A certain article in particular dives into the various criterion which measures the glass ceiling effect in terms of the discrimination women face as well as the acknowledgment of inequalities in business. Cotter et al. (2001) explain, "The definition of a glass ceiling must recognize that it reflects a job inequality that is unexplained by a person's past qualifications or achievements". When women attempt to gain a position of power in an organization, they are automatically judged based on their gender, regardless of their professional history. Similarly, how a person enters a position also affects their ability to succeed, which has always been more challenging for women. Stroh et al. (1996) explain "if men enter at higher levels to begin with, more men will end up at higher levels, even with equal promotions; and if women leave more often, for instance, because of perceived poor chances for promotion then that too would contribute to more men ending up in the highest positions (as cited in Cotter et al., 2001)." This indirect discrimination has led to fewer women being represented in organizations and has ultimately affected the way females are viewed in the business world.

Organizations have been predominately run by male figures which have contributed to the gender biases that are still exemplified today. When thinking of a high-level executive, certain traits come to mind such as powerful, confident, distinguished, and usually male. Unfortunately, these labels are not traditionally associated with women which explains why they have consistently struggled to assert themselves in the business world. On the whole, women have been stereotyped in such a way that sees they are unfit to lead. Director of Research

Caroline Simard quotes, "Stereotypes shape our perceptions of competence. We hold women to a higher standard in evaluations, and women also tend to evaluate themselves to a higher bar" (as cited in Silverman, 2015). While this is not necessarily a negative stereotype, society has continually viewed women as inferior to men which has made it difficult for everyone to overcome these biases. This has even caused women to view themselves in a dimmer light, ultimately affecting their confidence and self-esteem. Simard goes on to explain that these biases could eventually lead to "cumulative disadvantage over a woman's career over time, resulting in lower access to key leadership positions, advancement and pay," (Silverman, 2015).

Within this male-dominated world, women are not given as many opportunities to reach their full potential. Men have always had the advantage of automatically fitting in with the professional environment and are able to form bonds and connections through the comradery that comes with their gender. Oakley (2012) reports from Anne Richards, chief investment officer at Aberdeen Asset Management that "the problem for many women is that they have fewer networks than men, such as golf clubs and private members' clubs, which often help in gaining promotion and higher pay. She points to recent research by the University of Bristol, which found that "the golf club was more useful than attending a top university in helping someone gain a boardroom position" (Oakley, 2012). If networking is so important to advancing in the business world, women have to try even harder to be involved. Additionally, women have to work to assert themselves among the male population as well. Because of the stereotypical views placed on women, they must overcompensate to display traits of professionalism and power. At the same time, these types of dominant women make men feel inferior or uncomfortable which also affects their chances of moving up in leadership. An article from the Wall Street Journal dives into the male perspective of women in the workplace. Chief executive officer of the

Federal National Mortgage Association, David Maxwell explains that his fellow executives are much more comfortable dealing with other men (as cited in Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). He goes on to say how “top executives are often quick to feel the woman who is tough isn't being womanly, while the woman who isn't tough isn't worth having around.” (1986). While this example is from the 80s, this perspective is still evident today. Executives are predominantly male and women still struggle to break away from the idea that they are not worthy of a leadership role.

These facts pointing towards why women might have had a hard time excelling in leadership roles are understandable when looking at things historically. Women have traditionally been caretakers, housekeepers, or have had roles of similar structure which are not typical qualities of leadership. Because of this, women have also not been given opportunities to defy these stereotypes due to higher positions usually being given to men. Additionally, women face discrimination from past jobs they have had which stop them from being promoted or hired as a leader. Generally, men do not have this issue so they are taken more seriously and hired in better positions from the start.

Despite the evidence displayed on the fact that women have faced barriers to succeeding in business, women are capable of leadership and indeed can break the glass ceiling. Throughout the years, women have consistently persevered and have become an inspiration for future generations. Diversity within organizations has slowly evolved, however, there is still a long way to go. Nevertheless, women have constantly proven their capabilities in leadership and executive positions which can eventually destroy the glass ceiling permanently.

Research by Nixdorf and Rosen (2010) reports that “young women thrive in environments in which there are fewer male competitors, hold less stereotyped views on gender, hold higher

aspirations, may have greater opportunities for training of leadership skills, and may have increased self-confidence that may be the result of exposure to successful women role models” (Nixdorf & Rosen, 2010). Ultimately, women need support if they are going to succeed in the business world. This can be attained with the help of mentors and sponsors who advocate on behalf of their careers. Sponsorship has been integral to women’s advancement for years and helps to develop positive workplace relationships built on trust and respect. According to Rao et al. (2021), “Research has shown that women who are mentored do better in their careers than women who are not, and those sponsors are said to influence promotion decisions, give access to those in power, and provide other support for women's career progress” (2021). The concept of sponsorship is the same as making connections and networking, something that women have been unfairly left out of. Part of the reason why women have struggled for so long to excel in organizations is that they have rarely been acknowledged. Sometimes though, the support systems come from fellow women in business who come together to help each other out. Grandis (2022) describes some examples of how women have attempted to make up for the lack of female-inclusive networking opportunities. Various efforts include alumni groups from previous programs, coaching sessions for interviews or leadership opportunities, or even informal networks relating to childcare or family issues (Grandis, 2022). Mothers who spend time with their families should have every right to a leadership position as a father does. The more connections and support women have with other organizational members, the more confident and empowered they will feel to strive for higher positions.

In general, women should feel supported, inspired to succeed, and determined to break away from the social and societal restraints that have held them back. There have been various studies on what might help women feel more empowered in their career journeys and their lives.

A study from 2018 dives into the effects of implementing a social learning initiative through a community of practice specifically for women in sports professions. Kraft et al., (2021) suggest “Organizations, including sport, education, medicine, and others, may consider replicating a similar social learning initiative to enable women [and male allies] to engage in ongoing learning opportunities to support each other in their leadership development journeys” (2021). The main idea is that organizations should work to help women develop their own skills that will further their careers in leadership, which can be done through a community of practice. The alternative is a gender-biased organization that does little to encourage or enable women to be successful. The purpose of this study was to prove that women do face discrimination in the workplace despite the evidence proving how essential women in leadership could be to an organization’s success (Coleman, 2010, as cited in Kraft et al., 2021). Communities of Practice or CoPs have been used in many fields to develop and improve organizational practice. In this instance, these are a group of people who care to make a difference. Typically, CoPs are related to gender in that workplace roles are associated with either masculine or feminine traits. As a result of this, women have experienced challenges in leadership CoPs. The goal is to develop CoPs with a focus on femininity to enable women to develop leadership styles with their own capabilities, instead of replicating masculine traits. The study also reports feedback from some of the women who participated and how positive they feel their experience was. One participant who previously described herself as an introvert said being a part of a group of individuals who supported her growth has enabled her to gain more confidence in herself (2021). All in all, implementing a Community of Practice should help make organizations less gender-biased and more inclusive as women get the support they need to succeed.

While organizations might try to erase their gender biases, discrimination persists within the male-dominated business world. However, actions are being taken to develop more inclusion efforts as well as establish training initiatives to decrease workplace bias. This can be evaluated through constant feedback and performance assessments. An article by Silverman (2015) explains that men and women are assessed very differently at work, which is a product of unconscious bias. Companies use vague criteria instead of specific measures when evaluating employee performance which can contribute to stereotypical views. Nevertheless, managers are becoming more aware of how they react to certain situations or people, especially when it comes to gender. Additionally, new software is being developed to help train organizations to become more aware of their stereotypical views in hopes to eliminate them in the future. Silverman (2015) explains about a software company called Textio Inc. which analyzes language to avoid bias in job postings. “Textio is also developing a performance-review product that sends prompts to managers if the language in a review appears to have gender biases” (Silverman, 2015). This is a big step in an effort to break the glass ceiling so that women can feel confident applying for and aspiring to leadership positions. Similarly, learning to recognize and understand implicit bias is just as important to eliminating discrimination in the workplace. Organizations are starting to utilize the Implicit Association Test to help catch unconscious biases among employees. This is especially important for those male executives or higher-ups who tend to have certain views that diminish women’s potential. If people focused on rewiring their brains to think of women as equal to men in regard to business operations, stereotypes might eventually disappear.

Despite the evidence suggesting women receive fewer opportunities and respect within organizations, conscious efforts are being made to reverse this. Companies are beginning to recognize the benefits of having women in power. Because of the progressive efforts to eliminate

biases against gender roles in the workplace, there is more support to help empower women. There are also more chances for women to network and become involved in society today than ever.

While women still face some difficulty pushing past the stereotypical and discriminatory perspective of society, they have proven to be resilient and more than capable of attaining leadership roles within organizations. Despite the notion that CEOs and executives are traditionally male, women continue to move to the forefront of business. Recent studies on this topic reinforce the fact that women are essential to workplace success and they have every right to be taken as seriously in business as men are. However, opportunities and advantages are still more commonly given to male professionals, which has hindered women's abilities to progress forward in business. The most important people who should be concerned about this issue are top-level executives, hiring managers, as well as any male employee who lives with the mindset that women are inferior. Luckily, the literature on this topic displays how organizations are already working to put measures in place to eliminate gender biases when hiring new employees or when evaluating their performance. Actions like this can ensure more women can be rightfully hired into leadership positions in the future without discrimination.

Although men have always had an easier time networking through outlets like golf clubs or making connections over a night at a bar, there is no reason why women cannot establish opportunities for themselves such as these. The research discusses the various ways women have made their connections through female-inclusive networking opportunities such as coaching sessions or familial groups. Through all the ways society has attempted to diminish women's potential, they consistently display their resilience in professional fields. The most important thing now is for women to really use their voices and start asserting themselves in the face of a

glass ceiling. The studies on this topic express how young women can utilize their strengths and thrive in environments where they feel confident to succeed. There need to be more inclusive organizational environments that help cultivate women's abilities so they are aspiring to more than they thought they could ever do. Additionally, young people need to have more exposure to women role models to prove that achievement is possible, regardless of gender.

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