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**WOMEN EMPOWERMENT – BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING**

**ANANDAMMA N.  
SR. LECTURER  
DEPARTMENT OF MBA  
NAGARJUNA COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY  
BANGALORE**

**ABSTRACT**

*Women in recent years have undoubtedly proved themselves in all walks of life. However, women executives still have to cover a lot of ground. As per the report of Catalyst, the leading research & advocacy organization for corporate women, it will take women 47 years to attain parity as corporate officers. The prime reason being the gender discrimination that has unnoticeably engulfed into most companies across the world. Some research reports have revealed that women declare 'gender barrier' as still playing a key role in restraining their achievements at the workplace. As a matter of fact, very few Indian companies have women in senior management positions. Recent survey reveals that only 26.1% of the listed companies have women in their board. A leading company like Videocon does not hire women for its office in Mumbai, no women would be found on the shop floor of Bajaj Auto. Despite this, women executives in India earn 40% less than what men earn in their entire career. Corporate argue that no glass ceiling exists. They claim that "women were paid lower salaries since they left the jobs midway, worked for less time and joined low-risk jobs." It is suggestive to take some remedial measures to overcome the glass ceiling. The issue can be dealt from two sides- employer & the employee. Employer can ask women about the organisation's culture, make organization more friendly & supportive, conducting regular interaction of board members with talented female executives, monitor the flow of promotions, make succession planning irrespective of their gender, and promote best practices for women & men. Women employees need to understand their own strengths & weaknesses make preparations for long term route map need to manage their profile & reputation as a tool of impression management, and understand organizational negative politics at different power bases to resolve their conflicts etc.*

**KEYWORDS**

empowerment, gender discrimination, glass ceiling, organization culture, politics.

**INTRODUCTION**

**W**omen in recent years have undoubtedly proved themselves in all walks of life. However, women executives still have to cover a lot of ground. As per the report of Catalyst, the leading research & advocacy organization for corporate women, it will take women 47 years to attain parity as corporate officers. The prime reason being the gender discrimination that has unnoticeably engulfed into most companies across the world. Some research reports have revealed that women declare 'gender barrier' as still playing a key role in restraining their achievements at the workplace.

The overall employment situation of women has not evolved significantly. 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. There has also been little change in their share of professional jobs in the last few years. Women occupy around 30 to 60 per cent of professional jobs. This represents an increase of 0.7 per cent between 1996-99 and 2000-02. However, considerable variations remain between women's share in different types of professional jobs. Cultural and social attitudes towards what constitutes "male" or "female" jobs result in occupational segregation, although the extent of the problem varies from country to country, and from job to job. Women are mainly concentrated in the "feminized" professions such as nursing and teaching, where at the same time they remain in lower job categories than men. However, women continue to make small inroads into non-traditional fields such as law, information and communication technology (ICT) and computer science, and engineering, and there is evidence that employers are beginning to promote women more systematically and to introduce family-friendly policies in order to retain them. However, women who choose non-traditional jobs can face special constraints in the workplace, not least of which are isolation, limited access to mentoring and female role models, and sexual harassment.

Management positions represent only a small proportion of the total workforce, although this job category has grown over the last few decades due to the growth in the service sector. The expansion of this sector has often given more employment opportunities to women and, although they remain under-represented, their increased participation in the sector has exceeded in their labour force participation as a whole. Recent global statistics show that women continue to increase their share of managerial positions but the rate of progress is slow, uneven, and sometimes discouraging for women faced with barriers created by attitudinal prejudices in the workplace. In those professions normally reserved for men, women managers are few and far between. Even in female-dominated sectors where there are more women managers, a disproportionate number of men rise to the more senior positions. The rule of thumb is still: the higher up an organization's hierarchy, the fewer the women.

**EMPOWERMENT**

Empowerment is any process that provides greater autonomy to employees through the sharing of relevant information and the provision of control over factors affecting job performance. Empowerment helps remove the conditions that cause powerlessness while enhancing employee feelings of self-efficacy.

**GLASS CEILING**

The concept of glass ceiling surfaced in the US in the late 1970s. Glass ceiling was not a barrier to an individual as such, but a barrier to women and other minorities as a group.

The US department of labor has defined 'Glass Ceiling' as "an artificial barrier based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevents qualified women and other minorities from advancing upward in their organization into senior management level position."

**GLASS CEILING REALITIES**

As a matter of fact, very few Indian companies have women in their senior management positions. According to an index positioned by Humanscapeindia.net, nearly three quarters of Indian women CEOs believe that they have to work much harder than their male CEOs to prove themselves. Recent survey reveals that only 26.1% of the listed companies (392 of 1,500 firms) have women in their boards. Out of the 278 directors on the BSE listed companies, there are only 10 women directors. Despite this, women executives in India earn 40% less than what men earn in their entire career. Even when compared to its global counterparts, corporate India stands below average. It is surprising to note that, only 36% of Indian companies have women holding top management positions, as compared to 91% of companies in China. HCL has 24.5 percent female workforce which is a significant achievement. It is tipping point. About 80 percent of the women who works in the company are at entry level, and the other 20 percent re spread through the ranks. Within this 20 percent, about 15-18 percent are first or second level managers; the rest are senior managers. This is an eye opening fact to contemplate on how successful women have been breaking the glass ceilings. Glass ceiling is an invisible hurdle that determines the level to which a woman can grow in an organization. In general, it is an attitudinal or organizational bias, which prevents women from occupying leadership positions in organizations. There are many signs to indicate that the glass ceiling exists in

organizations. A major sign of the same is the difference in the pay structure of women. Another indicator of glass ceiling is that women's career growth is hampered by the corporate culture. For instance, corporate policies and practices can maintain the status quo by keeping men in positions of corporate power. Stating that while women outperform in taking care while men outperform in taking charge is how the corporate sector justify this bias. Despite better performances, women receive less support and appreciation from their male bosses and are slower to be promoted. Such stereotypes act as main reasons for women failing to reach the top in an organization.

As far as women's share of managerial positions is concerned, the rate of progress is slow and uneven. Their share ranged between 20 and 40 per cent in 48 out of the 63 countries in the sample in 2000-02. 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. Both visible and invisible rules have been constructed around the "male" norm, which women sometimes find difficult to accommodate: male and female colleagues and customers do not automatically see women as equal with men, women tend to work much harder than men to prove themselves, and sometimes they have to adapt to "male" working styles and attitudes more than necessary. Furthermore, women tend to be excluded from the informal networks dominated by men at the workplace, which are vital for career development. The problem is compounded by employers' assumption that women, unlike men, are not able to devote their full time and energy to paid work because of their family responsibilities. Consequently, women are not given as many opportunities as men to do the more demanding responsible jobs, which would advance their careers. However, there is evidence to show that once women attain the upper levels of management, attitudes towards them are not much different to those towards men.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to know whether there exists glass ceiling for women executives in the corporate or not and to come out with ways to reduce glass ceiling, if it exists.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data is collected through secondary data sources. Secondary sources mean gathering information using published data such as journals, newspapers, research papers, reports, books and also through online.

## DATA BY COUNTRY AND AGE GROUP

Data from a variety of countries reveals that women continue to be seriously underrepresented in managerial positions, especially at the higher levels.

According to a study by the United States General Accounting Office published in 2002, women in the country now represented close to 47 per cent of the workforce, but held only 12 per cent of all managerial jobs. Women managers tend to be concentrated in certain sectors and jobs. More than 60 per cent of women managers were working in professional medical services, hospitals, and education. Women managers were also more likely to be found in personnel and human relations, while men managers were more likely to be found in purchasing, marketing, advertising, and public relations. Women were particularly under-represented in higher positions.

### CANADA

In Canada, 35 per cent of managers were women in 2001, an increase of 6 per cent since 1987. However, women's share of senior management jobs was lower at 23 per cent in 2001.

### THAILAND

In Thailand in 2000, women's share in the private sector as officers (45 per cent), supervisors (42.2 per cent), and department managers (41.5 per cent) was nearly double their share as directors (28.7 per cent).

### LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the share of women in managerial positions ranged from 25 per cent to 35 per cent, with a high of 48 per cent in the Netherlands Antilles and a low of 10 per cent in Suriname.

### JAPAN

In Japan, women managers were markedly under-represented, particularly in higher managerial positions, although the statistics show a slight improvement in the last decade. According to a 2002 survey by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of approximately 6,700 companies, women managers were working as sub-section chiefs (11.9 per cent), section chiefs (5.5 per cent), and department heads (3.2 per cent). In 1989, the figures were 5 per cent, 2.1 per cent, and 1.2 per cent respectively. The survey also revealed that 30.5 per cent of the companies canvassed reported that male employees were promoted more rapidly than female colleagues with the same university degrees, and 32.9 per cent reported that the difference between male and female positions and promotions became evident six to ten years after they had joined the company (between the ages of 28 and 32).

## SHARE OF WOMEN MANAGERS BY AGE GROUP

The survey done by United States General Accounting Office analysed the share of managers among the female employees by age group. It showed that only 5.6 per cent aged between 30 to 39 were sub-section chiefs, 4.1 per cent aged 40 to 49 were section chiefs, and 1.4 per cent aged 50 to 59 was department heads. Conversely, the share of male employees in the same jobs and age groups was 20.6 per cent, 24.5 per cent, and 17.2 per cent respectively. These figures show that after several years of work, a woman is more likely to be found in a lower position than a man with the same qualifications who joined the labour market at the same time. The reasons for this discriminatory practice have been identified in a number of surveys and attest to the fact that the damaging myths associated with women in business continue to pervade the workplace.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strategies to facilitate women's progression to management and executive positions require high-level commitment to change the existing culture within a firm or organization. Sensitization programmes at all levels of the hierarchy should be geared to refuse the myths surrounding women's capabilities and dedication to work, improving managers' understanding of gender and family issues, and endorsing the valuable contribution women can make to an organization's image and to its productivity. This can be dealt from two sides namely, the employer and the women employee.

From employers' side:

- Employer can ask women about the organisation's culture
- Make organization more friendly & supportive
- Conducting regular interaction of board members with talented female executives
- Monitor the flow of promotions
- Make succession planning irrespective of their gender, and promote best practices for women & men



From women employees' side:

- Women employees need to understand their own strengths & weaknesses, make preparations for long term route map need to manage their profile & reputation as a tool of impression management
  - Understand organizational negative politics at different power bases to resolve their conflicts etc.
  - In order to compete on a par with men, it is also essential that women have access to management training and line experience, mentors and role models at the highest levels, as well as admittance to formal and informal networks and channels of communication at work.
2. Integrated and sustained efforts also need to be made to ensure that components of equal employment opportunity policies (including recruitment, job assignment, career planning, grading, wages, transfer and promotion) are closely monitored and that the procedures are transparent, objective and fair.
    - More inventive elements can be added to ensure that women are not penalized financially for motherhood, such as the elimination of retirement plan forfeitures for career breaks, the provision of unpaid leave of absence with a guarantee of a job on return to work, and the promotion of women who work part-time.
  3. One of the main characteristics of professional and managerial work is the extended working hours that are entailed to obtain promotion. At times it is difficult for both men and women to reconcile the long hours required of management employees with their family responsibilities. Therefore:
    - Family-friendly policies (including flexible working hours, parental leave for men and women, child care facilities, etc.) should be important elements in any integrated package of measures supporting women at work.
  4. Measures that employers can take to improve the work environment of women in non-traditional jobs should include:
    - Ensuring that anti-discrimination legislation is enforced at the workplace so that women have equal access to jobs;
    - Implementing no-nonsense sexual harassment policies whilst providing education about sexual harassment to create a climate of respect in the workplace;
    - And providing forums for women to address issues affecting them in non-traditional jobs.
  5. More decisive measures are needed to harmonize remuneration structures for both male and female employees, such as:
    - Making wage systems more transparent and employees' eligibility for different components of remuneration more specific;
    - Ensuring that all employees' conditions and benefits are equal and giving part-time workers the same entitlements, conditions and benefits as full-time workers on a pro-rata basis;
    - Subjecting wages to review procedures, and regularly monitoring and evaluating pay systems.
  6. Strategies to encourage female students to widen their study choices include:
    - Eliminating sex-stereotyped images of women and men and sexist language from school curricula (teaching materials and teaching methods) so that women's equal participation in all areas of society is instilled into children's consciousness from an early age;
    - Sensitization programmes for teachers, focusing on removing discriminatory practices and attitudes from teaching and vocational guidance, and awareness raising campaigns among students' families and friends, and among the community at large.
  7. Female mentors and role models on which students can shape their career aspirations are in short supply at the tertiary level because the teaching profession tends to be dominated by women in the more junior positions.
    - Programmes are needed to improve their presence in the academic hierarchy, particularly in non-traditional subject areas. These programmes could take the form of affirmative action or quota systems to promote women teachers from within schools and universities, nominate them to selection committees, and provide them with high-profile professorial chairs.
    - The provision of on-campus child care facilities would not only give teachers the work flexibility they need but may also increase tertiary level enrolment of women with young children. Also, more women may be persuaded to enroll in scientific and technological fields if promotional materials on university courses in non-traditional subjects specifically targeted female students.
  8. Lastly, in order to overcome the general discriminatory view of women with non-conventional qualifications, programmes need to be developed to help employers recognize the capabilities of women and the benefits they can bring to their businesses.

## BREAKING THE GLASS

Gone are the days when we could hardly see women in the core management of organizations. Women are increasingly taking up superior positions in the corporate world, thereby turning down all the male bastions. In the corporate world women have shown true perseverance and determination to break the glass ceiling. According to the survey report of Fortune 500 companies (May 5, 2008 issue), 12 companies of Fortune 500 companies are run by women and a total of 24 companies in the list of Fortune 1000 companies have women in the top positions. There are women who have taken on the entire world: Indra Nooyi, CEO, PepsiCo; Lalita Gupte, JMD, ICICI, Naina Lal Kidwai, MD, HSBC India; Chanda Kochhar, CEO, ICICI, Pragma Raman, Group Executive President of Aditya Birla Group to name a few. Some of the India's top corporates are now passing specific mandates to head hunting firms to fill middle and senior management positions with women candidates. Bharti enterprises & American Express have mandated their recruitment agencies to have a certain percentage of women candidates' at the interview stage. These efforts are commendable and could pave the way for the corporate world.

## CONCLUSION

Living in a borderless world, where organizations operate at a global level, lot of space exists for career development. Large organizations are trying to create a positive and conducive work environment for women to work effectively & enthusiastically. Many corporates believe that these glass ceilings are myths & self created. They are of the opinion that women would have to barge their way out of this self-imposed barrier. The first opinion is that women can hold higher positions based on their talents, through hard work and aspirations. The second opinion talks about work challenges & family responsibilities that get in the way of women's career development. Many women discover that family is more important to them as they climb the corporate ladder & hence quit playing senior roles in the management. However, some ambitious women are in a career race backed by family support, by sharing the family burden equally with their partner. The glass ceiling no longer applies to many workplaces for most women. In reality also there is not as much as a barrier stopping women from progressing to the top as they seem to think but they should overcome the challenges. Though the change is slow, it is underway.

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