
Women and the Glass Ceiling in the American Workplace:

Describing the Phenomenon and Its Internal and External Causes

Eva Har-Even

"If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place."

—Margaret Mead

This statement was made in 1935, and its profound and lasting importance is underscored by appearing in two out of the four reports of the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission of the U.S. Department of Labor, chaired by the Secretary of Labor. The commission was created as part of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, and sunset on November 21, 1995, after a four-year mission to conduct a study and prepare recommendations regarding the elimination of artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities, and to provide them with opportunities and development experiences in management.

The commission's reports define the glass ceiling as artificial barriers that are based on bias in attitudes of individuals and organizations, and that prevent the advancement of individuals into management positions that they qualify for. The glass ceiling disregards merit and achievement, by reinforcing barriers that are discriminatory in nature. The commission's reports make a strong point in asserting that not only is it morally and legally wrong, but that companies can't afford glass ceilings. Due to a competitive global marketplace, companies need to promote the most qualified people, regardless of gender, color, race, or national origin. In the last report, Robert B. Reich, the chair of the commission, says,

"The glass ceiling denies millions of Americans opportunities for economic and personal advancement (1995)." He also claims that during the past 15 years, most of the economic growth of the nation went to the wealthiest fifth of households, while incomes have fallen for the poor and reached a plateau for the middle class. Reich assigns the blame for two major "fault lines" between winners and losers, namely, access to education and discrimination (the glass ceiling in particular)

Even though women are not the only group who encounters discrimination, the focus here will be on how the internal and external causes for the glass ceiling affect women in the workplace, be it in business, government, the media, or the professions.

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As a result, women have a full view of the top of the organization, but if they try to move up there, they hit the invisible shield. The glass ceiling exists at different levels in different industries or organizations, even though originally it meant a barrier to entry into top-level management positions only. Judith Lorber (1993) in her essay about the inequality women physicians face in their profession, squarely assigns the blame for the phenomenon to sexism. She claims that sexism permeates men's attitudes and hinders women's career mobility. Tannen (1994) agrees with this view, but correctly adds that sexism tells us where we are, but not how we got there, or how to get out. I cover all three issues here.

Many executives (mostly men) believe that there is no glass ceiling, but rather a pipeline problem. Women, according to them, have not been in management positions long enough to reach positions at the top (Tannen, 1994). This opinion is corroborated by a Catalyst survey of CEOs who claim that it is only a matter of time that women will have an equal share of management positions on all levels, because their advancement is at the same rate as men's, but they are latecomers into the work force and their current status reflects it. Contrary to this view, the evidence I have found in my readings repeatedly confirms the existence of the glass ceiling phenomenon in women's professional lives.

Representation of Women in the Work Force

The readings provided a wealth of statistical data on women's unequal representation and advancement into higher positions in every field. According to the 1991 Glass Ceiling Commission report, from 1979 to 1989 women's representation in the top executive positions of the 1000 largest American corporations rose from 3% to 5%.

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A 1991 survey of 94 Fortune 1000 companies found women comprised 37% of employees, 17% of managers, but only 6.5% of executive-level managers (Tannen, 1994). A recent *Business Week* survey indicated that in the top 1000 corporations, all (but one) CEOs are men (Powell and Butterfield,

1994). Women comprise 2.6% of 6,500 corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies, 18% of state administrative heads, 5% of city managers, 16% of all state legislators (Bullard and Wright, 1993). In the Federal Government, in 1990, of 150 senior executive service (SES) positions, women filled 29 (or 19%). At the same time, there was a total of 10% women in SES positions (Powell and Butterfield, 1994). In public education, 3.7% of superintendents in 1988 were women (Hill and Ragland, 1995). Morrison and Van Glinow (1990) in their article about women and minorities in management, say that based on a study from 1986 of colleges and universities, only 1.1% of the top positions of deans and above, were occupied by women. Women, according to them, occupy a third of all management positions, but this ratio is misleading, because most of them are stuck in jobs with little authority and low pay relative to men at the same level. Snyder, et al, (1991) quote the results of a study done in 1984, of 400 California firms demonstrating that 59% of firms were completely sex segregated. They also claim, as many others do, and as seen by the data presented here, that women are overrepresented in lower organizational levels and underrepresented in higher levels. The last report of the Glass Ceiling Commission, from November 1995, provides the latest statistics and accompanying commentary by Robert Reich. He says, "The executive suite is still overwhelmingly a white man's world." He presents the fact that half of all master's degrees are presently earned by women, yet in Fortune 1000 industrial companies and Fortune 500 service companies, 95% of senior-level managers are men, and 97% of these men are white. This is at a time when 57% of workers are women, minorities, or both.

Not only is the glass ceiling manifested in the positions that women occupy, but also by the lower pay that they receive for the same work that men perform. Additionally, their title is changed and diminishes in its value, they report to a lower executive than a man in the same position thus undermining their executive power, and once they penetrate a male-dominated profession, the entire profession loses prestige as well as income level, and becomes "feminized" (Lorber, 1993).

In the 1991 report of the Glass Ceiling Commission, one of the findings was that even when women advanced in their positions, the titles they received were inconsistent with those of men's throughout all businesses and industries, and the levels of their salaries were inconsistent with their titles. The report also quotes a study of women in corporate management, conducted by Catalyst in 1990, that showed that in some fields, such as financial services, women attained higher percentages in all levels of management than in either durable goods or non-durable manufacturing. In the Commission's third report (1995), the industries that

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The majority of workers in all these fields were women, except in retail where the numbers were about the same both for workers and managers. The industries where the percentages of male managers were overwhelmingly higher than female managers, were manufacturing, transportation, public utilities, communication, and wholesale trade. Public administration had a somewhat lower differential, but it is still a male-dominated industry in both general and management positions. The report provides the findings of a Catalyst survey of women in the private sector being concentrated in staff positions that are traditionally female, such as human resources, corporate communications, community and government relations, and the staff side of marketing and finance. Certain professions are predominantly staffed by women, including management positions. Some of the female fields are public education, social work, nursing, etc. Even in these fields, the top positions are still mostly occupied by men (Levinson, 1996).

Recognition and Compensation

Hill and Ragland in their 1995 book about women as leaders in the field of education, elaborate on the role of a job label in the level of compensation. Women receive different titles for similar duties, hindering their future advancement and pay scale. In public education, for example, women will often be called "supervisors;" men in similar roles are "directors" or "associate superintendents." Women receive less pay for the same type of work.

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Another glass ceiling phenomenon is expressed in the commission's initial report (1991). Female executives are very

similar to their male peers in terms of job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, and stress related to job performance, but not in terms of their future promotability. Female executives have much lower expectations of being promoted. The report attributes this to women managers' awareness of the existence of a glass ceiling.

In his book, *The Seasons of a Woman's Life*, Levinson (1996) says that there are multiple glass ceilings that a woman must get through. In this sense, the original term is a misnomer, because it implies that once a woman passes through a glass ceiling to the top she will be home free. The reality is that at each level the woman encounters artificial barriers and the problems are greater than in the previous level. Men encounter obstacles in their ascent too, but women's problems are more acute because of sexism. Women are placed in staff rather than in line positions, and these have a limited range of advancement. It is like being placed on the wrong track to the top. Also, sexist obstacles increase in the senior levels. Destructive female stereotypes, such as a tyrant, dragon lady, caring but powerless mother, woman who uses sex to advance to the top, are applied more frequently to higher-level female managers.

External and Internal Barriers

On their rise to higher levels of management, women encounter barriers of two kinds: external and internal. These barriers are the cause for the glass ceiling. Walsh and Osipow (1993) in their career counseling book for women, claim that while men managers suffer mainly from internal pressures, women's pressures are mainly external. I share this view, since throughout my readings for this paper, there seemed to be an enormous amount of evidence on external barriers that women managers encounter and have to overcome, in addition to the external and internal pressures that their male peers have to deal with and that women cannot escape either. The internal pressures seemed to be fewer and easier to deal with, as evidenced by women's increasing shift of orientation from what Levinson (1996) calls the Internal Traditional Homemaker figure to the Internal Anti-Traditional Figure.

The internal barriers that may prevent some women's rise to the top are hard to observe and to verify; they are subjective in nature and may be based on the observers' biases or on the women internalizing and adopting others' stereotypical views of them.

In their article about women in management, Morrison and Von Glinow (1990) argue against some researchers' opinions that emphasize person-centered traits to explain women's generally low job status. They claim that women's traits and

behaviors, socialization and attitudes, do not make them deficient or inadequate for management positions. They say that field studies refuted the assumption that women suffer from a fear of success and of taking risks, and thus are internally prevented from becoming managers in larger numbers. AT&T's Assessment Center reports showed, according to the authors, that women and men managers were more alike than different in personality, motivation, and abilities.

I believe that many women do internalize or suffer from undue pressures that are placed on them by their social environment. Because of the patriarchal environment that many women grew up in, they may lack a sense of inner authority.

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Levinson (1996) suggests that with the traditional division of labor, there was also a division of authority, which set up the man and not the woman as the figure of authority, the "head of the household." The woman internalized this lack of a feeling of power. This may explain why many women may feel a lack of self-confidence, a deficiency in having management skills, and intimidated by men (Walsh and Osipow, 1993). Women's Internal Homemaker Figure, as Levinson (1996) describes, may experience an emotional pressure, one that is instilled and reinforced by the environment, to select traditional careers, to put their children's and husbands' needs and careers before their own, and to sacrifice their careers within the role conflicts that they experience.

Some studies (Walsh and Osipow, 1993) indicate that females are less confident in occupational attainment, and have lower academic self-esteem, even when they have equal ability. Women's lower self-efficacy, or belief in performing a given task successfully, is especially weak when it relates to male-dominated educational majors (particularly mathematics) and careers. This self-perceived weakness is, in my opinion, a clear internalization of a stereotypical view and behavior towards women. Hill and Ragland (1995), in describing barriers to women's leadership in educational settings, maintain that the ongoing message to women from an early age is that they are less worthy and deserving than men, and that this treatment permanently sabotages their self-esteem. They often lack self-confidence, and suffer from a fear to challenge the stereotypical roles they were assigned. The authors mention their objection to some women's occasional use of a fragile image in their seeking of acceptance. In my opinion, when it comes to internal barriers, the biggest way women contribute to their own failure to advance results from internalizing the negative stereotypes and evaluations of their management abilities, to a

degree that they turn down opportunities because of a fear of failing. In other words, other people's negative expectations of women managers, cause these women to turn down assignments, due to their fear of failure (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990).

As I've stated before, I believe that women managers' hardest obstacles to overcome in their rise to higher management positions are external, rather than internal ones. I am not minimizing the importance of internal barriers but it is obvious to me that many of the internal barriers are environmental rather than a part of the female "nature," and thus if the environment and the "nurture" will change, the internal barriers that are unique to women will no longer exist. Some of the many external barriers that comprise artificial obstacles to women's advancement are discrimination based on gender and sex-role stereotypes; early age education and career channeling; lack of role models; difficulties in finding a mentor; more scrutiny by supervisors and peers; stereotypical evaluation process; social isolation due to tokenism; not being part of the good ol' boy powerful network systems; top executives' ways of grooming their successors; unequal compensation; limited access to training and developmental opportunities; image and communications style; leadership and management style; and assumptions regarding mobility and corporate recruitment practices (Walsh and Osipow, 1993; Lorber, 1993; Levinson, 1996; Hill and Ragland, 1995; Sekaran and Leong, 1992; Glass Ceiling Commission Reports, 1991, 1992, and 1995).

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Stereotyping

I believe that gender and sex role stereotyping and the resulting sexism is at the heart of the glass ceiling phenomenon. Levinson (1996) investigates the social and historical aspects of gender splitting. In American society, a rigid differentiation between the masculine and the feminine is manifested in the "Traditional Marriage Enterprise" where the male is the husband, father, and provider, and the female is the wife, mother, and homemaker. As the provider, the male has the ultimate power and authority within the unit, as well as the opportunity to advance and gain executive and leadership roles in the public worlds of work and society. The male controls the public sphere. The female is mostly confined to the domestic sphere, where she is subordinated to her husband, "the head of the household." If the woman participates in the public sphere, her role is marginal and subordinated. If she chooses to work, it is in traditional "female" professions.

such as nursing, teaching, social work, and office support. These occupations are an echo of her nurturing role within the family, an extension of her providing service to others, without threatening the patriarchal power structure. There were many dissenting voices all along against the patriarchal society. One of the loudest was Virginia Woolf, whose internal figure of the Angel was like Levinson's (1996) Traditional Homemaker Figure, and her internal figure of the Writer was like the Anti-Traditional Figure. These two figures were locked in a mortal combat, and Virginia Woolf hoped that the next generation of women would be fully free of the Angel to participate in all domains of human life as equals, without the burdens and limitations of stereotypical gender roles.

As women became increasingly involved in the work force, the traditional female occupations created little social conflict and gender tension. These "Genderized" occupations kept women segregated in professions that payed less and offered fewer opportunities for advancement in authority and remuneration. Even in the genderized fields, men held positions of policy making and high authority. The most problematic area and the one that created social conflicts and stress, was the entry of women into higher-status organizations and professions that were always dominated by men, and were considered "men's work." It was a violation of the traditional division of labor and of male authority, and it changed the segregated and genderized world of work (Levinson, 1996). Unfortunately, gender discrimination, segregation, and stereotypes are still in existence in all areas of American society. The most recurring theme in all the readings I have done for this paper is the belief that achievement is not feminine, that women's place is in the home and they cannot combine domestic and professional lives successfully, and that women are not as motivated or committed to their work as men because they are not the "primary breadwinners" (Walsh and Osipow, 1993; Snyder, et al, 1991).

In their research of women's self-perceived competence and organizational commitment, Snyder, et al, (1991) prove that even though the common assumptions about women's deficiencies in these areas are false, they cause them to suffer from uneven treatment by managers when it comes to promotions. The authors' research points to a correlation between rank in the hierarchy and self-confidence and commitment to the organization, regardless of gender. The higher the position, according to Snyder, et al, the more self-confidence and commitment is experienced by a person. However, women have not been promoted to higher positions because of a stereotypical bias that they lack self-perceived competence and organizational commitment.

Other gender-biased barriers that keep women from advancing are male managers' beliefs that women lack the

interpersonal and technical skills to be effective managers, thus they deny women the same autonomy as men receive in similar positions and give them routine assignments that do not lead to promotions. The resulting apprehension and anxiety experienced by the women managers may lead to making errors and to mismanagement, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of ineffectiveness (Walsh and Osipow, 1993). Judith Lorber (1993) describes in her essay about women physician's careers, a subtle boycott against them to maintain the glass ceiling. She calls the process the "Salieri Phenomenon." It entails the combination of faint praise and subtle denigration of female physicians' abilities to be leaders in their profession by their male colleagues. Lorber ascribes the reasons for this manipulation to male physicians' fear of the profession becoming too feminized and, as a result, losing prestige, income, and authority.

There are several plausible theories that posit the existence of discrimination against women in organizations because of their gender (Powell & Butterfield, 1994; Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). Patriarch theories suggest that men wish to keep women in a dependent status, so they limit women's advancement and opportunities. The theory of sex discrimination says that the subjective decision to promote a candidate to top management involves the evaluation of whether she will fit in with the incumbent top managers. A female is at a disadvantage in a male-dominated organization because of her dissimilarity to the rest of the management group. In the rational bias theory, even when men managers consider women equally qualified for the position, they choose a male candidate out of self-interest and a lack of regard for eliminating gender discrimination. In some instances gender discrimination is unintentional, and can involve having unconscious stereotypical biases as to who is an ideal candidate, having a fear of selecting an unacceptable candidate, and the tendency of people to select a candidate similar to themselves. Since the majority of incumbents in top positions are men, the "similar-to-me" effect is a strong dynamic in the continuation of the glass ceiling phenomenon (Powell & Butterfield, 1994).

Walsh and Osipow (1993) quote several sources that suggest that gender is not a simple internal trait based on biological factors, but rather depends on social context. Gender is a complex social and environmental construct, and differences in gender can be largely explained by the degree of access to power and influence. I believe this to be true, especially in explaining the differences in male and female interpretation of management and leadership roles and style.

Leadership Style

A distinct profile of women's leadership style emerged from the various sources in the reading materials that I have cov-

