The Glass Ceiling Phenomenon Revisited

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Abstract

Although the number of women entering the workforce has continuously increased, women still find themselves lower than men on the corporate ladder. This study explores the effects of the metaphorical glass ceiling and the professional advancement of women over the past century. It will look at what women and organizations can do to try to eliminate the glass ceiling phenomenon. Lastly, the study looks at how the glass ceiling has changed over time and if it is still relevant today?

Keywords: Glass Ceiling, Women, Gender Inequality, Earnings Gap, Discrimination, Management

1. Introduction

Labor force participation worldwide is rising, aided by the introduction of new technologies and influenced partially by a higher cost of living. A single income household is struggling to support a family, thus more women are participating in the workforce. This introduces new challenges for women and the organization, which eventually created the evolution of the glass ceiling phenomenon. The glass ceiling is described as the invisible barrier which denies women the ability of advancing in their profession. Factors contributing to the glass ceiling metaphor are the perception of management, conflicts between work and life, and gender discrimination within an organization.

History shows that women have not always been a major part of the labor force. The first breakthrough for women in the labor force began during World War II. More recently, as it became difficult for a single income household to comfortably support a family, women more actively participated in the labor force and took on a new role in society. The increasing power of women has paved the way for women's equality within the work force. The glass ceiling phenomenon is the barrier for women to overcome. Bendl and Schmidt (2010) indicated that "drivers of change like globalization, virtualization, demographic developments and value changes have led to new forms of organizations and occupational life concepts of individuals" (p. 613). As a result, Carnes and Radojevich-Kelley (2011) discussed how women have gained ground on the once male dominated labor force, education achievement and management roles. However, they are still at a disadvantage and underrepresented in the workplace (Bendl & Schmidt 2010).

Although the number of women entering the workforce is continuously increasing, women often find themselves lower than men on the corporate ladder. This study will begin with an illustration of how the glass ceiling phenomenon has adapted over the decades and the effects it has on professional advancement for women. Next this study will examine ways women can break thru the glass ceiling, and if it is still relevant today. The research study will ultimately explain how the glass ceiling phenomenon has affected the professional advancement of women over time and programs which women and organizations can implement to help eliminate this barrier.

2. Literature Review

Bendl and Schmidt (2010) evaluate the relevance of the glass ceiling metaphor. Barreto, Ryan and Schmitt (2008) examine the current barriers effecting women's advancement and their experiences in an organization. In a brief article, Sirghani and Keramatnia (2014) suggest ways to break it. The research from Adams and Funk (2012) examines the core value differences between men and women, rather than just gender. Carnes and Radojevich-Kelley (2011) highlight the effects the glass ceiling places on women and methods for dealing with those challenges. Moving on, Sahoo and Lenka (2016) explores the organizational benefits of women's promotion as well as organizational strategies to help women progress within the company. Omran, Alizadeh and Esmaeeli (2015) investigate the reasons why women are promoted to higher management less than men.

Eyring and Stead (1998) suggest corporate practices that will help women shatter the glass ceiling. From here, Coleman (2010) identifies a plan that corporations can adapt to help empower women. Finseraas, Johnsen, Kotsadam and Torsvik (2016) study how exposure to female colleagues' effect promotion to leadership positions. Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia and Vanneman (2001) studied the gender and race inequalities of earnings and how the glass ceiling phenomenon pertains to mainly gender. Following up this research, Newman (2016) focuses more on the gender-based earnings inequality between men and women. Fitzpatrick (2016) illustrates how she believes American Presidency is the highest glass ceiling for women. Furthermore, Yeager (2017) briefly describes the contributions some women have made toward women presidency. This research will begin with a brief history of the changing role of women over the past century, illustrating the setting of where we are now and the role of women today.

3. The Changing Role of Women

Early on, women had the role of staying home and taking care of the children. World War II put many women in the role of men in society. While men were overseas, women needed to fill many empty jobs. Women noticed that they were just as able as men. After the war, men came home and reclaimed their jobs, and women were left in confusion about where they were needed. A couple decades after World War II, as the cost of living continually rose, women entered the workforce once again to support their family. Women's workforce participation has been steadily climbing;
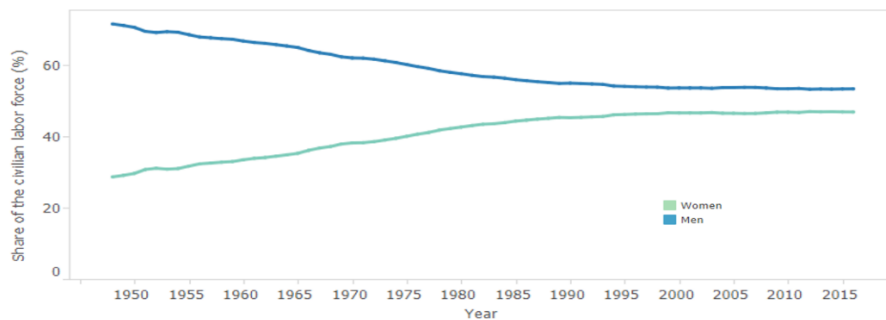
begging the question, why are so few women able to obtain managerial or upper level management positions compared to men? The glass ceiling metaphor was first appeared in an article written by Carol Hymowitz and Timothy D. Schellhardt, published in the Wall Street Journal on March 24, 1986. The glass ceiling is described as the invisible barrier which denies women the ability of advancing within their profession. The role of women in society has been evolving throughout the past century, eventually influencing the creation of the glass ceiling metaphor. It highlights the current movement towards women's equality in the labor force. Since its creation, new practices by women and organizations have been introduced to eliminate the barriers for women's professional advancement.

Figure 1: Labor force percentage between men and women.

The percentage of women's share of the civilian labor force grew from 29.6% in 1950 to 44.5% in 1986, and since then up to 46.8% in 2016 (United States Department of Labor, see Figure 1 above). Today, women and men are almost equal in the labor force, however, not in upper management positions (Jackson & O'Callaghan 2009). Many factors are impacting the growth of women on the corporate ladder; gender discrimination being the most prominent. Women are prevented from progressing in an organization even if their education and experience are more than enough. Women are perceived differently than men, and until the gender gaps disappear, the glass ceiling will remain.

Barreto, Ryan and Schmitt (2008) suggest that simply increasing women's representation within the workplace does not reflect a cutback in gender inequality. In many instances, when a woman's education and experience are superior to counterparts and is given the opportunity to advance within the organization, some may believe that gender was the reason for advancement. While advancing in an organization can be represented as 'cracking' the glass ceiling, discrimination can still exist. To start eliminating the glass ceiling, understanding of the current effects and factors associated with the glass ceiling is required.

4. The Effects of the Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling phenomenon has shed light to some of the obstacles facing women's advancement toward higher level positions. Gender inequality, although being the most prominent factor associated with the glass ceiling, is not the whole picture. Women experience gender inequality in nonmanagerial and managerial positions (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia & Vanneman, 2001).

The difference in earnings between men and women at the same level presents a strong disadvantage of the glass ceiling. A study by Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, and Vanneman (2001) concluded that at higher earnings levels, the gap between men and women's chances becomes greater over the course of the career. Despite this gap, older women can increase their earnings faster than younger women. Parental responsibility lowers as women age, given them the opportunity to devote the time and effort needed to advance, but not reaching the levels of men (Weinberger, 2011).

Another key disadvantage effecting woman is the hiring process since it involves deciding which of the most applicable candidates will benefit them the most long-term. Child birth can change a woman's career path immensely. During child birth, time is taken off from work, stunting the women's ability to keep up with constant changes in the workplace. If the woman decides to stay on leave and take care of the child full time, then the hiring process must start over. Although there are instances where men take time off, recruiters choose the best option at the time. The idea presents a difficult challenge for women's starting level in an organization and the adaptations they need to adhere to if they are expecting a child at any time during their career.

Having a child is an important time in a family's life and can have a major impact on the work-family balance. Some women choose to take care of their child by leaving work for an extended period or working from home. Leaving the workplace gives no career advancement. Working from home presents limits on the responsibilities, as well as decreasing personal interactions and communication making it more difficult to be considered for advancement. Sometimes, women are required to move away from their current position because of the man's relocation. If the man has a larger income, it may be the correct decision to move. In this case, women must obtain a new job at a new organization where their experience at the job is restarting. The glass ceiling metaphor could sometimes be used as an excuse for women to not put themselves in the best position for advancement. For example, women who do not continuously improve or strive to strengthen their skills create their own barrier. If a woman believes the glass ceiling is the highest they can achieve, then they will only reach the ceiling. Understanding the effects and factors the glass ceiling creates among women serves as a guideline to develop methods for women to break through the glass ceiling.

5. Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling phenomenon has been looming above women and organizations for decades. Although many improvements have been made to ensure the equality of men and women in upper management positions within the labor force, gender discrimination persists. Sahoo and Lenka (2016) illustrated a framework of strategies to eliminate the glass ceiling, while promoting

organizational performance, Figure 2. Women and organizations need to work together to eliminate discrimination and adopt new programs and procedures.
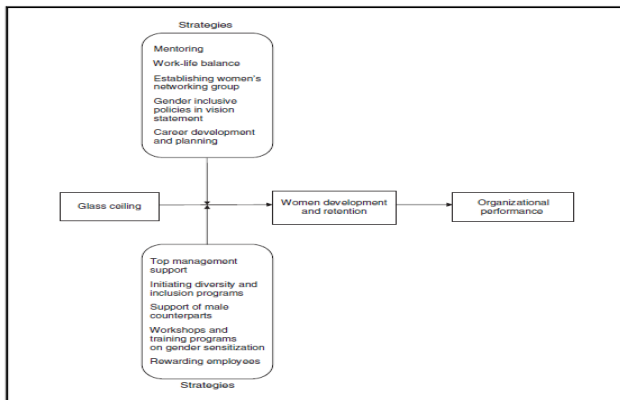

Figure 2: Strategies to minimize the glass ceiling.

Finseraas, Johnsen, Kotsadam, and Torsvik (2016) analyzed how exposure to female colleagues and leaders effected gender-based discrimination. The experiment results showed that the male candidate was ultimately chosen to a leadership position over a female with equal credentials; however, exposure to female colleagues decreases the overall gender discrimination and will present the ability for women to earn a leadership position. Thus, exposing the upper level management in organizations to more females can reduce gender discrimination and in turn help break the glass ceiling.

Gender-based earnings inequality effects a female's perception of the glass ceiling. Newman (2016) states that when women's income has surpassed that of men, we should expect an enhanced empowering sense. These experiences of confronting the glass ceiling should then teach and empower other women, in the sense of gender equality, and in turn diminish the weight of the glass ceiling. Practicing gender-based earnings equality within an organization will strengthen the empowerment of women and allow women to reach beyond the glass ceiling.

Organizations should practice strategies and provide resources promoting women's empowerment. Isobel Coleman (2010) illustrates a five-point plan to guide corporations. The plan includes measuring success appropriately (not numerical success), incorporating women's empowerment initiatives into business practices, providing appropriate resources and leadership training to women, aiding women's movements and helping close the gender gap in other countries, and partnering with women's empowerment organizations. Using this plan while promoting gender-based earnings equality within an organization can be used as a strategic aspect of operations. Organizational practices make a large impact on women's understanding of the glass ceiling and as such should make efforts to eliminate the barriers preventing women from ascending within the business. Eyring and Stead (1998) highlight the adoption of practices providing women with ways to mediate barriers affecting advancement. For instance, providing on-site child care and establishing programs creating flexibility between the work and family responsibilities.

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Women themselves contribute the most toward breaking thru the glass ceiling. By continuously exhibiting their personal ambition, improving their communication network, appreciation of other women's achievements, and not becoming discouraged when discrimination presents itself. When presented with a barrier, women should strive to continue to learn and gain experience so that they may soon break thru that barrier. Improving the communication network can present women with higher opportunities. Sirghani and Keramatnia (2014) state that "over 50 percent of managerial jobs are acquired through personal interaction and communication" (p. 5). Improving the communication network can open new opportunities potentially into higher management positions. The effects of women who successfully obtain high level management positions can directly influence the attitudes of other women.

Entrepreneurship is a growing trend among women in response to the need of flexibility between work and family lives (Carnes & Radojevich, 2011). Women are taking on more risks associated with organizing and operating their own business to put themselves in a high management position. Women who successfully establish and maintain business operations at a high-level break thru one of the barriers effecting women's advancement, but still does not eliminate gender inequality present in other workplaces. Successful entrepreneurs do, however, help the perception of women empowerment, and show other women what can be accomplished with hard work and ambition.

Many authors have accepted the United States presidency as the highest glass ceiling for women (Fitzpatrick, 2016). While the U.S. presidency has been dominated by men, women are on the verge of reaching America's highest level of management. Even at a worldwide scale, of the countries that have had a female head of state, few of them were directly elected (Yeager, 2017). United States presidency will help close the gender gap. Using the criteria for women and organizations to break thru the class ceiling, this research will determine if the glass ceiling phenomenon is still relevant today.

6. Is the Glass Ceiling Metaphor Still Relevant Today?

Just over three decades ago the glass ceiling metaphor was introduced, and much has changed since then; but how relevant is the glass ceiling metaphor today? Continuous efforts have been made by women and organizations to eliminate the phenomenon (Barreto, Ryan & Schmitt 2008). However, success should not be determined by the numerical representation of women in leadership positions, but only by eliminating gender inequality altogether.

There is an adverse relationship between the number of women in the labor force and the number of women in high management and leadership positions denoting that gender inequality is present. Organizations are putting an increased effort to promote diversity in response to the higher workforce participation of women. A more diverse workplace helps organizations grasp an advantage against their competitors (K.Y. Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). In turn, promoting diversity in the workplace may hinder the progress made towards eliminating the glass ceiling. Women who advance to higher management to promote workforce diversity are still scrutinized by other colleagues more qualified for the position. Is the glass ceiling phenomenon still relevant today? Yes. Although women and organizations are making strides to eliminate the barriers associated with the glass ceiling, women still find it difficult to surpass certain levels of advancement in organizations. Valiant efforts must be made to regularly analyze diversity

management and the obstacles that appear when women advance to higher positions within an organization.

7. Conclusion

In the United States, women represent half of the population and nearly fifty percent of the labor force, yet women are still struggle with the opportunity for advancement higher on the corporate ladder. Over the past three decades, women have made continuous strides to reduce gender inequality in the workplace. While there are many numerical statistics suggesting women are on the verge of shattering the glass ceiling, at this time the glass ceiling phenomenon is still relevant. To solve the glass ceiling problem, Omran, Alizadeh, and Esmaeeli (2015) suggest that it is necessary that organizations introduce policies and programs to create flexible working schedules or making part-time jobs possible. Managers should focus on presenting women with the resources and opportunities to be successful, and women should focus on the most suitable career path to balance their work and family responsibilities.

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