GLASS CEILING FOR INDIAN WOMEN - PROBLEMS AND REMEDIES

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ABSTRACT

"Women advance in the workplace but still trail men." This is a line that haunts me as a woman, as a professional and provokes me to write on. This issue of glass ceiling for women, which in my view does not exist in true sense but is attributed to be present by women themselves as they attribute their lack of presence in senior positions to this phenomena. The glass ceiling in my view does not exist by virtue of males being present but it is the Indian culture or the bringing up that binds women closer to their houses, growing children or lack of family support for working women that drives them out of the race for the top positions. When these women have fulfilled their so called responsibilities at the house hold front they find that the race is already over and this creates phenomena called the glass ceiling. This paper attempts to revisit this concept and suggest ways by which this could be tackled.

Key words: women, glass ceiling, career advancement

INTRODUCTION

Definition of the Glass Ceiling The term "glass ceiling" was coined in a 1986 Wall Street Journal report on corporate women by Hymowitz and Schellhardt. The glass ceiling is a concept that most frequently refers to barriers faced by women who attempt, or aspire, to attain senior positions (as well as higher salary levels) in corporations, government, education and nonprofit organizations. It can also refer to racial and ethnic minorities and men when they experience barriers to advancement. For the purpose of this article, the glass ceiling is discussed regarding women in business with a focus on advancement to senior positions.

The glass ceiling is not an effect that reflects due to the fact that there are disproportionately few women at the top of organizations— nor is it simply a claim that discrimination against women is pervasive at all levels of managerial hierarchies. It is a specific claim that the obstacles women face to promotion relative to men systematically increase as they move up the hierarchy. Of course, obstacles to promotion may also increase for men as they move up the hierarchy, but the idea of a glass ceiling implies that barriers to promotion intensify more for women than for men. Employers and top managers may be willing to let women occupy the lower reaches of the managerial structure, but—the argument goes—they obstruct the access of women to positions of "real" power. As a result, women are largely denied promotions to the higher levels of management. Many different concrete mechanisms may be responsible for this obstruction: old fashioned women managers' isolation from important informal networks, or more subtle gender biased attitudes that place women at a disadvantage. But whatever the specific mechanism, the glass ceiling hypothesis argues that the relative disadvantages women face in getting jobs and promotions are greater in the upper levels of managerial hierarchies than at the bottom.

In the Indian context this is more to be seen as first women in India have been more associated with raising families than raising careers. Indian women entered the workforce in large numbers and in various professions a little later than their western counterparts but this strength is only growing, however the number of women professionals in the top management of any organisation is scarce and this is a cause of concern to find out why does this happen, what factors intrinsic and extrinsic are responsible for this.

This study through indepth interviews of 25 women across different professions who have attained senior lever positions aims to reveal the fcators that cause this glass ceiling.

Using a sample of 200 large   U.S firms Shleifer, et al. (1997) did not find any significant relationship between the percentage of women in the upper management and firm performance. In 2009, Adams and Ferreira studied a sample of firms from 1996- 2003 and found a negative relationship between gender diversity and both ROA and Tobin's Q. In another study of 250 listed companies from 200-2006, Hussein and Kiwia (2009) found no relationship between female board representation and Tobin's Q. However, Adler's (2001) results are different from previous ones. He found that there is a strong correlation between women-friendliness and firm profitability. The sample in his study comprised of 25 Fortune 500 firms and showed a strong participation of women in executive slots. In Canadian firms, Francoeur, Labelle, and Sinclair-Desgagne (2007) found a positive correlation between female officers and financial performance, but no relationship between women directors and performance.

Another important paper on women representation on boards is Adams and Funk's study from 2009.

Their findings show that women who made it past the glass ceiling have something particular. Unlike women in general, women directors seem to be more prone to risk. Adam and Funk (2009) surveyed CEOs of publicly traded Swedish firms and showed that female and male directors differ systematically in their core values and risk attitudes. Even though, in general, women are more risk averse than men, the results from the survey show that female directors are more inclined to take risks than men are.

Further evidence sustains the negative or neutral effect of women CEOs on firm performance. Having a female CEO has no effect on firm performance. However, the author notes that his finding of a "zero gender effect" could leave space for interpretation. It could either mean that

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female CEO's perform

similar to men, or that the statistical power of the test is weak. There is also evidence that the stock market reacts unfavourably to the hiring of a female CEO (Lee and James 2007).

In the Indian context a few studies that have been conducted on the issue of women representation in management jobs reveal that women are lagging far behind men in managerial jobs. Globally women comprise around 10 percent of senior management positions in Fortune 500 companies (Chadha, 2002). In India there presence is known to range between a high of 5.8 percent (Kulkarni,2000, p.11) to a low of roughly 3 percent (see Chadha 2002, Mehra 2002, and Singh 2003) of all administrative positions. According to the study by Koshal, et al (2006) , 2 women per 100 economically active men take administrative and managerial positions in India.Recently the Confederation of Indian Industry released a study "Understanding the Levels of Empowerment of Women in the Workplace in India" covering 149 large and medium size companies across regions. The report highlights that women comprise 16 percent at junior management level, 4 percent each at middle and senior levels, and only 1 percent in organizational leadership positions (CEOs).

As evident from the data above, India is lagging far behind world's average in female representation in management. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that women constituting 48 percent of population (Census 2001), 48 percent of the marginal and 17 percent of the main workers (Census 2001), they take only 2-3 percent administrative and managerial positions. This discrepancy clearly sheds light on the solid "glass ceiling" that Indian women face in their professional careers.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

How does the existence of the glass ceiling effect women?

How can the glass ceiling be overcome?

METHODOLOGY

A group of 25 women across different sectors were interviewed through the in-depth interview process to identify the answers to the problem statement mentioned above. The in depth interview method was adopted as it best brought out the wide range of ideas that centered around this subject, enabling the researcher to probe further.

RESULTS

Glass Ceiling Effect - How to overcome it

It is quite evident that women in India experience a slower progression compared to their male counterparts. While entry is easier, growth slows and in most situations regardless of their qualifications, performances or achievements, women are prevented from climbing the corporate ladder to the top. Although a few women have made it to the very top in the world of work, the phenomenon of glass ceiling is still very much prevalent in India as well as in other countries. The glass ceiling has proved resistant to affirmative action, sensitization of senior managers and human resources staff, measures to promote work-family balance and a broad recognition that investing in the talents and qualities of both women and men at all organizational levels makes good business sense.

What organizations can do

Companies should implement the following changes to combat the ceiling: (1) Develop career planning policies including mentoring and leadership development programmes for women as part of a company's overall corporate strategy. (2) Identify high-potential women early on in their careers, involve them in decision making and provide them with opportunities to lead high profile projects so that they build their competencies and skill-sets to ascend to the upper levels of the company. (3) Create a climate in the company that is more inclusive and holistic, and more conducive to the management styles of women. (4) Make accommodations to women to enable them to strike the right work-family balance. (5) Have an open communication policy. (6) Consciousness among women managers to make mentorship of other women one of their primary responsibilities.

What individuals can do

1. Mentoring plays an important role in the advancement of managers in any establishment into responsible and senior management positions. However, mentoring is often limited to women, which in turn results in a lack of access and training and career development activities.

2. Women's career paths tend to be more circuitous and interrupted than those of men which are typically linear, and this impedes women's progress to top positions. Women often have to deal with the complexities of the dual role as working women and mother.

3. Many times they have to make compromises, prioritizing family life over work life which slow down their careers. Hence, women managers with children are often looked upon as less favorable than those without children as the former are viewed as being less committed.

4. Women workers still bear   more of the main burden of family responsibilities than men and so have less time for the "extracurricular" formal and informal networking essential for advancement in enterprises.

5. Inability to stay late at work and a disinclination for jobs involving travel, transfers has been identified as other major factor for women not achieving top positions. This can be worked out with suitable arrangements for the family.

CONCLUSIONS

Women's career paths tend to be more circuitous and interrupted than those of men which are typically linear, and this impedes women's progress to top positions. Women often have to deal with the complexities of the dual role as working women and mother and sometimes have to make compromises, which slow down their careers. Women managers with children are often looked at as less favorable than those without children and they are viewed as being less committed. This is, however, not same in the case of men who have children. Both family and work are fulfilling experiences in itself. Good support system at family and work place would enable women to fulfill both without being pressurized to prioritize one above the other. Companies should adopt best practices such as options to work in flexi-timings, work from home and transport facilities. Difficulty with child care arrangements was a major workplace issue. Companies should provide facilities like crèches to enable women to give their best in their profession. Companies should encourage its women employees to participate in programs that would hone personality development of women.

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