



## Corporate Leadership - Glass Ceiling and Gender Bias

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**Abstract:** It was strongly voiced that, being a herculean task, leadership qualities were solely in the male domain. But historical evidence proves women have also played a vital role in the Corporate Leadership. Globalization and the subsequent age of cut throat competition threw wide open the gateway to corporate leadership position for women. The status of women has been subject to many great changes from equal status to equal rights. The road of equality in the workplace has been paved with obstacles till date. Research studies and data suggest that they faced hardships and discrimination, persisted because of various needs and proved their capability as business leaders. But still whether in developed or developing countries, unfortunately, relatively few women have scaled the walls successfully and climbed over them onto major board directorships and top executive positions. This paper is a conservative attempt to capture a glimpse on some of the major pathways for women to obtain positions of leadership in corporate business.

**Key words:** Leadership, Corporate, Women, Glass ceiling, Obstacle

### Introduction

Traditionally, leadership has had a military connotation. The orthodox concept of leadership was based on differing levels of hierarchy and (importantly) lots of foot soldiers unquestionably obeying even the most dangerous of orders through fear of punishment. Interestingly, much of our thinking on leadership is still based on the military model. While we may have replaced fear of punishment with the provision of incentives, having status, authority and lots of followers will still often denote success in modern society.

One aspect of leadership as doing or saying what you think is right, even if you stand alone and even if others consider you wrong or misguided. After all whether something is wrong or misguided is often simply a matter of perspective and everything might, in any event, be judged differently with the benefit of hindsight.

It is important to accept that successful leadership will often go unacknowledged. Leadership may, in fact, operate behind the scenes. Sometimes leadership can, however, mean being a good

follower. Knowing when the common goal requires that you listen to, and follow, the advice and direction of others is a vital skill. Things do not have to be done your way all the time. Equally, good leadership includes an ability to delegate tasks and also the ability to accept the consequences (whether good or bad) of such delegation. There is always a chance that, when tasks are delegated, things might not be done your preferred way or they may in fact be done incorrectly. However, good leaders are able to accept that this might their fault whether through poor instructions, poor systems, poor training or it might just be the price that has to be paid for allowing others to reach their potential.

Being a herculean task, leadership qualities were solely in the male domain. But historical evidence proves women have also played a vital role in the Corporate Leadership. Globalization and the subsequent age of cut throat competition threw wide open the gateway to corporate leadership position for women. The status of women has been subject to many great changes from equal status to equal rights. The road of equality in the workplace

has been paved with obstacles till date. The early response to large numbers of women was an exploitative one and women were segregated into low-paying jobs that lacked possibilities for advancement. They faced hardships and discrimination, but they persisted because of economic need. Women have come a long way and today they are no less than “super women” juggling well between their families and professional lives. From the tentative beginnings made by the pioneer women in the post independence era we saw the emergence of the Y2K women - ambitious, confident and more in control of their destiny.

### Objective

The objective of the paper is to capture a glimpse through historical background to existing theoretical data sources on some of the major pathways for women to obtain positions of leadership in corporate business. It also includes examining the role of mentoring as a pathway to success for women in the corporate hierarchy issue of gender specifically involving the concept of glass ceiling.

### Literature Review

Women leadership in education is a complex yet ambiguous research as the paradigm present conceptual fuzziness (Cuvusgil, Knight, & Risenberger, 2008; Deresky, 2008; Eagly & Carli, 2007). In most advanced economies, research by Bailey (2009) observed the increasingly rate of women entering the workforce. Men, and women tend to share equal employment opportunities (Cavusgil, Knight, & Risenberger, 2008). This is because of changing in family structure, where in some cases women often become the sole source of the family's income.

Recently emerging trend is women are challenged to the face of business. There is no doubt that the balance between men and women in corporate leadership position are not at all balanced. People don't think women are natural leaders, when women are trying to climb the corporate ladder and when they act like that it is not tolerated. That shows even today leadership continues to be viewed as culturally masculine. This is not to say that women haven't made great efforts in the last several decades towards corporate diversity.

Even as European Union considers implementing quotas to increase the number of women in senior management roles, Grant Thornton has released a report showing that the number of women in senior positions has not changed much since 2004; it still hovers around 21percent.



Source: Grant Thornton International Business Report 2012

Although women comprise 47 percent of the overall labor force, they account for only 6 percent of corporate CEOs and top executives. Why are there so few women at the top? Supply side explanations stemming from sex differences in preferences and productivity, in either corporate leadership or in home production, may play a role. For example, women may shy away from competition for promotions (Muriel Niederle and Lise Vesterlund 2009) or choose to avoid the stress and work-life imbalance associated with occupying the executive office suite. Career interruptions due to childbearing may also limit women's ultimate professional advancement (Amalia Miller 2010, Marianne Bertrand, Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz 2010).

It has been suggested that “appropriate” leadership skills are often viewed to embody the masculine characteristics of dominant, assertive and decisive behavior and a leader is typically associated with masculine traits such as competence and the ability to influence (Schein, 2001), rather than the supportive behaviours which are often identified with women. The question thus arises as to why leadership skills and masculinity are often seen as intrinsically entwined. One reason that has been propounded for the notion that so-called ‘masculine’ qualities equate with leadership success is that it has become difficult to separate the qualities associated with leadership from the qualities associated with masculinity in light of the fact there has been a long history of male domination in leadership roles. It is thus apparent that perceived differences in the leadership styles of

men and women can have significant consequences for the advancement of women in leadership roles.

Many self-reports and laboratory studies have often indicated that women leaders display greater interpersonal skills and adopt more participatory democratic styles, while men rely on more directive and task orientated approaches. Indeed, the research of Rosener found that women were more likely to focus on interactive styles of leadership through encouraging participation, ensuring that power was shared and that self-worth of others was enhanced. By contrast, men were found to be more likely than women to adopt transactional leadership styles and use power that comes from their organisational position. It was accordingly posited by Rosener that women as leaders generally believed people would perform their best when they felt good about themselves and therefore tried to create situations that contributed to that feeling.

Despite the growth of different positive factors, women in developed and developing economies still exhibit gaps in leadership opportunities, and mentors compared to males. The acceptance of women as equal in the working place has not been uniformly accepted across industries, professions, and functions. Professional, economic, cultural, and social factors have not made access for women and for women to grow (Cavusgil et al., 2008).

In Table 1, statistics show percentages of women in leadership position.

**Table 1: Statistics on Representation of Women in Corporate Senior Management**

Country	All workers	Managerial workers
Sweden	48%	30.5%
USA	46.6%	46%
Germany	44%	26.9%
Japan	41%	8.9%

Adapted from Deresky (2008, p. 380) Exhibit 10-7

The recent research by Grant Thornton International in 2007, noted among 7,200 privately held medium-sized firms operating in 32 economies (mostly advanced nations) revealed similar trends. Philippines tops with approximately 97% of businesses having women in leadership (in Cavusgil et al., 2008, p. 569). Cavusgil et al (2008) suggested the outcome with support of rights of women, and the increased skills and abilities of females in entrepreneurial endeavors. The Global Gender Gap Report 2008 by the World Economic Forum (2009a), presented this document later and confirmed the assessment in Table 2.

In Table 2, statistics show percentages of women in leadership position.

**Table 2: Statistics on Representation of Women in Corporate Senior Management**

Country	All Workers	Managerial Workers
Philippines	97%	50%
China	90%	35%
Brazil	81%	41%
South Africa	78%	24%
Russia	72%	36%
Sweden	68%	21%
United States	65%	21%
Canada	63%	19%
Australia	62%	21%
United Kingdom	62%	19%
Germany	40%	10%
Japan	22%	4%

Adapted from World Economic Forum (2009a)

Ragins, Townsend and Mattis (1998) suggest that while women are flooding the managerial pipeline, their efforts to attain the more senior levels are being blocked. Rindfleish (2002) argues that

women's participation in the paid workforce has been one of the most remarkable social changes over the past 50 years, yet women are excluded from the most senior positions.

### **Obstacles and Challenges for Rising Women**

The barriers women face in corporate environments are common in the global economy. They emanate both from the organization and from social roles outside the corporation, and especially those related to family. Scholarly literature from several disciplines has identified specific barriers, or hurdles, for women desiring access to the highest level of leadership in organizations, and has suggested other possible factors in their achieving such leadership, both nationally and internationally.

#### ***Endogenous barriers***

Some barriers for women to top management appear endogenous to the business workplace. The term "glass ceiling," used to describe the host of invisible but very real barriers that limit women's rise to the top executive ranks of business organizations, is attributed to two *Wall Street Journal* reporters in 1986. In the United States and much of the developed world, the glass ceiling is attributable less to structural barriers and more to organizational and social barriers. Explicit sexual discrimination continues to play a role in reducing women's access to high levels of management. The more usual forms of discrimination, however, are the subtle but clear cultural biases and gender stereotypes<sup>35</sup> in corporate decision-making, behavior, and job assignment.<sup>36</sup> Men and women tend to use different styles of leadership and power and these differences reinforce the existing stereotypes. For example, the nature of managerial competition in large organizations, often described as a "tournament" system, favors more traditionally male styles of leadership, and perceives and rewards women who engage in that style differently than it perceives and rewards men.

#### ***Exogenous barriers***

A substantial body of literature indicates that many of the barriers women face on the way to top leadership stem from factors beyond the structures and constraints of their organizations.<sup>39</sup> Rather, they stem from social, political, and cultural factors that mediate the gender role. These factors are not

easily affected by the firm, but the firm may accommodate or adjust to these issues in order to have an efficient and productive workforce. And most particularly, they face the challenge of resolving the inevitable conflicts between traditional female and family roles and the role of managerial leadership.

One aspect of these role conflicts is the problem of balancing time between the traditional familial and the managerial role, the "work-life balance." Both male and female senior managers are subject to this conflict, but because women traditionally bear the heaviest load of "family work" in most cultures, men face fewer – and different --role incongruities and conflicts than do women. Women must resolve these conflicts in several contexts: Preserving the degrees of career and geographic mobility that the path to top leadership may require; sorting priorities at different points in time between the careers in a dual career family unit; dealing with the consequences of career interruptions that are more common among female managers than among male managers; and managing childbirth and child-rearing, neither of which is a traditional male role.

### **Research Methodology**

Mainly secondary study has been done from websites, books, journals, internet, database, interviews, observations, etc.

### **Key Findings from the Literature Review**

The increase in female leaders has been accompanied by changes in theories and practices of leadership. Women represent an important economic group in the changing composition of the market place and the global economy.

But why are women rising? May be because of the following reasons-

- Women characteristics have changed
- Leadership roles have changed
- Organizational practices have changed

Forward thinking companies want to retain high performers to develop future leaders and secure a competitive workforce. In order to achieve this

goal, they are investing in mentoring programs by giving high priority to women to flourish.

Though different previous studies reveal facts, like, women are under-represented at the top levels of management. Reasons that are given are mainly, women are not all flexible as men. They have their own constraints, like responsibilities and limitations. Again it depends on the cultural differences as well and some do not want the top job because too emotional and soft to lead, cannot or will not work for long hours, do not want to travel, do not want to relocate, cannot make tough decisions, less committed to the organization and to their careers. Most women don't want to fit into a male dominated companies and these are the constraints where and why women are underrepresented in corporate leadership position.

Corporations are structured by two primary styles of leadership: task (transactional), or networking (transformational) style. Responsible leadership requires leadership competencies to integrate people from different cultures to work together effectively (Eldridge et al.,2007; Global Gender Parity, 2009).

Diversity strengthens cross-cultural teams, but also increases the complexity of relationships making cross-cultural teams more challenging to manage (Engvig, 2008).

The ability of women to network is one of the major strengths of this gender (Gurian & Annis, 2008). Corporations such as Women Directors on Boards and the Alliance of Business Women International support the involvement of women in international endeavors (Cavusgil et al, 2008, p. 569). The "Global Power 50" report of 2008 revealed that global business is opening up to the female power.

Adler (2009) recommended corporations to use strategies of promotion that gave men and women the same opportunities to escalate positions, based on their capacity. The development of female leadership in corporations must include certain conditions (Price WaterHouse & Coopers, 2008, p. 6):

(i) Accountability: Recognition and accountability of the pipeline problem, by discussing the issue

openly to address ways to reduce the impact of leaks in the system;

(ii) Career Planning: Creation of effective planning processes, where promotion of women leadership becomes a routine business practice. This is especially important in large corporations where leaders are to match individual skills with the needs of the organization;

(iii) Cultural Awareness: Increase personal awareness about cultural and human elements in the pipeline problem. This includes dismantling gender stereotypes that refrain senior leaders to include women in succession plans, because of unsupported beliefs that women lack skills.

Despite great contributions, and advances women contributed in the workforce, negative perception, and stereotypes still exist (Weisman, 2008). One core perception is men viewed women as supportive followers, instead of leaders (Tung, 2008; Weisman, 2008). The perception of women as supportive followers is fostered due to lack of women mentors, or role models (Mooney, 2006). Having an effective mentor is one pathway around barriers women face along the path to top leadership, and the lack of mentoring may contribute to the disproportionate under-representation of women in top leadership of business. A substantial body of research supports the notion that mentoring contributes greatly to career outcomes. Kram's ground-breaking work in the field more than twenty years ago explicated the benefits of mentoring to organizations, to mentors, and to mentees. Subsequent studies confirm this positive relationship. The benefit of a good mentor for a mentee is well known, including higher income, greater job satisfaction, and promotions. In short, mentoring is a developmental relationship that may have a career-oriented function and it may also have a psychosocial function.

Without mentors, or role models, women perceived the lack of desire to identify themselves as leaders (Werhane, 2007). Addition to 40 percent reversed discrimination, i.e. fear from men that women are going to take over their positions (Tung, 2008). Women are perceived as "pushy", "emotional", and "no stamina" to withstand pressures associated with working in the corporate arena (Mooney, 2006). Laff (2007) added "children", "family commitment", and "soul



selling” to the perception, and the practice made it hard for women to balance their family-life-work expectations (Whitmarsh et al., 2007). The feminine nature and leadership is also perceived as being weak and ineffective in some culture that demands respects and is often confrontational (Rai, 2009).

Although mentoring relationships may be generally beneficial, there are some downsides to the relationship. Lillian T. Eby and her colleagues studied the negative aspects of the mentoring relationship. The study yielded five broad categories of negative experiences. In order of frequency they are: (1) mismatch with the dyad, followed by (2) distancing behaviour; (3) manipulative behavior; (4) lack of mentor expertise; and (5) general dysfunctionality.

Within those themes the most frequently reported negative experiences involved mentor neglect, mentor lacking interpersonal skills, mentor abuse of power, and the mentor having dissimilar values and work habits.

A considerable body of mentoring research has focused on the possible differences in the way men and women use, respond to, and benefit from mentoring and networking. Blake-Beard identifies five issues women should pay attention to in entering into a formal mentoring relationship. First, it is important to avoid unrealistic expectations—a formal mentoring relationship may not be able to provide the same benefits as an informal relationship. Second, mentoring relationships may fail due to lack of attraction or similarities between the mentor and protégé because they did not seek each other out. Third, mentees should try to maintain the relationship after its formal duration. Fourth, the relationship should be based on reciprocity so that it will be rewarding for both parties involved, and finally, the better relationships try to find the appropriate level of intimacy.

Although theory suggests women in U.S. culture benefit most from having a male mentor, there are a number of existing programs that link businesswomen with other Business women to help promote the success of women and to provide women with the opportunity to exchange ideas.

Globally, women indicate they like women-to-women programs because of the psychological support they provide. Additionally, women feel less left out and disappointed than when they are mentoring and networking with men. In addition to the benefits of same-gender associations that stem from similarities in behaviors, emotional expectations and interests, research suggests that same-gender role-models may prove to be more effective than cross-gender role-models.

Although women comprise 47 percent of the overall labour force, they account for only 6 percent of corporate CEOs and top executives. Why are there so few women at the top? Supply side explanations stemming from sex differences in preferences and productivity, in either corporate leadership or in home production, may play a role. For example, women may shy away from competition for promotions (Muriel Niederle and Lise Vesterlund 2009) or choose to avoid the stress and work-life imbalance associated with occupying the executive office suite. Career interruptions due to childbearing may also limit women’s ultimate professional advancement (Amalia Miller 2010, Marianne Bertrand, Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz 2010).

At the same time, there may also remain systematic demand-based or institutional barriers that present a “glass ceiling” blocking women’s progress to the highest corporate levels, despite their continued gains at lower levels and in middle management. Current top executives and corporate directors, who are primarily male, may tacitly discriminate or stereotype by sex, and the historic absence of women in top positions may lead to hysteresis, preventing women from accessing powerful, male-dominated professional networks, or same-sex mentors (Susan Athey, Christopher Avery, Peter Zemsky 2000). The existence of these demand-side barriers would suggest a potential role for women serving in positions of corporate leadership to help other women advance to top management.

### **Conclusion**

As Elie Wiesel has observed, ‘the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference’, then so too the indifference of organizations to women’s achievements in the workplace may be the very antithesis of equality.

Despite of all constraints women are giving tough competition in completing the tasks or targets assigned in limited time which is commendable. Over the past few years role of women is increasing at the global level as women have many valuable skills to bring into corporate leadership position.

It has been observed through thorough literature survey, that, networking and mentoring programs are important for career advancement but they are not gender neutral. Not only do men and women have different expectations about networking and mentoring programs, but they also face different consequences from participating in them. For a woman who truly has career advancement in mind, participation in a more mainstream network is highly advised. Perhaps the best solution for women is to participate in various networks for various purposes – such as emotional support, and career growth.

Moreover, cross-company and cross-gender programs have characteristics that are likely to combat the advantages of men over women. A cross-company, cross-gender approach seems to be ideal for women who are looking to move up in their companies.

In this regard, policy-makers have a critical responsibility in setting gender equality as a priority, as the development of a country depends on how the level of education, and utilization of women talent (Hausmann et al., 2008). Gender equality implies access to the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities for both men and women, and its achievement requires the involvement of government, education, businesses, and society.

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