

Women in Management: Gender Inequality and the Glass Ceiling

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Abstract

All through the corporate world, women have been instrumental in the drive for business success in many ways, yet there are social barriers and conceptions about their gender that tend to influence their place in management.

This paper looks at major causes of gender inequality in our society the psychological and sociological factors. It is a reflective study based on the concept of the Glass Ceiling. It is drawn from a study done in 2007 using organisations in Ghana's Club 100 listing of 2005.

The strongest common factor named as the cause of societal discrimination against women is that of social stereotyping. This influence cannot be overlooked, especially in light of the fact that societal stereotyping stems from physiological/natural characteristics of women.

Introduction

The term 'Glass Ceiling' was coined in the 1970s in the United States of America to describe the invisible artificial barriers created by attitudinal and organizational prejudices barring women from occupying top executive jobs. According to an ILO report "Breaking through the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management" (Wirth, 2001), it is an apt definition for an ongoing problem. And despite recent progress the Glass Ceiling in Ghana is still relatively intact.

"All human societies divide themselves into two social categories called 'female' and 'male'. Each

category is defined on the basis of varying cultural assumptions about the attributes, beliefs and behaviours expected from males and females. The gender of any individual depends on a complex combination of genetic, body, physiological and social elements, none of which are free from possible ambiguity or anomaly. Traditionally, sexual differences have been used to justify a male dominated society in which women have been given inferior or secondary roles in their working lives." (Price, 2004, p. 458) It is an undeniable revulsion that the woman, right from birth has seen herself counted among the low esteemed in the traditions of society (there are variations here depending on the society one is coming from). Opinions are that:

1. The woman as an 'item' is bought and owned by her husband (Nash, 1981, p. 107).
2. Her place in life is the management of the home even that subject to the man.
3. She is an 'element of pleasure' (George Aggudey, Presidential aspirant of the Conventions People Party for the 2004 General Elections) an assertion which was widely condemned by women activists in Ghana and beyond.

Some Causes of Gender Inequality

A number of studies have shown that society holds some views about women which eventually lend support to the glass ceiling, itself a product of gender inequality. There are three levels of studies here: The Individual, The Social Psychological Level and The Sociological Levels.

The Individual Level

Theories drawn in this level are largely physiological. Much of the argument in these theories is with the inequality in the division of labour. As far back as we have acknowledged, human societies have to some degree practiced a division of labour so that not everyone in society performs the same set of tasks. Views under this level of study include the **conventional anthropological** and the **bio sociological views**.

The Conventional Anthropological View—This theory holds that in a small primitive society, the vital task of having babies could only be assigned to women. Other tasks assigned to women tended to be work that was compatible with the focal responsibilities of pregnancy and child rearing. This left to the males the tasks requiring absence from home and freedom from caring for children. There could be variations from society to society in precisely how men and women divided the tasks, but this is a generalisation. Males took over and claimed such important responsibilities as hunting, defence and offence. Such physical differences gave males an initial advantage, an advantage they exploited into a system of structured inequality (Richmond Abbott, 1992).

As society shifted from subsistence living to industry, the family gradually ceased to be the site of economic production. Jobs were increasingly found outside the home in workshops and factories. The men ventured out into the work world and women were tied to the home. This made men better off economically than women who had by now come to be all the more economically dependent on men.

The Bio Sociological View —This group made a simple but significant input into this whole argument for the source of gender inequality. According to proponents of this theory, gender stratification in society is not so much as caused by gender determination. They contend that biological contributions shape what is learned and that there are differences in the ease with which the sexes can learn certain things. This theory is in consonance with that of Dr. Gary Smalley and Steve Scott (Smalley & Scott, 1982; Ritzer, 1986). The issue here

is that biology plays a role in gender role differentiation.

The Social—Psychological Level

Childhood socialisation—Socialisation for sex roles play a causal role in sex role inequalities in that we tend to socialise children into stereotypical male and female characteristics. Boys are taught at a tender age to possess instrumental personality traits which involve being industrious, decisive, dominant, aggressive, competitive, logical, tough, strong and un sentimental. On the other hand, girls are made to believe they must be sympathetic, compassionate, sensitive, aesthetic, followers and more moral.

We must appreciate the fact that most parents have these stereotypes in mind when they are raising their children. Boys are given the toy gun and car as Christmas gifts and the girls tend to have dolls (telling them that they will grow to raise children). The consequences of such stereotyping in the future life of every child cannot be ruled out.

Jack Sattel has argued that boys are generally socialised to be inexpressive; unable to show such things as affection, tenderness and emotion. He further contended that inexpressiveness is a characteristic that is needed to exercise power and that is what males learn during the process of socialisation. (Sattel, 1982)

Sociological Level

The Schools —The educational system also contributes to sex stratification in society. The treatment of males and females in children's textbooks depicts stereotyped sex roles. Even in pre school books, boys are pictured doing active, industrious and adventurous things. When girls are pictured they are shown in more passive, unproductive and generally inconspicuous postures. Boys are the 'doers'; girls are passive supporters. These are the forerunners of the instrumental and expressive dimensions of traditional roles.

At Work—Institutional sexism at work is typically portrayed in the gender segregation of occupations. This means that certain jobs have been traditionally assigned to women, while others have been

reserved by and for men. Heidi Hartmann has examined the root of the question of occupational sex segregation. She sees this division of labour as the combined product of capitalism and patriarchy (Hartmann, 1975).

Hartmann sees patriarchy or the hierarchical relation between men and women in which men are dominant and women subordinate as preceding capitalism. In Patriarchal systems, men controlled the labour of women (and children) through a system of personal control. However, with the advent of capitalism and its large scale economic units, such personal control was no longer adequate. What was needed in capitalism was more indirect and more impersonal methods of control. Although the capitalist control is not replacing Patriarchal control, in the name of maintaining the patriarchal system, men have acted in a variety of ways to keep women in a subordinate position.

The Glass Ceiling at the Work Place

A number of factors have been espoused as specifically contributing to why fewer women are found in leadership positions in the corporate world.

1. First, the fact remains that the nature of women's career paths blocks their progress to top positions. At lower management levels, women are typically placed in non strategic sectors and in personnel and administrative positions rather than in professional and line management jobs leading to the top. This means most women will be left out of the opportunity to do stretch assignments which provide the experiences necessary for successful promotions.

2. Often, these initial disadvantages are compounded by women being cut off from networks, formal and informal, so essential for career advancement. Exclusions from informal networks range from women not being invited to play golf with male colleagues to being left out of key discussions in the "men's rooms". The latter happened to Dr. Jacquelyn Kosecoff, an Executive Vice President of Pacific Care Health Systems Incorporated (USA) when she was the only female board member at another publicly held company. In

the middle of a debate about a proposed acquisition, some Directors and the investment bankers reached a tentative agreement about important aspects of the deal during a bathroom break.

3. For women with family responsibilities, their upward movement may be hampered as they juggle time to devote to both career and family. An important feature of professional and especially managerial work is the long working hours that seem to be required to gain recognition and eventual promotion. A recent ILO report revealed that removing one's wedding ring before a job interview has become commonplace among women, along with hiding details about family plans.

Mrs. Elizabeth Adjei, Director of the Ghana Immigration Service observed that:

The blunt fact is that women face multiple social and professional challenges. There are many social and professional barriers militating against women's ability to realize their full potential. There is the pressure to live up to the expectation of womanhood; the pressure to marry, procreate and mother children. But ironically, fulfilling this role, that is, being a mother or a potential mother is a major obstacle to women's professional mobility, because no one wants to have people who are likely to be absent for long hours, weeks and months in the name of procreation.

Further, some professions are simply not women/feminine friendly, both in terms of job content and work environment. In the security services for example, the job structure and content, working hours, transfers, etc do not help women to improve themselves. Being unable to leave your family to go on transfer or to undertake physical activities gives the impression that women are less committed to their advancement than men. Yet appraisals about performance and promotion are dependent on how much time you can avail to the job. And in this case, women, by virtue

of their natural roles will always be disadvantaged because the systems are unsympathetic to family considerations. (Adjei, 2006).

In 2007, a survey was conducted (by the author) involving women managers and non managers as well as men managers (to provide a balanced view) from the Ghana Club 100 listing of 2005. A summary of the survey revealed that:

- 100% of women managers and non managers said it did exist;
- 76.9% of men managers admitted that the Glass Ceiling existed.

Again, while majority of respondents affirmed that there were barriers to women's advancement in the business world, just a little over 55% admitted that it was due to natural factors such as family life, career tendencies and the biological disposition of women that makes them very much at the centre of human reproduction. The remaining percentage attributed the glass ceiling effect to artificial causes such as unfair workplace tendencies and societal prejudices against women.

Call to Action

1. The level of stratification based on gender in our school literature could be adjusted to ensure that children do not grow up with the notion already inculcated in them that men lead in society and women are meant for raising families. School textbooks, especially those at the lower levels of Basic Education should be made to include pictures/drawing of women taking active leadership roles in society or doing the 'blue collar' jobs like mining. These mental frames when built up in the young girl child will certainly not make her behave as if certain jobs are the preserve of men or that leadership is reserved for men. That will also help boys to raise their regard levels for girls and avoid viewing girls as 'subordinates'.

2. In Management Development, one strategy that can well be used to develop successors is Mentoring. Organisations should make concerted efforts at providing mentoring for women in Middle Level

Management. The problem here will be: how many organisations have women in Top Management Positions? The answer then will be to make conscious attempts at promoting qualified and capable women to fill vacancies in Top Management positions. This will give other women managers Role Models to look up to.

Childbearing, as a natural part of women, should be treated as a National Asset. This is in the sense that it is a means of providing the human resource base for National Development. Countries such as Singapore and Sweden place value on child birth and child development. It is the developed human resources that can channel material resources into real development.

3. Corporate Institutions are also admonished to provide women in management positions with stretch assignments. This will provide opportunities for them to explore and improve upon their managerial and leadership skills. ICT should be used to help reduce loss of man hours during Maternity leave. Telecommuting with the aid of the intra/internet will enable a woman on leave to perform some duties that may not necessarily be stressful.

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