

Existence of Glass Ceiling and Discriminatory Attitude in the Service Sector

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the perceptions of women executives regarding the situation confronted by them in the service sector of India. It is based on the administration of a questionnaire to 300 women executives. Three main areas were explored: organizational discrimination, family/social discrimination and self-discrimination. Results show that in Indian service sector women hold the perception of the existence of glass ceiling.

INTRODUCTION

The "glass ceiling" is one of the most compelling metaphors for analyzing inequalities between men and women in the workplace. The expression has been used widely in the popular media as well as in official government reports and academic publications (Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration, 1994; Catalyst, 1990; Garland, 1991; Scandura, 1992). The image suggests that although it may now be the case that women are able to get through the front door of managerial hierarchies, at some point they hit an invisible barrier that blocks any further upward movement. As one of the early writers who used the metaphor commented, the glass ceiling is "a transparent barrier that keep women from rising above a certain level in corporations.... It applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher because they are women" (Morrison et al., 1987).

One of the important factors for India's stupendous growth has been its young and educated population. Economic predictors believe that the phenomenal growth rate of Indian economy will be fuelled by the young work ready people in

the coming years. Despite the fact that India has almost 25 million women in the working age group very few reach the top in Indian organizations. Huge number of females now work in the organized sector, but they remain at the lower or middle levels in the organizations. Women today comprise only 2 per cent of the total managerial strength in the Indian corporate sector.

The report titled, 'Women and the Economy in India' says that the effect of education on the employment status of women is not straightforward. Higher levels of education do not automatically ensure higher proportion as the main work force.

Historically, India has been a male-dominated society. Yet, in the past two decades or so, social change has opened the possibility for women to attain managerial roles in corporate India. Today, the number of women students in business schools has grown significantly. These changes are in large part due to a significant cultural shift in parental perspective that allows for the possibility of women working outside the home, contributing economically to the family and even pursuing a career. As social values change, Indian women have been entering the workforce in the past couple of decades. Globalization has brought an influx of multinational corporations to India, with Western HR practices and concepts such as gender diversity in leadership roles. As opportunities for women in management in India slowly increase, women are entering professions previously seen as the domain of men in the corporate world: advertising, banking, civil services, engineering, financial services, manufacturing, police and armed forces, and emerging fields such as IT and communications.

Professor Pawan S. Budhwar, Head of Group, Aston Business School at Aston University in the United Kingdom, has written extensively on human resource management issues in India. In the 2005 study 'Women in Management in the New Economic Environment', he and his research team pointed out that "developments in information technology and related services sectors are helping women in India to move out of their traditional household roles and develop a career in organizations."

DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination is defined under ILO Convention No. 111 as any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin (among other characteristics), "which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity and treatment in employment or occupation". Discrimination can perpetuate poverty, stifle development, productivity and competitiveness, and ignite political instability, says the report which was prepared under the ILO's 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and

Rights at Work. Discrimination is still a common problem in the workplace. While some of the more blatant forms of discrimination may have faded, many remain, and others have taken on new or less visible forms, the report says.

According to ILO report, 'Time for Equality at Work', sex discrimination is by far the most prevalent and women are by far the largest discriminated group. Although more and more women are working, in addition to the "glass ceiling", the "pay gap" between women and men is still significant in most countries. Women are also more likely to be stuck in lower-paid and least secure jobs. They face higher unemployment rates. Discrimination can occur at every stage of employment, from recruitment to education and remuneration, occupational segregation, and at time of lay-offs.

Research all over the world has shown that leadership qualities, communication skills, negotiating skills and good listening skills are traits which cut across gender, and if given proper training, the right work environment, support system at home and most of all, a fair opportunity to compete, women managers can deliver, and excel too. The above mentioned traits belong to any good and successful manager, and gender should have nothing to do with it.

Women comprise a large segment of the available managerial talent across the globe, yet their representation at top level managerial positions in business and public administration, is rather obscure. The leadership prospect for women managers is a critical issue in gender equality and remains a researchable proposition.

'Women in management' remains an issue of concern, given that an increasing number of women are in the workforce, but only the small percentage holds top level managerial positions in business and public administration. Evidence suggests that the absence of women at the top level of large companies is a global phenomenon, indicating that biological sex (often referred to as gender in management literature) is a common barrier in a variety of international contexts to women's career advancement. Career advancement for women managers has been of considerable research interest. Therefore, the absence of women in the highest and most visible positions in corporate hierarchy cannot be ignored.

As in many other countries, working women of all segments of Indian society face various forms of discrimination including sexual harassment. Even professional women find discrimination to be prevalent: two-thirds of the women in one study felt that they had to work harder to receive the same benefits as comparably employed men. It is notable that most of the women in this study who did not perceive discrimination worked in fields (e.g., gynaecology) where few, if any, men competed against them.

The share of women in Indian Board room is much smaller than the global

figure. Looking around, one struggles to find even a handful of companies headed by women or women at the helm of strategic departments. The study titled 'Understanding the Levels of Women Empowerment in the Workplace', released on December 14, 2005 by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) reveals :

- Only 6% of the total number of employees working in medium and large scale industries constitute women, with 18% in medium and 4% in large companies.
- The incidence of women employed at managerial levels of companies was only 16% at junior levels, 4% each at the middle and senior levels, and almost nil in organizational leadership positions.
- 25% of women faced gender bias on jobs.
- 56% of the companies that were surveyed did not have any formal policies in place to counter sexual harassment.
- The attrition rate of women in larger companies was higher and in managerial positions the ratio of women was quite low.

SERVICE SECTOR

Service sector in India today accounts for more than half of India's GDP. According to data for the financial year 2006-07, the share of services, industry, and agriculture in India's GDP is 55.1 per cent, 26.4 per cent, and 18.5 per cent respectively. The fact that the service sector now accounts for more than half the GDP marks a watershed in the evolution of the Indian economy and takes it closer to the fundamentals of a developed economy. Hence, the importance of service sector cannot be over-emphasized and any negative indicators in this sector can hamper the economic growth.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Jennifer (2008) in his study of 'California Women Business Leaders', found the corporate environment of California in last place nationally in regard to women holding leadership positions. Women represent only 8.2 per cent of the highest-paid California executives, and only six out of 200 companies had a female chief executive, according to the study.

Bansal, Founder Editor, JAM (2005) says that thousands of talented women never make it to higher management – and not merely because of the 'glass ceiling'. It is often because they are not willing to pay the price demanded by such jobs. "While women look for a better work environment, supportive colleagues, financial security and career advancement at the workplace, for men salary and career

advancement are more important", said Mandeep Maitra (Head, Human Resource, HDFC Bank).

Husain (2005), in his article titled, "Do men resent women in positions of power?" has given the details of a survey in the US that women do not get their dues in terms of salaries nor in terms of representation in the top positions. The study also reflects that the under-representation of women in the executive ranks of the larger companies and a woman's virtual absence at the higher-rank job of CEO or president may well reflect some form of discrimination.

Shaw (2006), CEO of Biocon Ltd. said about the position of working women that all other things being equal, no corporate should deny a job to a woman because of her gender. In her views, in many companies, the glass ceiling is in evidence. But the women have shown, over and over again, that they are no less than men in the organizations.

Rao and Ramasundaram (2007) studied the incongruence in the various roles played by employed women and its effect on work-family interface. Work-Life balance emerged as a major issue that impedes the career progression of women. It explores the main barriers to women progression and highlights the long hours and multi-tasking of women associated with her work.

Lesa (2008) in her book on Glass Ceiling pointed out that more than one-third of Fortune 500 managers are women, but hold very less percentage of the CEO positions. Usually, the theories are that there is a glass ceiling, preventing women from moving into executive positions. She asks women to look at their own self-defeating or self-limiting actions, what she calls "sticky floors."

OBJECTIVES

The present study has been carried out on four sectors. These are Banking, Insurance, Telecommunication and IT, and IT Enabled services. The study has the following objectives :

- To find out if female executives at lower and middle levels feel that they face any discrimination in their organizations in terms of occupational segregation differentiated remuneration and equal opportunities to get to higher levels.
- To find out if female executives experience family or social discrimination which they feel hinders their career growth.
- To find out if female executives experience any self-discrimination, i.e. they sacrifice leisure time; feel guilty at spending time away from family and

work harder at both workplace and home to succeed.

To find out if the glass ceiling exists at all in the Indian service sector.

SAMPLE DESIGN

The survey was carried out on 300 lower and middle level female executives working in the above mentioned sectors. 75 female executives were selected from each sector, i.e. Banking, Insurance, Telecommunications and IT and ITES, using random sampling methods. The surveyed females belonged to age groups ranging from 22 years to 55 years, were both married and single, and also were both with and without children.

Research Tool

A questionnaire and a scale were prepared by the researchers to fulfil the objectives of the research. Reliability and validity of the scale was established before conducting the survey. Apart from the demographic information, which was collected through the questionnaire, the scale measured the attitude of females regarding discriminatory attitudes. The scale was made using the five-point Likert method. The scale carried sixty-five statements; the responses could vary from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Both negative and positive statements were a part of the scale, and the scoring was reversed accordingly. Strongly agreeing to feeling of being discriminated at work had a score of one and feeling no discrimination at all, a score of five.

RESULTS

Organizational Discrimination

To measure discrimination at work-place, sixteen statements were included; three pertaining to occupational segregation, two to difference in remuneration and eleven to whether females found equal opportunities to excel at their workplace.

The mean value for occupational segregation, as depicted in Table 1, is 1.9622. This mean value means that females working in the service sector feel that there is an occupational segregation, where some jobs are not found to be suitable for them because of their gender. The Standard Deviation is low at 0.58029 and the coefficient of variation is also low at 29.57. This further indicates that the data is quite consistent and there is very little variation around the mean.

Table 1 also shows the results for statements pertaining to differentiated remuneration for males and females. The statements measured if females are paid lesser than their male colleagues for doing similar jobs. Again, the mean value

Table 1
Organizational Discrimination Parameters

Discrimination Parameter	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	CV
Occupational Segregation	300	1.9622	0.58029	29.57
Differentiated Remuneration	300	1.8833	0.55142	29.28
Opportunity to Excel	300	1.9572	0.36895	18.85

indicates that differentiated remuneration exists in the surveyed organization, showing discriminatory attitudes towards females. Again, SD and CV show consistency in the data.

The problem, however, isn't restricted to India alone. An International Labor Organization (ILO) report says wage differences in male and female managerial jobs all over the world stem from the reality that even when women hold management jobs, they are often in less strategic, lower-paying areas of a company's operations.

Similarly, Table 1 shows statistics for, whether females find equal opportunities to excel at their workplace as their male colleagues. The mean is 1.9572, with SD of 0.36895 and CV of 18.85, which indicate that female executives working in the service sector of India agree to the statements that they do not get equal opportunities to excel and also the data is very consistent, with little variation around the mean. The combined mean of these three indicators of discrimination at work place is 1.9342 showing the sample's agreement to discriminatory attitudes of employers and superiors.

Family/ Social Discrimination

In India, the role expected of a man, as the breadwinner, and a woman, as the homemaker, though not always so apparent, essentially exists at the subconscious level. The expectations of the husband's family after marriage, viz. the woman giving up her career after marriage or childbirth; the overbearing need to look after the in-laws, the home, the children and the husband even if she works outside of the home can prove too much for many women to handle, and they end up giving up their careers midway.

These stereotypes are the main reason why surveys have shown that only four out of ten CEOs in India considered the advancement of women to be critical for their organizations. The increasing feeling is that a majority of Indian companies still have a kind of institutional sexism that assumes women are less able than men.

The second part of the work-sheet measured the discriminatory attitudes experienced by female executives from their families or the society in general. This

section carried twenty-five statements pertaining to the attitudes of family members, social group they live in or people around in general. Families in India, as also in many other parts of the world, expect females to carry out most of the household chores and be more responsible for children or older members in the family than their spouses even if earning equal salaries. During the study it was quite evident that women generally experience this unfair attitude on a daily basis. Though, some men have now started sharing some responsibilities at home but still taking care of the home and children is considered essentially the domain of females even if working full time.

Table 2

Social/Family Discrimination

N	Mean	Std. Deviation	CV
300	1.9559	0.24961	12.76

Table 2 shows that the mean is quite similar to indicators of discrimination at work place in Tables 1 through 3. The mean value is 1.9559 and the SD is very low at 0.24961, showing a very high consistency in the data. The coefficient of variation is also quite low at 12.76 showing that variation around the mean is quite low.

Self-discrimination

Indian culture, though in a state of flux, still expects that females fulfil their role as housewives despite being equal earning partners. The key challenge for women managers is managing both their traditional role as housewives and their career. While performing this balancing act sometimes they tend to take their careers less seriously than the male members of their family. In a way, they discriminate themselves, feeling guilty for spending time away from home. Being too ambitious is still considered a male trait. This self-discrimination might be a major contributory factor in females not reaching the top of the organizational ladder.

To find out if females subject themselves to this discrimination with their mindset, feeling of guilt, considering themselves to be solely responsible for taking care of family and children, the scale carried twenty-four statements. The results are evident from Table 3. The mean value 2.0232 shows that females do subject themselves to discrimination. The results are very consistent with SD of 0.20780 and CV of 10.27. During the study, it was found that though females find themselves equally equipped

Table 3

Self-discrimination

N	Mean	Std. Deviation	CV
300	2.0232	0.20780	10.27

as men in terms of education, personality traits and will required to succeed and reach the very top, they do not find a level playing field.

Women experience great pressure to work hard to prove themselves in the workplace, and one of the greatest obstacles is how women managers are treated by men. They often receive differential treatment, reinforcing the stereotypical view of being inferior and less important than men, resulting in not being offered challenging jobs and not being part of important organizational issues.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper sets out to examine whether the glass ceiling exists in the Indian service sector, and has concluded that it does exist. It has been established, with the study that glass ceiling does exist for females in the service sector. Negative stereotypes lead to a form of subtle discrimination towards them. They perceive constraints reflected in the salary gaps, barriers in the hiring process and limits to career development. All this, mixed with raised family expectation create an invisible and subtle barrier for them, which stop them from reaching the top. They have a feeling that they are considered suitable for PR and HR jobs and the general notion is 'think manager-think male'.

Normally, females exhibit more talent and work harder to get a job – due to job segregation. Labour protection laws should have in their scope the recourse for women where they are considered equal as men for all jobs. This would slowly give rise to neutral jobs rather than a perception of 'male' and 'female' jobs. Salary structure and remuneration policies also should be transparent. Organizations need to understand that presence of females rather increases the likelihood of their success and profitability. A number of studies including those done at Columbia University, McKensey & Co. and by Goldman Sachs, document clear relationship between women in senior management and corporate financial success. A study done in the London School of Economics also found innovation capacities highest in the companies which had mixed gender teams at the top. A study by Catalyst (1990), a leading researcher of women in the workplace shows that Fortune 500 companies with the highest percentages of women corporate officers yielded, on an average, 35.1 per cent higher return on equity than those with the lowest percentages. When females bring so much of value to the organizations, compensation must at least be equal to their male colleagues.

It requires a strong will, policy formulation and implementation and affirmative action to bring about a change in attitudes.

Significant change in the workplace takes time. Transformation in the Indian context for women in management can happen through policy and regulations that

promote gender diversity and equality. Change can occur through the collective will to change the mindset of people to overcome gender differences at the educational and organizational levels. It is likely that negative or unfavourable attitudes on the part of organizational decision-makers have played a significant role in promulgating the employment and career discrimination faced by women. While women have made considerable progress in the past 10 to 20 years, they have been less than successful in penetrating the top managerial echelons of organizations; they have, by and large, failed to crack the glass ceiling, which definitely exists in the Indian service sector.

It is, no doubt, unfortunate that the corporate sector is not utilizing the vast talent pool it has available to it.

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