

# Leadership: Women and the Glass Ceiling

## Regent Business School

**Paresh Soni**  
**Xolelwa Linganiso**  
**Farhana Hoosen**

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Globalisation, the network economy and the knowledge society are some of the new expressions that have epitomised the new century. Although less evident, the commencement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has also witnessed a new phenomenon – an era where women are beginning to overcome age old barriers in almost every sphere. A major advance, especially taking into consideration that *women suffrage* was only achieved in a few western countries towards the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women are now being appointed as presidents of countries, ministers in parliament, managing directors of large corporations and executives in boardrooms. In essence, they are storming the traditionally held citadels of male power and leadership.

However, despite the progress made, research has shown that many women still confront the so called “glass ceiling” at the work place. The *glass ceiling* refers to a business metaphor used to describe the way a woman can reach a certain level in an organisation, but find it extremely difficult to reach a higher rank. The term “glass ceiling” was coined in a 1986 report on corporate women by Hymowitz and Schellhard. Numerous authors, since then, also describe it as a term that refers to ‘barriers’ that prevent qualified women who attempt, or aspire, to attain senior positions (as well as higher salary levels) in corporations, government, education and nonprofit organisations.

Fundamentally, the *glass ceiling* describes a tendency for women to be over represented in the lower levels of an industry but underrepresented at senior levels. The practice is also synonymous with a now commonly referred term - *gender discrimination*. Generally, it is defined as the unsystematic and unfavorable treatment of individuals on the basis of their gender which denies them their rights and opportunities. It can be classified as an any unequal treatment based on gender and may also be referred to as sexism. This is most common to women, especially in the work environment.

Does the *glass ceiling* really exist? In response to this question there seems to be some ambivalence. Responses are largely gender biased. However to surmount this problem

and provide a more objective account of the problematique, the authors undertook a brief desktop survey on the glass ceiling.

A 2014 report released by the *United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women* clearly indicates that while progress on women's political participation continues to be largely positive across the world, the *glass ceiling* remains firmly in place for women at the highest levels. By 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014, there were 36 countries with 30 per cent or more women ministers, a jump from 26 in 2012. With 14 women in such posts, Nicaragua heads the global table of women in executive government, followed by Sweden, Finland, France, Cabo Verde and Norway. Apart from the Nordic countries, it is the Americas and Africa regions which have the highest numbers of women ministers, although figures for Africa have stagnated at 20.4 per cent since 2010. Nevertheless, the Arab, Europe and Pacific regions also witnessed some growth. Definitely there has been a significant shift in women occupying executive positions in government.

In terms of the private sector, the latest report which is based on the research from the *International Business Report (IBR)* in 2013, explores the global shift in the number of women at the top of the business world. Key findings from the survey indicate that 24 percent women hold senior management roles globally, a three point increase over the previous year. The proportion of businesses employing women as CEOs has risen from 9 percent to 14 percent. Only 19 percent of executive positions around the world are held by women.

It is quite obvious from these reports that whilst women have made significant progress in achieving executive positions in both the public and private sectors, the *glass ceiling* remains largely intact.

What accounts for this unethical and unjust predicament? As much as some (both male and female) are in denial of the phenomenon existing, others have chosen to tender reasons to justify its existence. For purpose of this paper, we can categorise these responses into four schools of thought.

Research into the concept of the *glass ceiling* has produced multiple theories. These range from questioning the differences between men and women in leadership; whether these differences are about style or substance; whether or not the approach to leadership differs between men and women as distinctive biological groups; and whether one leadership approach is more or less effective than the other and which is more likely to succeed.

One of these theories postulates that leadership is biologically determined, innate for men and therefore unattainable for women. Another premise acknowledges the role of

socialisation and explores the notion of gender role as a determinant of leadership. A third perspective involves the identification and consideration of a variety of other contributing factors, for example, prevailing attitudes, women's self-confidence, their prior experience, the corporate environment, and the old boys' network – factors that could predict or influence leader emergence. The fourth approach which exemplifies emergent thinking accepts that there may well be a difference in the way men and women approach leadership and then attempts to capture or articulate this difference in terms of real world implications.

Indeed the *glass ceiling* is still alive and continues to be an intrinsic part of the corporate world, as it was many decades ago. From the brief analysis above, it is quite obvious that some organizations mirror society's notions of which group of workers are most appropriate for certain types of managerial positions. Although the processes of hiring and promotion are supposed to be compliant with labour laws, the state constitution and rational universal criteria, they often express informal expectations about gender for particular positions and in the process inadvertently produce a gender stratified workforce.

In sharp contrast to the above, a case is being made for women to be in senior management positions. Studies conclude that inclusion of women in the top ranks of company leadership has a direct and positive impact on a company's bottom line and risk management. The first empirical study that showed a strong correlation between a company's solid record of promoting women into the executive suite and high profitability was conducted by Adler.

Adler's study examined the practices of 215 Fortune 500 firms over a 19-year period, analysing longitudinal and historical performance data. Four evaluations of profitability were studied, including profits as a percent of revenues, assets, stockholders' equity, and a firm's competitiveness vis-à-vis its industry median counterpart. The results showed a clear correlation. Fortune 500 firms with a high number of women executives outperformed their industry median firms on all measures of profitability. The study also revealed that firms with the very best scores for promoting women were consistently more profitable than those companies whose scores were rated as good.

Notwithstanding the above, shattering the *glass ceiling* is complex and requires action on several fronts. The state, employers, academic institutions, and women themselves are essential players in breaking down barriers that are holding women back.

The glass ceiling is not healthy for anyone. It suppresses the diversity that is any country's most unique and powerful advantage. So, if you are a supervisor, manager, or CEO of a corporation and are serious about having a diverse workplace, then you should

consider and understand the barriers that are keeping you from having these barriers. Ultimately, the solution to these barriers is affirmative action. Affirmative action is a positive step that is taken by employers which contribute toward greater employment opportunities for women. This is an important tool used to strip away emotional baggage and occasional abuses of a company and to shatter the *glass ceiling*.

Smashing the *glass ceiling* may be the fair and even the right thing to do, but companies with male-fixed corporate culture may not immediately see the business reason for doing so. There are very solid reasons for making sure that women have equal access to top management and prime assignments that even the most male secured cultures can understand.

Male managers and leaders need to understand that leadership is not about them but about those they serve. It is not about exalting themselves but about lifting others up. Ultimately, it is a question of leadership. In the interest of justice and morality, as a collective, we need to make a concerted effort to smash the *glass ceiling*. As Ann Frank said, “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

We welcome any suggestions, comments and critique.

***Paresh Soni*** is an Institutional Researcher at the Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA)

***Xolehwa Linganiso*** is a Researcher at REGENT Business School

***Farhana Hoosen*** is Director for Teaching and Learning at REGENT Business School

***The authors can be contacted at [www.regent.ac.za](http://www.regent.ac.za)***