Breaking the Glass Ceiling: A Qualitative Study on Gender-Based Career Advancement Barriers Across Job Sectors

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Abstract

This study investigates the manifestation of the glass ceiling in five sectors: manufacturing, technology, finance, healthcare, and education. Employing a qualitative approach, it explores industry-specific factors that either exacerbate or mitigate the glass ceiling, assesses perceived hurdles to women's progression in leadership positions, and examines strategies employed by women who have successfully navigated these challenges. The research also evaluates the efficacy of existing organizational strategies aimed at promoting career advancement and gender equality. For this study, purposive sampling was utilized, and data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The findings demonstrate a lingering "double glass ceiling" caused by societal and structural obstacles that are exacerbated by localized biases and micro-inequities. The study found significant inter-sectionality effects, where age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status exacerbate problems. While certain obstacles are shared by all industries, each one has unique difficulties. The study identifies effective strategies for career advancement, including ongoing skill development, mentoring, and strategic networking. However, there seems to be a big gap between understanding policies and using them effectively. This thorough analysis offers insights for focused interventions and policy recommendations to promote more equitable work environments, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of gender inequality in career advancement across diverse job sectors.

INTRODUCTION:

In the rapidly sprouting landscape of India's modern workplaces, the persistent issue of gender inequality continues to challenge our notions of progress and equal opportunity. At the forefront of this discourse lies the concept of the "glass ceiling," a term that describes the invisible yet formidable barriers preventing women from ascending to the highest ranks of organizational hierarchies. Despite significant advancements in women's rights and professional opportunities over the past decades, the glass ceiling remains a pervasive phenomenon across various job sectors in India, warranting continued scrutiny and research.

As a social work academician and researcher specializing in gender issues in the Indian workplace, I have observed that the manifestation of the glass ceiling is not uniform across different industries in our country. While some sectors have made strides in promoting gender equality, others lag behind, entrenched in traditional gender roles and stereotypes deeply rooted in Indian society. This disparity calls for an in-depth examination of how the glass ceiling operates within and across different job sectors in India, considering the unique challenges and opportunities presented in each field.

The persistence of the glass ceiling in India is not merely a matter of individual career trajectories; it represents a systemic issue with far-reaching societal implications. When women are disproportionately excluded from leadership positions, Indian organizations lose out on diverse perspectives and talents that could drive innovation and growth. Moreover, the underrepresentation of women in top-tier positions perpetuates gender stereotypes and discourages younger generations of Indian women from aspiring to leadership roles, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of inequality.

Recent data underscores the urgency of addressing this issue in the Indian context. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, India ranks 127th out of 146 countries in terms of gender parity. In the realm of economic participation and opportunity, which includes workplace equality, India's performance is particularly concerning, ranking 143rd globally. The female labour force participation rate in India has declined from 30.3% in 1990 to 19.2% in 2021, as reported by the (*Global Gender Gap Report 2023*, n.d.), highlighting a worrying trend in women's economic engagement.

The glass ceiling is evident across various sectors in India, iIn the corporate world, women held only 17.1% of board seats in India's top 500 companies in 2021, according to a report by Institutional Investor Advisory Services (IIAS). In the technology sector, while India has a higher percentage of women in tech (35%) compared to the global average, only 3% of Indian tech CEOs are women, as reported by (Williams, 2014). In academia, a study by the University Grants Commission found that women constitute only 27.3% of professors in Indian higher education institutions (2022). In the public sector, women represent only 13.74% of the total workforce, as per the All India Survey on Higher Education (Department of Higher Education, 2020)The researcher tried to explore deeper into the ways in which the glass ceiling manifests across these and other job sectors in India. By employing a qualitative approach, we seek to uncover the lived experiences of Indian women navigating career advancement, the subtle and explicit barriers they encounter, and the strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles. Through this investigation, the researcher hope to contribute to the body of knowledge on gender issues in the Indian workplace and provide insights that can inform policy-making and organizational practices to foster more inclusive and equitable work environments.

Through this study, it is vital to acknowledge that the glass ceiling in India is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader area of gender-related challenges in the workplace. Issues such as the gender pay gap (women in India earn 19% less than men) mentioned in the report by International Labour Organization (*Global Wage Report 2022-23*, 2022). The work-life balance struggles exacerbated by traditional family expectations, and sexual harassment intersect with and compound the effects of the glass ceiling. By examining these interconnected issues through the lens of different job sectors, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary landscape of gender equality in the Indian professional world.

The research results discloses a significant opening to drive long-lasting effects within India's workforce. By pinpointing specific barriers and identifying best practices across several sectors, we can empower Indian organizations, policymakers, and advocates with the insights essential to create dedicated interventions. Our ultimate aim is to aid in dismantling the glass ceiling in India, fostering a future where professional progress is determined by talent and merit rather than gender, thereby contributing to a more equitable society in our vibrant and diverse nation.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Comprehensive review seeks to develop sector-specific insights on the glass ceiling phenomenon. These

insights are intended to inform targeted interventions and policy recommendations, contributing to a broader understanding of gender inequality in career advancement across diverse job sectors. By combining existing research and identifying gaps in current knowledge, this review aims to pave the way for more effective strategies to shatter the glass ceiling and promote gender equality in leadership across all industries.

Women face systematic obstacles in promotions, highlighting that gender oppression within institutional structures considerably impacts women's career advancement in various labour markets, including India. They come across direct discrimination in promotions and face obstacles rooted in institutional structures (Wright & Baxter, 2000). Glass ceiling in India prolongs gender issues by hindering women's advancement in managerial roles due to stereotypes about their competencies and commitments, underpinning workplace inequality (Rathore, 2017). Systemic barriers hamper women's advancement in workplaces, subjective to social norms and organizational practices, demanding broader societal changes for true gender equality (Casini, 2016). Gender stereotypes and discrimination, including sexual harassment, are predominant, impacting women's career advancement (Kaushik et al., 2014).

Societal factors expressively hinder women's career advancement in India's IT industry, together with personal and organizational factors, influencing perceptions of women's capabilities for higher management roles (Azeez & Priyadarshini, 2018). Glass ceiling in Indian workstations creates barriers for women, leading to gender discrimination, reduced organizational commitment, and augmented by turnover intentions among corporate women (Tiwari et al., 2019). Women on corporate boards in India reveal ongoing gender issues and a glass ceiling, despite regulatory reforms aimed at promoting gender diversity in the workplace mentioned in the (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 2009). The glass ceiling in India reflects gender inequalities, with women facing barriers such as stereotypes, limited access to power channels, and management styles favoring male characteristics, hindering their promotion (Soleymanpour Omran et al., 2015). The study conducted by Mohanty and Jena (2016) highlighted that glass ceiling barriers, particularly organizational and societal, significantly hinder women's career progression in India's service sector, emphasizing the need for equitable advancement opportunities. significant gender issues, limiting women's advancement in senior management due to cultural, societal, psychological, and organizational barriers, despite increasing workforce involvement.

Indian women managers face a glass ceiling prejudiced by social, organizational, and personal biases, yet they succeed through hard work, support systems, and a practical approach to balancing home and career. Successful women managers often trust on a combination of organizational support and personal determination to direct these challenges. The interplay of familial support and individual drive is vital for overcoming the glass ceiling

Achieving gender equality in corporate leadership roles may take long years, highlighting the persistent nature of these blockades. While some women have successfully navigated these encounters, the broader systemic issues continue to hamper progress, suggesting a need for broad reforms in workplace policies and cultural attitudes.

The literature on the glass ceiling for women in managerial roles discloses substantial gaps, especially in India and Kerala. While the phenomenon has been studied broadly, research precisely on managerial roles is limited. Indian-specific studies are scarce, with existing literature mostly focused on the IT sector. Notably, there is a complete absence of research examining this issue in Kerala. This gap presents an opportunity for valuable research into the challenges faced by women in managerial positions across

various industries in India, chiefly in Kerala, which could inform policy-making and efforts to promote gender equity in leadership.

Method:

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design to understand the glass ceiling phenomenon across various job sectors in India, with a focus on individual experiences and perceptions that are best captured through qualitative methods. Here's a summary of its key components:

Research Design & Approach:

The research is qualitative and exploratory, aiming to capture in-depth insights into the glass ceiling phenomenon that are often missed by quantitative methods.

Methodology:

Data was collected using In-depth Interviews with individuals in leadership and those facing advancement barriers, allowing for detailed exploration of personal experiences and strategies and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to capture group dynamics and validate insights from individual interviews, adding layers of complexity to the discussion through diverse perspectives and collective debate. Data Collection Tools were Interview Guide and Discussion Guide for FGDs.

Purposive Sampling was used, ensured representation from both men and women across five major sectors (Technology, Finance, Healthcare, Education, and Manufacturing). The Sample Size comprised 10 interviews per sector, totalling 50 participants, and one FGD per sector with 6-8 participants, guided by data saturation principles.

Data Analysis was done using thematic analysis of verbatim transcripts from both interviews and FGDs to identify patterns and insights across different sectors. This approach provides a comprehensive view of the glass ceiling, blending individual insights with group dynamics to identify sector-specific and cross-sectoral patterns in perceived barriers and strategies within India's evolving economic landscape. The researcher used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to facilitate the coding and analysis process.

Results:

Sector-Specific Manifestations of the Glass Ceiling

In all sectors, women face a "double glass ceiling" due to cultural and structural barriers, compounded by micro-inequities, subtle biases that accumulate and hinder career progression. Persistent stereotypes contribute to representation gaps, limiting female role models and creating a mentorship gap. Despite gender policies, inconsistent implementation highlights a policy-practice disconnect, impacting work-life balance.

Barriers to Advancement and Intersectionality of the Glass Ceiling

Common Barriers across Sectors: Across sectors, women encounter common barriers to advancement, including implicit biases stemming from stereotypes about their capabilities and commitment. Disproportionate caregiving responsibilities exacerbate work-life balance challenges, hindering career progression. Additionally, women often lack access to high-level mentors and sponsors, further impeding their development. Exclusion from informal networking opportunities also limits their chances for career advancement, reinforcing existing disparities in professional growth and representation. Addressing these barriers is essential for fostering equitable workplaces.

Sector-Specific Barriers

Sector-specific barriers significantly hinder women's advancement in various fields. In technology, women's technical skills, especially in coding and engineering, are often underestimated, and the high-

risk culture of startups favors young, male employees. In finance, the stereotype of women as risk-averse limits their promotion opportunities, while client preference for male advisors further complicates their progress. In healthcare, despite women's dominance in nursing, leadership roles remain male-dominated, and funding disparities impact career advancement. Education presents challenges for women transitioning to administrative positions, while manufacturing suffers from stereotypes about women's physical capabilities and barriers to accessing male-dominated networks, restricting their advancement.

Inter-sectionality Findings

The study highlights the compounded impact of inter-sectionality on the glass ceiling effect across various sectors. Women face a "double glass ceiling," navigating both gender and ethnic barriers. Younger women in healthcare and education often feel undervalued, while older women in tech and manufacturing deal with ageism and sexism. Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds struggle to access elite networks, particularly in finance and tech, and first-generation academics encounter added challenges in achieving tenure and leadership roles. LGBTQ+ women face the "lavender ceiling," which limits advancement, especially in conservative industries, while transgender women experience significant discrimination. Women with disabilities report multiple forms of discrimination, with the greatest challenges in manufacturing and healthcare. Additionally, women with neurodiversity face unique difficulties in tech environments designed for neuro-typical individuals. The "motherhood penalty" significantly affects all sectors, with single mothers facing the most substantial barriers, particularly in roles requiring travel or long hours. Addressing these intersectional challenges is crucial for fostering equity.

Intersectional Strategies and Support:

Strategic Effectiveness

Evaluated the success of intersectional approaches in addressing multifaceted barriers to women's leadership advancement. Complex, multifaceted nature of the glass ceiling phenomenon underscore the need for deeper intersectional approaches to address gender-based career advancement barriers across different sectors.

Successful Strategies for Career Advancement within the Glass Ceiling

The study identified effective strategies employed by women to navigate career advancement despite the glass ceiling. Key approaches include seeking diverse mentors and sponsors, regularly updating technical skills and industry knowledge, engaging in strategic networking, developing strong negotiation abilities, and utilizing flexible work arrangements while maintaining clear boundaries for work-life integration.

Sector-Specific Strategies

Women employ sector-specific strategies to navigate the glass ceiling across diverse fields. In technology, they showcase expertise through open-source contributions, speaking engagements, and alliances. Finance professionals emphasize quantitative skills, client relations, and risk management. In healthcare, women focus on research, publications, and leadership within associations. Education strategies involve early policy experience, grant acquisition, and community engagement. Manufacturing emphasizes diverse operational expertise, safety initiatives, and cross-functional roles. These tailored approaches, alongside universal career advancement strategies, enable women to effectively address industry-specific barriers and progress in their fields.

Innovative strategies

Women advance through innovative strategies like reverse mentoring, where younger women mentor senior leaders on tech trends, and male advocacy programs, where male leaders sponsor women's progress.

Returnship programs ease career re-entry in finance and tech, while intersectional networks support diverse representation. Personal branding through thought leadership enhances visibility.

Organizational Support Factors

Successful women frequently leverage transparent promotion criteria, unbiased performance evaluations, and inclusive leadership development to advance their careers. Flexible work policies that support career progression without penalties also play a crucial role, allowing women to balance professional growth with personal responsibilities, thereby fostering equitable opportunities for advancement.

Personal Attributes

Women who advance successfully often share key traits: resilience, adaptability, and confidence, enabling them to navigate challenges effectively. Their willingness to take calculated risks and their strong communication skills foster influential relationships, while an authentic leadership style inspires trust and empowers them to make meaningful contributions to their fields. These findings highlight that while systemic changes are crucial, individual strategies play a significant role in navigating and breaking through the glass ceiling. The most successful approaches often involved a combination of sector-specific tactics, innovative networking, continuous skill development, and leveraging organizational support systems.

Effectiveness of Existing Policies and Gender Perspectives on the Glass Ceiling

Our study examined the effectiveness of existing policies aimed at addressing the glass ceiling and explored gender perspectives across the sectors. Gender equality policies show varied effectiveness across sectors. Awareness is high (90%+), but only 40% report effective implementation. Mandatory policies, like parental leave, are more consistently enforced than voluntary ones, which depend heavily on organizational culture. Short-term policies (e.g., diversity hiring) yield immediate effects, while long-term ones (e.g., leadership development) support sustained impact. In technology, returnship programs retain mid-career women, while finance struggles with flexible work policies. Healthcare sees success with mentorship programs, and education benefits from tenure extensions for caregivers. Manufacturing improves with safety and training programs, although harassment underreporting persists.

Gender perspectives on policy effectiveness

Gender perspectives on policy effectiveness reveal major differences. Male leaders tend to view policies as effective (70%), contrasting with only 40% of female employees, especially in finance and manufacturing. Women prioritize work-life balance and promotion transparency, while men focus on recruitment and bias training. Many women fear backlash for using family-friendly policies, and both genders see male engagement as crucial. Intersectional gaps persist, with only 25% of women finding current policies effective, and LGBTQ+ women calling for inclusive language.

Innovative Policy Approaches

Innovative policies like formalized sponsorship, gender-neutral parental leave, transparent promotion criteria, and intersectional diversity approaches have effectively supported gender equality, reducing bias and broadening caregiving roles.

Challenges in Policy Implementation

Policy implementation faces challenges like securing middle management support, limited resources in education and healthcare, inadequate metrics for impact assessment, and cultural resistance in male-dominated sectors.

Best Practices in Policy Effectiveness

Effective policies adopt a holistic approach, addressing recruitment, retention, and advancement to support

diversity at all levels. Data-driven implementation, involving regular audits and adjustments, ensures policies remain responsive to actual needs. Leadership accountability is essential, with diversity metrics tied to performance evaluations, promoting commitment from top management. Additionally, involving employees in policy development fosters a sense of ownership and relevance, enhancing overall effectiveness and alignment with organizational culture and goals.

Discussion:

The study reveals a complex landscape of gender inequality across five diverse sectors: technology, finance, healthcare, education, and manufacturing. The persistence of the glass ceiling phenomenon, despite increased awareness and policy implementation, underscores the deeply rooted nature of gender disparities in career advancement.

A significant finding is the existence of a "double glass ceiling" caused by the intersection of cultural and structural barriers. This is further complicated by micro-inequities and subtle biases that accumulate over time, hindering women's career progression. The study highlights that while common barriers exist across sectors, such as implicit biases and work-life balance challenges, each industry presents unique obstacles. For instance, in technology, women's technical skills are often underestimated, while in finance, stereotypes about risk aversion limit promotion opportunities.

The inter-sectionality findings are particularly noteworthy, revealing how factors such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and sexual orientation compound the challenges faced by women. This multifaceted nature of discrimination calls for more nuanced, intersectional approaches to addressing gender-based career advancement barriers.

The research identifies several successful strategies employed by women to navigate these challenges, including seeking diverse mentors and sponsors, continuous skill development, and strategic networking. Notably, sector-specific strategies have emerged, such as showcasing technical expertise through open-source contributions in technology or focusing on research and publications in healthcare.

Organizational support plays a crucial role in facilitating advancement, with transparent promotion criteria and inclusive leadership development programs proving effective. However, the study reveals a significant gap between policy awareness and effective implementation, with only 40% of respondents reporting effective execution of gender equality policies.

The gender perspectives on policy effectiveness highlight a concerning disconnect, with 70% of male leaders viewing policies as effective compared to only 40% of female employees. This disparity underscores the need for more inclusive policy development and implementation processes.

Innovative approaches, such as formalized sponsorship programs and gender-neutral parental leave policies, show promise in supporting gender equality. However, challenges in policy implementation persist, particularly in securing middle management support and overcoming cultural resistance in male-dominated sectors.

The study emphasizes the necessity for continued efforts to address the glass ceiling phenomenon. Future initiatives should focus on intersectional approaches, sector-specific strategies, and bridging the gap between policy creation and effective implementation to foster truly equitable work environments across all sectors.

Limitations of the study

The study, while comprehensive in its examination of five diverse sectors (technology, finance, healthcare,

education, and manufacturing), presents several limitations that warrant consideration.

- Its scope may not fully capture all industries affected by the glass ceiling, and its findings may not be universally applicable to smaller organizations or different geographical regions.
- The reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, affecting the overall accuracy and reliability of the findings.
- As a cross-sectional study, it provides only a snapshot of the current situation, limiting the ability to track changes over time or establish causal relationships.
- While acknowledging inter-sectionality, the study may fight to completely capture the complex interplay of multiple identity factors.
- The evaluation of policy effectiveness may be caught up by the gap between informed awareness and actual implementation, and the balance between quantitative data and qualitative insights might restrict a deeper understanding of individual experiences.
- Potential selection bias, limited accounting for cultural differences, and the exclusion of small to medium enterprises or non-profit organizations could skew the results.
- The study's long-term relevance may be limited due to evolving workplace dynamics, and the criteria for measuring "successful" career advancement may vary across sectors and individuals.
- The study faced challenges in fully catching the range of male attitudes, evaluating the effectiveness of inter-sectionality policies, and providing a thorough analysis of sector-specific challenges.
- The assessment of innovative strategies may be controlled by their recent implementation, not permitting for a comprehensive evaluation of their long-term impact.

Recommendations

- Develop intersectional policies addressing multiple discrimination factors to tackle the "double glass ceiling" and provide targeted support for diverse women across various demographics.Adopting a mixed methods approach for deeper understanding of individual experiences and contextual factors.
- Improve policy effectiveness by linking diversity to leadership evaluations, conducting audits, training middle management, and establishing accountability measures across all organizational levels.
- Cultivate inclusive cultures through bias training, male allyship programs, and open dialogues on gender issues across all organizational levels.
- Create personalised career advancement strategies for women according to the requirments of each sector.

Conclusion

This study explores the glass ceiling phenomenon across five sectors: technology, finance, healthcare, education, and manufacturing, revealing persistent gender-based barriers to career advancement. It highlights both common obstacles and sector-specific challenges while emphasizing the importance of inter-sectionality in shaping women's professional experiences. Despite some progress in policy implementation, a significant gap exists between awareness and effective execution.

The findings suggest the need for tailored strategies, including individual career tactics and organizational support systems, to dismantle the glass ceiling. Future research, particularly longitudinal studies, will be essential for tracking progress and refining interventions to promote gender equality in leadership across all sectors.

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