

Encyclopedia of Social Problems

Glass Ceiling

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The glass ceiling is a metaphorical reference to systemic obstacles created in the workplace that prevent the socioeconomic advancement of minority groups by blocking them from reaching the upper echelons of leadership and management. This concept suggests that individuals who are otherwise qualified for higher-level positions are unfairly limited in their advancement through the organizational ranks. Traditionally, the glass ceiling metaphor pertained exclusively to women, but contemporary definitions now extend it to include minority groups as well. As the term *glass ceiling* implies, the barriers that limit these individuals are not immediately apparent but are tantamount to bumping one's head against a glass ceiling. The opposite term, *glass escalator*, refers to men's more rapid upward movement in organizations, suggesting a gender bias.

Historical Perspective

Coined in 1986 by the *Wall Street Journal*, the glass ceiling characterized organizational constraints that limit the movement of women to assuming leadership and managerial positions. The term quickly worked itself into the public vernacular as women earned promotions to middle management positions in increasing numbers while few advanced further. The glass ceiling metaphor has since been repeatedly stretched and molded to also apply to career mobility for those of minority group status based on race, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation. While there have been numerous interpretations of this phenomenon, the fundamental and underlying concept has remained the same: the scarcity of women's movement into top management positions in the workplace.

In its definition of the glass ceiling, the U.S. government views the glass ceiling as any artificial barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions because of an attitudinal or organizational bias. With this definition, the glass ceiling now applies to all minorities, and not exclusively to women. The importance of this concept is that it implies that minority group members experience greater resistance to their advancement as they climb their organizational ladders. Although the experience of career impediments is common for all minorities, the patterns differ depending on minority group membership. For example, [p. 409 ↓] minority men are not as likely to experience sexual harassment, a barrier to mobility, as their female counterparts do.

The glass ceiling is a reality when certain preconditions exist in the workplace. First, workplace inequalities based on race, ethnicity, gender, or other minority indicators cannot be explained by the employee's job performance. Second, racial and gender disparities in representation are more evident at higher organizational levels than at lower levels. Third, advancement becomes more difficult for minorities as their careers progress.

Research

Some research analyzes the glass ceiling phenomenon by examining quantitative and experiential representations of minorities occupying top management positions. In comparison with conventional barriers to career advancement, such as educational qualifications and job performance reviews, barriers that constitute the glass ceiling are frequently rooted in cultural, societal, and psychological factors. Because of the transcendent and subjective nature of the glass ceiling phenomenon, research analysis has produced mixed and varied results. However, its existence in the corporate world is less questioned than its constituent elements, which continue to be a subject of debate among researchers.

Society as a whole presents a major hurdle to the movement of minorities through the corporate ranks. Discrimination arising from strongly held attitudes, biases, and stereotypes toward women and minorities, as well as varying perspectives of normative behaviors associated with gender and social groups, directly contribute to the glass ceiling.

Researchers have identified three interrelated and panoptic hindrances to the upward mobility of females and members of minority groups on the corporate ladder in their examination and inquiry into the glass ceiling phenomenon. One barrier involves societal and cultural aspects or socialized attitudes or social psychological factors that can impose restrictions. A second barrier deals with organizational limitations or structural factors, and the third barrier addresses the personal, individual, and psychological factors that may interfere with the promotion process.

The supply barrier is the pervasive social force that acts to directly hinder women and members of minority groups from attaining the credentials necessary to move forward in their professional development. This, in turn, leads to a deficiency in the number of skilled and qualified women and minorities. Empirical research shows that each group has differential access to resources, educational and work opportunities, and status. As a result, women and minorities are frequently relegated to the confines of a narrow range of restrictive occupations, a pattern known as “occupational segregation.”

The difference barrier arises from the social and cultural preconceptions associated with certain individual differences, such as gender, color, and culture. These barriers can interfere with job performance and employer evaluations. For example, prejudices associated with gender are frequently anchored in the traditionally held views of women's roles in society. Cultural and racial biases are also rooted in the established values and norms of the majority.

Individual and psychological barriers are the result of internalizing the generally held perceptions and stereotypes about women and minorities that employers may hold. Individual and societal barriers are deeply interwoven as lack of self-confidence, motivation, and aspirations. These usually stem from the generally held perceptions and stereotypes about women and minorities which these group members then internalize. One consequence can be development of an inferiority complex.

Organizational barriers occur within the workplace and its structures, a pattern known as “institutional discrimination.” Institutional discrimination is systemic and ingrained in policies, laws, and procedures within an organization and is designed to keep individuals or groups of individuals subordinated. This can be intentional or unintentional by design and can include recruitment and hiring practices in the workplace. This barrier also extends to systems which may not be intentionally discriminatory but which generate the effect of depriving women and members of minority groups. These include corporate environments that alienate and isolate those in minority groups.

Future Directions

Networking is an important process that contributes to the entrenchment of the glass ceiling. Employees typically become aware of open positions through word-of-mouth networking, and many organizations routinely hire from word-of-mouth referrals. In predominantly white male organizations, referrals will [p. 410 ↓] generally produce more white males for available opportunities. Under current federal guidelines, therefore, organizations must maintain responsibility for general awareness and enforcement of equal opportunity and affirmative action mandates.

Despite growing awareness among leaders in the corporate world of the intrinsic economic value of including women and minorities in senior corporate positions, progress remains slow in penetrating glass ceiling barriers. While each individual company is clearly different and must evaluate its own particular needs, advocates insist that all companies must address each of the glass ceiling barriers, that they must embrace diversity and inclusion from the top down. They also suggest that corporate leaders work to change the climate of the work environment by including a mentoring process to assist in the success and upward mobility of women and minorities.

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See also

- [Affirmative Action](#)
- [Discrimination, Institutional](#)
- [Feminism](#)
- [Feminist Theory](#)
- [Gender Bias](#)
- [Gender Gap](#)
- [Hostile Environment](#)
- [Pink-Collar Occupations](#)
- [Segregation, Gender](#)
- [Segregation, Occupational](#)

- **Sexism**

Further Readings

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