

Glass Ceiling for Professional Women: A Study on Bangladesh

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The 'glass ceiling' metaphor is used to describe invisible barriers (glass) through which women see elite positions but cannot reach them (ceiling). The scenario poses as if there is not sufficient room for women at the top positions like a board member, authoritarian bodies, and top executive committees. Under such circumstances, whether the glass ceiling exists in Bangladesh, the obstacles the professional women face because of their gender, the kind of support they need, and the factors that assist them to overcome those: these were the research areas of this study. This study gained insight by interviewing high position holder female professionals from versatile and challenging sectors. The barriers found were many: stereotypical undervaluation of women, child-care challenges, social underestimation and disobedience due to professional jealousy, scarcity of family support and additional work efforts due to gender. Factors like support from family and husband, urge for a separate identity, self-determination, educational excellence was found to assist women to shatter the ceiling. The study provides interesting findings that can be rendered useful and essential.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling, Women in Bangladesh, Barriers for women.

1. Introduction

The concept of 'the glass ceiling' was originally introduced in July 1979 by Katherine Lawrence. Davies-Netzley (1998) defined the 'glass ceiling' as a metaphor that has been used to describe invisible barriers (glass) through which women can see elite positions but cannot reach them (ceiling). Although largely talked about in Western countries, it is one of the least understood concepts in Bangladesh. Children here are taught through various social institutions that girls are to be the manager of the family and boys are to manage corporations and office-hold. Still today women are put in the top positions as puppets or for the sake of tokenismⁱ. There is strong evidence that the glass ceiling strongly exists and women are struggling and breaking through it. In the HDR 2014, Bangladesh ranked 81 in GEMⁱⁱ(Gender Empowerment Measure) out of 93. Percentage of female bodies in parliament is 15.1%, female legislators, senior officials and managers are 23% and female professional and the technical workers is 12%. It implies the lack of women's participation and access to the high ranked positions. Keeping half of the population out of the authoritative bodies and policy-making entities means depriving Bangladesh of half of its merit and asset.

This study aims at finding proof of the existence of the glass ceiling, the barriers women face in their professional life because of it and the success factors that assist them to overcome the barriers. The first section deals with Introduction. The second section

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discusses the Literature Review. The third section describes the Methodology. The fourth section presents the Findings and the last section is the Conclusion of this paper.

2. Literature Review

The 'glass ceiling' poses various barriers which prevent large numbers of women from obtaining and securing the most powerful, prestigious, and highest-grossing jobs in the workforce. This makes women feel unworthy to hold high-ranking positions or not seriously taken as potential candidates for advancement (Nevill, 1990). Korabik (1990) found out in his research on homogeneous and heterogeneous sex groups and on persons in positions of leadership that adopting an androgynous management styleⁱⁱⁱ may help women to mitigate the negative impacts of sex-stereotyping in workplace. Such acceptance and adaptation by the managing authorities can improve the workplace environment since stereotyping in the workplace is a major barrier in Bangladesh. Eyring and Stead (1998) found out on their survey on 931 companies in Houston that most of the companies showed evidence of existing glass ceiling and the companies had several programs to reduce that. This reflects that the acceptance of the glass ceiling is an important trait and only after that, necessary steps can be taken in order to reduce the impacts. Ragins, Townsend & Mattis (1998) stated that dismantling the glass ceiling requires an accurate understanding of the overt and subtle barriers to advancement faced by women. Their study identified key career strategies used by the women in their rise to the top. A startling finding in their study was that there was a disparity in the perceptions of CEOs and the high-ranking women in their firms. Grout, Park & Sonderegger (2007) insisted that the glass ceiling exhibits the following features-

- a) a lower number of female employees in higher positions
- b) Women have to work harder than men even in equivalent jobs
- c) On average women are paid less than men when promoted
- d) Women face more obstacles to get to the top positions

All these studies are focused on Western countries mostly. Very few were done in the South Asian region even fewer in Bangladesh. The cultural factors were not considered before which is important because along with financial issues; societal norm, prejudice, political instability and religious framework had constructed an unfavorable environment for women to pursue higher ranks. This study gives emphasis on understanding the deep-rooted issues of stereotyping high-ranking women in Bangladesh like never before. To bring progress in the barely touched area of the glass ceiling in Bangladesh, this study worked on the following objectives:

1. To find proof of the existence of the 'glass ceiling' for professional women in Bangladesh
2. Finding the barriers women face in gaining the higher positions
3. Finding the success factors that assist women to overcome the barriers
4. Seek solutions to remove the 'glass ceiling'

3. Methodology

This is an exploratory study as it enquires deep into a problem related to a significant part of the society of Bangladesh. Thus interview was chosen as the research method. The research was done in a time span of four (04) months. The data is the interviewees' opinions, experience at work and details of their personal history of the obstacles they faced in their

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careers: how they overcame these obstacles, what factors facilitated their success, whether they faced discrimination in payment, promotions or facilities. To derive these data the necessary target sample comprised of women who are currently working at top positions of several fields of profession, women who actually have faced the glass ceiling, survived it, shattered it and have outreached the upper-management authority of their work sector. The sample size was eight (08) and it was enough to address the objectives of the study as they were carefully selected based on three different sampling methods: a) Stratified Sampling^{iv}- target sample was divided into two major groups: public sector (Group 1) and private sector (Group 2) b) Diversity Sampling^v- Group 1 had three interviewees chosen in three separate sectors of government job. Group 2 had two academicians, one politician, journalist and international diplomatic attaché each. c) Convenience Sampling is when available targets are approached. The secondary data used in this study are necessary information collected from various electronic sources.

The first objective was to find proof of the existence of the glass ceiling and to find the data for this the interview questions were asked regarding the characteristics of the glass ceiling provided by Grout, Park & Sonderegger (2007) as these were taken as the basis for proving the existence of the glass ceiling in this study-

1. Whether there are a lower number of female employees in higher positions
2. Whether women have to work harder than men in equivalent jobs
3. Whether women are paid less than men
4. Whether women face obstacles to get promotions; if the answer was yes, the proof of the glass ceiling was taken as positive.

The second objective was to find barriers of their professional life and so the questions involved their personal experiences of work life. Most of the answers came out by 'in-depth probing' which means intentionally and carefully pressing on sensitive issues to bring out essential information. The answers found as the barriers were many: stereotypical undervaluation of women, child-care support, and facilities, lack of family support, social underestimation, disobedience due to professional jealousy from that and additional work efforts due to gender etc. The third objective was to find out factors that helped them in overcoming the barriers, they were asked about their personal history regarding their childhood, family background, marriage and career since the beginning. Factors like family inspiration, educational excellence, support from husband and an urge for a separate identity came to light.

The fourth objective was to look for recommendations and as for its data and as its answer the respondents revealed solutions to assist women in breaking the glass ceiling and came up with ideas very significant and plausible.

3.1 Analysis of Results

The transcriptions of the interviews were coded based on their responses: 'lack of family support,' 'child care,' 'husband discouraged,' 'prejudiced husband,' 'husband offering money to quit job,' 'unsupportive in-laws,' 'bright student,' 'very determinant about job and identity' etc.

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Table 1: Details of the Interviewees

Profession/ Job Sector	Number of Respondents	Notions	Designation
Government Job	03	A	VAT & Customs Commissioner
		B	Deputy Secretary, Dhaka South City Corporation
		C	Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Youth & Sports
Journalist	01	D	Feature Editor, The Daily ProthomAlo
Diplomatic Attaché	01	E	Kyrgyz Consulate in Bangladesh
Teacher	01	F	Professor, United International University
Politician	01	G	Member of the Parliament, People's Republic of Bangladesh
Researcher	01	H	CEO, Business Initiative Leading Development (BUILD)

The codes formed 'patterns' by bringing many codes together and later to form a category. The categories were then analyzed using Thematic Analysis^{vi}. The second objective was analyzed on six themes: underestimation of the society, stereotypic notion towards women, the necessity of additional work efforts, and lack of family support, child-care, disobedience due to professional jealousy. The third objective was analyzed based on four themes: self-determination, inspiration & support from family, educational excellence and identity crisis.

4. Findings

4.1 The Existence of the Glass Ceiling for Women in Bangladesh

Barriers to promotion: More than half of the respondents (62.5%) had faced promotional barriers in their career. They have been undermined by colleagues, staff, and seniors; denied their deserving promotions, men were preferred for an important job and delicate and important posts were not assigned to them due to their gender. The rest said that they were spared because of the established structure of promotion procedure in their sector of the jobs-public sector (BCS).

Discrimination of payment: One-third of the women have seen discrimination in payment in high positions. Others agreed that till the middle management posts there is some discrimination but in the higher positions, not much difference is seen.

Women working harder than men in equivalent jobs: All the respondents agreed to it and added that women have to prove their capability every day.

Fewer women in top positions: Though there are some remarkable changes and landmarks today in women holding top positions, the respondents strongly agree that there is still a very low number of female in the top positions in comparison with men.

All these agreements lead to the decision that the glass ceiling exists for women in Bangladesh in almost all sectors of jobs.

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4.2 Reasons behind Barriers to Promotions to Higher Positions

Lack of procedure and strict guidelines: The barriers created in the corporate, private or non-government jobs exist 'because of the lack of strict hierarchic structure, established guidelines and procedures for promotion'. Respondent E agreed that the absence of these push employees towards 'unhealthy fight.'

Stereotypical mindset: A great portion of the interviewees (62.5%) believe the authorities and employers still hesitate to assign women with important duties. The sexual objectification of women is still in the act and many men believe that women progress only by being physically attractive and manipulation. Respondent D says,

"I have a girl working here who left her job at a newspaper. She worked at the Secretariat. I asked her why she left her job. She said that on days she failed to get any news out of the Parliament Members or Secretaries her male colleagues would say, "She is a woman for God's sake, what more can she do?" And days, when she could get very important news those same men, would say, "She is a woman! Who knows what she has done to get this news!"

The unwillingness of some women to dedicate more effort: Examples were mentioned where some women were not eager to learn more and undertake more responsibilities even to accept promotions. The confidence in women falls because of such women.

4.3 Major Obstacles in Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Child-care: 75% of the interviewees mentioned child-care as the major obstacle to do a job. There are very few day-care centers in Bangladesh let alone in the offices. Most of those are not run under any guideline and provisions and do not have trained personnel to look after the children. Such shortcoming creates a great inconvenience because without the knowledge of her children being safe a woman can barely focus. Finding a nanny or a maid to look after children is as hard today as it was before. They added that they had to leave their children under the supervision of their neighbors or at a relative's house nearby. Only 25% of the women had their own mother or mother-in-law to look after their children.

Underestimation of the Society: Working women are often looked down upon by the society as the rebellious ones: who do not care for family, are selfish, power-hungry and self-centered; these were some of the responses from the interviewees. Often they were brought down by humiliation and harsh words for not being 'more social'. Being social means 'gossiping with people' and 'spending time at home'. C said,

"At any social gathering, people always try to point me out as the mother 'who stays out of home all the time.' They even advised me to stop working by using religious references even though they have no knowledge about what Islam said about this."

Lack of Family Support: Family support has been found out to be the most important element in a woman's success in career. A quarter of the interviewees (25%) have never received any support from the family of in-laws or their husbands. They believe they could have gone much higher than they are now today if their families have been supportive and stood behind

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them. With family-ties in line, it is unlikely for a woman to be able to focus on work. The other portion of the women said that the support they received from their family had not come easy either.

Disobedience due to Professional Jealousy: 62.5% of the interviewees often face negative behavior from their male staff and colleagues and are often undermined and disrespected by them. 'Professional Jealousy' creates a more hostile working environment. Half of the interviewees (50%) agreed to the old phrase- 'women are the enemy of women' because even today many women are not ready to work under the command of another woman. The possible reason behind this is that they were taught from the childhood that only men are born to be leaders.

Additional Work Efforts: 75% of the interviewees agreed that they have to struggle harder to maintain a work-home life balance. They have to give additional effort to do a job than a man to achieve the faith of their employers. Interviewee D said,

"A working woman has to score twice in the same goal post to win."

Stereotypical Notion: Women are still viewed through the lenses of popular stereotypes. Half of the interviewees (50%) agree that most of the times women are not appreciated for their work and are not assigned challenging tasks.

4.4 Factors Facilitating in Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Family Support and Inspiration: The majority of the interviewees (75%) admitted that the major factor that assisted them to hold their career in place is the inspiration and support they receive from their family. Their families had helped them look after their children, do their chores, acted as their mental support backing up their struggles throughout their career. Interviewee A remarked,

"My mother always said, 'I did not educate my daughters to do all her life what I did-cook food and do chores.'"

Self-Determination: Half of the interviewees agreed that their very own self-determination helped them to cling to their job no matter what. Also, lack of determination is a major reason for many women giving up their bright careers. This way the economy is losing the contribution that these women could provide.

Identity Crisis: 37.5% of the respondents stated that they always craved for creating a separate identity. This urge led them to fight for a superior position and inspired them to break through the glass ceiling. Interviewee H said,

"I always wanted my very own identity. I never sign Mrs. Bashar or introduce myself so. I sign my own name."

Educational Excellence: Reaching top positions sure requires educational excellence and this creates the confidence to shatter any barrier. For 25% of the respondents, educational excellence always was a reminder of their worth.

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4.5 Recommendations on Ways to Shatter the Glass Ceiling

Inspiring Girls since Childhood: Inspiring girls to be strong enough to stand up for themselves from their early childhood was a major recommendation. They believe that change starts at home. If daughters are not taught to be bold in their life the nation will lag behind and we will not see more women in top positions. (A, H)

Child Care Issue: There were a lot of recommendations to solve this crisis.

- i) Earlier the families were joined and there was always someone- a mother, a mother-in-law or an aunt to look after children from time-to-time. With the emergence of nuclear families, such help is obsolete. Initiating a certified nanny or maid-service officially was an idea.
- ii) There is no 'day-care center policy' in Bangladesh. Formation of it can establish many reliable and safe day-care centers. (H)
- iii) Several offices in the same area can build one safe and reliable day-care center together for a start. Also, housewives living in modern apartments could open day-care centers in basement or garage to look after the children of working mothers and earn some money as well. (D)
- iii) Establishing proper day-care centers could be made an obligation not a corporate social responsibility (CSR) for organizations. (H)

Considerate Authorities: The authorities should be trained and motivated to give women more chances and depend more on them. They should be more considerate of those who are pregnant or have a new-born child. (B)

Training the Men: Half of the interviewees claimed that boys, young adult males, and adult men need to be taught at home to change their mindset about role of women. Generally, men believe their duty as an educated husband or role as an open-minded male ends with just letting the wife work, which is the least of it. They need to lend their hand in household works, child-care, family responsibilities which are always carried out by women. The family has to be taken as a 50-50 responsibility. Many women's possibilities of building their career are nipped in the bud for un-supportive husbands. (Interviewee A, C, D, H)

Self-Determination and Patience: 'Self-determination and patience' is an essential duo of traits for all working women who are rising to the top, agreed upon by all the interviewees. They rose up through career ladder only by keeping their determination intact and confidence in their capacities. Interviewee B reflected,

"When Begum Rokeya started female education, was it easy? Time changes and every crisis passes. Women must be patient, determined in their goal and very clear about what they want, what they are fighting for."

In short, the first objective of the study was to identify the existence of the glass ceiling for professional women in Bangladesh and the findings were positive. This is similar to Ragins, Townsend and Mattis (1998). The additional finding of this study is the difference in the degree of the glass ceiling between private and public sector jobs. This opens scope for detailed studies focused on specific sectors. The second objective was to recognize the barriers towards diminishing the glass ceiling and the findings are backed up by Rey (2005) as she stated that 'women's access to leadership positions has been hindered by

discrimination and stereotyping.' The additional barriers this paper has found in the context Bangladesh are child-care, lack of family support, social underestimation and rendering extra work effort compared to men. These specific social issues were not explored by any studies. The third objective was finding out the essential factors that assist women in breaking the glass ceiling. The factors that are new from this study are strong self-determination, inspiration & support from family, educational excellence and identity crisis. The fourth objective was seeking solutions for breaking the glass ceiling. The solutions the interviewees all presented were innovative and effective ideas of solutions. The country needs a 'Day-Care Center Policy' to ensure the establishment of reliable and safe child-care centers. Families need to be supportive of women in tasks of looking after children and household chores. The men need to understand that they are not only a member of the family; they are also a caretaker and a doer. These add to the body of solutions to solve the glass ceiling issue.

5. Conclusion

In the Indian sub-continent women had long been confined to four walls. Now even in Bangladesh, women are taking charge, taking hold of top positions, owning companies, running countries, and global corporations. But there are still a lot of constraints in their path. Thus this is the perfect time to dig deep into the constraints and mitigate those to ease the path for women towards progress. Not many researches were conducted on this topic. This study successfully proves the existence of the glass ceiling barrier in Bangladesh. It also specifically identifies the existing constraints faced by professional women and the success factors that facilitate; implying a breakthrough in new knowledge which will contribute in mitigating the obstacles by policy advocacy and recommendations. This study faced great difficulty in reaching the top position holder women and it is the major limitation of this study. There is scope to conduct future studies with bigger sample and segregated sectors of profession to implement suitable solutions to resolve the glass ceiling problem. Women have always been judged by their looks, by their jobs and even their joblessness. It is high time they reach the position they deserve by their merit and hard work. This study will contribute with interesting facts regarding these factors.

Endnotes

ⁱTokenism is the policy and practice of making a perfunctory gesture towards the inclusion of members of minority groups (based on sex, races, religion and color etc.)

ⁱⁱ In the Human Development Reports (HDR), Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) is used as a widely accepted indicator to reflect the portion of empowered women's percentage of a population.

ⁱⁱⁱ A management style including both men and women in top leadership positions

^{iv} Stratified Sampling is when there are specific groups and sub-groups and the sample is random within those target groups.

^v Diversity Sampling is when there is some deliberate difference inside the groups to seek a variation

^{vi}Thematic analysis is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research. It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns or "themes" within data. Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question. The themes become the categories for analysis.

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Appendix

The interview questions of this study are-

- i) Did you face any problem in getting promotions in your career? If yes, what were they?
- ii) Is there any discrimination in the payment for men and women in the same position?
- iii) Do you believe you have to work harder to prove yourself because you are a woman?
- iv) What are the major obstacles you have faced in your career? Please share some incidents and experiences.
- v) What are the factors or what are the things that have motivated you to go on in your career and assisted you to reach this position today?
- vi) Do you find any differences in the participation of women in the top positions between the time you started your job and now?
- vii) What can be done to bring more women through these barriers and in the top positions?