

Do women in the IT industry experience a “glass escalator”?

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Abstract

The technological expansion in the mid-1990s opened the prospect of a career in IT for girls. Most assessments reveal that, notwithstanding the gender mainstreaming in this sector, the highest level of gender diversity has not yet been achieved in top-level management. Professionally, women have proven their essence in the conventionally male-dominated fields. As more women enter the workforce, governments have formed laws, passed regulations, framed policies, and circulated instructions to help employees and organizations avoid unlawful practices against women. Despite an almost equal ratio of men and women in the workforce, the number of women progressing to top-level management positions is relatively small. A wide gender gap in the IT sector at the C-suite level is a persistent reality worldwide.

Compared to the glass ceiling, the glass escalator is a lesser-known concept. When it comes to women-dominated sectors, the glass escalator is the idea that men ascend faster and higher than women. Women in male-dominated fields earn less money and advance slower than men in such fields. In areas where women predominate, women receive fewer benefits than men. Career planning requires a high commitment, strategy, and personal sacrifice. In our society, a wife's career is viewed as less important than her husband's. A woman's career is often re-shaped and re-moulded by her social roles. All employed women have jobs, but they do not have meaningful careers. Women typically shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden of balancing work and family; their careers may suffer.

Most organizations consider a stereotypical masculine model of leadership which causes the stepping out of capable women at every stage. The absence of gender-sensitive policies, inflexible work hours, and the inability to make a difference, and inadequate chances for career growth at work are the reasons for such a leak out. The cost of good crèches is very high, and most families find it unaffordable. Failure to decode informal networks, especially those that

can provide vital information, is one of the key hindrances to women's corporate progression. The dynamics of gender have to be acknowledged instead of spending resources on preparing women to follow the rules created by men.

Keywords: Glass Escalator, Glass Ceiling, Gender, Career Planning

Introduction

The term "management" has been highly associated with men and masculinity. Historically, managerial research has been done on male leaders and labelled leadership as a masculine concept¹. Generally, board of directors are overwhelmingly dominated by men. Gender-neutral leadership can be understood either through the equal distribution of critical managerial positions to employees or an unbiased evaluation of all work updates, irrespective of who executes the leader's role². Much research shows that having more women in the C-suite results in higher performance for the organization and the sector. Therefore, it is essential to discover what hindrances stop women from stepping up the career ladder.

Motherhood is expected to serve as the principal part of a woman's life. The irrational norm of a child-raising set by society sends the hidden message that women can't have both a family and a career. Lack of reasonable and good quality child care facilities is a barrier to women's participation at top-level management levels. Their senior colleagues often question women's ability to combine work and family responsibilities. Women are stepping out of corporate life not just for their families but also due to inflexible practices, inability to make differences and inadequate opportunities for personal development at work. There is also a growing awareness that women face various types of discrimination in the workplace, which inhibits them from taking up leadership roles³.

Feminine Leadership Style and Glass Ceiling

Most organizational practices mirror the patriarchal structures of our society. When women climb the corporate ladder, the construction of gendered workplaces changes. Leadership is still linked with stereotypically masculine traits such as hostility and arrogance. Current organizations require non-coercive leadership based on building relationships and teamwork⁴.

Generally, being sensitive is considered a womanly trait. Feminine traits such as empathy, caring, and problem-solving skills are devalued under the gendered arrangement of

management. Doing masculinity is the currently hidden norm that guides people's behaviour, outlooks, and actions in the workplace. Women and men often vary in their leadership styles and strategies. Our social conditioning expects men to behave in specific, predetermined ways and women differently. Assertiveness, outspokenness, and ambition are considered leadership prerequisites. If women show the same attributes, they will be labelled as bossy and bitchy. Organizations are at times giving a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't dilemma' situation for women. Women are guided to show more boldness and initiative within the work atmosphere. But they are at the risk of breaching gender roles and societal expectations of how a female leader should or should not act. Gender segregation is predominant in the IT sector. This segregation can be seen by assigning routine work or specialist work with less technical skills and having low decision-making power for women. These differences are frequently interpreted into firm beliefs for how a woman or a man must perform their duties. These categorizations reinforce the cultural building of leadership as a gendered phenomenon.

Gender may not be an element of leadership style, but it affects the self-image of the leaders and their social conditioning⁵. As tech organizations require interpersonal skills, team building, relationship management and multi-tasking skills, a feminine leadership style will be more apt. Feminine leadership is related to a more interactive and involved style, which is non-hierarchical.

The vibrant and liberal nature of the social sciences reflects the growing interest in gender studies. Certain traits exhibited by women may also result in a self-imposed ceiling on their careers. E.g. failure to network after office hours, reluctance to take up lucrative opportunities in other organizations, failure to keep abreast with the latest technology, failure to bargain for higher perks or better pay scales, etc. Their career choices are constrained by distance from home, domestic responsibilities, job security, the reputation of the company, and other social reasons. The prefix "feminine" can be interpreted as women being leaders or sometimes referring to a particular leadership style. The disadvantage of this norm is that it raises questions like: if leadership is distinguished based on gender, it would mean that leadership is not gender-neutral.

There are characteristic differences between male and female leadership styles. Management beliefs favour the masculine outlook. The major hurdle to feminine leadership is that mind-set, which was supposed to select leaders who fit into a male-dominated setting⁶. Stereotypical masculine images still carry on about leaders and effective leadership found that inherent biases toward male leadership behaviours remain stout despite an increasing number of women

entering into crucial leadership roles. Women bring a diversity of thoughts, ideas, and experiences, which decides a firm's success. Having a woman on the board improves relations between management and employees. Specific theories, concepts, constructs found in earlier research will be summarized in association with this study.

The glass ceiling in HR parlance refers to the invisible but strong barrier which obstructs women from stepping up in the career ladder of an organization. The gender gap in top-level management has led many academicians to explore whether a glass ceiling exists. They found that gender discrimination, wage gaps, gender stereotypes, workplace harassment, and a lack of family-friendly policies in organizations are the barriers to women's advancement.

Many researchers have established the presence of a glass ceiling in different organizations and industries. In 1997, Tokunaga & Graham observed that the female employees could not progress as far up the management ladder as male employees. A study conducted by Veale & Gold (1998) confirmed that the glass ceiling did exist within the council and obstructed women's advancement to senior management. Schein (2007) found that gender stereotyping in organizations has resulted as a significant barrier to women's progress in one direction. The gender wage gap also exists in organizations. Scholars argue that the glass ceiling has been cracked already, and others say it still exists. Maybe women are now experiencing a glass labyrinth instead of a glass ceiling. Women have the opportunity to progress to critical positions, but they face many hindrances on the way, unlike men. The idea of what makes an efficient leader is changing and becoming more gender-neutral⁷. Feminine leadership is still an unexplored research area. More women are cracking the glass ceiling and making their way to top-level management. De-gendering leadership is a revolutionary concept. So the new emphasis is on understanding the impact of gender in an organization to study masculine perceptions and their acceptability.

Glass Escalator Effect and Equality at Workplace

The glass escalator effect describes the disparities in upward advancement in the workplace between men and women. The metaphor of the glass escalator argues that men in female-dominated occupations are more likely than women to rise to positions of responsibility because they are seen as having the attributes desired for leadership jobs. Men are frequently pushed into administrative roles, where they receive informal mentoring from other men in senior positions, even when they work in female-dominated fields. Furthermore, men are frequently the ones who make career advancement decisions. Gender's implicit effect on job-matching procedures has been substantially proven through statistical discrimination and other aspects of social closure, i.e., the process by which a group strives to retain its position by restricting others from entering. When women enter male-dominated occupations, they not only enter a job queue, as suggested by job search and matching theories, but they also enter a "gender queue," in which employers rank women lower than males due to gender stereotypes. As a result, women are typically at a disadvantage when vying for employment and promotions, and they are frequently pushed out of male-dominated fields owing to prejudice or a lack of opportunity.

The researcher questioned if glass escalators could be applied to women who work in the IT industry, a male-dominated world. Even though women face impediments to development at work, management positions in technology necessitate good interpersonal skills. Women in technology are guided toward the social side of their employment. Interpersonal skills are a feminine-associated quality. On the other hand, engineering is a technical position that is associated with men. As a result, women in computing may face a glass escalator effect, as gender stereotypes suggest that they would be better managers than engineers. Thus, a critical examination of this phenomenon is crucial.

While the impact of the glass escalator is clear for male IT employees, it does not appear to apply to female IT employees equally or equitably. Career breaks and maternity leaves are considered for promotions in the performance appraisal, which negatively affects their careers. Usually, gender discrimination is justified by redefining or manipulating the merits of male employees. Work-life balance difficulties are inextricably associated with IT jobs. Long work hours, working late at night to deal with international clients, the necessity to go on-site to finish projects and the office culture of staying late contribute to work-life challenges. IT jobs require a 24 *7 working style that often forces professionals to sacrifice

their family time for career advancement. Married employees are subjected to multiple roles and have more family obligations than unmarried employees. Working time arrangements for IT jobs are challenging for career family women to reconcile between work and family life, which deters them from pursuing career advancement possibilities within their firm.

Support is a crucial component of professional success. Women do not earn the same compensation as men. Women in male-dominated sectors claim that they do not receive the same social support from managers and co-workers as their male counterparts to perform adequately⁸. Women's ability to perform is influenced by the type of help they do not receive. Assistance with work-related activities and socializing with co-workers after hours and during breaks are examples of the forms of social support that women do not receive. Women in male-dominated fields are viewed differently than men in female-dominated areas.

The masculine work culture of the IT sector results in women experiencing exclusion, alienation, pressure, and harassment. Social capital assists by virtue of memberships in professional associations and access to social networks. Mentors, sponsors, and informal social networks are called "informal social capital." Social networks are considered a critical facilitator for vertical advancement. By attending casual networking events, employees can obtain information vital for climbing the career ladder, which is usually available to the participants of "good old boy" networks. The women who hammered the glass ceiling will be punished through negative social sanctions and by reducing their access to gaining social capital. The under-representation of women in critical roles in the IT sector should not be considered a women's problem but rather an issue for the industry. Without knowing the socio-cultural facts that influence women's career decisions, the social inclusion of women in the IT sector is not possible. This study aims to identify the individual and organizational reasons for gender bias that women face in making career decisions that impact their career progression and determine an action plan to address each of those issues .

Research Design

The study was conducted using qualitative research methods. For data collection, the interview method was used. In-depth interviews of 50 women from private IT firms in Kerala were chosen to capture the essence of their survival experience. The data were analysed using appropriate statistical analysis tools. R software was used to analyse the questionnaire. The interviews provided critical information that revealed hidden tendencies and patterns. The responses were tallied to determine the severity of the employees' issues at work. Three sections

of questions were divided into significant sub-themes in the interviews. Diversity, inclusivity, gender traits, and cultural diversity were the four significant subthemes. To determine their leadership strategies, researchers looked at the characteristics of successful female leaders.

Findings

- Masculine characteristics like influence, aggression, independence, objective, and competence are generally considered essential for management rather than so-called feminine features such as cooperative, flexible, subjective, and emotional, which can be observed as unproductive management traits.
- Male stereotyping and perception of women, exclusion from informal networks of communication, and lack of mentors are the reasons that hinder women from reaching top-level management.
- Women are not often aware of the strategic significance of their findings related to their careers. Women are more job-focused than career-focused. A majority of the women were not aware of office politics. Because of that, they don't know the power center in their office politics.
- Job segregation is also why the selection process can favour women for specific jobs. Policymakers are men. Men tend to stay in their comfort zones and choose more men, women often cannot work the long hours required for promotion because of the lack of support from their families. Most organizations do not provide child care facilities even though it is mandatory under the Maternity Benefit Act.

Recommendations

- Management must learn to appreciate gender differences as positive ones, which can serve as an asset for the organization. Males and females differ in their communicative styles. Therefore, each individual can communicate in their way at their own pace. For example, instead of meeting over drinks, meet for breakfast or lunch.
- Difficulty with child care arrangements was a significant workplace issue. Organizations should provide facilities like crèches to enable women to give their best in their careers.

- Organizations can provide coaching or career planning services that enable women with the resources they need to make informed early career choices. Organizations can have company visits where networking, resource sharing and vital information exchange can occur based on activities in which both gender can participate (not typically gendered activities such as a golf game).
- Companies should be transparent about their employment, promotion, and training policies. Promotion should not be linked to transfer. The transfer should be need-based.
- Organizations can create learning and development opportunities like mentoring programs and leadership development courses to give women equal opportunities to compete, grow confidence, and develop competence. Organizations can incorporate mentoring programs for women like sensitization programs, corporate mentoring programs and specific career skills programs on professional networking, time management and developing business strategies. Organizations can hold managers accountable for initiatives by rewarding only those who successfully meet the programme's goals.
- Organizations can provide a forum for women to address issues affecting them by establishing women development cells and encouraging women cell activities by giving empowering women awards.
- Re-examine the role of organizational culture in reinforcing gender stereotypes that negatively impact how women are viewed. In general, assessment criteria of a female is much tougher than a male. The requirement for women to substantiate themselves more than men was seen as a hindrance. Social and cultural conditioning can be considered as a reason for this. Companies should orient their recruitment policies to hire an equal number of males and females at the entry-level to bring in gender diversity and inclusiveness. The organization should go for gender audits.
- Government should force organizations to make annual reports about their human resource development. In that report, they need to show how many male and female employees were recruited last year, the ratio of male and female employees, and the performance appraisal of employees.
- Often the communications of board members with female employees are minimal. The board members may be unaware of the problems women face in the organization.

But this can be solved by a reverse mentoring process where directors are mentored by some women in managerial positions so that the board members can understand the actual situation.

- Rather than waiting for external legislation, now is the time for organizations to set voluntary targets for women's representation in top-level management and hold people responsible for meeting them. Organizations should implement boardroom quotas to ensure female participation in top-level management. Such a goal could indirectly address threats to the status quo that hold women from stepping up the career ladder.
- Business leaders must take accountability for building an effective talent pipeline and make it a corporate responsibility to develop and promote potential leaders of both genders proactively.

Conclusion

Elements obstructing women who wish to climb up the power hierarchy have little to do with women and much more to do with the organizational culture. In most cases, women never get off the sticky floor. They reach middle-level management and are stuck there. Women are expected to be harsh but not show 'macho' features; they were expected to be determined yet not expect equal treatment.

Most women stick with the organization just because of job security. It deals with the typecasting like women are said to be more job-focused than career-focused and are often not aware of the strategic importance of the decisions they make related to their careers. Women frequently lack the 'right' type of job experience to move ahead.

The more significant lessons that can be drawn from this study are that women's representation at the top management level is proportionately low compared to men. A solid glass ceiling exists and resists women's movement in their upward ladder of career growth. The study concludes that the significant barrier for women managers' progression comes from the corporates' thoughtlessness towards women's professional and personal roles.

Women can think masculine, and men can believe in a feminine way. Although gender influences are there in perceiving things differently, nobody makes decisions based on gender. The gender differences in leadership style can be summarized that men managers are more

prone to command-and-control. In contrast, women managers are more tending toward social and interpersonal techniques. Most of the leaders have a multitude of styles.

There is no denying that a Glass Escalator exists. Still, it is essential to recognize that it is strengthened by the exclusion and marginalization of individuals victimized by caste, sexuality and class.

Limitations of the Study

1. The primary assumption of the study was that the respondents were honest in the information that they were provided.
2. The sampling method used for this study is convenience sampling, and it is not considered an effective method of representation of the population. Generalization of the results is not possible.

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