

## Glass Ceiling or Personal Barriers: A Study of Underrepresentation of Women in Senior Management

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### Abstract

*The glass ceiling has been termed the factor for underrepresentation of women in higher management positions. Pakistani society is believed to be dominated by men in all walks including positions in higher management. The purpose of this study is to explore whether it is the glass ceiling or the personal barriers that result in the underrepresentation phenomena of women in higher management. This exploratory study has surveyed, through a semi-structured interview, the middle and higher-level women manager from private organizations located in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The findings suggest that it is not only glass ceiling barriers but also personal characteristics that hinder women's professional growth. The study also contributes to identifying personal and glass ceiling barriers and their relative importance.*

### Key Words

Glass Ceiling, Personal Barriers, Private Organizations, Senior Management, Underrepresentation

### Introduction

The glass ceiling represents the unnatural, invisible and transparent barriers that prevent women and minorities to climb up corporate ladder to senior management of organization (Weyer, 2007). The metaphor 'Glass Ceiling' does not represent one barrier or wall that prevents women from reaching top positions but it consists of many varied and pervasive forms of gender bias that halts women to upper rung of corporate ladder (Oakley, 2000).

A number of studies discussed different types of barriers that are related to the glass ceiling and that leads to underrepresentation of women in higher management, for example, lack of networking access, mentoring, training and development opportunities, anti-female nature of the organizational environment, etc. (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010).

Women underrepresentation in top management has been major research issue since the dawn of the twenty-first century and as result majority of seminars and workshops are held to make an overview of women issues and their progress in overall world but still women stay behind their male counterparts in senior management (Brower, Schwartz, & Bertrand Jones, 2019; Longman, 2018). Literature has identified number of barriers preventing the advancement of women to senior management. The study summarizes these under two categories namely own created in and glass ceilings barriers. The personal barriers to women's' advancement to senior management are given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Personal Barriers to women's advancement

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Authors</b>
Experience	(Eyring & Stead, 1998; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Li & Wearing, 2001; Mirza & Jabeen, 2011; Naff, 1994; Oakley, 2000; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998)
Work-life balance/ childcare	(Cooper, 2001; Eyring & Stead, 1998; Li & Wearing, 2001; Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Mathur-Helm, 2006; Mattis, 2004; Shoaib, Khan, & Khan, 2010; Tabak, 1997; Walker & Aritz, 2015)
Lack of qualification	(Bain & Cummings, 2000; Mathur-Helm, 2006; Mattis, 2004; Mirza & Jabeen, 2011; Naff, 1994)
Communication differences	(Cooper, 2001; Oakley, 2000; Walker & Aritz, 2015)
Women's personal preferences	(Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Mirza & Jabeen, 2011; Tabak, 1997)
Decision making	(Kay & Brockman, 2000; Shoaib, Khan, & Khan, 2010; Tracey, 2006)
Willingness to relocate	(Cooper, 2001; Naff, 1994)
Flexibility	(Mathur-Helm, 2006; Mattis, 2004)
Preferred leadership style	(Oakley, 2000; Weyer, 2007)
Lack of confidence	(Mathur-Helm, 2006)
Skill acquisition	(Hancock & Hums, 2016)
Lack of understanding of corporate politics	(Mathur-Helm, 2006)
Lack of having a partnership in business	(Kay & Brockman, 2000)
Job satisfaction	(Kay & Brockman, 2000)
Occupational choices	(Shoaib, Khan, & Khan, 2010)
Degree of job commitment	(Eyring & Stead, 1998)
Time devoted to job	(Naff, 1994)
A career-oriented mindset	(Mathur-Helm, 2006)

The study of literature has shown that there are a number of glass ceiling factors acting as barriers to women's progression to higher positions in organization. These factors are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Glass Ceiling Barriers to women's advancement

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Authors</b>
Networking	(Bain & Cummings, 2000; Cooper, 2001; Eyring & Stead, 1998; Lemons, 2003; Li & Wearing, 2001; Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Mathur-Helm, 2006; Mattis, 2004; Mirza & Jabeen, 2011; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010; Walker & Aritz, 2015)
Mentoring	(Cooper, 2001; Eyring & Stead, 1998; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Linehan & Scullion, 2001; Mathur-Helm, 2006; Mattis, 2004; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010; Yusoff, Kassim, & Seenivasa, 2011)
Management perception & Company culture	(Cooper, 2001; Eyring & Stead, 1998; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Mirza & Jabeen, 2011; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010; Walker & Aritz, 2015)
Gender stereotypes	(Cooper, 2001; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Lemons, 2003; Mathur-Helm, 2006; Mirza & Jabeen, 2011; Oakley, 2000; Shoaib, Khan, & Khan, 2010; Weyer, 2007; Yusoff, Kassim, & Seenivasa, 2011)
Gender pay gap	(Kay & Brockman, 2000; Oakley, 2000; Tandrayen-Ragoobur & Pydayya, 2015; Walker & Aritz, 2015; Yusoff, Kassim, & Seenivasa, 2011)
Facilities provided by the organization	(Kay & Brockman, 2000; Oakley, 2000; Tandrayen-Ragoobur & Pydayya, 2015; Walker & Aritz, 2015; Yusoff, Kassim, & Seenivasa, 2011)

Recruiting differences	(Cooper, 2001; Eyring & Stead, 1998; Shoaib, Khan, & Khan, 2010; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010)
Suitable employment/ Training opportunities	(Eyring & Stead, 1998; Mirza & Jabeen, 2011; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010)
Tokenism in top management circles	(Hancock & Hums, 2016; Oakley, 2000; Shoaib, Khan, & Khan, 2010; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010)
Behavioral double binds	(Eyring & Stead, 1998; Oakley, 2000; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998)
Female role models	(Cooper, 2001; Lemons, 2003; Mathur-Helm, 2006)
Sexual harassment	(Bell, McLaughlin, & Sequeira, 2002; Eyring & Stead, 1998)
Promotion policies and opportunities	(Mattis, 2004; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010)
Old boy network maintaining the status quo	(Cooper, 2001; Oakley, 2000)
Societal barriers	(Mirza & Jabeen, 2011; Tabak, 1997)
Lower productivity of women	(Bain & Cummings, 2000)
Departure from practices	(Kay & Brockman, 2000)
Unsupportive supervisors/colleagues and subordinates	(Mattis, 2004)
Governmental barriers	(Mirza & Jabeen, 2011)

Despite the positive trend of women's presence in the workplace, women are struggling to get to higher management specifically in developing countries. In Pakistan, men constitute 68% of the labor force as compare to women with 20% participation (PBS, 2018). Despite legal rights and constitution women have fewer opportunities to participate in economic activities and they remain restricted from opportunities due to patriarchal system. In Pakistani context, there is a male-dominated society; mostly women depend on male members of family for financial support. Pakistani women often face low opportunities for growth like education, training, employment, etc. However, some women are stepping out of home to get recognition in career orientation as well. In the first place, males hardly accept women standing equal to them in every field so women have to face many barriers in order to continue their careers and to get positions in senior management (Shoaib, Khan, & Khan, 2010). On the other hand, some studies suggest that women create glass ceiling on their own due to their attitudes and competencies (Shakir & Siddiqui, 2014).

### Context of the Study: Pakistani Culture

The focus of researchers is the phenomenon of the glass ceiling in private organizations located in twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Pakistan's total population is approximately 207.77 million, out of this population 51.23% consists of male and 48.76% comprises female according to the census of 2017. A significant part of population consists of labor force that is 65.50 million with a labor force participation rate of 44.3%, out of which 68.0% are males and 20.1% are females, which means male has 48.0 % more participation than women (PBS, 2018). Despite legal rights and constitution women have fewer opportunities to participate in economic activities and they remain restricted from opportunities due to the patriarchal system (Syed, 2009). Pakistan has one of the lowest women participation rates in economic activities because of cultural and social stereotypes, organizational factors, individual factors, interpersonal factors, governmental factors and many more independent barriers (Mirza & Jabeen, 2011). This issue needs to be taken seriously because gender equity is economic necessity for every country's progress and growth.

Pakistan has had initiatives to remove or reduce barriers impeding women's growth and gender discrimination and empower women and assure their safety at workplace (Shafiq, 2014). Among these practices some are First Women Bank Limited, The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2010 and Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment), Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010, National Commission on Status of Women Bill 2012, Quota for Women in Public Sector Jobs, Millennium Development Goals, and Convention on removing discrimination against women.

The concern of the article is to find if glass ceiling exists in the society under study and to what degree it exists. Primarily, this research aims to know whether cultural or personal reasons cause the hindrances to women's growth to higher management positions in specific cultures.

### Methodology

The study is focused on exploring the issue of women underrepresentation by asking questions from experienced respondents working in private organizations. The present study used semi-structured interviews to collect data

from women at middle manager level and higher manager levels from different sectors including private banks, higher education, multinational companies, IT companies, telecommunication companies, and non-governmental organizations.

The respondents were selected based on women representation in senior management in private organizations to explore the reasons for women's underrepresentation in higher management. For data collection, thirty women managers from private sector were requested for interview however seventeen respondents finally agreed for interview. Four out of 17 interviews were conducted on phone call and other data collected were tape-recorded.

Using a bilingual approach, respondents had the choice to answer either in English or in Urdu language. Most of the answers were in Urdu that were translated into English. The study used snowball sampling technique to find out the females who are at middle and higher positions in private organizations from Islamabad.

All interviews were imported in Nvivo 11 in MS Word form and codes and labels were assigned to these themes that were converted to nodes. Then interviews were studied and answers to questions were added to nodes. NVivo 11 was used for organizing and arranging data in the structured form with text search query, word clouds, and matrix coding query.

### **Findings of the Study**

This study explores barriers to the promotion of women to higher positions in private organizations. The interest is to know if the glass ceiling is created by cultural or individual characteristics. Furthermore, it was intended to assess the relative influence of personal characteristics of women employee and glass ceiling factors. The findings are presented as follows.

#### **Barriers to Women's Growth**

The respondents mentioned barriers causing the glass ceiling thwarting the promotion of women to management positions. These barriers are related to organization and society putting glass ceiling in the way of professional growth of women as well as personal characteristics limiting the chances of promotion to higher positions.

#### **Glass Ceiling Barriers**

Organizational environment. The study suggests that organizational environment does not support females, according to a respondent:

*"Women usually don't get full authority mostly heads don't trust girls, as this is male dominating society and men are given preference over women, moreover the salary of male employees is higher than female employee and adverse comments from males are always there."*

Corporate politics. It is one of the barriers usually faced by women in organizations. The majority of respondents faced corporate politics in form of friends, peers and senior male and female colleagues. The study found that both males and females face problems during their career paths, but the female's problem ratio is more. According to a respondent:

*"A lot of men are in marketing profession and they do not accept women equal to them."*

Another respondent said:

*"Given the nature of marketing that is fieldwork, organizations don't give any flexibility to women."*

**Societal Pressure:** This issue was faced as a barrier in their career progression. In some job role women must go outside for fieldwork, like in marketing and they come across different barriers while working in the field. They mentioned that women don't take decisions themselves rather their family is the decision-maker for them. According to respondents, families don't prefer women to work in field that results in loss of better opportunities.

**Societal Perceptions.** Some respondents specified some cultural aspects due to which they could not avail opportunities, like one of them, said:

*"I got a promotion opportunity but that had a link with media, and I was afraid due to societal perceptions as our society does not like association of girls with media. So, I refused to join."*

#### **Personal barriers**

**Lack of confidence:** Respondents mentioned that women face barriers due to lack of confidence:

*"Women are less confident, they go for safe and secure jobs so mostly they choose education and medical field".*

**Psychological Pressure:** Some respondents specifically mentioned the psychological pressure of work as a barrier to their careers:

*“Men give psychological pressure to women by giving them work not related to their field and when they fail in doing that work, they highlight women’s mistakes.”*

**Job Preferences:** Women are very selective in choosing a job field that is mostly related to medical and education. Civil services are also the job priority of women.

**Emotional Behavior:** A respondent mentioned that women are emotionally flooded so they face barriers due to their emotional behavior. Another respondent reported that women are less social than men, so men get more benefits.

**Egoistic Behavior:** A respondent got egoistic issues due to corporate politics and promotion opportunity was lost, a respondent quoted:

*“Yes, I had an own created barrier, I was getting a promotion opportunity to the senior position but due to some egoistic issues I lost that”*

**Lack of experience:** A respondent missed an opportunity of promotion due to lack of experience according to a respondent:

*“When I started to work at the manager level, I didn’t have much experience and exposure. I did not know when to express my point of view. I missed opportunity for promotion as I could not speak at right time,”*

**Flexibility to relocate:** A respondent could not relocate to another place, according to a respondent:

*“I missed an opportunity to shift to Lahore and my promotion was also linked to this relocation but because of circumstances, I could not relocate and eventually I missed the promotion.”*

Table 3 shows a mixture of barriers that women created due to their attitudes and barriers that women face due to organizational environment, family and societal issues. This includes corporate politics, attitudes of males of organization, pressure from in-laws family and parents and emotional attitudes of females.

**Table 3.** Major Barriers Mentioned by Respondents of the Study

Barriers	Frequency by respondents
Corporate politics	12
Family pressure	04
The psychological pressure of work	03
Lack of confidence	03
Fieldwork	03
Women own choices	02
Societal pressure	01
Women are less social	01
Women are emotional	01

This shows that women miss opportunities not only because of organizational and societal factors but their own attitudes like ego issues, time management, lack of confidence, changing of goal destination are also reasons for their underrepresentation in senior management.

### Glass Ceiling or Personal Barriers

Barriers to women's growth to higher positions are summarized after an extensive review of literature. A research question was designed that “What does relative importance each barrier has and ranking of the barriers according to importance assigned by the respondents?” The list contains barriers from different aspects i.e. societal barriers, organizational barriers, family barriers, barriers due to women's own attitudes, etc.

The list was given to respondents to explore their opinion about the relative importance of barriers faced by women considering their experience as mentioned in research question number three. Barriers were ranked on a five-point Likert scale by the respondents where 5 shows very important, 4 shows important, 3 shows moderately

important, 2 shows of little importance and 1 shows not important. Then these values were entered in SPSS and average values were found to calculate the relative importance index of barriers. The relative index method was adopted from Somiah, Osei-Poku, and Aidoo (2015) and Muhwezi, Acai, and Otim's (2014) research study. Results show the relative importance of barriers to women during their professional growth in the light of respondents' experience with the help of relative importance index. The relative importance of personal barriers to women's career growth is given in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Relative importance of personal barriers

<b>Personal barriers</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Relative Importance</b>
Work life balance/ child care	4.12	0.824
Willingness to relocate	4.00	0.800
Women's personal preferences	3.59	0.718
Flexibility	3.59	0.718
Job satisfaction	3.35	0.670
Lack of confidence	3.29	0.658
Time devoted to job	3.18	0.636
Occupational choices	3.12	0.624
Lack of having a partnership in business	3.06	0.612
Decision making	3.00	0.600
A career-oriented mindset	3.00	0.600
Experience	2.94	0.588
Lack of understanding of corporate politics	2.88	0.576
Lack of qualification	2.71	0.542
Communication differences	2.65	0.530
Skill acquisition	2.59	0.518
Degree of job commitment	2.53	0.506
Preferred leadership style	2.18	0.436

The strongest personal barrier in women's progression is 'work-life balance'. The relative importance of glass ceiling barriers is given in Table 5. The strongest of the glass ceiling barriers is 'behavioral double binds' barrier.

**Table 5.** Relative importance of glass ceiling barriers

<b>Glass Ceilings barriers</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Relative Importance</b>
Behavioral double binds	4.12	0.824
Tokenism in top management circles	4.00	0.800
Female role models	3.65	0.730
Departure from practices	3.65	0.730
Performance evaluation	3.59	0.718
Societal barriers	3.59	0.718
Sexual harassment	3.47	0.694
Unsupportive supervisors/colleagues and subordinates	3.47	0.694
Networking	3.41	0.682
Gender pay gap	3.35	0.670
Old boy network maintaining the status quo	3.29	0.658
Mentoring	3.29	0.658
Governmental barriers	3.24	0.648
Suitable employment opportunities and training	3.12	0.624
Company culture	2.94	0.588
Gender stereotypes	2.76	0.552
Recruiting differences	2.76	0.552
Promotion policies and opportunities	2.65	0.530
Lower productivity of women	2.65	0.530

Generally, barriers found with second most frequency are tokenism and women's low willingness to relocate to other places. Work-life balance is a barrier for married women. They face difficulty in time management between their domestic chores and professional life tasks. Tokenism is organizational barrier that leads to glass ceiling. Women's willingness to relocate to other places is women's own choices and behavioral double binds are societal

perceptions. Results show that tokenism in organizational barrier category and behavioral double bind in the societal barrier category are the strongest barriers to women's career progression. This shows that women are unable to rise to higher positions due to different factors other than 'glass ceiling'. Respondents were also asked to add more barriers according to their experience that is not mentioned in the list. They added a barrier that women are emotional and sensitive, they take decisions in emotional state of mind and that leads them to lose opportunities to grow. This also shows women's own attitude as a barrier to their progression. The findings of the interview study show that women face glass ceiling. On the other hand, they are not behind men due to glass ceiling only, other social and family factors count for underrepresentation of the women in senior management.

## **Discussion**

Women have abilities however still they are not reaching higher management of organizations. This inequity comes under observation when we calculate the male to female ratio in top management. The study aimed to analyze the reasons why women are not reaching to the top management. While studying the previous literature researcher observed some barriers that women face during their career paths. Research identifies these obstructions as glass ceiling barriers. This research aimed to explore glass ceiling empirically, therefore, the researchers conducted a qualitative study to find presence of glass ceiling and identify major obstacles to women's progression. Furthermore, it was aimed to get insight whether glass ceiling bars women to reach higher positions or it is something else. For example, women own attitude that keeps them behind.

The research question was about the existence of glass ceiling that does glass ceiling really exists or women underrepresentation is due to their attitude? Some of the respondents quoted the barriers they faced during their careers as glass ceiling barriers. They mentioned that glass ceiling does exist, women face glass ceiling barriers during their career path however it can be reduced with passage of time by creating awareness and with women's own abilities and confidence. A respondent quoted:

“Although it is difficult to change people's mind but if awareness programs are started at organizational level and governmental level and if people who has broad thinking help to create awareness then it is possible to shatter glass ceiling.”

Society is progressing and nowadays women are welcomed in organizations for better opportunities. This is women own attitude, they lack confidence sometimes or they get some family issues due to which they change their preferences from career to family and they lag. If women develop their mindset which is more career-oriented, they will get much more senior positions in organizations.

## **Conclusion**

Over the present study found presence of glass ceiling barriers in Pakistani female's career life. Some of the barriers are due to societal perceptions, family issues, and women's own choices as the reasons for women's underrepresentation in higher management. Nevertheless, these barriers can be overcome by following situation specific tailored strategies according to problem and women's own abilities. The study achieved all of its objectives by identifying barriers causing glass ceiling and exploring the existence of “Glass ceiling” in our society. All the senior or mid-career women interviewees identified many barriers they faced during their careers. It was found that many women face glass ceiling barriers during their careers. However, the magnitude of its existence and the extent is much less than originally perceived in our society. This phenomenon is controllable and can be shattered with positive attitude of women and creating more awareness in the organizations.

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