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Glass Ceilings: Do Women in Leadership Face Organisational Barriers?

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I. Executive summary

Gender inequality is a societal problem that ages back to the inception of mankind itself, and in recent years, the problem has seeped into the corporate world. The brief will cover how women in leadership roles face organisational challenges, and how these can be combated with policy implementations.

II. Overview

Gender inequality in the United States is an issue that entrenches systemic biases and damages the livelihoods of women, often manifesting in barriers such as glass ceilings and sticky floors. Women can remain trapped in a cycle of professional stagnation in many industries due to discriminatory barriers. Despite progress in women's education and efforts to increase women's labour force participation, female representation in senior management remains very low, partially due to invisible barriers preventing advancement to leadership roles (glass ceiling) and barriers causing them to be trapped in low-paying jobs (sticky floor). Hence, this paper investigates the phenomena of glass ceilings and sticky floors in the corporate, public, and non-profit sectors in order to understand how these issues have been perpetuated and how women can break barriers and advance into leadership roles.

A. Relevance

The term 'glass ceiling' was coined in 1978 by Marilyn Loden1 to describe an invisible yet unbreachable barrier that prevents ascension to high level roles in a corporate hierarchy for women. This period – known as 'second wave feminism' – was when the dialogue on women's rights and employment took off. It implies a level of transparency where women can see the upper echelons of leadership and management but are unable to reach them due to a myriad of factors. Despite having adequate qualifications, women may be blocked from application or disregarded immediately. India ranked as one of the lowest countries in the subindex 'Economic participation and Opportunity' on the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, achieving only 36.7%. This shows how women may be treated unfairly in the American labour force.

III. History

A. Current Stances

Patriarchy has been a long standing global issue, but the United States has historically been dominated by a patriarchal structure that has significantly influenced its social, economic, and political spheres. This patriarchy has generally relegated women to the private domain of home and family11, which meant that there were few career opportunities for them. In fact, according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, the

United States ranks 51st for economic participation and opportunity, suggesting that gender inequality remains a pressing issue unlike popular opinion.

Women in the United States are fairly underrepresented in leadership roles, with only 18.3% of women occupying positions of senior leadership, making the phenomenon of glass ceilings prevalent, especially in the corporate setting. However, it is important to acknowledge that glass ceilings are manifested at the very beginning of a woman's career advancement, from getting selected for an interview to landing a promotion. While entry is easier, growth slows and in most situations regardless of their qualifications, performances or achievements, women are prevented from climbing the corporate ladder to the top.

Marital status and family planning can often be the turnover for a woman's selection process. According to a staff manager at an educational institution in Illinois, the chances of employment for a woman is always directly linked to her family plans, and they often consciously reject women with children simply due to the dual duty associated with the role of being a working woman and a mother. It is a common bias across most hirers that women are bound to their familial duties, and hence would not be able to contribute and commit as efficiently to the organisation. Women's career trajectories due to socio economic factors tend to be scattered/broken for junctures of time. This also impacts their chance of being hired, as they tend to take time off for familial duties that is expected from them traditionally. Working outside of the household for mothers is socially penalised.

IV. Policy Problem

A. Stakeholders

It is given that the primary stakeholders are women themselves, especially those who are seeking job opportunities or are already placed in mid to high tier jobs. These barriers prevent their career advancement, leaving them in lower-paying jobs and limiting their access to leadership roles. As result, they are left to be mere workers rather than the leaders they aspire to be by virtue of how a job progresses. Ideally, these women should have a stake in the policy that evaluates their performance, ensuring that the mechanisms in use are fair and just.

Businesses and corporations are stakeholders as they stand to benefit from diverse leadership and a more equitable workforce. However, systemic biases in these organisations are what cause (and further exacerbate) gender inequality. Therefore, it is pivotal to sensitise such companies of the importance of inclusivity to enhance workplace morale, performance and reputation.

B. Risks of Indifference

The risk of indifference to gender inequality lies in the perpetuation of existing biases and the resulting loss in productivity and economic growth. If stakeholders continue to neglect the problem at hand, it is a given that the societal conditions of bias and prejudice would worsen. The cycle of exclusion and discrimination for women, especially for leadership roles, would continue unhindered. This is not to mention that inaction would shed a negative light on these companies, and over time, a lack of action could damage an organisation's public image, leading to decreased employee morale. Apart from such organisational problems, indifference can also hinder women's economic independence, contributing to broader social inequities and limited household income. Therefore, it only makes sense for there to be action, rather than inaction.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because gender inequality doesn't only affect individuals, but rather societies and communities themselves, it is imperative that nonpartisan intervention takes place. The benefits of such intervention include but are not limited to the following:

1) Economic growth and overall increase in productivity: Reducing barriers to advancement for women benefits the entire economy. When women can progress into higher and more senior positions, they are able to contribute more greatly to the household income. Consequently, it can be said that there is to be an increase in the mean household income if the practice is sustained, that is. Unlocking the full potential of half the population's talent pool is therefore beneficial for society at large which means that it is not only a social benefit but a highly strategic one too.

2) Improvement in organisational performance: A diverse workforce improves problem-solving and innovation by bringing different perspectives to the table. Because of this, it is only inevitable that a gender diverse population would be likely to be more creative, innovative and contribute to the organisation's performance more effectively. Therefore, removing these barriers of entry and progression for women would pave the way for an array of organisational changes that would benefit not one but all relevant stakeholders.

3) Social equity and community well-being: As is now made explicit through studies, gender inequality has long-term effects on family stability, community resources, and overall social cohesion, especially in the twenty-first century. When women can contribute more fully to the workforce, families often have increased financial security, which is beneficial to maintain a sustainable livelihood for generations to come.

V. Tried Policy

To begin with, a quite recent policy was implemented in the United States and was aimed at reducing gender bias that has struggled to meet its goals is California's Senate Bill 826 (SB 826), passed in 2018. This law requires public companies headquartered in California to have at least one woman on their board of directors, with conditional requirements based on board size.

However, the policy received its fair share of legal and social backlash. For starters, SB 826 faced several lawsuits for the fact that it violated the Equal Protection Clause of the US Constitution by mandating quotas based on gender. In action to this, in 2022, a court in California had no choice but to strike down the law. Additionally, rather than working on sensitization, this law is more imposing in nature and doesn't show companies why they logically require women in their employee base. As a result, ingrained prejudices could still continue to exist, masked by this policy and quota.

VI. Policy Options

Standardisation of hiring and promotion processes

Unconscious bias, stereotypes, societal norms, etc. can hamper one's ability to look at things neutrally and clear assessments can become tainted. Hiring and promotion processes work in a similar way, biases can cloud judgement which leads to unfair decisions. This prevents women from advancing and leaves them trapped on sticky floors.

To overcome this, I recommend a standardised, data-driven process of hiring and promotion which helps limit biases and hostility against women. Although this practise will be put into action primarily by the Human Resources department, it can be proposed that such a system is overlooked by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

Paid paternity leave policy

Child care is exhausting and often takes a toll on women's health- both physically and mentally. Paid parental leave reduces the negative ramifications of postpartum amongst mothers by ensuring that Their S a the distribution of workload is even. Although the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provides unpaid leave, it doesn't adequately address the economic burdens that new parents face. A federal paid paternity leave policy would help balance childcare responsibilities, reduce postpartum health burdens on women, and mitigate the career impact that often accompanies maternity leave. One notable thing to keep in mind is how countries like Sweden, which have tried and tested the paternal leave policy, are flourishing and face little to no gender bias.

Pay transparency mandate

Although the Equal Pay Act of 1963 mandates equal pay for equal work, gaps persist due to a lack of transparency in pay structures for both the public and private sector. Policies like the Paycheck Fairness Act, if strengthened and further enhanced would ensure that companies recognise the importance of workplace well-being. Organisations can also be encouraged to conduct internal reviews of pay practices and publicly report gender-disaggregated pay data and report their findings to governmental representatives for further deliberation and review.

VII. Conclusions

In this paper, I have explored a plethora of topics underlying women in work and the barriers faced by them, going into an in-depth analysis of glass ceilings and consequent policy options for the same. However, out of these options, the one that is the most implementable in its scope is a Pay Transparency Mandate, administered by the EEOC.

With that said, women in leadership is a vital concept and in order to study it, taking even the most trivial detail into account is essential to gain adequate understanding of it. Though we have a long way to go in achieving absolute gender parity in the workplace and overcoming Glass Ceilings, it can be achieved by focussing on policy structure and its implementation, limiting socio-economic factors, and providing incentives to women to work. I believe these barriers can be overcome if we envisage it in a pragmatic manner and follow through the solutions systematically.

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