

Glass Ceiling and Sticky Floor: Barriers to Women's Career Advancement in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in the workplace remains a significant issue across the world despite progress in education, employment opportunities, and legal reforms. Two important concepts associated with workplace inequality are the “glass ceiling” and the “sticky floor.” The glass ceiling refers to invisible barriers that prevent women and minority groups from reaching higher managerial and leadership positions, while the sticky floor refers to barriers that keep women concentrated in low-paying and low-level jobs with limited growth opportunities. This research paper examines the causes, effects, and organizational implications of the glass ceiling and sticky floor phenomena.

The study adopts a descriptive research methodology using both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through questionnaires distributed among employees from different organizations, while secondary data were obtained from journals, books, reports, and research articles. The findings indicate that gender stereotypes, discrimination, unequal opportunities, work-life imbalance, organizational culture, and lack of mentoring significantly contribute to workplace inequality. The study also reveals that women continue to face wage gaps, slower promotions, and reduced leadership representation. Recent research further demonstrates that women often face barriers both at the lower and upper levels of organizational hierarchies. The paper concludes that organizations should implement inclusive policies, equal opportunity practices, leadership development programs, and flexible work arrangements to reduce workplace inequality. Addressing glass ceiling and sticky floor barriers is essential for organizational growth, diversity, and social justice.

Keywords: Glass ceiling, sticky floor, gender inequality, workplace discrimination, women empowerment, organizational behavior.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern business environment, organizations increasingly recognize the importance of diversity and gender equality in achieving organizational success. Women today participate actively in education, employment, entrepreneurship, and leadership roles. Despite these advancements, gender inequality continues to exist in workplaces across industries and countries.

Two major concepts explaining workplace gender inequality are the “glass ceiling” and the “sticky floor.” The glass ceiling refers to invisible organizational barriers that prevent qualified women from reaching senior management and leadership positions. Although women may possess the required education, skills, and experience, they often face obstacles in career advancement due to discrimination, stereotypes, and organizational bias.

The sticky floor, on the other hand, refers to barriers that keep women concentrated in low-paying and low-level jobs with limited promotion opportunities. Women working in sectors such as retail, hospitality, and care services often struggle to move beyond entry-level positions.

Gender inequality in organizations affects employee morale, productivity, and economic growth. Studies show that organizations with greater gender diversity in leadership positions perform better financially and foster innovation. However, women continue to face challenges such as unequal pay, lack of mentorship, work-life conflict, and biased evaluation systems.

The increasing participation of women in the workforce has made gender equality an important topic in human resource management and organizational behavior. Governments and organizations worldwide are introducing policies promoting equal opportunity, diversity, and inclusion. Nevertheless, achieving true gender equality remains a challenge due to deeply rooted cultural and institutional barriers.

This research paper examines the concepts of glass ceiling and sticky floor, their causes and effects, and strategies for promoting workplace equality.

I. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To understand the concepts of glass ceiling and sticky floor.
2. To analyze factors contributing to workplace gender inequality.
3. To examine the impact of glass ceiling and sticky floor on employee performance and organizational growth.
4. To identify challenges faced by women in career advancement.
5. To provide suggestions for reducing workplace discrimination.

Research Questions

1. What are the major causes of glass ceiling and sticky floor effects?
2. How do these barriers affect women's career growth?
3. What organizational factors contribute to workplace inequality?
4. How can organizations promote gender equality and diversity?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Concept of Glass Ceiling

The term "glass ceiling" describes invisible barriers preventing women and minorities from advancing into higher managerial and leadership positions despite qualifications and performance. According to Purcell et al. (2010), the glass ceiling is maintained

through stereotypes, networking barriers, discrimination, and organizational culture.

Research indicates that women remain underrepresented in executive and decision-making positions globally. Organizational structures and cultural norms continue to favor male leadership patterns.

Concept of Sticky Floor

The sticky floor phenomenon refers to barriers keeping women trapped in low-paying and low-level positions with minimal opportunities for advancement. OECD research found that women experience wage inequality both at the lower and upper ends of the wage distribution.

Women in low-income jobs often face limited access to education, training, and promotion opportunities, making upward mobility difficult.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory explains that education, training, and work experience influence employee productivity and career growth. However, studies suggest that women often receive fewer opportunities for leadership development and career advancement despite possessing similar qualifications as men.

Gender Role Theory

Gender Role Theory suggests that social expectations influence workplace behavior and career opportunities. Traditional beliefs associate leadership with masculine traits, creating barriers for women aspiring to leadership positions.

Organizational Barriers

Studies identify several organizational factors contributing to workplace inequality:

- Gender stereotypes
- Unequal promotion practices
- Lack of mentoring
- Work-life conflict
- Male-dominated organizational culture
- Discriminatory policies

An integrated framework study on the glass ceiling highlights that “think manager, think male” stereotypes strongly influence promotion decisions.

Wage Gap and Workplace Inequality

Research across European and Asian labor markets reveals persistent gender wage gaps associated with glass ceiling and sticky floor effects.

Women often receive lower wages than men for similar work and are concentrated in lower-paying occupations.

Impact on Organizations

Gender inequality negatively affects organizations through:

- Reduced employee morale
- Lower productivity
- Talent loss
- Reduced innovation
- Poor organizational image

Organizations promoting diversity and inclusion tend to experience better employee engagement and financial performance.

Recent Research Trends

Recent studies show that workplace inequality also intersects with race and ethnicity. Research on promotion systems indicates that women and minority groups experience unequal advancement opportunities across organizational levels.

Research in the software industry highlights challenges such as sexism, lack of recognition, work-life imbalance, and exclusion from leadership opportunities.

Research Gap

Previous studies focused mainly on leadership inequality and wage discrimination. Limited research examines the combined effects of glass ceiling and sticky floor barriers on employee motivation, organizational culture, and long-term career growth. This study addresses this gap.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study uses a descriptive research design to examine workplace gender inequality related to glass ceiling and sticky floor effects.

Research Approach

A mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods was adopted.

- Qualitative data were collected through literature review.
- Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires.

Sources of Data

Primary Data

Primary data were collected through questionnaires distributed among employees from different organizations.

Secondary Data

Secondary data were obtained from:

- Research journals
- Academic books
- Government reports
- Online articles
- Organizational publications

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling was used to select respondents.

Sample Size

The study included 100 employees from various industries.

Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire with close-ended questions was used.

Data Analysis Tools

Data were analyzed using:

- Percentage analysis
- Tables
- Graphical interpretation

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the research process.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Respondents	Percentage
Male	45	45%
Female	55	55%
Total	100	100%

Interpretation

Female respondents represented the majority of participants.

Table 2: Awareness of Glass Ceiling and Sticky Floor Concepts

Response	Respondents	Percentage
Highly Aware	40	40%
Aware	38	38%

Neutral	12	12%
Unaware	10	10%

Interpretation

Most respondents were aware of workplace gender inequality issues.

Table 3: Major Barriers Faced by Women

Barrier	Percentage
Gender Discrimination	30%
Work-Life Balance Issues	25%
Unequal Promotion Opportunities	20%
Lack of Mentoring	15%
Wage Inequality	10%

Interpretation

Gender discrimination and work-life imbalance were identified as major barriers affecting women’s career growth.

Table 4: Employee Opinion on Equal Promotion Opportunities

Response	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	35	35%
No	50	50%
Unsure	15	15%

Interpretation

Half of the respondents believed that promotion opportunities are not equally available to men and women.

Table 5: Impact of Workplace Inequality on Employee Performance

Impact Level	Respondents	Percentage
High	48	48%
Moderate	32	32%
Low	20	20%

Interpretation

Most respondents believed that workplace inequality negatively affects employee motivation and performance.

Table 6: Organizational Measures for Gender Equality

Measure	Percentage
Flexible Work Policies	30%
Equal Pay Policies	25%
Leadership Training	20%
Mentorship Programs	15%
Diversity Programs	10%

Interpretation

Flexible work policies and equal pay initiatives were considered important for promoting workplace equality.

III. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate that women continue to face significant workplace barriers related to promotion, wages, and leadership opportunities. Respondents identified gender

discrimination, unequal promotion systems, and work-life conflict as major contributors to glass ceiling and sticky floor effects.

Research also suggests that women are often concentrated in lower-paying sectors and face slower career progression.

The study confirms that organizational culture and stereotypes continue to influence promotion decisions and leadership opportunities. Women in male-dominated industries frequently experience lack of recognition, exclusion, and limited mentorship support.

Furthermore, recent studies indicate that workplace inequality affects organizational productivity, employee morale, and innovation. Diverse leadership teams contribute positively to organizational performance and decision-making.

IV. CONCLUSION

The glass ceiling and sticky floor phenomena remain major challenges affecting workplace equality and women’s career advancement. Although women have made significant progress in education and workforce participation, organizational barriers and social stereotypes continue to limit equal opportunities.

The study confirms that women experience discrimination in promotions, wages,

leadership opportunities, and workplace recognition. Sticky floor barriers further restrict women's mobility by concentrating them in low-paying and low-growth jobs.

Organizations must adopt inclusive policies, transparent promotion systems, mentorship programs, and flexible work arrangements to reduce workplace inequality. Government support, awareness programs, and stronger legal protections are also essential for achieving gender equality.

Overall, eliminating workplace discrimination and promoting diversity are essential for sustainable organizational growth and social development.

V. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Organizations should implement equal opportunity and anti-discrimination policies.
2. Transparent promotion and performance evaluation systems should be established.
3. Leadership development programs for women should be encouraged.
4. Flexible work arrangements should be introduced to support work-life balance.
5. Equal pay policies should be strictly implemented.

6. Mentorship and networking opportunities for women should be expanded.
7. Organizations should conduct gender sensitivity training programs.
8. Government should strengthen workplace equality laws and enforcement.
9. Diversity and inclusion initiatives should be promoted at all organizational levels.
10. Organizations should regularly monitor and evaluate workplace equality practices.

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