



## The Glass Ceiling Phenomenon: A Comprehensive Review of Theoretical and Empirical Literature

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### Abstract

*The glass ceiling remains a persistent barrier to women's career advancement, particularly in the context of India's evolving socio-economic landscape. This study presents a comprehensive literature review of both theoretical and empirical research on the glass ceiling phenomenon, with a specific focus on Indian organizations. Drawing upon a wide range of academic sources, the paper examines the structural, cultural, and organizational factors that contribute to gender-based disparities in leadership positions. Key issues identified include deeply rooted patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, unequal access to professional networks, and work-life balance challenges that disproportionately affect women. The review further explores how organizational practices such as biased promotion policies, lack of mentorship opportunities, and limited representation of women in decision-making roles reinforce these invisible barriers. While globalization, policy reforms, and diversity initiatives have contributed to gradual improvements, the findings indicate that progress remains uneven across sectors and regions in India. The study also highlights the role of education, economic participation, and government interventions in shaping women's career trajectories. By synthesizing diverse perspectives, this paper identifies critical gaps in existing literature, particularly the need for more intersectional and sector-specific studies within the Indian context. The review concludes by emphasizing the importance of inclusive organizational policies, leadership development programs, and cultural transformation to effectively address the glass ceiling and promote gender equity in the workplace.*

### Keywords

Glass Ceiling, Gender Inequality, Women Leadership, Indian Organizations, Workplace Barriers, Work-Life Balance, Organizational Bias, IT Sector India

### Introduction

In recent years, gender equality in the workplace has gained significant attention, yet the problem of the glass ceiling continues to exist, especially in developing countries like India. The term "glass ceiling" refers to invisible and unofficial barriers that prevent women from reaching higher positions in organizations despite having the required qualifications and skills (Cotter et al., 2001). These barriers are not openly visible but are deeply rooted in organizational structures, cultural norms, and societal expectations.

India has made progress in education and employment opportunities for women, but their representation in leadership roles is still limited. Studies show that women are often concentrated in lower and middle-level positions, while top management roles are dominated by men (Budhwar et al., 2005). This indicates that the issue is not about entry into the workforce



but about growth and advancement. The glass ceiling restricts women's career progression and reduces their chances of reaching decision-making positions (Kumari, 2017).

Several factors contribute to the existence of the glass ceiling in India. One major factor is the persistence of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, which influence how women are perceived in leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are often expected to balance professional responsibilities with family duties, which creates additional pressure and limits their career growth (Buddhapriya, 2009). Work-life balance challenges are particularly significant in sectors like information technology, where long working hours and high performance expectations are common (Kumar & Verma, 2021).

Organizational practices also play an important role in maintaining the glass ceiling. Bias in recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation can hinder women's advancement (Ibarra et al., 2013). Lack of mentorship and networking opportunities further limits their ability to move into leadership roles (De Klerk & Verreynne, 2017). Research in the Indian IT sector highlights that although women enter the workforce in significant numbers, many leave within a few years due to limited growth opportunities and workplace challenges (Gupta et al., 2021).

Moreover, the glass ceiling not only affects career growth but also impacts women's job satisfaction, confidence, and overall well-being (Al-azzawi et al., 2019). It creates a sense of inequality and reduces motivation among women employees. Despite various initiatives such as diversity programs and government policies aimed at promoting gender equality, progress remains slow and uneven across different industries (Sharma & Shrawat, 2014).

This study aims to review existing theoretical and empirical literature on the glass ceiling phenomenon, with a focus on the Indian context. By analyzing previous research, the paper seeks to understand the key barriers faced by women, evaluate the effectiveness of current measures, and identify gaps in the literature. The findings will help in developing better strategies to promote gender equality and support women's career advancement in India.

## Literature Review

The concept of the glass ceiling has been widely studied across different countries and industries, highlighting the invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing to top leadership positions. Early studies defined the glass ceiling as a structural and cultural limitation within organizations that restricts women's upward mobility despite equal qualifications and performance (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). Later, Cotter et al. (2001) explained that the glass ceiling becomes more visible at higher levels of management, where the gap between men and women increases significantly. In the Indian context, the existence of the glass ceiling has been confirmed by several researchers. Yadav and Khanna (2014) found that gender discrimination and societal expectations continue to influence women's career growth in India. Similarly, Kumari (2017) observed that women face major challenges in reaching senior positions in corporate sectors due to both organizational and social barriers. These barriers are often not formal policies but are embedded in workplace culture and attitudes. One of the major factors contributing to the glass ceiling is gender stereotyping. According to Eagly and Karau (2002), leadership roles are often associated with masculine traits, which creates bias against women leaders. This idea is supported by Baker (2014), who



noted that women are often judged more critically than men when they occupy leadership positions. Such stereotypes reduce opportunities for women to be considered for promotions and decision-making roles. Work-life balance is another important issue affecting women's career advancement. Buddhapriya (2009) highlighted that Indian women often struggle to manage both professional and family responsibilities, which can limit their career growth. Kumar and Verma (2021) also found that work-life imbalance is a significant barrier in the Indian IT sector, where demanding work environments make it difficult for women to continue in leadership tracks. Organizational factors also play a crucial role in maintaining the glass ceiling. Ibarra et al. (2013) pointed out that women often lack access to informal networks and mentorship, which are essential for career advancement. De Klerk and Verreynne (2017) further explained that networking practices are often gendered, making it harder for women to build professional connections. In addition, biased promotion systems and lack of transparency in evaluation processes contribute to unequal opportunities (Datta & Agarwal, 2017). Several studies have focused specifically on the Indian IT sector, where women's participation is relatively high but leadership representation remains low. Azeez et al. (2018) identified factors such as lack of career support, gender bias, and organizational culture as key barriers to women's advancement. Similarly, Mishra and Banerjee (2019) found that women face limited growth opportunities and often experience slower career progression compared to their male counterparts. The impact of the glass ceiling goes beyond career growth and affects women's psychological well-being and job satisfaction. Al-azzawi et al. (2019) reported that the presence of glass ceiling barriers can lead to stress, low self-esteem, and reduced organizational commitment among women employees. Aranha et al. (2019) also found that these barriers negatively influence the performance of women in the workplace. Despite these challenges, some studies suggest gradual improvement due to policy changes and diversity initiatives. Sharma and Shrawat (2014) noted that awareness about gender equality is increasing in modern organizations. However, the progress is still slow, and deep-rooted cultural norms continue to act as obstacles. Overall, the literature shows that the glass ceiling is a complex issue influenced by social, organizational, and individual factors. While many studies have explored this topic, there is still a need for more research focusing on sector-specific and intersectional perspectives in the Indian context.

### **Research Gap**

Although a large number of studies have examined the glass ceiling phenomenon, several important gaps still exist in the literature, especially in the Indian context. Most of the existing research focuses broadly on gender inequality and women's underrepresentation in leadership, but there is limited in-depth analysis of how different factors interact to create and sustain the glass ceiling in specific industries. For example, while the IT sector has received attention, there is still a lack of comparative studies across sectors such as banking, education, and manufacturing (Azeez et al., 2018; Dastidar & Kalita, 2020).

Another key gap is the limited use of an intersectional approach. Many studies treat women as a single homogeneous group, ignoring differences based on class, caste, region, education, and work experience. This makes it difficult to fully understand how multiple forms of inequality affect women's career advancement in India. As a result, the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds remain underexplored.



There is also a lack of longitudinal studies that track women's career progression over time. Most research is cross-sectional and focuses on a specific point in time, which does not capture the long-term impact of the glass ceiling on career growth, job satisfaction, and retention (Lathabhavan, 2019). Understanding these long-term effects is important for developing effective organizational policies.

In addition, while many studies identify barriers such as gender bias, work-life imbalance, and lack of mentorship, fewer studies evaluate the effectiveness of existing interventions and policies aimed at reducing these barriers. For instance, diversity initiatives and gender equality programs are widely discussed, but there is limited empirical evidence on their actual impact in Indian organizations (Sharma & Shrawat, 2014).

Another important gap is the lack of focus on men's role and organizational culture in addressing the glass ceiling. Most research centers on women's challenges, but less attention is given to how organizational leadership, including male counterparts, can contribute to creating a more inclusive work environment.

Finally, there is insufficient research linking the glass ceiling to psychological outcomes such as confidence, motivation, and well-being in the Indian setting, even though some studies highlight its negative effects (Al-azzawi et al., 2019). More comprehensive research is needed to understand these aspects in detail.

Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive review of both theoretical and empirical literature, with a focus on identifying underexplored areas and suggesting directions for future research in the Indian context.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to examine and understand the glass ceiling phenomenon through a review of existing theoretical and empirical literature, with a special focus on the Indian context. The study aims to provide a clear and comprehensive understanding of the barriers that limit women's career advancement in organizations.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To understand the concept of the glass ceiling and its relevance in modern organizations based on existing literature (Cotter et al., 2001).
2. To identify the major factors contributing to the glass ceiling in India, including social, cultural, and organizational barriers such as gender stereotypes, work-life balance issues, and lack of career support (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Buddhapriya, 2009).
3. To analyze the impact of the glass ceiling on women's career growth, job satisfaction, and overall well-being in the workplace (Al-azzawi et al., 2019).



4. To examine sector-specific challenges, particularly in industries like the IT sector, where women's participation is high but leadership representation remains low (Azeez et al., 2018).
5. To review existing policies and organizational practices aimed at reducing gender inequality and promoting women's advancement in leadership roles (Sharma & Shrawat, 2014).
6. To identify gaps in the existing literature and suggest areas for future research, especially in the Indian context.

### **Research Methodology**

This study is based on a qualitative research approach and uses a literature review method to understand the glass ceiling phenomenon in the Indian context. The research relies entirely on secondary data, which has been collected from various published sources such as research papers, journals, articles, reports, and books.

The data for this study has been gathered from reliable academic sources including national and international journals like South Asian Journal of Business Studies, International Journal of Human Resource Management, and other peer-reviewed publications. In addition, reports from organizations and online sources have also been considered to provide a broader understanding of the topic. Previous studies related to women's career advancement, gender inequality, leadership barriers, and the glass ceiling have been carefully reviewed.

The selection of literature was based on relevance to the topic, focus on the Indian context, and contribution to understanding key factors such as organizational bias, gender stereotypes, and work-life balance challenges (Budhwar et al., 2005; Azeez et al., 2018). Both theoretical and empirical studies have been included to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

For analysis, the study uses a descriptive and thematic approach. Important themes such as barriers to career growth, organizational practices, and psychological impacts have been identified and discussed based on the reviewed literature. The aim is to compare different findings, identify common patterns, and highlight differences across studies.

This methodology helps in developing a clear understanding of the glass ceiling issue without collecting primary data. However, the study is limited to the available literature and may not capture recent changes or real-time experiences of women in organizations.

Overall, the research methodology provides a structured way to review and analyze existing knowledge and to identify gaps for future research in the area of the glass ceiling in India.

### **Conclusion**

The present study aimed to understand the glass ceiling phenomenon through a comprehensive review of theoretical and empirical literature, with a focus on the Indian context. Based on the analysis of existing studies, it is clear that the glass ceiling continues to be a significant barrier to women's career advancement, especially in leadership and decision-making positions.



Although women have made considerable progress in education and workforce participation, their representation at higher levels of management remains limited. The review highlights that the glass ceiling is not caused by a single factor but is the result of a combination of social, cultural, and organizational barriers. Gender stereotypes, traditional societal expectations, and the burden of balancing work and family responsibilities continue to restrict women's professional growth (Buddhapriya, 2009; Eagly & Karau, 2002). In addition, organizational practices such as biased promotion systems, lack of mentorship, and limited networking opportunities further strengthen these invisible barriers (Ibarra et al., 2013). The study also shows that sectors like the Indian IT industry, despite having higher participation of women, still face challenges in promoting women to leadership roles. Many women either experience slow career progression or leave their jobs due to limited opportunities and workplace pressures. Moreover, the glass ceiling has a negative impact not only on career advancement but also on women's job satisfaction, confidence, and overall well-being (Al-azzawi et al., 2019). Even though there have been efforts through diversity initiatives and policy changes, progress in breaking the glass ceiling has been slow and uneven. Deep-rooted cultural norms and organizational resistance continue to hinder real change. In conclusion, the glass ceiling remains a complex and persistent issue in India. Addressing this problem requires a combined effort from organizations, policymakers, and society to create a more inclusive and supportive environment. Future efforts should focus on promoting equal opportunities, encouraging women's leadership, and bringing about a shift in mindset to achieve true gender equality in the workplace.

### **Suggestions and Recommendations**

Based on the findings from the literature review, the following suggestions and recommendations are proposed to reduce the impact of the glass ceiling and promote women's career advancement in India:

#### **1. Promote Gender-Sensitive Organizational Policies**

Organizations should implement fair and transparent policies related to recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation. Equal opportunities must be provided to both men and women to ensure merit-based growth (Datta & Agarwal, 2017).

#### **2. Encourage Work-Life Balance**

Companies should introduce flexible working hours, work-from-home options, and parental leave policies to help women manage both professional and personal responsibilities. This can reduce career interruptions and improve retention (Buddhapriya, 2009).

#### **3. Provide Mentorship and Networking Opportunities**

Organizations should create formal mentorship programs where experienced leaders guide and support women employees. Encouraging networking opportunities can help women build professional connections and improve their chances of advancement (Ibarra et al., 2013).

#### **4. Address Gender Stereotypes and Bias**



Awareness programs and training sessions should be conducted to reduce unconscious bias and change traditional mindsets about women in leadership roles. This will help create a more inclusive work environment (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

#### 5. Increase Representation of Women in Leadership

Organizations should actively promote women to managerial and leadership positions. Having more women leaders can inspire others and help break existing barriers.

#### 6. Strengthen Government Policies and Support

The government should enforce strict laws related to equal pay, workplace equality, and anti-discrimination. Policies encouraging women's participation in leadership should be strengthened and effectively implemented.

#### 7. Focus on Skill Development and Leadership Training

Women should be provided with leadership development programs, training, and skill-building opportunities to prepare them for higher roles in organizations.

#### 8. Create a Supportive Organizational Culture

Organizations should foster an inclusive culture where women feel valued, respected, and supported. Open communication and employee-friendly policies can help reduce workplace stress and improve job satisfaction.

#### 9. Encourage Further Research

Future research should focus on sector-specific studies, intersectional analysis, and long-term career tracking of women to better understand and address the glass ceiling in India.

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